The Emotional Labour of Critical Pedagogy:

An Autoethnographic Study of Teacher Identity

A Thesis

Submitted to the Faculty of Education

In Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements

for the Degree of

Master of Education

The University of Prince Edward Island

Elizabeth Blake

Charlottetown, PE

January, 2007

Your file Votre référence
ISBN: 978-0-494-22817-3
Our file Notre référence
ISBN: 978-0-494-22817-3

SIGNATURE

PAGE(S)

ii

REMOVED

SIGNATURE PAGE

(iii)

REMOVED

Dedication

To the special women in my life

To **Nola** who always believes in me and who helps me believe in myself

To **maman** who models the importance of life-long learning

To **mémère** who loved unconditionally

And to my special boy **Timothy** who stayed up late night after night waiting for me to go to bed

Acknowledgements

My thesis is the combined emotional and intellectual labor of

Dr. Elizabeth de Freitas: She challenged me to read difficult texts and to think beyond what I believed I was capable of doing. She helped me discover the healing power of theory and she gave me confidence in my writing.

Dr. Anne-Louise Brookes: She modeled excellence in teaching and learning and helped me see that my thoughts and experiences were important forms of research.

My Grade 6 students: They inspired me throughout my work and challenged me to reflect on my teaching practices in order to improve the learning and teaching that goes on in my classroom.

Nola: She showed unconditional love and support throughout the writing of this thesis. I was able to write about my personal experiences knowing that she would say and do all the right things when I needed her the most. Je t'aime.

ABSTRACT

This thesis examines my life-history and how it has impacted my teaching practices in my Grade 6 classroom. Specifically, I use autoethnography, narrative inquiry and critical theory as I weave my lived experiences, letters to my grandmother with the theories of various researchers. I recount specific experiences from my past in order to identify the power relations that exist in our society. I argue that my schooling greatly influenced the way I learn, the way I teach and the way I live my life. Indeed, I only learned to know myself once I entered the Masters Program and was challenged to unlearn, learn and relearn all that I knew about teaching and learning. I invite the reader to reflect upon my lived experiences and question my thesis through a critical lens. I believe we must enter into meaningful dialogue about the hidden messages in our society in order to create a better world for our students and children.

Table of Contents

Dedication iv

Acknowledgements v

Abstract vi

Table of Contents vii

Preface 8

Introduction 13

Part One

Chapter 1: Examining Student History 23

Chapter 2: Examining Teacher History 34

Part Two

Chapter 3: Tribes/DEAL 45

Chapter 4: Dream Analysis 58

Chapter 5: Messy Books and Letters 67

Part Three

Chapter 6: Resistance to Change 77

Conclusion 96

References 107

Preface

The emotional and intellectual labor that went into producing this work transformed the way I teach, the way I learn and the way I live my life. I enrolled in the Masters of Education at UPEI thinking I had the knowledge to write a fine research project. I imagined I would produce a thesis that would add to the current literature of my topic of study and become what many call a teacher-expert. Little did I know that most of what I knew about teaching, researching and learning would be questioned, critiqued, analyzed and turned upside-down.

I imagine the experience might have left some people frustrated, disheartened and angry, but I entered the program wanting something that I never believed was a part of research. I was confronted with many questions posed, not only by other researchers, but through my own thinking and reflection. I began asking questions about what I really wanted to research and I was excited at the possibility of writing a thesis different from the norm. I also decided I was far from being a teacher/expert as I had to unlearn, learn and relearn most of what I believed about education. As I delved further into the field of critical pedagogy, I discovered just how ill-educated I really was. I had allowed myself not to see the oppressive nature of our educational school system. I was intrigued at the questions posed by many critical theorists: Who speaks? Who is silenced? Who has authority? Who makes decisions? Who decides which research is valid and which one is flawed?

I came to research hurting and once I realized that writing about my personal experiences was considered a form of research, I wanted to understand the experiences in my life that made me question my existence in this world. I was drawn to the research

that allowed me to talk about my personal experiences both as a student and as a teacher. I found myself not only wanting to write about my past history, but needing my research to reflect a personal side of myself. My research began with a letter I wrote to my grandmother about the night she died. I realized the night I wrote this letter that the writing of my thesis would be as much an emotional labor as an intellectual act.

My thesis begins with a personal narrative and a letter to my grandmother which mark important moments in my life. I discovered early on that if I was to write an autoethnography—studying my culture and myself as part of that culture—, I must be willing to include personal stories about myself.

> Back and forth autoethnographers gaze, first through an ethnographic wide-angle lens, focusing outward on social and cultural aspects of their personal experience; then, they look inward, exposing a vulnerable self that is moved by and may move through, refract, and resist cultural interpretations. (Ellis & Bochner, 2000, p.739)

In Chapter 1, I examine my student history. I recall events in my past that have always been clear in my mind. I knew I needed to relive these moments in order to understand how being a student in our school system affected who I am and the way I teach my students. I spent most of my schooling trying to figure out what was wrong with me and sat in a classroom hoping that a teacher would help me understand my own alienation. I argue that schools teach to a dominant curriculum and leave behind the students that do not fit within the norms of society. I quote the work of Bourdieu to explain that schools condition students to think within the dominant ideology. Near the

end of the chapter, I am able to use my experiences in order to speak out against this intense silence.

In Chapter 2, I reflect upon my experiences as a teacher. I use my six years of experience in the classroom to question my own teaching practices. I relive my first teaching days explaining how I was prepared to solve all the problems of our educational system. I came to teaching thinking that I would not repeat the mistakes of my own teachers and ensure that all students were happy and learning in my class. I retell my struggles as I quickly realize that teaching is hard work and that no matter how hard I tried to connect with my students, it was often impossible. Again, I realized that my past experiences were closely linked to who I was as an educator. "When I do not know myself, I cannot know who my students are. I will see them through a glass darkly, in the shadows of my unexamined life—and when I cannot see them clearly, I cannot teach them well" (Palmer, 1998, p.2).

Also, the work of Friere and Shor is a key component in my research. They explain that teachers often teach without really knowing their students. Students have ideas and thoughts, but many have come to realize that schools and its teachers are not interested in knowing who they are. I begin to question my own teaching and I use my reflections on my time spent in schools. I begin to ask critical questions about how to better teach my students and question my assumptions about what it means to be a teacher and a student in today's society.

In chapters 3, 4 and 5, I examine three different teaching techniques I use in my own classroom. Once I began to understand my experiences as a student and a teacher, I knew that I was more prepared to teach in different ways. I use different techniques in

my classroom in order to assist students in becoming critical thinkers and encourage them to begin to ask critical questions about schools, about my teaching and about their own learning. I try to answer the questions: Why is Critical Pedagogy important in a Grade 6 class? How do I engage my students to become active learners and how do I get them to write truthfully about their experiences?

In Chapter 6, I recount events that brought me to question my teaching even farther as I faced resistance from parents and supervisors. Again, I use the words of researchers who have also faced much resistance. The events in this chapter came at the end of my thesis work. I believed that my work was almost completed when I was forced to look even deeper within myself and my work. At first, the words of a few individuals made me doubt myself and my teaching. Fortunately, the research that led me to better understand the oppressive natures of society helped me to better understand this resistance. I used this chapter to reiterate the importance of questioning the dominant ideology and the significance of some to continue to live and teach against the norms of society.

Also, I know that as I reread my own work, now that my thesis is almost complete, I question some of the things I have written. I am Ellsworth's (1997) moving subject. My views and opinions are constantly changing with new experiences and discussions I share with others. In the end, however, my hope as I write from a personal perspective would be for my thesis to be read. In writing my story, I have always wanted my work to encourage discussion and debate between friends, classmates, families or colleagues. In telling my own story, I knew that I wanted my readers to get involved in the theory supporting my arguments, reflect on the letters to my grandmother, and react

to the stories from my past. In other words, I hope the next hundred pages, will "provoke readers to broaden their horizons, reflect critically on their own experience, enter empathically into worlds of experience different from their own, and actively engage in dialogue regarding the social and moral implications of the different perspectives and standpoints encountered"(Ellis & Bochner, 2000, p.748).

Introduction

I stopped writing after I tried to kill myself at 17. I burned all that I had ever written and decided I would never write again. I then spent a few days planning my death. I asked my father if I could spend the weekend alone at my cottage. I purchased a one-way bus pass for Friday after school. I walked to the drugstore during my lunch hour to buy pills and orange juice. I told my friends I was busy that weekend and I would see them on Monday.

A blizzard was forecasted that weekend and my relatives were reluctant to see me spend the weekend alone in the woods. My Dad was out of the country and I assured them that I would be fine. I would call if I needed anything. I made a fire as soon as I arrived and in no time, the heat in the cottage was unbearable. I fell asleep on the couch and woke up to a crazy whirlwind of falling snow outside. I was hungry. I looked through the cupboards and realized that I had not anticipated my own hunger. I found a few individual servings of Chicken Noodle Soup and tons of rock-hard marshmallows. I laughed and thought about numerous camping adventures with Dad. I boiled some water and returned to the couch. I watched the birds outside on our feeders and was amazed at their resilience as the storm encased them.

I crushed 70 pills with the pocket knife in my back pocket and scraped the crushed pills off the counter and into a glass of orange juice. I picked up another glass and started swallowing the other 30 pills, when I suddenly realized that I had forgotten to do something on my list. I put the glass down and retrieved a box from my closet which contained everything I had ever written. I must have spent hours reading my poems, my unsent letters, my class notes, a few journal entries and previous suicide notes. The tears

were rolling down my checks. I relived every moment of my life in those few hours. I pictured my mother crying over my poems and blaming herself for my death. I pictured my father coming back and telling stories about moments we had spent together. I know my brother would say I was insensitive, and would then spend the night consoling my mother. I hated the thought that my written words would allow them a glimpse into my life. I wanted to leave this earth the way I signed all my things: unknown, anonymous or blank. I threw all that I had ever written into the fire and watched it burn.

≈

It was time. I went back to my orange juice and finished the pills and started on the other glass. I drank and threw up in the sink a few times, but I kept on going. I was determined to take 100. I was not going to fail again. I went to lie down on my bed and I kept trying to fall asleep. I felt miserable and unable to move. I threw up many times on the floor. The phone was ringing. I threw up again. A friend wanted to talk. I was dozing off. She was asking so many questions. I just wanted to sleep. I wasn't able to articulate anything. I fell asleep. The phone rang again. My aunt wanted to know if everything was ok. My worried friend had called her. She said she would be right over. I was awake. I was frantic. I tried getting up, but I kept throwing up. I wanted to run into the woods and freeze to death before she came. I wanted to die. Please don't let them save me.

I woke up the next morning. I hated the world. I hated the doctors, the nurses and the shrinks. I hated their questions and their stares. I hated their whispers and their big yellow pills. I was transferred to the psych ward and began my own private healing process. I lied. I lied about everything. I lied about the kinds of cereal I liked. I lied about

the colors and shapes that I saw in their pictures. I lied about the events of that night. I listened for the answers in their presupposed questions and I learned to shed a tear for effect. I knew no one would ever notice since no one was really listening anyway.

I also never wrote again. At least, I never wrote anything that was really true or that would allow anyone to really know me. My true thoughts would be only for me. I was afraid they would be used against me. I would let them have the rest of me to probe, examine and question, but I would never reveal what I was really thinking. What others saw would all be made up. They bought it all and it gave me power knowing I was winning their game.

≈

I have been dreading these first sentences for 10 years. At seventeen, I decided I would never write again, and when I was forced to, I would never write the truth. I would make things up and write what I assumed the reader wanted to hear. I would stretch the truth, change the truth and concoct the truth, but never would I write the truth. How will you believe what I write if you know I never write the truth? After all, the beauty of writing one's own story is that, one can decide: "what to put in and what to leave out" (Dillard, 1998, p.143).

The first story I wrote about the night I tried to kill myself and the second will tell a childhood story. But now, I will explain to you how I plan to unlearn to write what others want to hear and to learn to write truthfully. I will start by telling you my second true story.

When I was little, I spent all my summers with my grandparents on the old farm. The animals had been sold long ago, but the old barn and house still had plenty of stories

to tell. I spent most of my days running in the fields, chasing wildlife and helping my grandmother in the garden. She had the biggest and most beautiful garden I have ever seen. At night, we played cards and she would tell many stories. Sometimes, I would get into some trouble and my grandmother would call me back into the house. I knew I had to tell the truth, because of her magic wand up on the roof. My grandmother made us believe that the wand had magical powers and would tell her if we were lying. I always went along with the story, mostly, because I loved my grandmother, but partially, because I always felt it best not to take the chance. I grew up telling my grandmother the truth. In those days, I had no reason not to tell the truth. I had not shed my childhood innocence and my grandmother never gave me any reason to lie. The old farm kept me safe and so did my grandmother.

I understood as I wrote these two stories that if I was ever going to tell the truth—my truth, I needed to find a way to uncover the memories of my lived experiences. I discovered that my grandmother would become an important part of uncovering the "moments in [my life] which changed [me] forever" (Bailey, 1997, p.137). I would use letters as my methodology, because I saw letters as a means to write my hidden experiences. "I saw in letters [...] a location for healing" (hooks, 1994, p.59). I knew right away that by writing to my grandmother, I would be able to find the words to write my story. How could I lie to my grandmother with the magic wand still on the farmhouse roof?

I sat down and wrote my grandmother her first letter and talked about the last time we saw each other. The night she died still remains very clear in my mind.

Chère Mémère,

The last time we were together, we had just finished eating Kentucky Fried Chicken. Pépère and my brother were downstairs and we were talking about how things might be when I grow up. Mom was away on business and you had come to stay with us. That night, mononcle came over with his new car and we decided to go for a ride. At first, I didn't want to come, because I was on the phone with my cousin, but you insisted and of course I came along. We drove around and not long after we left, you were having trouble breathing in the car. We stopped at the gas station down the hill from our place and mononcle left to call the ambulance. I wasn't exactly sure what was going on and I don't remember talking to you. Finally, the ambulance came and took you to the hospital. Mononcle finally came back with a V-8 and offered that I sit in the front. I was hugging your purse as I walked into the emergency room. Mononcle had disappeared again and I was alone in the waiting room clutching the crucifix from your purse. Eventually, the doctor came out of room number five and told me you had not been strong enough and died not long after you arrived. He said you had given up. How dare they tell me you were not strong! I called mom, your daughter, and told her you had died. Everyone rushed to the hospital and I was quickly pushed aside. They only wanted to know the facts about what had happened. I was fifteen.

A few days later, we buried you in the cemetery next to your church in St. André. Many people attended your funeral and many more people cried. I looked for you dans l'jardin after the funeral and mourned your death the only way I knew how. I sprinkled a few flowers on the garden. You see, I never thought that you could die. The idea never

crossed my mind even as you were unconscious in the front seat of the car and as the ambulance stopped on the side of the road as they were heading towards the hospital.

I think of you everyday and I miss you more than I can imagine.

Je t'aime,

Elizabeth

The day I wrote that letter, I knew that something had changed. I never once thought to rewrite it to fit someone else's truth. I wrote it in order to better understand myself. I realized that my grandmother was always the one closest to the truth. I discovered that writing letters to my grandmother as part of my thesis would allow me to examine my ways of thinking, learning and knowing truthfully. I have hidden behind my own walls for many years and I am ready to uncover the layers of self-protection which prevented me from shaping my true identity. In writing my thesis, I wish to discover myself as a woman, as a lesbian, as a daughter, as a lover, as a teacher, as a researcher, as a soon-to-be mother and as a person who belongs on this earth.

I have to admit that I am a little nervous about this great undertaking. I am worried about the reactions of many people—especially my family—to the stories that I will write and the implications they may or may not have on our relationship. Of course, many people have asked the topic of my thesis and I have been unable to reveal the whole truth. I know that at some point, I will have to let everyone —especially my family—know that I am not writing a traditional research thesis about literacy in schools or children with special needs. One day, I will have to tell them that my thesis will

examine how I was unable to shape my true identity as I struggled though a life I felt I did not belong to.

At the same time, I imagine I will have to justify how "my story reflects my past accurately" (Ellis & Bochner, 2000, p.746). Rather than answering the questions: "What are the consequences my story produces? What kind of person does it shape me into? What new possibilities does it introduce for living my life?"(Ellis & Bochner, 2000, p.746) I realize that my stories are only *a "kind of truth"* written from one perspective at one point in time. I know the ones closest to me whom share these experiences will tell a different story of the same snapshots of my life. Nonetheless, like many who have come before me, "I did not feel empowered until I wrote from an inner place where I could find the key words to name my experience" (Brookes, 1992, p.99). The telling of stories—or rather the retelling of stories—is not for me a way to remember the moments as they happened, because I believe that is impossible and in my case unnecessary, but instead, find out the reasons why these memories have stood the test of time in my mind.

Chère Mémère

I am relieved that I have finally found something I am passionate enough to write about, but I fear that my family will tell me that family matters are not for public discourse. I can already hear them say: How dare I tell my story to strangers when I am unable to share my story with my own family? At this, my family is right. They—especially mom—have spent the later part of my life trying to climb the walls I built around me. In many ways, she knew that I kept my true thoughts to myself and that I would never reveal what I was really thinking. She understood that what I said was

mostly all made up. The more time my family spent climbing the walls around me, the more time I spent reinforcing and rebuilding the walls that kept me safe from the outside world.

I am also thinking that some will not understand why I am doing this and what relevance it has to Educational Research. In fact, my intentions as I entered the Masters program at UPEI two years ago mirrored those thoughts. I planned on researching a particular field of Education in which I would never have to talk about myself. At the time, my knowledge of research was based on notions of universal truths so I figured that my own personal voice had nothing to do with research anyway. Little did I know that my research would eventually turn into a journey of self-discovery! I finally realized that my contribution to the world of Educational Research would be both personal and political. I hope to convince others that my work is both meaningful and relevant as I bring the private into public discourse. I also hope my family will see that I am happy and allow me the freedom I need to write truthfully. At the moment, I am happy to be writing again. I will share these letters I write to you with others and let them see who I really am.

And so my journey begins...

Je t'aime, Elizabeth

In continuing to be truthful, I think I must tell the obvious. I have come to write this thesis because I was hurting. I was ashamed of my experiences and I could not bring myself to share my stories with myself—let alone others. My thesis, as it is written today, began as a painful reminder of all those stories I tried hard to forget. I had seen

"the glazed eyes, shuffling feet and uncomfortable reactions" too many times to want to bring back any awful memories from my past (Brookes, 1992, p.13). Nonetheless, what became apparent during my time at UPEI was that I must first get to know myself before I am able to open up the world to my students. Palmer (1998) claims that "knowing my students and my subject depend heavily on self-knowledge. When I do not know myself, I cannot know who my students are. I will see them through a glass darkly, in the shadows of my unexamined life—and when I cannot see them clearly, I cannot teach them well" (p.2). Therefore, the first part of my thesis will uncover key learning moments that helped shape my identity; both as a student and as a teacher. If it is true that I teach who I am and I believe that it is, I must better understand myself before I can better understand my students. I must therefore answer: "Who is the self that teaches?" (Palmer, 1998, p.7).

The second part of my thesis reflects on my journey as a beginning teacher. I describe events in my classroom that have brought me to question my teaching practices. I consider my own experiences growing up as I try to understand how my teaching affects my students. I question my methodologies in order to become a better teacher and I critique the structures that reproduce the ideologies of the dominant group in the Educational system.

I also include letters to mémère throughout my work in order to help heal my mind and my soul. I wrote letters when I was frustrated with the process and found myself staring at the computer screen. I also found that writing letters helped make the journey through difficult moments more bearable and allowed me to uncover the truth behind my experiences. Also, I use theory "to create a place from which to speak"

(Bailey, 1997, 20). I have found solace in the words of various researchers who have helped me to find a voice—one voice—a voice that speaks these truths. Theory gave me the words to understand my experiences. I was able to relate to the words that I was reading and I admired the researchers for speaking the truths that I was unable to speak. hooks (1994) "came to theory desperate, wanting to comprehend –to grasp what was happening around and within [her]" (hooks, 1994, p.59). I came to theory oblivious, but soon, discovered "in theory a location for healing" (hooks, 1994, p.59).

I encourage readers to think critically as they read my work. I know that my own personal bias will not only play a part in my research, but has led me to uncover the events that shape my identity. I believe that we come to interpret experience *through* our biases and prejudices and *not despite* them (Schwandt, 2000). I will try to name my assumptions along the way, but as I am still continuing to uncover my own ways of learning, unlearning and relearning, I also imagine that I am still working to know that I know. My intention, as I arouse Freire's *conscientização*—the awakening of critical awareness within myself—would be to begin, and to continue, discussion about *messy subjects*. Boler describes a pedagogy of discomfort where she "invites educators and students to engage in critical thinking and explore the multitude of habits, relations of power, knowledge, and ethics" (2003, p.131). I want my stories to encourage conversation between readers, colleagues, friends and families in order to change "the glazed eyes, shuffling feet and uncomfortable reactions" to a critical discussion about the inequalities of our system (Brookes, 1992, p.13).

Chapter 1: Examining Student History

I have spent over 20 years being a student and I have seen my share of teachers. I have sat silently in classrooms listening to male and female teachers, young teachers, old teachers, divorced teachers, and happily married teachers. I have listened to teachers with kids and teachers without. I have been in classrooms where teachers have been listened to and many more where teachers have not. I have seen many angry teachers, sad teachers, happy teachers, discontented teachers, anxious teachers and a few drunken teachers. I have had good teachers and bad teachers. I have had teachers who scream a lot and some who rarely spoke.

Unfortunately, I can barely remember a half a dozen of my teacher's names. I have sat in front of over a hundred teachers and only a few remain clear in my mind. I cannot understand how I could have gone through the Educational System and not remember the teachers—good or bad, with whom I have spent the majority of my life with. I am not placing blame on these teachers, because I imagine the circumstances of my life also played a part in my forgetting. Indeed, I recall very few names of students in my classes. As I look through class pictures, I can only name the students that I might have allowed access to my true self or those that I tried endlessly to get close or push away. The others, like my teachers, are only blurred faces with names too far away to remember. How has not remembering affected who I am and the way I teach my students?

On the other hand, I do have a few vivid memories of my time spent in school. I have a few happy memories: My best friend in Elementary School was Sandra Mercier, my mother was my kindergarten teacher, I walked to school with my big brother every

day in Grade 4 and in Grade 5, and there were two Elizabeths and one Liz in a class of 10 students. In Grade 9, my soccer team won the provincials and in Grade 10, we won the Regionals in basketball and soccer.

I also have several horrible memories. I describe my time spent in Junior High as insufferable, excruciating and horrendous. My feelings of inadequacy were unbearable as I tried to learn how to be like everyone else. Unfortunately, the more I tried to belong, the more I screwed it up. I learned early on that the important classes were given outside of the classroom: Fashion 101, Boys 102 and Popular 103. I spent all my time in Junior High trying to figure out what was wrong with me. The older we got the further away I was from the reality of the other girls. Unfortunately for me, sports were now out of style, dress codes had turned to pink skirts and scrunchies and the only topics of conversation were boys and the next school dance.

In High School, my alienation from the other students kept mounting and I wanted nothing more than to get away from it all. I tried to stay focused on my school work and I spent all my free time in the gym. I dealt with the painful realities of High School by being someone else. I pretended to be the person everyone wanted me to be and kept up the façade of being happy. I was involved in school committees and I was part of the school's basketball and soccer teams. The problem was not with my friends, but with my own feeling of isolation. I was different. The last thing I wanted to do was spend time talking about boys or shopping for the latest fashions. I always laughed it off when I never had the right hairstyle or the perfect pair of jeans. I pretended it didn't bother me and joked that I would like it once it went out of style. My friends poked fun at my poor sense of style and my weekend attire, but in the end, they respected me for

who I was. The main problem was that I couldn't seem to respect myself. I was never satisfied and I always had a nagging sensation that something was terribly wrong. Looking back, I realize that I spent most of my time thinking about girls (some more than others) and finding ways to get their attention.

The realization that I was a lesbian and that I was looking for a girlfriend only came to me years later after many attempted suicides and cuttings. Of course, I realize I am making a huge leap into the world of assumptions and what ifs. What if I had overdosed on the word lesbian all those years? I might have never made the connection between it and my life. What if something else affected the way I felt? The death of my grand-mother definitely played a role in my feelings of sadness. Perhaps, my life would have been as confusing and isolating having the word discussed my entire life. Eisner argues that "what schools allow children to think about shapes, in ways perhaps more significant than we realize, the kind of minds they come to own" (Eisner, 1993, p.5). Of course, I will never know for sure, but one thing I do know is that I was part of an educational system that refused to even remotely discuss the possibility that gays and lesbians were a part of the world. "So repressed was I, that I didn't dare come out. I didn't dare breathe a word of anything to anybody. I couldn't even articulate what was 'wrong' with me, or what I thought was wrong with me" (Morris, 2003, p.192).

Bourdieu argues that the members of the dominated groups come to internalize the messages of the dominant groups and come to believe that "the dominant ideology of legitimate culture [is] the only authentic culture" (Bourdieu, 1977, p.40). I believed that boys were to fall in love with girls and girls are to fall in love with boys. I never knew

that girls could love girls. The messages of the dominant group or the failure to name homosexuality confused me about my feelings for other girl. Magda Lewis writes,

> If we are not men, if we are not white, if we are not economically advantaged, if we survive by the labour of our hands, if we are not heterosexual, and if we do not embody and display the values assets of the privilege of Euro-American culture, the school curriculum and schooling experience fling us to the margins. Nowhere in the curriculum do we see even a glimpse of a reflection of ourselves, of our present realities or of our future dreams. (p.33)

I wish the word lesbian had been part of my vocabulary while I was in school. I wish I could have had the chance to use it in a sentence or question its meaning. I wish a teacher would have made a place for the word in the classroom through class discussions or part of a novel study. I wish I could have seen a movie with two women kissing or caught a glimpse of two women holding hands. I wish someone would have acknowledged that *girls are allowed to fall in love with girls.* Unfortunately for me, "questions of sexual identity never enter the classroom even as we turn a blind eye to the violations of homophobia that hold many students physically, emotionally and psychologically hostage to their peers" (Lewis, 1995, p.41).

≈

Her name was "Annie Labelle". I was in Grade 10 and she was a year ahead of me. We played on the same basketball team and I remember how my heart pounded each time I saw her walking down the hall. My hands were all sweaty when she came near and I would rehearse conversations we never had in my head. I thought about her all the time and made a few detours to get to class in order to pass by her locker. I wanted her to pay

attention to me and I wished that I could spend more time with her. Basketball practices were the most rewarding as we played one on one during practices. All was well until I decided that I wanted more. I wasn't quite sure what it was that I was seeking or why I needed to be closer to her.

I came to school one morning and asked if I could talk to her. She was so beautiful with her blond curly hair and bright blue eyes. I wanted her to come closer to me. I wanted the close interaction friends share while comforting each other. I told her that I wanted to kill myself. I showed her the self mutilation I had done to myself the night before and explained to her that there was something wrong with me. She cried as I explained to her how something was missing in my life and I just couldn't stand not knowing what made me so sad all the time. She listened and once I was done, she walked me to the Student Services Office and I was admitted to the hospital a few hours later. She came with me to the hospital and left as soon as I was admitted. We never shared the moment of close interactions between friends. In fact, we barely spoke again. Little did I know that I had just gone through my first heartbreak. Unfortunately, I learned little from the experience, because I spent many years continuing to reach out to girls in the same way. I was always sadly disappointed even though the outcomes were always slightly different. I never did find what I was looking for.

Chère Mémère,

Do you remember the night you died? We ate KFC that night and then we talked in the living-room upstairs. We were reminiscing about holidays and summer vacations and talking about relationships and friendships. Do you remember saying that one day I

would meet someone that made me really happy? I'm not sure why and how I remember your exact words, but I remember that you never used the word boy. Would you have used it with my other cousins? Of course, at the time it never made a great difference, but later on, I always believed that you already knew what took years for me to realize. Je suis une lesbienne. Did you know? Unfortunately, I made the mistake of confiding this to my mother and she said you would have been devastated if you knew that I kissed women. She tried to ruin my memory, but I still continue to believe that you knew. I am convinced that you would have supported me and talked to my mother to help her better understand me.

Life was difficult after you died. We were all very sad and no one was talking very much about it. Mom was always working and we talked less and less. She wanted to know what was wrong with me and I always refused to talk to her. She tried to get me to talk to a shrink, but the fact that I really did not know what made me sad did not please anyone. They all thought I was hiding something and they insisted that I talk about my feelings. I quickly understood that no one really needed the truth, but just a little something to make them feel better. They didn't really care about the truth, because it seemed that if they did, they would have realized that I really didn't know. They wanted me to talk about you and my parents' divorce. They labeled me with Post Traumatic Stress Syndrome. I eventually broke down and started to lie about it all. I didn't know how else to stop their long line of questions. I'm sorry I used your death and my great memories of you in such a way.

Everything got much worse once I started trying to kill myself. I was admitted into hospitals numerous times and my time varied depending on the attempt. The worst was

my last. The night I burned everything I had ever written. I was desperate to stop this horrible feeling that life was not worth living. I took hundreds of pills. Fortunately, a friend called and noticed something was very wrong and she called Matante. I hung up and considered running outside in the middle of the blizzard to freeze to death or go downstairs to get dad's hunting rifle before they arrived. I guess I didn't really want to die. I was admitted to the hospital to recover from an infected liver and drug overdose. A few days later, I was moved to the psych ward where I met another shrink. I told him that I had to go back to school as soon as possible, because I didn't want to fall behind. I told him that my basketball team was playing in an important tournament and I desperately wanted to be there. He let me out a week later and made me promise I would see a shrink twice a week. He concluded that I must be doing better because I was living for something. I had them fooled again. Unfortunately, I arrived home and I was still miserable. I decided that I would give one shrink one more chance to help me with my problems. I wanted to get better.

I attended my first mandatory session and I was pleased at how well it went. I attended a few more sessions and was thinking that I might finally realize why I was always feeling sad. I was getting better. Unfortunately, my recovery was short lived. I walked into my psychiatrist's office one day and he mentioned that my mother had called. I knew I was in for some bad news. I had moved to Quebec to live with dad a few months previously and my mother called from New Brunswick. He told me that he couldn't be responsible if I decided to try suicide again. His speech had my mother written all over it. He wanted to send me to Quebec in order to take some tests. He promised that they would help with my recovery. At that point I trusted him, so I agreed to go.

I had been tricked. I was not only going for some tests, but I was being admitted to the psychiatric children's ward. I pleaded with my father not to leave me here. He said he couldn't be responsible if I tried to kill myself again. My mother! My mother was in on this terrible scheme. I should have known. I immediately put my escape plan to work. I looked interested in all their activities and I was pleasant to everyone. I talked about my parents' divorce to the shrink and decided I would spend all day with the ward's teacher. I always impressed the psychiatrists with my interest in school. The nurses marveled at my fast recovery and I was send home three weeks later. They never mentioned the attempted suicides or the scars on my arms. I had fooled them again.

I have never been to a shrink since that day.

Je t'aime,

Ta petite fille

In Grade 12, I won Most Cheerful and Best Team Spirited Award. I was happy that I was able to fool them all, but was saddened by the fact that no one really knew me. I had tried to kill myself three times and wanted more than anything to get out of this hateful world. I thought it would be hard going back to school after coming out of the hospital. I figured I would be bombarded with questions about my whereabouts or how I was doing. Yeah right. I think suicide is another one of society's hidden secrets. I went back to school as though nothing had ever happened. I knew better than to talk about my suicides attempts and I learned to be ashamed of what I had done. I took my diploma and never looked back.

In University, I took a course called *Social and Personal Issues in Education.* We were asked to read many articles including *Confronting Class in the Classroom* from the book *Teaching to Transgress: Education as the Practice of Freedom* by bell hooks. I was intrigued by her name and wondered why the lowercase letters. I figured she must have something to prove. Why else would she want to stand out from the rest of us? I had just graduated from High School and the last thing I wanted was to stand out from the rest of the world. I thought very little about social issues in Education and the papers I wrote did not include my personal thoughts. I mimicked the words of the professor and gave her a few personal tidbits in order to achieve the requirements of the class. I was ill-educated.

I only realized how uncritical I was as I entered the Masters Program at UPEI. Of course, I knew about reading, writing and arithmetic, but I knew nothing about the oppressive nature of the Educational System I'd known. I only began to understand the oppressive forces of the dominant class as I was introduced to the theory that spoke the words of my unknowing. At first, I thought the readings were difficult and arduous and the writing was painstaking, but eventually, I came to enjoy theory. The readings gave me the words to understand my experiences and the writing allowed me to finally speak differently about those experiences. I was able to relate to the words I was reading and I admired the researchers for speaking truths that I was unable to articulate. "I felt safe (enough) to write the words which were key to exposing a previously untouched part of myself" (Brookes, 1992, p.99). I was finally encouraged to write and speak from a place I had not visited in a long time. I was empowered!

I spent 20 years in school without ever questioning the system that prides itself on the teaching and learning of students. All my life, I sat quietly in classrooms and the only thing I ever doubted was myself. I have recently re-read bell hooks and have been able to put her words in the context of my own life. My professor from *Social and Personal Issues in Education*, tried to educate me about the ills of our Educational System but her teaching was far away from my own reality and she could not reach me. I could not begin to comprehend the wrongs she spoke of. At the time, I had no idea that her words were so intimately related with knowing my identity.

I was part of the "intense silence" to which bell hooks refers. I was part of the hidden curriculum that no one wants to discuss. I was a part of the dominated class, flung to the margins, and I never even knew it. I was always desperately hoping to catch a glimpse of what it was I thought I was missing. Surely, I would have a teacher that would mention something that would turn my life around. Unfortunately, the majority of my teachers concentrated mainly on getting through the material. Kincheloe and McLaren (2002) believe that in an educational context, "legitimized discourses of power insidiously tell educators what books may be read by students, what instructional methods may be utilized, and what beliefs systems and views of success may be taught" (p.94). The curriculum served as a means of domination, "establishing one correct reading that implants a particular hegemonic/ideological message into the consciousness of the reader" (Kincheloe& McLaren, 2002, p.94). The curriculum and those that implement it "regulate what can and cannot be said, who can speak with the blessings of authority and who must listen; and whose social constructions are valid and whose are erroneous and unimportant" (Kincheloe&McLaren, 2002, p.94).

The silence in my schools felt intense: I never knew to question who spoke and who was spoken to. At the time I wasn't about to ask: Who decided on the mandated curriculum? Who silenced me into a world of attempted suicides and cutting?

Why was I left to figure it out on my own? I never got the impression that a teacher "[taught] in a manner that respects and cares for the souls of [...] students" which bell hooks argues "is essential if we are to provide the necessary conditions where learning can most deeply and intimately begin"(hooks, 1994, p.13).

If these words seem to be an attack on teachers, I can assure you that they are not. But, I have now entered the Educational School system wearing a different hat. I am a teacher and I have come to understand what I failed to know as a student. "Nowhere is there a more intense silence about the reality of class differences [inequalities] than in the educational settings" (hooks, 1994, p.177). I cannot blame my teachers for my unknowing, because I believe they are as much a product of this structure as was I. Indeed, "the ES [Educational System] tends to equip the agents appointed to inculcate with a standard training and standardized, standardizing instruments" (Bourdieu, 1977, p.58). What I wanted was to learn something that was meaningful to better understand myself. I realize I am dwelling in the world of what-ifs, but I am confident that if my teachers had reached out to me and taken the opportunity to see me better, I may have had a different experience in school.

Chapter 2: Examining Teacher History

I remember my first teaching assignment. I was walking into my very own classroom just out of university. I was eager and optimistic. I was ready to take on the challenges of teaching. I was prepared to make a difference in the lives of my students and I was convinced that I could make learning fun and exciting. I agreed with bell hooks (1994) "that the classroom should be an exciting place, never boring" (p.7). As I first started teaching five years, "I entered the classroom with the conviction that it was crucial for me and every other student to be an active participant, not a passive consumer" (hooks, 1994, p.14). I wanted to make my classroom a place where students not only wanted to learn, but where they wanted to spend some time. I wanted to give my students the education that I never had. I believed that I could solve all the problem behaviors by offering a wide range of activities and keeping children involved on the task at hand. I was adamant that my students would all be eager to learn and I would provide challenging and meaningful learning opportunities for them.

Of course, I was naïve imagining that I could solve all the world's problems in one year. I quickly realized that I would spend the majority of my time planning, marking, working on report cards and doing parent-teacher interviews as well as wiping runny noses and handing out band-aids, zipping coats, putting on mittens, dealing with tattle-tellers and trying to listen to too many stories at once. Where, I wondered would I ever find the time to put my vision into practice?

Now after five years of teaching, I can confidently say I am still an optimist. Yet, I am more realistic. I learned that turning my classroom into a challenging learning environment where students want to spend time is easier to say than to put into action.

I've also learned that teaching is sometimes difficult and that some days are much harder than others. I come home discouraged, wondering how I am supposed to meet the needs of all my students. I was never told that I might question my decision to become a teacher, nor did I imagine I might add to the toxicity of the educational system. I was not trained to deal with teachers who would find fault with my vision of teaching. Nevertheless, I persevere because I want my students to have a more positive experience in school. I want them to have good memories and wonderful stories to tell. I want them to remember that I was dedicated to learning and teaching. I want them to remember my name!

I have spent the last years trying to figure out how learning could be fun and how to teach everyone what they needed to know all at the same time. I sometimes have the impression I either bore my students or excite them to the point that no one learns anything at all. I imagine I am exaggerating a bit, but I often wonder how I can create both learning and excitement. As I reflect on my years of teaching, I realize I have very few teachers whom managed such a feat. Why then, is it important for me to write a personal history?

Knowles and Coles (1994) suggests that:

> [W]e make the claim that writing a personal history account may facilitate your professional development [...] because, in writing about your experiences associated with learning, schools, classrooms, and teachers, you can make known the implicit theories, values, and beliefs that underpin your thinking about being a teacher. (p23)

In writing this history, I have come to learn that I have confused my experiences in unexciting and uninviting classrooms with a lack of fun. I began teaching wanting learning to be fun. I got more caught up with planning lessons that would excite, rather then lessons that would excite learning. In affect, I failed to answer the questions: What are they learning, why am I teaching it and are they learning what they need? I now realize I was not lacking in fun during those years. I wanted a teacher to teach something that was meaningful to me. hooks (1994) explains that "[students] want an education that is healing to the uninformed, unknowing spirit. They want knowledge that is meaningful" (p.19). I believed however, that there was merit in other ways of teaching. My students were excited about coming to school, the parents complimented me on my teaching and I was excited about children. I was knowledgeable about current teaching practices and I applied numerous teaching strategies. My former Grade 6 students often said they wished they could have continued to be in my class.

However, I knew my methods lacked something, but I refused to be the teacher that bored all kids to death. I refused to fall in line with traditional teaching styles that tube fed information to students.

During my struggle to find new ways of teaching, I was fortunate enough to spend a few weeks in a graduate class designed to teach critical pedagogy. A few summers ago, I was amazed at the teacher's ability to create a learning community in a few short weeks. I saw how she was able to make the curriculum come alive with personal stories. I started to realize what I had missed in my early school years. I sensed I had to teach to the whole student if I wanted to make a profound influence in his/her life. I was empowered by this type of teaching and I was determined to find a way to make it work in my own

classroom. I understood "that we cannot separate education from personal experience. Who we are, to whom we are related, how we are situated all matter in what we learn, what we value, and how we approach intellectual and moral life" (Noddings 1992, p.xiii).

I returned to my classroom in September with a new goal. I wondered how a critical approach would work in a Grade 6 class. I introduced the concept of community to the class. I quickly saw the need to be more attentive to students' personal stories, and to allow more time for them to dialogue with the materiel and with each other. I encouraged students to listen attentively to their classmates and to ask questions to better their understanding. As I encouraged dialogue and participation, I noticed that the students began to form a learning community. They had begun to acknowledge each other, and they had begun to share their thoughts and opinions more openly. They had begun to understand that "[m]y language counted, but so did theirs" (Freire & Shor, 1897, p.23). "What mattered, I think, was my refusal to install the language of the professor as the only valuable idiom in the classroom" (Freire & Shor, 1897, p.23). My students were beginning to understand that I was genuinely interested in their words, their culture and their lives. I knew that "[v]ery rarely had a professor taken them so seriously, but the truth [was] that they had never taken themselves so seriously either" (Freire & Shor, 1897, p.23).

As a result, I asked more questions—effecting more change. Who decides what they learn? Who am I silencing as I teach? Who is being privileged? What is valued in my classroom? With this change, new questions were asked: What assumptions am I making? Am I generalizing? Who is in charge? Do have a choice? I began to reflect on my teaching practices and I realized that I was opposed to teaching in a manner that

refuted what was meaningful to students. Am I teaching what someone else believes they need to learn or am I teaching what I assume they want to learn? Am I teaching because it is imposed or because it is meaningful? Are they learning to be critical thinkers or are they learning to pass a test, to pass the grade and to move to the next level?

These questions lead to a new clarity in my thinking. Specifically, I do not assume that teachers cannot teach from the mandated curriculum and follow the outcomes described by the Department of Education. Like Noddings (1992), I am not arguing against the needs for student to acquire knowledge in various subjects. "It is an argument, [however], against an ideology of control that forces all students to study a particular, narrowly prescribed curriculum devoid of content they might really care about" (Noddings, 1992, p. xii). Like Noddings, I assume students need to acquire skills in order to move ahead to the next class and to negotiate in a demanding world, but I also believe that teachers must find ways to teach these important skills without losing sight of student identity.

Shor argues that "[e]ducation is much more controllable if the teacher follows the standard curriculum and if the students act as if only the teacher's words count" (Freire & Shor, 1987, p.10). I confess I have strayed from the mandated curriculum many times over the past years and I have put aside what someone else prescribed and created units I assumed were meaningful to students. Like many teachers, I was searching for units and themes related to the lives of the students in my class.

Unfortunately,

> After years in dull transfer-of-knowledge classes, in boring courses filled with sedating teacher-talk, many have become non-participants, waiting for

> the teacher to set the rules and start narrating what to memorize. These students are silent because they no longer expect education to include the joy of learning, moments of passion or inspiration or comedy, or even that education will speak to the real conditions of their lives. (Freire & Shor, 1987, p.122)

My intent is not to say that we must throw away the curriculum in order to actively engage students, but rather, I am attempting to distill the ideas suggested in the curriculum and to teach them in ways that will reach more students. My goal is to create a learning environment where the ideas in the curriculum can be discussed from meaningful student and teacher perspectives. Together, we can examine the curriculum and asked important questions: Who is this teaching? Who is silenced? Why is this important? What beliefs and assumptions do we have about the curriculum? Who are the learners?

The Foundation document for the Atlantic Canada English Language Arts Curriculum states: "[s]tudents will be able to respond critically to a range of texts, applying their understanding of language, form and genre" (p.28). Specifically, students will respond critically to texts and "apply a growing range of strategies to analyze and evaluate a text; demonstrate growing awareness that all texts reflect a purpose and a perspective; recognize when language is being used to manipulate, persuade or control them; and detect prejudice, stereotyping and bias" (28). I wonder how many teachers are able to meet or exceed these outcomes. I was taught critical thinking as a graduate student. I am not sure I would have been able to teach my students effectively the outcomes from the Foundations document before I was able to learn them myself. How

many times did I look at a textbook and fail to recognize the hidden curriculum within? Would I have thought to question the purpose and perspective of the curriculum guides? Students and teacher can learn critical thinking skills by working through the curriculum and asking interrogating questions and dialoguing about the purpose and the intent. Freire and Shor (1987) argue that "[i]f teachers or students exercised the power to remake knowledge in the classroom, then they would be asserting their power to remake society" (p.10).

How do I work to move my students away from passive learning to construct their own knowledge? How do we teach students to become critical thinkers? How do we get students to question themselves and others? When I started raising questions, at first, students are not accustomed to such teaching and were a little unsure how to react, but with the help of their more outspoken classmates, they soon realized their new freedoms. In an ideal world, students might come to class knowing what they want to learn. Teachers would not be so concerned with meeting the outcomes, and getting through the curriculum. Instead, teachers might ask students what is important to them. Shor says, "How can I motivate students unless they act with me? Inventing a course in-progress with the students is both exciting and anxiety-producing" (Freire & Shor, 1987, p.7). On one hand, how can a teacher be expected to have lesson plans and long-term goals before knowing the interests of the students? On the other, how can teachers be prepared for class if I do not come with well thought out lesson plans based on the mandated curriculum?

Students often tested me as they questioned the importance of new material and negotiated the amount of homework or the type of work assigned. Initially, I think they

wanted to see my reactions, but eventually, they challenged me in order to change the classroom to better suit their needs. I also encouraged them by reflecting aloud on the lessons and discussing with my students what I would do differently next time. I reflected on ways I teach students and questioned myself in front of them as I tried to figure out the best ways to proceed. We formed a community where everyone's ideas and questions were acknowledged and welcomed.

The questions I posed about the curriculum brought me to reflect on other teaching practices. I wondered in which ways I was teaching—or not teaching the students in my class. Over time, I learned that I needed to talk less: I noticed my voice was occupying too much time in the class. In many instances, I dominated most of the key learning moments. I took too long to explain concepts and I spoke too often once I put them to work. Even now, I continue to talk too much, but I have made my students aware that I am trying to improve. "What mattered, I think, was my refusal to install the language of the professor as the only valuable idiom in the classroom. My language counted, but so did theirs" (Freire & Shor, 1987, p.6). I ask them if I am talking too much. At first, they were not sure what to say. They believed a teacher had to do most of the talking, but now, they laugh when I ask if I am talking too much. They have started to time me and remind me when my five minutes are up! In this way, I have enabled them to practice what Shor and Freire suggest. Shor writes, "[w]hat matters most to me in the beginning is how much and how fast I can learn about my students" (Freire & Shor, 1987, p.6). Similarly, I understand that in order to learn about them, I need to "restrain my own voice" and allow them to voice their thoughts and opinions (Freire & Shor, 1987, p.6). I also learned that it is not always easy, because students have not been

taught to dialogue. As educators, we constantly talk—sometimes about different things with more than one student at a time. I have learned I need to teach students to express their opinions fully—and to listen—to each other and to not just direct their accustomed one sentence answer to me. In other words, I need to create an open atmosphere, a community where dialogue happens. I remind students that they know how to talk to each other, because they spend hours on the phone, on MSN and out on the playground. "It's not the same", they tell me. "We were never asked to talk that way before. "How will you know if we know the right answers if we don't tell you?" they ask.

How then do I know I am teaching students well? And, am I preparing them well for Grade 7? Freire says that "[t]he traditional ideology is so strong that we need successes, in order for the young teacher above all to feel that he or she is right" (Freire & Shor, 1987, p.26). I constantly question my teaching practices, I admit that some days I am not convinced that I do well by my students. However, as I hear their stories, read their letters and messy books, listen to their questions and watch them interact with each other, I imagine I do well by them.

Am I taking risks? Everyday, I take risks, but I am learning how far I can question the dominant way of teaching. I understand better what it means to learn the limits of what I can do. As I teach, I am aware of my students, the other teachers, my principal, the superintendent, and the parents of my students. I know that what I say and do in the classroom will eventually shape others. In fact, I encourage students to continue our conversations with their parents, and I tell them when I have spoken to others about the events in the class. I know to be careful with how I word things, and that I can only take things so far. Freire and Shor say that "[y]ou research your field of

action to see how the results and limits of your intervention. Then, you discover how far you can go or if you've gone beyond the limits" (Freire & Shor, 1987, p.58). For example, I only talked about being a lesbian once the students asked me directly and showed me they were ready to have the conversation. I understand well that they might not be ready to hear this information, or know what to do with it once they have it. Often, students ask me what I think about a subject, knowing I have tried to keep my opinion to myself in order to allow them time to discuss. I am always aware of the influence my opinion has on my students and I am always negotiating how much I think they are ready to know.

How does this change in authority work? Freire and Shor argue that "[y]ou can let go of the authority too soon, just as you can let go too late" (Freire & Shor, 1987, p.90). I know I am the teacher. I discuss with my students what that means to them. In a traditional classroom, I would transfer knowledge rather than construct or de-construct it with my students who would sit quietly, taking it all in. Once they realize that they have some power in the class, they begin to negotiate their power. Power shifts include: Can we change the schedule? Can we go to the bathroom anytime we want? Can we work in groups? Can we not have homework tonight? Students enjoy discussing these issues, and I am happy to see them reclaiming power. Eventually, they learn to trust my judgment and they respect the decisions. Once in a while, we renegotiate decisions, and they learn to move around within the limits I have set. Of course, every class is different. Always, I need to re-evaluate the way I negotiate authority in the class.

Sometimes I wonder how others will react when they enter my classroom and see students sitting on desks, under desks, on the couch, on my chair or even in a milk crate. I

know it may appear chaotic to some, but the students know that even the seating arrangements has been negotiated. They know that the atmosphere in the classroom is never one of *laissez faire, laissez-allez.* They know not to go beyond the limits we have set up as a learning community. "You learn democracy by making democracy, but with limits" (Freire & Shor, 1987, p.90).

Chapter 3: Tribes/DEAL

How, then, do I do critical pedagogy in a grade 6 class? How do I get students "to name, to reflect critically, to act" (Wink, 2000, p.31)? Of course, I have few models: I had never been part of an elementary classroom that practices critical pedagogy. All I know is what I have seen in a few university classes. I know that a class full of 11 and 12 year olds would have to be different. I would have to find innovative ways to work with the Grade 6 outcomes and find themes and projects that would reflect their interests and my goals. My intention was not only to teach them how to learn, but to get students to ask questions about their learning and my teaching as they developed their critical awareness.

As I began my fourth year teaching, I discovered I would learn more about what it is to be a teacher than in any other year. Wink believes that "[r]elearning takes place when kids teach us all those things we didn't learn in teacher education" (Wink, 2000, p.31). I would also doubt myself and my methodological approach more than in any other year. I decided to delve in the learning, unlearning and relearning of what it means to be a teacher, because of everything I knew about sitting in a classroom as a student.

Prior to getting ready to go back to school, I reread a book my mother gave me during my first year of teaching. I remembered being unsuccessful with the implementation of ideas from the *Tribes* book; I had posted the *Tribes* rules and I had followed the instructions for a few activities. I realized my mistakes after I took the Critical Pedagogy Graduate course. I understood that Tribes was much more than a few rules posted on the wall and a bunch of activities played out every once in a while. *Tribes* was

about forming a community within the class. The teacher and the students had to buy into its ideas in order for the activities and the discussion to be meaningful and relevant.

I decided that if I really wanted to teach critical pedagogy, I needed to give it importance within the class. Therefore, *Tribes* was every second day after lunch as an extension of English Language Arts. I decided to start it on the second day, since the first day was filled with introductions, explanations and rules. The students were quick to pick up on the new way of teaching and learning and the majority had their hands up with questions. They wanted to know what it was and asked that we start it right away. I was pleased with my decision to add it to the schedule. The students were already hooked and I knew I had to follow through. As I hoped, the students walked in the second day and immediately wanted to know when we would do *Tribes*. I must have said *after lunch* a hundred times that morning. I certainly didn't have to force them in from big recess. They were lined up and ready to learn! Lisa Delpit believes that "[w]hen students' interests are addressed in school, they are more likely to connect with the school, with the teacher, with the academic knowledge, and with the school's language form" (Delpit, 2002, p.45). They all sat down and after a short introduction of what I believed *Tribes* to be, I gave each group of two a pencil and a paper. I explained that they would not be allowed to talk as they both held the pencil and drew a picture to show the class. They giggled and laughed, but began right away. I was pleased to see my students eager and excited.

Now came the bigger challenge. I needed to begin the teaching of critical thinking through the activities I presented to the students. I asked: What did you learn about yourself/others as you drew your picture? Why did I ask you to draw the picture

together? Who was the leader? How did you decide what to draw when you could not speak? After the activity was over, I talked more about how *Tribes* could look like in our class. I talked to them about my expectations and my hopes for the year. My intentions were that using *Tribes* would help me teach my students critical thinking skills and the discussions before, during and after the activities would bring us to form a learning community. I wondered if I had time to dedicate to a new subject. I remembered I talked a lot the first days of school and my students stayed silent during the whole 'speech'. Were they listening? Or had they spaced out during the first five minutes? Would *Tribes* become more to my students than a fun activity? Am I doing the right thing? What will the parents think? Will the students learn anything? Will I really teach something?

Tribes is a three stage approach to building a classroom community. The first stage is Inclusion—the goal is for all students to introduce themselves, share their thoughts and opinions with each other and feel that everyone has listened attentively and acknowledged their thoughts. Second is Influence—the students started to get to know each other and work on impressing their ideas on others and learning to voice their thoughts more openly. The last of the stages is called Community—the students are comfortable with each other and challenge their own thoughts as well as the opinions of their classmates. *Tribes* has four rules: Respect yourself and others; Right to Pass; No put-downs; and Listen Attentively.

Over the course of the year, I noticed that the students who often passed their turns (rule #2) participated more often and were much more willing to share their ideas with us. The students who needed more time to think about an answer also became more confident and were quicker to speak as the year went on. Unlike other years, I came back

to the rules many times and explained their significance. How did it all work? At first, very slowly! My goal was to use the activities from *Tribes* to teach my students critical pedagogy: "a lens that empowers us to see and to know in new ways" (Wink, 2000, p.72). I knew that "the official syllabus has not spoken their language, not developed their critical desire, not related to themes intimately rooted in their lives" (Freire & Shor, 1987, p.88). I knew I wanted to move beyond the traditional and make teaching and learning a new experience for us all.

What did Tribes look like in my class? Well to the distant observer, we were having too much fun, we talked too much, and seemed not to be working, but within the class, we had achieved our goal. We had formed a community of learners, and a community of friends. We laughed a lot, played a lot and learned a great deal about each other and the world. At anytime during the day, you could come into our class and find students sitting on chairs, on desks and on the floor. One sat under a desk, another in a milk crate and a few more sat surrounded by pylons in order to represent their personal space. To the distant observer, our class may have seemed like a place not conducive to learning, but from my perspective, we had created a place where we felt safe to be ourselves. Students understood how to move around the class without impeding the needs of their classmates. They knew they could speak openly about their beliefs, their fears and themselves. They knew they might be challenged, but welcomed the opportunity to challenge back.

How did we get to this point? I think we all knew the moment we moved into the last step to form a community. I had asked them to take out a coloring pencil in the color that best represented them that day. I was trying this activity out for the first time and never could I have imagined that it would challenge all that I knew about students and teaching.

I don't think my students knew that from this day on, they would expect more from teachers and schools as they were laughing at my instructions.

They had just come in from big recess and they were still using their outdoor voices as they came in. I instructed them to sit at their desks as I normally did and told them to take out a colored pencil. Of course, they were laughing and chatting as they did as they were told. We went around to each student as he/she told us what color best described him/her today. The laughing stopped abruptly, as one student seriously said that white best described him that day, because he would like to be invisible. Another student decided that blue would allow her to fly away from all her problems. The chatter took on a different form as the students were surprised by these responses. As we listened to the different colors, I wondered how I would move them to question their responses.

Once most people shared, I asked that they think about what they had just heard and formulate a good question for someone else. The students shared personal stories about friends, family, death, school and teachers. Many students cried that day as they were sharing their stories with others. I also noticed that students started moving around in order to comfort others. I noticed a few had their *messy books* out and were writing or drawing (messy books are hard cover books meant to write/draw thoughts and ideas). I noticed the Kleenex box being passed around. I noticed they were asking questions and were listening to each other. I was no longer the center of the classroom, but another participant. "My language counted, but so did theirs. My language changed, and so did theirs. This democracy of expression established a mutual atmosphere which encouraged the students to talk openly, not fearing ridicule or punishment for being stupid" (Freire & Shor, 1987, p.23).

That day I knew a shift had occurred. Students were learning what was meaningful and authentic to them. We all left changed by our discussion. Many were still crying and others comforting their friends. Some had risked being vulnerable and we all learned something. Parker Palmer would say: "When my students and I discover uncharted territory to explore, when the pathway out of a thicket opens up before us, when our experience is illumined by the lightening-life of the mind—then teaching is the finest work I know" (Palmer, 1998, p.1).

We came back the next morning knowing that something had changed. One student announced that we were now in the third stage of *Tribes*. We had formed a community. The other students agreed. From that day forth, we continued to share moments in each others lives and everyday the students came in wanting to do *Tribes*. They pushed the boundaries of my schedule and *Tribes* became a powerful connection between students and between students and teacher. *Tribes* happened all day everyday. *Tribes* became a way of being in the classroom. We listened, we discussed, we learned, we cried and we laughed a lot. We participated in "genuine dialogue" where "neither party knows at the outset what the outcome or decision will be" (Noddings, 1992, p.23).

Unfortunately, the year came to an end and we left knowing that next year would not be the same. They were moving on to another school and chances are, they would never be able to learn in the same way.

I left them that day in June with many questions. I replayed our conversations in my head and wondered if I had done the right thing. I was afraid that they would probably not be able to find a space like the one I had given them. Would they revert back to their old ways and "become non-participants, waiting on the teacher to set the rules and start

narrating what to memorize" (Freire & Shor, 1987, p.122)? "After years in dull transfer-of-knowledge classes, in boring courses filled with sedating teacher-talk", I was afraid my students would become silent once again and no longer "expect education to include the joy of learning, moments of passion or inspiration or comedy, or even that education will speak to the real conditions of their lives" (Freire & Shor, 1987, p.122). Would they go back to their old ways, knowing there was another way of learning and teaching? Would they challenge the system and the teachers? Would they resent what they had learned? Would they question my methodology? Would they be ready for Grade 7? Should I have showed them another way of learning or should I have told them to assume the position as I feed them the information of the mandated curriculum? I was torn because what I knew felt right was so difficult to prove. I needed to defend my teaching and find others who agreed with me in order to continue on this new path. Ng (2003) argues that:

> [t]eaching and learning against the grain is not easy, comfortable, or safe. It is protracted, difficult, uncomfortable, painful, and risky. It involves struggles with our colleagues, our students, as well as struggles within ourselves against our intellectualized beliefs and normalized behaviors. In other words, it is a lifelong challenge. (p.217)

I read a lot the summer after my fourth year teaching. I read to understand theory that supported my teaching philosophy. Theory only fueled my passion to find new approaches. I was eager to re-create a dynamic learning community in September.

I knew that Tribes would look different the following year because the students were different. I realized that with new students and a new group dynamic, I would have to

readjust but never would I have realized how different it would be. I struggled with my students as I lead them through activities used the year before. I explained to them my philosophy, and my expectations for the year. They had heard good things from former students and they, too, were disappointed in the lack of progress we were making. I was optimistic as I spoke with them, but somehow, we were unable to create a viable community. I lay awake at night wondering what I was doing wrong. Students rarely shared with each other, and we felt disconnected in many ways. I was ready to give up and move on to a more traditional approach to the curriculum. Yet, I was determined to make it work. Also, I knew my students would take it out on themselves if they were unable to reproduce what they had heard so much about.

And one day it happened! We spent the afternoon talking about a comment a student made during one of our activities. *I think boys and girls should go to separate schools.* And then another student asked what if that boy was different, would he go to a girls' school. At first, the students were confused by the comment. What did that mean? I questioned him on his comment and found out that different meant gay. What if the boy was gay? Would he go to a girls' school? The students all jumped on this and they were all talking at the same time. I finally asked for their attention and gave them the chance to share their thoughts one at a time. They made many assumptions and generalizations about gays and lesbians, about their classmates and about schooling. They also told many stories and shared their thoughts and beliefs. I sat quietly and listened. How could I get them to make sense of everything they were saying? How could I get everyone involved, because the loudest were doing most of the talking? How could I get them to understand everything that was being said? Either way, they were excited about our

discussion. They knew they had made some kind of breakthrough because the discussion was energetic, everyone wanted to participate and questions continued as the students went home that night. I told them we would continue in the morning. They knew this was special!

I arrived that morning with more questions than answers, but I thought I had found a way to clarify their thoughts. I wrote on the board:

Who spoke?	Who was privileged?	Who silenced
Who did not speak?	Who was not privileged?	Who was silenced?

I started to explain it and the students were more confused than ever, but I encouraged them to give my approach a chance. We started with the first one. Who spoke yesterday? The students came up and signed their names. Who did not speak? Those students came up. Who silenced? (Who spoke too much? Or offended someone else?) A few students came up and signed their names? Who was silenced? (Who felt they could not speak?). A few more students came up. The last two were much more difficult. What does it mean to be privileged? (Who was allowed to speak? and who was not allowed to speak?) They imagined that they were all allowed to speak until a student spoke up and said that she was not allowed to speak because she came in late and did not know what was going on. She signed her name. I gave them examples from different scenarios. Who is privileged in our society? Men or women. Teachers or students. Heterosexuals or gays

and lesbians. They all caused some commotion, but the last one left them quiet. I talked about what it meant to be privileged. They were still a little confused about the middle two. We continued with a few stories and the board filled up with names of people and groups. We spoke all morning and through little recess. We spoke until the students had to go to gym. In the afternoon, I asked the students to write about the morning discussion. I also asked them to state several I ams. I am a sister. I am a teacher. Many students wrote back: I am confused.

The next day, one student asked me where I fit on the board and what would I write. Would I share my truth? Would I come out as a lesbian to help clarify their thinking? Boler (2003) speaks of a pedagogy of discomfort. "This pedagogy emphasizes the need for both the educator and the students to move outside their comfort zones" (Boler, 2003, p.111). I decided I would take the risk.

> It is often productive if professors take the first risk, linking confessional narratives to academic discussions so as to show how experience can illuminate and enhance our understanding of academic material. But most professors must practice being vulnerable in the classroom, being wholly present in mind, body, spirit. (hooks, 1994, p.21)

I came out to my students only a few months into the year and was able to explain the ways I assume I fit, and didn't fit, on the board. We had a great discussion!

> My fear that a topic will explode in the classroom may be not a warning to flee from it but a signal that the topic must be addressed. My fear of teaching at the dangerous intersection of the personal and the public may be not

> cowardice but confirmation that I am taking the risks that good teaching requires. (Palmer, 1998, p.39)

I figured out what was wrong with my approach. Students did not see the need to share moments and stories and in many cases, they didn't believe they had anything important enough to share. From that day forward, *Tribes* became a more intellectual happening. The sharing of stories and ideas were only one way to clarify the lesson and add to the discussion, as opposed to last year, where stories and ideas were the springboard for learning. In other words, I was better able to make connections between their lives and the workings of society. I was not looking to create a therapy group—nor was I last year—but I realized how to make "excitement [...] co-exist with and even stimulate serious intellectual and/or academic engagement" (hooks, 1994, p.7).

What have I learned so far? I have learned that "[d]ialogue is profound, wise, insightful conversation. Dialogue involves periods of lots of noise as people share and lots of silence as people muse" (Wink, 2000, p.47-48). I learned that I must not control the rhythm of the students and have all the answers if I expected something authentic to happen. I have learned that "[students] are very clever in hiding from the teacher, to say what the teacher wants to hear, to confuse the teacher with defensive statements and copycat answering form the teacher's own words" (Freire & Shor, 1987, p.22). I have learned that:

> [b]ehind their fearful silence, our students want to find their voices, speak their voices, have their voices heard. A good teacher is one who can listen to those voices even before they are spoken—so that someday they can speak with truth and confidence. (Freire & Shor, 1987, p.46)

I learned that I had to listen more and I had to allow time for discussions to unfold. I have learned that "knowledge and intelligence is more important than conformity to the norms of testing. And the sensible revolt of young children when they are articulate and clear about the issues is a sign of the success of education, not a failure" (Kohl, 2002, p.149). I learned that I had to give authority in order for students to believe what I was teaching. I learned that "[t]he object is not to lower standards or just teach what is interesting to the students, but to find the students' interests and build an academic program around them" (Delpit, 2002, p.45). I have also learned that "when [students] recognize that we believe in them, they come to trust us, to accept us, to identify with us, and to emulate us" (Delpit, 2002, p.45). I have learned that students do have lots to say if we take the time to listen to them and allow them to take some control of the classroom.

In part, I credit my students for teaching me all these things. I could have read it a hundred times in theory books, but until I experienced it and lived it first hand, I could never have believed it to be true. I understand that my schooling experience could have been different. As I reflect on the interactions of my students with each other and with me, I acknowledge that I was flung to the margins as a student and I refuse to allow my students to be a part of the hidden curriculum. "[Y]ears of un-critical, rote learning had taught me how to not know" (Brookes, 1992, p.2).

I stopped doing *Tribes* long ago and moved towards my own style of Critical Pedagogy. The ideas from the *Tribes* book helped me develop my own approach to teaching. I have come a long way since I first introduced *Tribes* to my students. Although I continue to use some of the activities in the book and still follow the same class rules, I approach them in different ways. I have come to understand that by

developing critical thinking skills and encouraging dialogue amongst students and teacher, a learning community will naturally be formed. I have discovered the importance of teaching students to ask good questions of themselves and of others and of challenging students' assumptions and biases. According to Sánchez-Casal and MacDonald (2002), "[t]hese knowledge-making communities—what [they] call communities of meaning—cultivate a diversity of socially embedded truth claims out of which epistemic wholeness develops" (2002. p.3). In other words, "decentering the authority of the professor, developing and foregrounding subjugated knowledges, legitimizing personal identity and experience as the foundation of authentic and liberatory knowledges [...] have enormous power to democratize knowledge production in the classroom" (Sánchez-Casal & MacDonald, 2002, p.5). The teacher/student relationship changed in my classroom. The focus turned towards the theory that in communities of meaning, the authority belonged to the person—student or teacher—who demonstrating the most knowledge "depending upon the content under study" (Sánchez-Casal & MacDonald, 2002, p.12).

Indeed, I believed this new approach warranted a new name. Last year, my students owned *Tribes* and it was a part of the class dynamics, so I believed it was inappropriate to change the name. This year, however, I believed my students needed to own it for themselves. I also believed they might stop comparing themselves to last year's class and come to own the new name. After much debate and discussion, we decided on DEAL: Discuss, Enjoy and Learn. Come into my class these days and all you can hear is Let's make a DEAL, Seal the Deal, DEAL them, What's the DEAL? The new name has taken off and I think it is much better suited!

Chapter 4: Dream Analysis

I have always believed that the best teachers are those who get the students actively involved in learning and teaching. I believe that the very few memories I have of my own schooling emphasize the importance of making learning meaningful to students. Sadly, students are often subjected to passive consumerism and rarely become active learners. In an ideal world, students would come to class knowing what they want to learn and teachers would not be so concerned with meeting the outcomes and getting through the curriculum, but instead asking students what is important to them. How can a teacher be expected to have lesson plans and long-term goals before knowing the interests of the students? Others may argue, how can I be prepared for class if I do not come with well thought out lesson plans based on the mandated curriculum?

Last year, I realized first-hand just how "exciting and anxiety-producing" (Freire & Shor, 1987, p.7) it can be to watch students actively involved in learning. We had just started our first unit in English Language Arts. I was working right from the Teachers' Guide and only changing a few things as we moved along. We had been working for about two weeks when I took a few moments to do *Tribes*. Each child was to answer, what do you dream about? I was amazed at the discussion and we ended up talking about dreams all afternoon. I was flying by the seat of my pants as I put my lesson plan aside and listened to my students actively involved in discussion. After much dialogue, the students decided on five main questions that came out of the discussion. One student stood up and wrote the questions on the board as the others all had their hands up to provide additional input. I decided it would be best to divide into groups and give everyone a chance to voice their thoughts within their small groups. At the end of class,

each group was given a few minutes to present back to the others. I noticed many presentations resulted in many more questions. The bell rang and the kids continued the discussion as they walked out into the halls.

What had just happened? The students were motivated and were active participants in their learning. They had taught each other, listened to each other speak and generated more questions about dreams. I could have continued teaching from the mandated curriculum, but instead, I let the students take over the class and talk about what is meaningful to them. I was giving voice to the more talkative students in a whole class discussion. I had involved my shy students in small group discussion and my weaker students were not only keeping up, but talking in ways I never knew possible. I even had my more active students writing on the board or moving around from group to group. I had done it. I had helped to create an atmosphere conducive to learning for all the students in my class and we were all having fun doing it.

I went home that night energized and excited. The learning that went on in my class was contagious and I was determined to make it continue. I went on the internet and to the library and created a whole unit on dreams. I even included a sleepover at school near the end of the unit. The next day, I was eager to tell my students what we were going to be doing for the next two weeks. I explained to them that I would put our other unit aside in order to continue our discussion on dreams. They were ecstatic and I think they believed that their opinions mattered in my class.

The energy continued throughout the next few weeks as we wrote Dream Journals and found answers to many of our questions. The students talked about dreams as they lined up in the morning and left at the end of the day still talking about dreams and

dreaming. They loved that some of their questions did not have proven answers. They were empowered knowing that their answers could be as plausible as those given by Dream scientists since many questions are still left unanswered in the Dream World. Why do we dream? What do dreams mean? Why do we have recurring dreams? What is REM sleep? Why do we have nightmares? Many of these questions have multiple answers and the students were able to add to the research using their own Dream Journals. Everyday we shared our dreams from the night before and added the dreams into categories we had created. We graphed our categories and found connections between our dreams and our lives. Noddings believes that the education system is based on "an ideology of control that forces all students to study a particular, narrowly prescribed curriculum devoid of content they really care about" (Noddings, 1992, p.xii). Eisner thinks that "the curriculum we use in schools defines the opportunities students will have to learn how to think within the media that schools provide" (Eisner, 1993, p.6).

How can teachers have long-term lesson plans ready to go in September without knowing what students want to learn? I was as guilty as the teacher next door. The idea of creating lessons as the year progressed was a little difficult, because as teachers, we are expected to know what we will be doing throughout the year. Every year, we are expected to introduce textbooks, curriculum guides and themes we will be using throughout the year to parents during *Meet the Teacher Night*. How can I tell parents that I will keep them updated as the year goes by, because I am not certain of the direction the year will take? How can I explain that I must get to know their child before I decide how I will be teaching? I am trying to picture my students' parents who already have doubts about my different forms of teaching! Can I tell them that I would rather put textbooks

aside and teach the students what they want to know? Can I tell them about the hidden curriculum that is meant to teach to the dominant class and fails to acknowledge the marginalized groups in society? Can I tell them to trust me?

Ellsworth (1997) writes that,

> [c]urricula and pedagogies, like films, are *for* someone. They have intended, imagined, and desired audiences. Most decisions about a curriculum's content, structure, uses of language and image, its difficulty or ease, are made in light of conscious and unconscious assumptions about who its students are: what they know, what they don't know, what they need to know for their own good, for society's good, or both, how they learn, which curricula have worked with them in the past and which they failed, what motivates them, what is relevant to them, who they think they are in relation to themselves and to others. (p. 58)

Will they assume I have a hidden agenda? Are they a part of the dominant group who demands that only their views be taught? Do they believe that it is the role of the teacher to teach and the student to listen? Are they part of the conservative ideology? Perhaps they do not agree that "the sensible revolt of children…is a sign of the success of education" (Kohl, 2002, p.149). Perhaps they do not agree that "if learning is not meaningful to students, it is irrelevant what the teacher does" (Wink, 2000, p.123). Or, perhaps, we are not all that different, because we have been through the same school system "[W]e have built into all of us blueprints and response, old structures of oppression" (Lorde, 1984, p.64). In fact, I am the product of an educational system that denied my cultural identity and until a few years ago, I was very unaware that it could be

any other way. How can I expect my students' parents and even many teachers to think differently? Or better yet, how can I teach them that teaching and learning that can be done another way.

I realize I have chosen a difficult approach to learning as I enter my sixth year teaching. I know I am in a minority as I continue to move away from curriculum guides in order "[t]o teach in a manner that respects and cares for the souls of [my] students" (hooks, 1994, p.13). I am reminded of the words Ursula A. Kelly wrote in a letter to Anne-Louise Brookes:

> Now, in my ending, let me talk once again about hope. The fact that we even ask the questions we ask, and examine our teaching practices in the ways we do, is hopeful. We must not be too hard on ourselves in this questioning. With integrity, we do the best we can, always wary of our weaknesses. But there is such glory for me in knowing that you persist, against such odds, to teach compassionately and justly. (Brookes & Kelly, 1989, p.124)

Does good teaching mean forgetting the curriculum guides and mandated texts all together? Certainly not! For one, I know it is impossible—at least for me—to create entire day plans on magical conversations I have had with my students. In fact, I have taught from the curriculum guides and straight out of textbooks on many occasions. I have asked students to turn to a page in the mandated text and to follow teacher guides. I realize that making and planning the lesson as we go along is difficult for teachers who teach many different subjects and who teach to very large classes.

My lessons on Dream Analysis did not create themselves as I searched the Internet for hours in order to ensure I was meeting the outcomes of our English Language Arts program. I realize that moving beyond the mandated curriculum takes time and effort. At first, I assumed I was cheating students of a more meaningful education every time I reverted back to a more traditional approach, but now I realize that teaching from the mandated curriculum in not the problem. In fact, I have realized that the material is not always the problem. Rather, the way teachers use material in the classroom is the problem. "Teaching the purely technical aspect of the procedure is not difficult; the difficulty lies rather in the creation of a new attitude—that of dialogue, so absent in our own upbringing and education. The coordinators must be converted to dialogue in order to carry out education rather than domestication" (Freire, 1973, p.52).

I have discussed my teaching practices with many teachers and parents over the last few years and I often get the question: Am I teaching them what they are suppose to be learning? I think I must make the distinction very clear that when I move beyond the curriculum and the textbooks, I make an even greater effort to organize my lessons in order to meet all provincial outcomes. I have emphasized the importance of listening to students and learning what is important to them, but as I build a unit around their interests and needs, I am always aware of the outcomes that need to be met. I dedicate many hours to matching outcomes requirements to spontaneous lessons and discussions in my class. I believe it is worth the time as I know students realize that I am prepared to move beyond textbooks and mandated curriculum, if it means they will be excited about their education. I have learned over the years that once they realize I spend a great deal of time getting to know them and what they care about, they begin to share their world

through stories they write, in the responses they make and through the dialogue. The time we spent together is meant to be meaningful and once we are all actively involved in the teaching and learning going on in the class, I begin to realize how much these young children know about the world around them, how many questions they still have and how much they are willing to share.

The Social Studies textbook requires students in Grade 6 to understand the Canadian Charter of Rights and Freedoms. Students are asked to read different scenarios where the rights of some Canadians have not been upheld and match it with one of our rights and freedoms. I believe the Charter is important and we must know what it says, but for the majority of my students who at first glance fit the dominant mold of PEI, they lack the connection with its importance to their lives. How can I make some understand that there exists a privileged class? How can I get the more privileged students to realize that they are among the majority who need not fight for their rights? How can I get the minority students to understand their own position?

I had a student question why we were learning about the Charter. She voiced that the Charter should be taught to older students, because as a sixth grader, it had nothing to do with her. I asked the other students if they felt the same way and many raised their hands. Others were opposed but had a difficult time supporting the importance of the Charter. I asked the first student, who loved the extra attention, to stand in front of the class while the others described what she looked like and what she wore. One student stood up and wrote all the responses on the board. Finally, a student spoke. She had understood. "I know why the Charter is not important to her". She is not black, not disabled, not a lesbian, not a criminal, not an immigrant and not poor. The Charter does

not apply to her". "Indeed", I said, "she is privileged and she has freedoms that others do not have." We continued this conversation throughout the year as we talked about the privileges of those who speak and decide as opposed to those who listen and obey.

I asked my students to find someone they know who is different from themselves and might in some way be protected by the Charter of Rights and Freedoms. I asked them to think of a friend, a family member, a classmate or a member of their community who in some way would lead a different life if the Charter did not exist. They prepared interview questions for their chosen person and wrote a consent form explaining the project. They practiced their interview with a friend and we discussed how to make a person more comfortable during the interview. We talked about interview questions that would lead to a better understanding of their person's experiences. The students transcribed their interviews and answered some generic questions. What did you learn? What surprised you the most? What other questions do you have? They also wrote a poem and a letter in the hopes that they could help others better understand the difference the Charter of Human Rights has on a person's life. The experience was overwhelmingly positive. The project also became a part of English and French Language Arts as the students were actively writing, reading, listening and presenting. The project focused on provincial outcomes but was also intimately related to their lives as they interviewed friends, students, family members, neighbors, teachers and relatives. Students learned about illness such as breast cancer, leukemia and epilepsy. They had a better understanding of the students living with autism, learning disabilities and Spina bifida. They interviewed people who were black, gay and lesbian, Chinese, adopted, Deaf and Aboriginal. In the end, the students were able to describe their own privileges; realize

their own assumptions as they interviewed a person they believed to be different; and applaud Pierre Elliot Trudeau for fighting for the rights and freedoms of Canadians.

Chapter 5: Messy Books/Letters

"Teacher: Imagine. How it feels to learn how to read, write and think when all you feel is badly about yourself. Imagine" (Brookes, 1992, p.6).

The Messy Book was another idea I learned from a Critical Pedagogy graduate course. As we all walked in the first day, a messy book was waiting on the top of each desk. A messy book was the teacher's name for a colored hard-cover lined scribbler from the Dollarstore. She explained that the book was to be used for writing/drawing/sketching our thoughts. We could use it for new words, great quotes, authors we have read or wanted to read. We could use it as ideas came to us during discussions in class or to write thoughts we were afraid would escape us. In fact, the messy book had no rules. They were a gift to us from our teacher. The next day, many students came back with well decorated messy books full of pictures, quotes, writing and inspirational flare. My book had stayed in my bag that night and came back the next morning the same way I had received it. The messy book screamed journal to me and I had no intention of journaling any of my thoughts in this class or at any other time. I was not going to fall in the trap of journaling my thoughts and ideas even in a book with a catchy name. Nonetheless, I took it out the next day and wrote some notes from the board and a few ideas that had been shared. I noticed a few students frantically scribbling in their book and wondered what it was they were writing. I remember thinking that these people are real writers and I am just pretend. I often spent hours looking at a blank screen without a thought in my mind or sitting staring at the inside of a blank card and never knowing what to write. And on the chance that I do start to write, I question myself, I doubt my

abilities, I change the same sentence over and over and I read and re-read sentence after sentence without being satisfied with myself.

So, as I sat with my messy book at my desk, I wished I could be one of those people for whom writing comes easily. I wished I could write freely without agonizing over every word and sentence. The messy book was just another way of showing me that I was not a writer. At the end of our two week class, I had stuck a PEI Rainbow sticker on the front and written my name. Inside, I had written notes from class and wrote down the names of authors I wanted to read. At the very back, I had written words I thought were interesting or might be useful for my thesis. I had written safe words. Words that said nothing about me or what I was really thinking. The messy book was filled with words that were not my own. I had filled it with the teacher's words, and words from famous researchers. The messy book was no different than anything else I had written for a very long time.

Parallel to this experience, the teacher assigned a letter written to her every night about the material. She explained—very much like the messy books—that the letters had no rules. She asked us to write about a page every night. I must have tormented over the first letter for hours. I could not seem to write anything. I sat at the computer; I played a hundred games of solitaire and minesweeper and drank too many Shirley Temples. I found the experience frustrating and deleted sentences before I had a chance to complete them.

And then I did it, I spoke my truth! I wrote exactly what I was thinking. I read it over a few times and printed it off. I started the letter with: "Dear Anne-Louise, I have always struggled with the writing process. Words do not come easy. I entered the

Masters program with passion, dedication and a commitment to Education. I wanted to make a difference in the world. My main concern however, was how I was ever going to write about it all in a cohesive and grammatically correct way." And she wrote back a day later: "Dear Elizabeth, Let me begin by saying that I very much enjoyed reading your work. Liz told me ahead of time that I would value your wonderful mind and way of being/seeing the world."

What had just happened? I had written for the very first time in a long time. I wrote words that were mine and that were truthful and a teacher appreciated my work. I continued writing letters to Anne-Louise and in a very short time, I discovered my own writing voice. These letters quickly became a way to express my thoughts and ideas about my teaching, her class and my life. We had a written conversation through these letters as Anne-Louise replied to each one and I understood the power of letters as communication. She responded to my work with encouragement and gave me the confidence I needed to continue writing. Indeed, it was through these letters that I decided to incorporate letters to my grandmother in my thesis.

Our last project for the class was a Mind Map: a way of visually clarifying our thoughts about the Master's Program and our thesis. I had to explain to my colleagues where I was in the thesis process and what my work was all about. Originally, I had planned to research literacy, a topic important in education and certainly important to me, but the more theory I read, the more I realized that my interest was elsewhere. I wanted to answer the questions: Who Am I? Why Am I doing this work and Where do I fit in? The theory I had read in this class and in a previous class was starting to make sense to me. I was empowered by the theory I was reading and I now had a method to sort my

thoughts. I presented my Mind Map to the class that last day and whether they realized it or not, I had come a long way in my journey towards self-discovery. I was finally started to understand who I was as a learner.

I brought my new knowledge to my Grade 6 class in September. I started by introducing the letters to my students. I explained—not so differently from my teacher—their assignments for the next year. I asked that they write me a letter every two weeks about anything they wanted. The reactions from some of my students were similar to mine. "Do we have to?!" "I hate writing!" "Please don't make us!"

Nonetheless, I expected a letter from everyone twice a month. It was painful for some at first. In fact, it might have been painful for a few the entire year. How do children come to hate writing I wondered? What are we doing in schools to foster these negative reactions? Why did I decide to implement a practice I dreaded in my own life?

As a result of my own change, my goal was to foster an environment which allowed students to write freely without fear of criticism. I did for my students what some of my professors had done for me at UPEI; they had taught me to use my voice through letter writing.

Similarly, I was able to use letters to get to know my students. They told me about their families, their friends, their fears and their weekends. They shared their thoughts and feelings with me and I was able to respond to them the same way my professor had responded to me. The letters helped me to understand them. They shared with me their secrets and talked to me about their lives. I considered myself privileged, and they know that *Letters*, as we call it, is one of my favorite parts of class. I often take many hours to write them back and ask questions about what they have shared.

Sometimes, I must write to students more than once every two weeks as they pass in their scribblers eager for me to respond again.

I tried to be compassionate with their stories, and I tried to be a good listener. I asked them questions about their thinking and I tried to get them thinking further. Often, the students would write about Tribes/DEAL and tell me something they did not want to share with the group, or they would ask me to clarify something that had been said. A few times, students questioned me about something I had said or done in class. They made me think about my words or actions and I was able to go back and speak about it the next day.

I also decided to introduce the idea of the Messy Books. I know that I was hesitant with my own messy book, but I thought it had a place in the classroom. I thought about my colleagues who loved to scribble, draw and write frantically during my summer class. I shared with my students the ideas of the messy book and explained that it was a book entirely for them. I encouraged them to decorate them and I promised I would not read them. The messy books are yours to enjoy I said! The next day, many students came back with a well decorated book. They shared with me the pictures they had drawn and the writing on each page. I took the opportunity to explain my own uncertainty with the messy books. I showed them my own book and the little writing I had done. Again, I promised they would not be corrected or read. They are yours to use as you wish I told them. In a few weeks, the messy books had taken on a life of their own. I have never seen students so eager to write and draw in these books intended to include what's important to them. I was blown away every time a student presented his/her Messy Book. The majority of my students had a messy book as unique and as

real as the next. My students impressed me everyday as they allowed me to hear and see the privileged information they shared with me. By the end of the year, a few students were already on their second and third Messy books.

Why did the Messy Books and letters work so well in my class and in my summer class? Teachers sometimes have difficulty getting students to write anything. What is different about these two forms? Where does that resistance come from? Why do some students assume they cannot write? I grew up believing my words and thoughts were not important. I also thought that my writing was never good enough as it was passed back full of red marks and odd looking symbols. I struggled to write the words of the teachers in order to meet to standards of their grading systems. Have we as teachers demanded that they work in ways that are irrelevant to their lives that they have forgotten how to speak the truth. Have we taught them that their words and experiences are not important in the context of the school? I have been able to write words unconnected from my own experiences for so long, because no one has insisted that I write any different. No one questioned the truthfulness of my work and no one asked me to clarify my thinking. Shor wrote to Freire in their book *A Pedagogy for Liberation: Dialogues on Transformation Education*,

> [Students] are very clever in hiding from the teacher, to say what the teacher wants to hear, to confuse the teacher with defensive statements and copycat answering from the teacher's own words. This defensive language prevents teachers from finding out what the students really know and can do. (Freire & Shor, 1987, p.22)

How have we come to this? Why have we structured our educational system in a way that denies the identity of students? We often force them to speak our language, demand they write our words and insist they obey our rules. To what expense will we continue to teach in this way? Magda Lewis (1995) writes,

> As form, education through schooling both offers and requires the consent to a contained agenda. For students marginalized through gender, class, race, ethnicity, culture, and sexuality, questions of the relationship between education and power have substantively to do with how they are encouraged to embrace forms of schooling that systematically require them to deny who they are; that measure of performance in school by how well they succeed in negating themselves; that leave those parts of their lives that do not fit inside the dominant molding forms to pour and splash over edges of what's acceptable and allowable. (pp.33+34)

How do teachers decide what is important to students? I often wonder why students are not included in curriculum development. Teachers sit on many pilot planning committees and make decision as to what textbooks should be used for the next decade or more. As teachers create curriculum, they must assume they know what meets the needs of students. Do teachers take into account the changing world of students as they develop curriculum, and choose new textbooks? I think it would be ingenious to allow students to read and critique the texts before a decision is made to implement them in schools? I also wonder who decides which materials are appropriate for students to view. Do these people have any idea what goes on the minds and hearts of the students they are serving. In a world that changes quickly, is the educational school system keeping up with the

interests of students? Teachers often teach to the average group of students hoping to reach the strongest and weakest as much as possible. Are we missing the point of learning? How can we individualize our teaching to meet the needs of all students?

The letters and the messy books are two ways I show my students that I care about their realities and their individual needs. I allowed a space within my classroom for messy topics of conversations. While teaching the required material, I cannot pretend that they don't have questions and experiences dealing with sex, drugs, suicide, divorce, racism, sexism and homophobia and I assume that if teachers continue to deny the experiences and stories of students, students will assume that schools are not meant to connect with their lives. Schools become a mandatory place they must attend to get a job.

Chère Memère,

I would never have thought that there would come a day that I would come out to my students. I would have believed it too risky and not worth the homophobic responses I would get from students, parents, staff and community. I thought I would rather stay in the closet than to face the hatred of those I needed to work with everyday.

But in the end, I wasn't surprised when my students finally asked me if I was a lesbian. They had been asking questions about Nola—my partner—for quite some time and a few students took every opportunity to mention gays and lesbians. I wondered when they would find the courage to ask me. I knew that if I had taught them well, they would feel safe in asking me if I really was a lesbian. I had already decided that I would tell them the truth, because concealing the real me would undermine everything that I was trying to teach in my class.

I had worked hard at creating an atmosphere of open communication and offered a safe and welcoming place for my students to share their thoughts and ideas. I paid attention to their language and challenged them on their assumptions. I showed interest in their lives and laughed with them every chance I could. I knew I had to give some of myself if I expected the same from them. I hoped they would respect me for telling the truth and practicing what I taught.

We had been talking about The Charter of Rights and Freedoms for a few days and we had talked about the rights of gays and lesbians. Our discussions happened as the media was publishing articles every second day about Gay and Lesbian Marriage. I spoke freely about it and so did many others. At the end of class, a student tried to get me to say that I was a lesbian, but I thought I would wait until someone would ask me directly. The next day someone did. She raised her hand and asked me if I was a lesbian. I paused, looked at them all and said, "yes I am a lesbian. I'm surprised it took you all so long to ask me". We all laughed and the questions started.

That night, I was nervous and I wondered what reactions I would get from parents and students the next day. I was also relieved to have finally spoken the truth to my students and I hoped our relationship would not deteriorate. The next day, my principal told me that two parents called and wanted to know how my conversation with my students related to the curriculum. My principal cautioned me against discussing the issue any further with my students, but defended my right to discuss my family like any heterosexual would. The dominate ideology reigns again, but this time, I was encouraged by a few parents and colleagues who applauded me for having the courage to come out. They understood that I was modeling what I expected from my students. I

hope my students will remember that their Grade 6 teacher was a lesbian. I hope the heterosexual students can look past my lesbianism. I hope my coming out has shown that lesbians are not all that different from anyone else and that some may support or defend another gay and lesbian person. For the gay and lesbian students, I hope I have given them a glimpse of how things can be. I had no role models growing up to help in my self-discovery and I wish these students will have the courage to be true to themselves.

Je t'aime,

Elizabeth

Chapter 6: Resistance to Change

Today, I was told to stop teaching my students to think outside the dominant mold, to discourage any discussions that take time away from the curriculum, and to put an end to any personal stories shared by students and teacher. I was informed that I must follow the curriculum, and to forget about Tribes/D.E.A.L. I was warned that a parent had called and questioned my teaching approach and my lifestyle. I was alerted that I would not be supported if I continued to stray from the curriculum and to use personal stories to make learning meaningful and relevant to my students. I was also told that there is no room in a Grade 6 classroom for subjects such as homophobia, suicide and abuse, because they are not age appropriate. I was told I had no right to allow students to discuss issues intimately related to their lives and that I must never discuss these ideas in my classroom. Personal issues, I was told, are issues that must be talked about at home. Teachers do not have the responsibility, or the right, to discuss issues of a personal nature with a group of Grade 6 students.

My response to this suggestion is well encapsulated in Berlak: "The failure to recognize and honor troubling feelings in our classrooms sustains cultural secrets. It permits students to remain comfortable by reading stories of oppression and injustices as exaggerations and exceptions, and narratives of justice as the rule" (2004, p.142).

I was also informed that a safe classroom for students to share their real thoughts and ideas was an illusion and only created a false sense of security. How did I not know that students are vulnerable and cannot understand the ramifications of their shared thoughts and ideas? I was told to protect them from saying anything outside the regulated norms of society by shutting them up and pretending issues are secrets and that teachers

must guard them from the cruel reality of bullying, teasing and name calling. Teachers must continue to follow the mandated curriculum that often denies all forms of what is really going on in the minds and hearts of students. I was told that the parents are not knowingly sending their students to be taught in this way, and if I was to take the issue any further, I would also not be supported by the parents in my class. In other words, I was told that parents expect teachers to teach the norms of society and are not ready for teaching practices that encourage students to share what are considered *family matters* only.

> The young teacher will be guided by his memories of his life at the *lycée* and as a student. Don't they see that this is to decree the perpetuity of routine? Tomorrow's teacher can only repeat the gestures of his teacher of yesterday, and since the latter was merely imitating his own teacher, it is not clear how any novelty can find its way into this unbroken chain of self-reproducing models (Bourdieu, 1977, p.61).

I was given a similar message by a parent who said he was nauseated at the environment I created in my classroom. He believed that I was putting my students at risk by giving them the opportunity to share their personal stories. He argued that the environment I had created allowed students a podium to share their thoughts and opinions without understanding the implication their stories may come to have on their lives. Also, according to him, my classroom environment only creates a false sense of security since nothing can be kept behind closed doors. He was adamant that my methodologies were deplorable and claimed that I was not following the mandated curriculum. He believed that personal issues—aka secrets—had no place in a classroom environment and

should be discussed at home with parents. He argued that children are impressionable and teachers must model the norms of society.

I realized my being a lesbian was deeply rooted within these two conversations. I am reminded of an article from the Globe and Mail published a few weeks ago. The headlines read: *If I was a Heterosexual teacher, I would not be here today!* Of course, I would hope that these concerns are based upon my teaching practices, but I think it would be naïve to think that my being a lesbian does not come into play. I am a proud and out lesbian teacher and I am not teaching to the norms of society. I have put a word in the mouths and minds of young students who look up to me. I have introduced a taboo subject to my students and a parent claimed that young minds may come to identify with my reality and label themselves lesbian or gay. The lesbian teacher from Nova Scotia, outlined in the Globe and Mail, found herself in a hellish situation. A few teachers noticed her walking out of the locker room with a female high school student and accused the teacher of committing a sexual act with the student. The on-looking teachers believed the student to be distraught and uncomfortable as she walked out of the locker room. They immediately reported the incident to the school principal. The lesbian teacher found herself in the office soon after and escorted out of the school by local police officers. Later, the student denied all allegations and the teacher returned to school. Unfortunately, the accusations led to continued suspicions by staff and students. She was on constant watch and no longer had the right to organize or participate in extra-curricular activities. Six years later, she continues to fight for her job, her dignity and her reputation. How close am I to be accused of these outrageous claims? Would I be

discussing my teaching practices with this parent if I were a heterosexual? Does my being a lesbian have everything to do with the conversations of the last few weeks?

As a matter of fact, the parent argued that gay and lesbian labels are the cool thing these days. Students are looking to be different and since I am a proud and out lesbian, they will not understand the difficulties involved with these labels. The parent who challenged me directly is opposed to my allowing students the opportunity to share *what he called secrets* with others. D.E.A.L., according to him, pressures students to share something personal with their classmates and some may decide to lie in order to be a part of the classroom community. In other words, through my own disclosures, I have not only encouraged students to share a secret of their own, but I have given the impression that being a lesbian is a wonderful possibility. How dare I?!

What happened next? I replayed the conversations in my head a million times and wondered if he could still take me to court if I decided to quit tomorrow. Perhaps I would finally get the chance to fulfill my childhood dream and become a farmer. At that moment, I believed that a man had the power to destroy my career and/or control the way I teach my students. I was scared and decided I would do whatever it was I needed to do in order to make things right. I convinced myself that the *majority* would support the ideologies of the dominant class and I would be left fighting an impossible battle alone. In a moment of weakness, I decided I would bend down and follow the orders I had been given. I figured I did not stand a chance against a system that forced the mandated curriculum on students and opposed any mention of the hidden curriculum.

Fortunately, my moment of frantic pessimism was short-lived. I arrived home and discussed the situation with my partner who assured me that we had come too far to

allow these barbaric, ignorant and traditionalist thoughts to prevail. Nonetheless, I had allowed the fear, instilled in all those dominated by the status quo, to overpower my rational thought process and decision making. My fear of the dominant ideology sent powerful images of the heterosexual traditionalist closet to take hold of my emotions. I understood how powerful the dominant ideologies are in our society. For a moment, I was even prepared to deny my identity and forget my methodologies in order to ensure my good-standing with the parents, the teachers and all involved in the educational system. I also realized that had this happened a few years ago, I would probably have been unable to hold my ground and defend my methodologies. I would have been unable to identify the powers of the dominant class and voice my opinion in order to support my teaching philosophy. Indeed, I have come a long way in understanding who I am, why I teach the way I teach and how society works to keep the dominated in their place.

At the same time, I realized that I had gained allies in my work as a teacher. Freire calls it making an 'ideological map'. I have identified colleagues, friends and parents that support me and share similar beliefs about my methodologies. Unfortunately, during my moments of pessimism, I believed few would be willing to defend me. Again, the dominant thought prevails as I believed it would be difficult to find others who shared my thinking. We often think we are the only ones who work against the grain. Fortunately, conversations with a friend and a few teachers allowed me to see that fear blinded my thinking. They reassured me that many parents would be willing to fight with me, because I was making noticeable differences in the lives of students. We concluded that anyone who argues against creating a safe space where students can discuss important personal issues is also acting out of fear. It is much easier to silence a teacher

who works against the grain rather than to fight a system that refuses to question the hidden curriculum in schools.

The same parent declared that heterosexuals do not go around announcing their heterosexuality to their students and colleagues, since sexual orientation is not a part of the curriculum. I have always been suspicious of people who make the argument that heterosexuals do not promote their lifestyles every day and all the time. Can they honestly say that their colleagues do not know whether they are married, single or divorced? Whether they have children or are trying to have children? Can they argue that they do not go to work every day and talk about what they did on the weekend or enjoy walks in the park hand in hand with their partner? I think that those who argue that they do not need to announce their sexual orientation are unaware of the issues faced by gays, lesbians, bisexuals, transgendered, transsexuals and two-spirited people. I do not have the same liberties as heterosexuals. Anytime I speak of my partner, the wedding we are planning or children we hope to have, I must decide how much or how little to say or which pronouns to switch. Will I talk about Nola or will I pretend I do not have a partner and forget to mention parts of my personal life. All those who make the argument that they do not have to pronounce their sexuality in order to deny me the right to announce mine, are oblivious to their privilege and dominance. Are others afraid I am explaining the truth about women on women sex? I believe they assume that whenever I speak about being a lesbian, I am discussing what I do in the bedroom. Why does being a lesbian always have to be about sex? Being a lesbian is not about my sexual preference.

How much am I willing to risk? How much do I believe in what I do? How far will I go to defend myself? Freire argues that:

> [t]he dominant ideology makes its presence in the classroom partly felt by trying to convince the teacher that he or she must be neutral in order to respect the students. This kind of neutrality is a false respect for students. On the contrary, the more I say nothing about agreeing or not agreeing out of respect for the others, the more I am leaving the dominant ideology in peace! (Freire & Shor, 1987, p.174)

In my classroom, I have created a space for students to share their personal thoughts and opinions. I have formed a community of learners by forming a community of students who care for and trust each other. I have shared personal stories in order to enhance learning for my students and I have encouraged them to share their own interests, thoughts and emotions in order to make learning meaningful and relevant. I believe I have taught my students to become more critical thinkers and to question the way the world operates by asking who speaks, who learns, who decides and who is silenced. I have taught them that their language and their thoughts are important in my class. I spend a great deal of time listening to their language and researching "what they know, what they want to know, and how they live" (Freire & Shor, 1987, p.9). I defend their right to speak and be listened to. I believe the classroom and the school belong to students. They have the right to decide how they are run. I agree that "[w]hen they recognize that we believe in them, they come to trust us, to accept us, to identify with us, and to emulate us" (Delpit, 2002, p.45). Is that a problem?

I have tried to explain to those who question my teaching methods that I cannot stop teaching critical thinking. What they fail to realize is that D.E.A.L is not a subject, but a way of being and thinking. It is integrated in everything I do. D.E.A.L is a part of

every subject, because critical thinking cannot be shut off during parts of the day. Critical thinking is rooted in my teaching philosophy and is part of the way I have structured my classroom. My students believe we are making a D.E.A.L, sealing a D.E.A.L, D.E.A.Ling every time we are *D*iscussing, *E*njoying and *L*earning. "[W]e cannot separate education from personal experience" (Noddings, 1992, p.xiii).

In the past few weeks, I have tried to find ways to teach within this system. I imagined I would have to change the circle of chairs for rows of desks; I would have to use more passive learning approaches; I would have to stop answering questions and listening to their stories; I would have to take back my authority by getting them to sit in their chairs and punish them for questioning the way I teach. They would revert to being passive consumers of knowledge and I imagined I would bore myself and my students by lecturing from the mandated curriculum. Without a doubt, my students would wonder why I was such a crank. In the end, I have come to understand that this condemnation is not about any of these things, but instead, it seems to be about doing all of these things too much.

We live in a very political world and those who work within the educational system are at the mercy of many political parties. Advocates for standardized testing would like to see teachers teach to the curriculum in order for students to obtain the knowledge needed to achieve high scores on mandated tests. Fundamental Christian groups would like teachers to promote their views and to teach that homosexuals must burn in hell. White heterosexual males would like to remain in power by hiring those who agree with their beliefs and keep a watchful eye on anyone who tries to question the system. According to Bourdieu, "[e]very power to exert symbolic power, i.e. every

power which manages to impose meaning and to impose them as legitimate by concealing the power relations which are the basis of its force, adds its own specifically symbolic force to those power relations" (Bourdieu, 1977, p.4).

Power relations are apparent in the very structure of our educational institution. The hierarchical structures created by the gatekeepers of the institution form invisible barriers and roadblocks. A teacher risks insubordination if she speaks to someone too far above her in the hierarchical chart. A teacher is obligated to obey the workings of a system that hired her and await word from the person directly above her. Of course, the lone teacher cannot easily speak out about the injustices of this system if she hopes to keep her job. How does such a person even get hired? In schools, the dominant parties are able to maintain their positions of power by hiring and promoting persons who believe in the same ideologies. In fact, "[w]e know that it's not education which shapes society, but on the contrary, it is society which shapes education according to the interests of those who have power" (Freire & Shor, 1987, 35). Unless some of us are willing to risk dying alone on a hill in order to prove our beliefs, the world will not change.

Unfortunately, these structures force me to remain silent in my classroom. I have encouraged students to ask questions about my teaching, about their learning, about themselves, about others and about the world all year. At this point in the year, my students would consider me a traitor, a cheat and a liar if we did not continue work as usual. They might ask: Why are we not doing D.E.A.L.? What has changed? Why are we being silenced? Who has authority? They will demand a better education! I would be disappointed if they didn't. What would I tell them? If I follow orders to teach from the mandated curriculum, not only would I be insubordinate if I discussed the reasons of the

changes with my students, I would be forced to ignore their questions and personal stories. I would be ashamed and I would be a coward. If I disobey orders and continue doing what I do, I will have to defend myself to a group of people who are maintaining the status-quo. How far am I willing to go to defend my beliefs about teaching and about my own lifestyle? "Who can guarantee the safety of the educator" (Boler, 2004, p.12)?

I began teaching wanting to make a difference in the lives of students. In fact, I entered the Masters Program thinking I would learn how to be a better teacher. I never planned that the knowledge I would acquire would cause me to question my very decision to become teacher. I began my journey in academia thinking I would find the answers to my questions and as I approach the end of my thesis, I realize that I have found much more than a few answers. Cole (2003) argues that "[t]he work of a thesis [...] is as much a journey of self-learning and personal transformation as it is an academic exploration. It is about developing one's identity as a researcher and writer, gaining confidence and trust in oneself, finding voice"(p. 9-10). I wonder what happens when one's identity and voice are not part of the dominant culture. What becomes of the educator who dares to do things differently? Who will support the teacher who practices a different kind of teaching? Was I doomed from the beginning as my research moved from the impersonal to the personal?

I have argued throughout this work the importance of sharing personal stories in the classroom. I have given concrete examples of the difference they can make in the lives of students and I have quoted many theorists/educators who share my beliefs, thoughts and methodologies. But, just when I thought I was nearing the end, I was forced to "look again, [to] go deeper, [to] look for overarching point to theorize" (Cole, 2003,

p.7). Indeed, I "[tried] to answer the questions: What is your thesis about? What can a reader learn from it" (Cole, 2003, p.7)? First, have I assumed that my students need a safe place to share personal stories, because I needed one growing up? Do I sound like a wounded soul as I tell the stories from my past? Will readers be convinced of my teaching practices or assume my experiences have clouded my judgment as a teacher? I must admit that the conversations I have had over the past few weeks have brought me to ask these questions. I was not certain what to think when I was compared to a wild horse in need of a bridle. Apparently, I have great energy and spirit; I just need help bridling that energy into more positive forms. My teaching practices have been well received by many parents, teachers and others involved in education. I have been applauded over the years and I have been asked to present during Teacher Professional Development Days. My teaching practices have been praised and I have succeeded in convincing others that the results of my practices are overwhelmingly positive. Today, I realize that it does not matter that my students represent our school during Science, French, English and Art competitions and win. It makes no difference that my students have gained confidence in their writing, reading and oral skills. And, the fact that my students want to come to school every day and are afraid to miss a great conversation is not proof of my good teaching practices. All that is important in the minds of some Islanders is that I am a lesbian and that I spend my day teaching children.

Over the past few weeks, I have also started to question whether or not I am prepared to publish a work that reveals so much about who I am. Ellis and Bochner speak of "the vulnerability of revealing yourself, not being able to take back what you've written or having any control over how readers interpret it. It's hard not to feel your life

is being critiqued as well as your work. It can be humiliating" (Ellis&Bochner, 2000, p.738). Again, how far am I willing to go to express my beliefs about teaching and about my own life? I realize it is impossible to convince a whole room at a time, but instead to repeatedly discuss new ideas with one individual at a time. As a lesbian, I must always decide whether or not I will *come out* to those around me, because coming out is a never ending process. I must constantly assess the situation and decide whether or not the situation is safe and worth the risk. In this case, it is like coming out to a whole room at a time knowing that the majority is not on my side. I have come:

> to understand the conventions that constrain which stories we can tell and how we can tell them, and to show how people can and do resist the forms of social control that marginalize or silence counternarratives, stories that deviate from or transgress the canonical ones. (Ellis&Bochner, 2000, p.744)

I began telling my stories because I thought personal stories have a room in our classrooms and in our society. I believed—and still believe—that as long as the dominant ideology reigns, we will continue to be ashamed of our experiences and scared to share our stories with others. "In being forced to get on with it because of the conditions of this society, I allowed the status quo to move forward, unchallenged, and I lived in a state of tension and fear" (Brookes, 1992, p.99). I must ask myself: Am I willing to get on with it? Am I willing to forget what I know about teaching and learning and stop teaching the way I do?

Berlak (2004) suggests:

> If a major purpose of teaching is to unsettle taken for granted views and feelings, then confrontation, with its attendant trauma, and reflection upon

> the trauma are necessary. Thus, confrontation and the intense emotional repercussions that are likely to follow may be essential to the process of eroding entrenched cultural acceptance of injustices. (p.123-124)

I am not saying that my style of teaching is the best and only way to teach. I know that I can readjust some of my teaching practices to ease some fears of my colleagues and parents. In fact, I am constantly changing and improving my teaching practices in order to better meet the needs of my students. I believe all educators must be reflective practitioners, always looking for better ways of teaching. I realize that bringing the personal into the classroom may create messy situations at times. Students may share, according to some, something that is not "age appropriate" and we may wander into uncharted territories. I realize students may be teased, bullied and called names if they share something within the class. Does that mean I must stop what I do? My intent in teaching critical pedagogy is not for students to share personal issues with the class. I think most of the controversy with my teaching practices is that opponents think I am encouraging students to share secrets during discussions. On the contrary, I am asking students to be real and use their own personal experiences in order to better understand the material being taught. Of course, students might share something that is considered too personal as I create a safe environment for thoughts and beliefs to be shared. They have found a place where they are able to bounce ideas and try new ways of thinking. They want to know if others think and do the same things. They have found a space where others will listen and ask them questions.

I also have the opportunity to teach children to be compassionate and to care for their classmates. Must I stop because they will never find the same safe space anywhere

else? Who will educate these children to be compassionate beings? In a world where the role of the teacher is constantly increasing in scope, where we are asked to act as parents, counselors, mentors and coaches to students, I think that "[h]ow one speaks and how one hears are essential factors in how well one teaches" (Kohl, 2002, p.160). Some students come to school scared, sad, angry, beaten, abused and suicidal. Am I supposed to educate their minds and forget the world they come from? Am I supposed to look into their eyes everyday and pretend that I am preparing them for the world? What about the students who are oblivious to the cruel realities of the world? Can we shelter them from knowing the truth? How long do we protect their innocence?

Chère Mémère,

You know when you think things cannot get any worse? And then they do.

I remember when I got my first teaching assignment. I was ready to take on the world: I was moving to a new province, I bought my first car, and I was looking for a place of my own. I was growing up.

I also remember the advice I got from a few people close to me. I was advised not to come out as a lesbian to the community, the teachers or the students. They said it would be a bad move for my career and being a lesbian had nothing to do with being a teacher anyway. So, I decided five years ago that I would go back into hiding as I started my new life. I don't think anything could have prepared me for the Teacher Life. I was naïve in thinking that I could pull off such a feat. In fact I never understood then what I know today.

The beginning of my first year was okay. I was more concerned about doing it right; the planning, the marking, the report cards and the parent-teacher interviews. I worried little about my hidden life. Eventually, I started to understand how hard to would be to continue the charades. I didn't have the luxury of talking about my weekends to my colleagues in the staff room, since I had gone to a gay bar that weekend. I couldn't share with my teacher mentor what movies I had watched; I didn't think Better than Chocolate or It's in the Water would have gone over very well. I wouldn't dare tell them what book I was reading; I figured "The End of Gay" sounded a little too Gay for some Islanders. In the end, I never concerned myself how my coming out as a lesbian would have affected my relationship with my colleagues that year. I asked for a transfer to a bigger city. And yes, still in PEI.

In my second year, I was feeling the effects of my other life. I wanted to scream out that I was a lesbian and let everyone just deal with it, but of course, I never did. I started to wonder if being a lesbian did have something to do with my teaching. I never signed up to be a straight when I started my BEd. No one ever told me that becoming a teacher was synonymous with being straight or of course, the popular term "in the closet". I wanted to reclaim my identity. I started to get involved with the gay, lesbian, bisexual and transgender community in Charlottetown and I volunteered as much as I could. I became chair of the GLBT Youth Committee and helped my partner with Pride events. I overdosed on queer as much as possible on the weekends in order to come back to school able to play the straight teacher for a week.

My third year teaching on Prince Edward Island opened a whole new chapter in my life. I enrolled in the Masters program and I was just a little bit more experienced in

teaching. I was able to relax a little bit more and try new things in the classroom. I felt more at home in my school and safer among my colleagues. I continued volunteering with the GLBT community and became more and more involved in promoting and advocating for GLBT rights. I did wonder sometimes: Could I jeopardize my career throughout my activism? I was bound to get outed some time or another. Funny thing was, it seemed to matter less and less. I decided to write new rules for myself and try out the path less traveled. I even came out to a few colleagues. I was starting to see that I could be a lesbian and a teacher.

Why do I insist on flaunting my lesbianism? I imagine many people think that I am. Why can't I just be who I am and keep it to myself? Some days, I wish that being a lesbian had nothing to do with being a teacher, but the more I learn, the more I realize that my personal life has everything to do with my professional life. Over the past few years, I have answered the questions: Who am I as a teacher and how did I become the teacher I am today?

How can I continue teaching when I know that I can only teach who I am? I cannot sit by and pass as a heterosexual. I remember too well how it was for me when I went to school. I was part of the hidden curriculum. No one would have dared to talk about the 100 000 gays and lesbians killed in concentration camps in the Second World War or mention Virginia Woolf, Walt Wiltman and Gertrude Stein as gay or lesbian authors. What about popular Math problems: Elizabeth and Timothy are buying a house. Why not talk about Elizabeth and Nola or Timothy and Jonathan? And let's not get into a discussion over the Family Life Programs! Gay and lesbian students come to believe that

their own culture is unacceptable, because the presence of their culture is restricted within our schools.

I remember saying to some students a few years ago that I am unable to come out as a lesbian teacher. I looked them in the eyes and told them that I would have to sit on the sidelines and watch them fight for their lives without me. I was too scared. I listen to gay and lesbian students tell their own story time and time again, but I couldn't be part of the fight. I remained hidden.

Why do I insist on flaunting my lesbianism? How can I sit by and let students fight by themselves? How can I pass as a heterosexual when I have been through the same school system? I came into teaching thinking that I could leave the real me at home. I understand that no matter how much I try, the real me will continue to come out into the classroom.

And here starts my problem. In the past two years, I have come out to my students. I have openly discussed my being a lesbian with my students and I have answered a few of their questions. I would never have thought to be here today as I entered the classroom five years ago. I still remember the major breakdown I had in one of my university classes as I was explaining that Nola was in the paper promoting Pride. She had mentioned that she was living with her partner in Hunter River. I cried thinking my students and their parents would figure out that I was Nola's partner, and then know that I was a lesbian. I was devastated. I thought for sure parents would picket the school, call the office or transfer their children out of my class. I couldn't imagine the situation being anything positive. I had given the world the power to deny Nola's existence.

I was relieved to find out that the event went by unnoticed or at least unmentioned, but I know that the event had changed me. I realized that I would not be able to hide any longer. I would not deny Nola's existence and I would not continue to play the game. I decided that I would not pass by the opportunity to talk about Nola in order to make someone else feel more comfortable. I would no longer play the pronoun game and I would take the same liberties as my straight colleagues.

Unfortunately, I have been paying the price for my unwillingness to hide my identity during the past few weeks. I have parents and colleagues questioning my motivation for discussing these matters with their precious little ones. They argue that a conversation about sexual orientation should be had at home and not in the classroom. They think their children are impressionable young minds and they would prefer I do not talk about being a lesbian. I have to admit that I am tired of defending my right to be who I am. I replay conversations in my mind over and over all day and all night. The conversations of the last few weeks have totally consumed me. I am unable to think about anything else. I have seriously thought about following my childhood dream and becoming a farmer. Nola tells me that being a vegetarian might impact my revenue. Did I tell you that she is the practical one?!

In the end, I know that these people are working from their own homophobia. I realize that the world will not suddenly change because I have decided to announce I am a lesbian. I do know however that I am fighting an important battle. The struggles of the last two weeks have crystallized the importance of my work. I know that I must continue to fight even though it is a very lonely battle at the moment. I was asked recently if this is

the hill I want to die on. At this moment, I am asking myself: How much can a lone teacher do and how much am I willing to do to? On s'en r'parle.

Je t'aime,

Elizabeth

Conclusion

> The challenge of critical/feminist pedagogy is to find that vacuous space between rhetoric and practice; between the language of democracy, freedom, possibility and justice and the actuality of constraint, denial of voice and containment of possibility, and claim that space—like a crack in the pavement where a flower might grow—as a place from which to listen and speakin [*sic*] order to enact with our students transformative practices in the classroom. (Delpit, 2002, p.42)

I do not think I will ever understand what brought me to become a teacher, but once I began teaching, I realized that being with students was something I was meant to do. I now assume I have the ability to touch the minds and souls of students; I have the passion and dedication to engage students in real learning; the determination to understand the assumptions behind the spoken and written words of students; the profound conviction of what it means to be a great teacher, and the courage to teach what matters, despite resistance. Nonetheless, I have, at times, been told that unless I join the crowd, it would be best that I find myself something else to do. I admit this message has drained some of my passion and dedication, but yet, I am still willing to *claim that space* where I can work against the resistance to change, where I can promote another way of teaching and living, and where I can erase the fear of something different.

I think that if a person can dream and imagine how the future may be then it can come true. Freire and Shor believe that "to anticipate tomorrow by dreaming today", makes utopia a possible reality (Freire & Shor, 1987, p.187). At present, I am facing resistance and opposition to my thoughts, beliefs and personal life. I understand well that

teaching children another way of learning might go beyond the scope of one classroom. "Critical pedagogy starts in the classroom and goes out into the community to make life a little better" (Wink, 2000, p.123). My hope would be that my students might go to the next classrooms and question the teaching and learning taking place. I wish that they will continue to develop their critical thinking skills and question the notion of education and freedom. In the event that they are not pleased with their education, I would hope that they demand answers to their questions and start spreading the word of how things are and might be in the classroom. Freire and Shor speak of an "imagination in dialogue" (Freire &Shor, 1987, p.184). The students themselves might start to dream of the ideal school. They might start to discuss how they wish to be educated and begin to realize they have great power within the educational system if they chose to use it.

Many parents and students are made to think that teachers have all the power. They are not confident in their own knowledge because they believe that teachers know best how to educate children. As much as I do not agree with the parent who critiqued my work, I do know that if parents speak up about different ways of educating their children, educators and other parents might be forced to listen. The parent, who questioned my teaching approach, has shown me the possibilities of change. He has proven to me the power parents hold on the educational system. He was well educated and well informed. He spoke well, and he made his arguments forcefully. He was able to change the way I teach, the way I view my profession and the way I will continue to be with my students. He was able to make me question my coming out as a lesbian, and he had the power to make me feel badly about myself. Unfortunately, the self-reproducing structures of the schooling institution have educated these parents. They have come to

believe the messages of the dominant ideologies because they have been educated within the same school system. From my perspective, the majority of parents do not dare speak up because they also fear the repercussions of their actions. They question: Will their children be treated fairly if they go and voice an opinion outside the norms of society? Will their good name and reputation be tarnished year after year? Will teachers tell them the truth about their children's education? Teachers are powerful when it comes to fear and parents. We have the capabilities of playing with words in order to pretend that what we do works well. We can easily manipulate grades and lesson plans in order to give the illusion that our work matters. Of course, the majority of teachers are genuinely concerned about doing right by students. They want to educate children the best way they know how and many teachers dedicate extra hours to ensuring a great education for their students. How do we begin to have genuine discussion with students and parents? How do we involve all parties to participate in a discussion about education? How can we begin to make dreams happen? Freire and Shor argue that "those whose political dream is to reinvent society have to fill up the spaces of the schools, the institutional space, in order to unveil the reality which is being hidden by the dominant ideology, the dominant curriculum" (Freire & Shor, 1987, p.36).

I am fortunate to have a special someone in my life who understands the Educational System better than anyone. She, too, started her career with the same drive and determination, and even though she has been an educator for over 40 years, she remains as passionate and as dedicated as the day she began. I listen to the wisdom she shares with me, and I watch how she is able to make changes while gaining care and respect from those around her. She is a leader in her field, and she has the ability to bring

together the people who can help her make dreams happen. I have difficultly accepting that change can only happen over time, but I will continue to learn how to work with the people around me in order to make changes happen. She also tells me that a piece of paper always has two sides no matter how thin it may be. She cautions me that as much as I think I may be right, someone else also thinks that they are right. I must be patient and find innovative ways to convince others of my philosophy. I understand that others hold on to their dreams as tightly as I hold on to mine.

I have argued throughout my work that my schooling experience would have been a lot different if a teacher cared to look into my eyes and teach me what I really needed to know. I have described stories from my past in order to better understand how my experiences enlighten my own teaching. I have discovered through my own stories that my unknowing about myself was clearly linked to the inability of my teachers to reach me on a personal level. Although I did not know it at the time, I wanted more from teachers who seemed to teach within the boundaries of the dominant ideology. Through my research, I have gained a better understanding of the self-reproducing system that keeps the dominant ideology in power. I wonder how many teachers in the system dreamed of another way of teaching. Did any of my teachers face the same resistance as I am facing today? Have their dreams of a better tomorrow been fulfilled?

My intention in this thesis was not to condemn other ways of teaching, to lash out at any teachers I have encountered in my past, or to hurt the people who mean the most to me. My intention as I began writing my thesis was to better understand myself. I started to write because I wanted to comprehend how I learned to write and speak what others wanted to hear. I wanted to unveil the structures of the dominant ideology who kept me

from knowing myself. After discovering another way, I wanted to soak up the theories and the theorists who validated my new experiences and my changed teaching methods. I was hurting and I wanted to hear that my experiences were not all that different from others. I needed to know that I was a good teacher. Reflecting on my past, I argue the importance of students' stories in the classroom. I explain how I structure my own classroom in order to listen to the written and spoken words of students. I quote from the works of researchers to defend my thinking. And, I allow myself to be vulnerable when I share my relationship with my grandmother, and recount stories from our shared past. I have included a very personal side of myself in order to connect with readers, and to encourage discussions of messy subjects.

I can only imagine that my work might bring about change in the Educational System. I began the Masters Program at UPEI thinking I would engage in a conventional research practice. But, I journeyed further into the understanding of Autoethnography and letters as research, I realized I could make a personal difference. I understand that my ideas will not create a new teaching wave, but I am adamant that my ideas can make a difference in the lives of students. My hope is that other teachers may try critical approaches in their classrooms as well as continue to discuss their teaching practices with others. I assume that if teachers continue to show the importance of sharing students' stories in the classroom, and prove the benefits of teaching students to think critically, schooling would change. To imagine a better tomorrow, by discussing how we think it might be, seems like an excellent way to begin.

I recognize that I have made many assumptions throughout my thesis. I have examined my experiences from my own perspective, and I have not given others the

opportunity to voice their opinions. Possibly, some of my arguments are clearly more complicated than I have made them out to be. I realize that the business of educating children is very complicated and what works for one student or one teacher may not necessarily work for others. I do assume that as long as teachers are willing to continue dialogue about what is said, and most importantly, what is not said, we will be moving in new ways.

A few summers ago, I took a class that directly changed my thinking about myself and about teaching. I was intrigued by a professor's ability to build a community in a very short time. Her approach enabled me to think about things I had tried hard to forget, to write truthfully about my experiences, and to question my ways of knowing. I left class wondering how I could recreate this same atmosphere in my own classroom. I wondered how I could integrate Critical Pedagogy in a Grade 6 class and I was excited about getting the students to think critically. I was not surprised at my students' reactions when I announced that the year would be much different than they were used to. In fact, as I discussed my expectations for the year, I knew that my students were intrigued but hesitant about what I was saying. We spent the first part of the year negotiating boundaries, but eventually, we had accomplished what I had set out to do. We had formed a community of learners and friends and we learned more about ourselves and the world than I could have imagined.

As I look back at my few years working Critical Pedagogy into my Grade 6 classroom, I wonder how many others have ventured on the same path. I realize that all the research I have quoted and my few experiences with Critical Pedagogy all happened in university. Could I be taking my students on too difficult a path or could we argue that

Grade 6 students are not ready to be asking such important questions about their world? Who decides what is appropriate for each student? Do we structure the curriculum in order to avoid messy subjects for the sake of students or adults? The parents and members of the professional community who oppose my teaching practices believe that much of the conversations we are having are the responsibility of the parents. I wonder if fear factors into the equation. Would parents argue this same point if they were more comfortable in discussing messy subjects with their children? Do they doubt my ability because of their lack of openness with their own children? Are they afraid their children will bring home an issue they are not willing to address? Are they acting out of the belief that family matters must remain in the family?

In an era where standardized testing is the norm, teachers and administrators are under extreme pressures to prepare students to write a test. I realize the weight of teaching X amount of curriculum in X amount of time in order to meet the grade of testing. I realize that the work I have been doing with my students has not happened very often on Prince Edward Island. I understand the resistance I am facing; I am venturing into uncharted territories and no one wants to be blamed if something goes terribly wrong. I am asking my students to practice a pedagogy of discomfort and move away from their regular comfort zones. I want my students to think about their own place in the world. I create a space where I hope my students will engage themselves, the teacher and their peers in meaningful dialogue and risk being confronted about their thoughts and beliefs. Do I have the right to ask my students to question the structures of our society? Are they shedding their childhood innocence a little too soon or am I offering them a space to discuss what matters most to them? Obviously, I finish my thesis with hundreds

of questions on how to teach well. Where do I see myself going from here? I expect I will continue developing critical practices, —perhaps a little more cautiously than before—while working out the questions that remain in my mind. The resistance I encountered leads me to assume that I am asking important questions. I have just begun to uncover the structures that dominate our world, and the hidden truths that trouble my mind. I think I will continue to claim *"that space, like a crack in the pavement where a flower might grow"* (Delpit, 2002, p.42).

Chère mémère,

How shall I end it? I cannot believe that I am almost done writing my thesis. I have spent many hours writing, reading, playing solitaire, drinking Shirley Temples, procrastinating and rewriting the words and the sentences that make up this thesis. At first, I have to admit that I could not imagine producing a piece of writing any more than a few dozen pages. At least, I would never have thought that I would write anything as personal and as meaningful to me as this present work. I still remember crying over the first letter I wrote to you. I had just begun to chisel my way through the walls that kept me safe from remembering my own past. As much as I wanted to remember the great memories I had of you, I wanted to forget the events that brought you to your death. I wanted to erase the heartaches of my childhood and I knew that once I began the process of reliving those memories from my past, I would also have to experience again the moments that brought me to end my own life.

However, I was determined to understand how the events of my life shaped my ways of seeing the world. I decided that if I was ever going to teach my students, I had to

first better understand myself. I began teaching knowing that I wanted to do better by my students, but as I entered my first classroom, I quickly realized I had a lot to learn. I worked through the events from my past always keeping the magic wand in mind. I was truthful as I wrote my thesis and I never lost sight of my reason for beginning this work. I was hurting and I wanted to uncover the memories that allowed me not to know. I believed that once I uncovered these important events of my life, I would begin to have a better understanding of who I am.

It became clear that I would have to sort through the multiple I's as I began my research. I was speaking from different perspectives and I knew that I would have to uncover each of them as I wrote my thesis. I began telling the story of the teenage I. I wanted nothing more than to leave this hateful world. I wrote of the night I tried to kill myself and I relived the events over and over in my mind. I also explained the student I. I discussed the events that shaped my schooling experiences. I never found my place in the classroom and I spend most of my time trying to understand myself. I have also recreated a few memorable events of my teacher voice. I have been able to tell of certain practices that have framed my teaching philosophy and even though I have faced resistance, I have been able to uncover the self-reproducing structures that enable the dominant powers to reign. As a lesbian, I know that that voice has been heard throughout my thesis. I think the hidden curriculum in our schools prevented me from understanding myself better. I have finally found a stronger voice and although it continues at times to be silenced, I know that it will always resurface stronger than before.

Am I complicating matters? I think it is because I do not want to finish this letter. I began writing to you, because you were the one person in my life I could always count on. I knew that if I was ever going to write a thesis that meant something to me, I needed to include you in the process. Ma chère mémère, I have not only found myself through these letters, but I have found you all over again. The night you died remains very clear in my mind. I imagine I will never be able to forget the memories of that night, but these letters have also brought back all the wonderful memories we have shared. Remember the day I came back from Matante Hugette's and said she had the best chickens in the world. I had been to the barn twice that day and had gathered the eggs on both occasions. Remember how much you laughed at me for thinking a chicken had laid two eggs. And do you remember playing cards all night; somehow you always managed to have the right cards. I think the fudge and the Root-Beer made me forget that you always cheated. I loved how frustrated I got and how much you laughed every time you won. I still think of you every time I have Kraft Dinner; You always made to believe that the pepper was already included in the box. I only realized that you fooled me all those years once I started making my own lunch.

I know this letter must eventually come to an end, but before it does, I want to tell you one last thing. Nola and I are going to have a baby. Eventually, if all goes as planned, I would love to have four. I think that Nola is hoping for two, but I still have lots of time to convince her! We are hoping that one will be a girl because we will be naming her after you. I promise to keep your memory alive as I pass on to her all the wisdom and the love you have given me. Of course, if we end up with four boys, I will be

sure to teach them the same. Thank you for being a part of my life and the key to my recovery. I could never have done it without you.

Je t'aime mémère,

Ta petite fille Elizabeth

References

Armstrong, J. (2006, February 3). Locker-room 'look' sparks furor: If I were a heterosexual teacher, I would not be here today. *The Globe and Mail,* p. A1.

Bailey, C. (1997). A Place From Which to Speak: Stories of Memory, Crisis and Struggle from the Preschool Classroom. In J.A. Jipson & N. Paley (Eds.), *Daredevil Research: Recreating Analytic Practice* (pp.137-149). New York: Peter Lang.

Berlak, A.C. (2004). Confrontations and Pedagogy: Cultural Secrets, Trauma, and Emotion in Antioppressive Pedagogies. In M. Boler (2004). *Democratic Dialogue in Education: Troubling Speech and Disturbing Silence* (pp.123-144). New York: Peter Lang Publishing.

Boler, M. (2004). *Democratic Dialogue in Education: Troubling Speech and Disturbing Silence (Ed.).* New York: Peter Lang Publishing.

Boler, M., & Zembylas, M. (2003). Discomforting Truths: The Emotional Terrain of Understanding Difference. In P.P. Trifonas. *Pedagogies of Difference: Rethinking Education for social Change (pp.110-136).* New York: RoutledgeFalmer.

Bourdieu, P., & Passeron, J.-C. (1977). *Reproduction: In Education, Society and Culture.* London: Sage Publishing.

Brookes, A.-L.(1992). *Feminist Pedagogy: An Autobiographical Approach.* Halifax: Fernwood Publishing.

Brookes, A.-L., & Kelly, U.A. (1989). Writing Pedagogy: A Dialogue of Hope. *Journal of Education,* 171(2), 117-131.

Burnaford, G., Fischer, J., & Hobson, D. (1996). *Teachers Doing Research: Practical Possibilities.* New Jersey: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates Publishers.

Cole, A.L. (3003). The Thesis Journey: Traveling with Charley. *Brock Education, 13*(1),1-13.

Connelly, F. M., & Clandinin, D.J. (1990). Stories of Experience and Narrative Inquiry. *Educational Researcher,* 19(5), pp. 2-14.

Delpit, L. (2002). *The Skin That We Speak: Thoughts on Language and Culture in the Classroom.* (Ed). New York: The New Press.

Dillard, A. (1998). To Fashion a Text. *In W. Zinser (Ed.), Inventing the Truth: The Art and Craft of Memoir (pp.141-161)* . Boston: Houghton Mifflin Company.

Gibbs, J. (2000). *Tribes: A New Way of Learning and Being Together.* Sausalito: Centre Source Systems.

Eisner, E.W.(1993). Forms of Understanding and the Future of Educational Research. *Educational Researcher*, v.22, no.7, pp. 5-11.

Ellis, C., & Bochner, A.P. (2000). Autoethnography, Personal Narrative, Reflexivity: Researcher as Subject. In N.K. Denzin and Y.S. Lincoln (Eds). *Handbook of Qualitative Research* 2nd Edition (pp.733-768). Sage Publishing.

Ellsworth, E. (1997). *Teaching Positions: Difference, Pedagogy, and the Power of Address.* New York: Teachers College Press.

Freire, P. (1973). *Education as the Practice of Freedom.* London: Writers and Readers Publishing Cooperative.

Freire P., & Shor, I. (1987). *A Pedagogy for Liberation: Dialogues on Transformation Education.* New York: Bergin & Garvey.

hooks, b. (1994). *Teaching to Transgress: Education as the Practice of Freedom.* New York: Routledge.

Kincheloe, J.L., & McLaren, P. (2002). Rethinking Critical Theory and Qualitative Research. In Y. Zon & E.T. Trueba (Eds.), *Ethnography and Schools: Qualitative Approaches to the Study of Education* (pp.87-138). Maryland: Rouman and Littlefield Publishers.

Knowles, J. G., Cole, A. L., & Presswood, C.(1994). *Through Preservice Teachers' Eyes: Exploring Field Experiences Through Narrative and Inquiry.* New York: Macmillan College Publishing.

Kohl, H. (2002). Topsy-Turvies: Teacher Talk and Students Talk. In L.Delpit (Ed.), *The Skin That We Speak: Thoughts on Language and Culture in the Classroom* (pp. 145-161). New York: The New Press.

Lewis, M. (1995). Power and Education: Who decides the forms schools have taken, and who should decide? In J. L. Kincheloe & S. R. Steinberg (Eds.), *Thirteen Questions: Reframing Education's Conversation Second Edition (pp.31-42).* New York: Peter Lang.

Lorde, A. (1984). *Sister Outsider: Essays and Speeches.* New York: The Crossing Press.

Morris, M. (2003). Queer Pedagogies: Camping up the Difference. In P.P. Trifonas. *Pedagogies of Difference: Rethinking Education for social Change (pp. 188-219).* New York: RoutledgeFalmer.

Ng, R. (2003). Toward an Integrative Approach to Equity in Education. In P.P. Trifonas. *Pedagogies of Difference: Rethinking Education for social Change (pp. 206-219).* New York: RoutledgeFalmer.

Nodding, N. (1992). The Challenge to Care in Schools: An Alternative Approach to Education. *Advances in Contemporary Educational Thought*, v.8. New York: Teachers College Press.

Noddings, N., & Witherell, C. (1991). *Stories Lives Tell: Narrative and Dialogue in Education.(Eds).* New York: Teachers College, Colombia University.

Palmer, P. (1998). *The Courage to Teach: Exploring the Inner Landscape of a Teacher's Life.* California: Jossey-Bass Inc.

Sánchez-Casal, S., & MacDonald, A. (2002). *Twenty-First Century Feminist Classrooms: Pedagogies of Identity and Difference (Eds).* New York: Palgrave MacMillan.

Wink, J. (2000). Critical *Pedagogy: Notes from the Real World: 2nd Edition.* United States: Addison-Wesley Longman Inc.