

From At-Risk to Advocate: One Teacher's Journey
An Auto-Ethnography

Mikkaka Hardaway Overstreet
University of Louisville
United States

ABSTRACT Using ethnographic methods, the author studies her experiences as a child, teacher and a scholar through the lens of critical literacy. In doing so, she confronts challenges that students, families, and teachers face in the spaces where their worlds overlap. The author explores the implications of her experiences as it relates to teaching and learning, family literacy, and the current political climate.

The Scholar

"I want to earn my doctorate for reasons that are both personal and professional. I grew up in an environment with which many of our students can connect. My home life was inconsistent at best, but terrifying and painful at its worst points. However, school was nothing like home. I loved the consistency of it, the safety of it, and the hope I found there. It quickly became my refuge. Thanks to the support of many quality educators I was able to beat the odds and grow into a successful adult. They are the reason I was the first in my family to graduate college and the only to attempt a master's degree. They are the reason I am here today."

—Excerpt from my admissions essay for the PhD program

When I started my PhD program, I was fresh out of the classroom. I'd taught in a political climate (that still endures today), in which teachers were often the target of blame for the failures of our educational system. This experience, coupled with those of my childhood, brought me into the program with an idea of studying family literacy. I soon learned, however, that my aims were grounded in a "deficit perspective" of families and a chip on my shoulder.

Current trends, societal expectations and political moves have placed teachers in a difficult situation without respect for their efforts and with misguided and inappropriate pressures and expectations. Media and political attacks on education abound: headlines on failing test scores and tougher standards for teachers get front page attention, but positive stories on good teachers rarely even make the feature page (Zemelman, Daniels, & Bizar, 1999). Some teachers attribute this to the public's general lack of faith in schools and feel that their creativity, professionalism, and choice as teachers is restricted by testing and other bureaucratic intervention (Finn, 2009).

I was one of these teachers, and I was angry. I didn't know how deeply that anger lived, but I felt it. On the surface, I was outraged as a teacher. I had busted my butt for five years—staying late, lugging work home, spending my own money, waking up at 2 a.m. worried about other people's children—and I was angry that efforts like mine were so unappreciated by the general public. It certainly wasn't like I'd gone into teaching for the prestige and because I thought I'd have hordes of adoring fans; few of us become teachers for any other reason than we are called to do it. So it wasn't that I needed a public pat on the back, or an award, or any sort of recognition. What I needed, what we all needed, was a break! We needed a break from the politicians using Michelle-Rhee-like tough tactics to show their constituents that they care about education. We needed a break from administrators making decisions driven by test scores and not kids. We needed a break from the constant media onslaught focusing on our failing schools, our bad teachers, and our system that can't compete with the rest of the world.

I found my anger directed at the only people I could reach: parents. Why wasn't the media lamenting poor parenting? Why weren't politicians threatening mass revocation of parental rights? Why was nobody holding the parents accountable for their part in this situation? I came face-to-face with the results of poor parenting everyday (or so I thought). I saw students underfed, uncleaned, and seemingly unloved. I saw students who lived in front of the television and video games, whose parents changed phone numbers more than I changed clothes, who wore new Jordans and other name brand clothes, but who could barely read. Where were their parents' priorities, and how was I supposed to "fix" the messes their parents were making?

I realize now that my surface anger as a teacher was influenced by my own experiences as a child. I viewed my own upbringing from what Auerbach (1989) deems a deficit perspective. The deficit model assumes that since low-income families often do not engage in the literacy practices most valued by schools that they are somehow "lacking," and it is the necessity of schools to fill those voids, often without consideration of the families' particular cultural values, needs, and experiences (Auerbach, 1989; Compton-Lilly, Rogers, & Lewis, 2012; Dudley-Marling, 2009; Edwards, 1992; Morrow & Tracey, 2012). As the only child of a young, single mother, I was at one time or another every child I described above—hungry, poorly dressed, well-dressed but neglected and on and on. I saw myself reflected in these children, and I was as angry at their parents as I was at my own.

As a scholar stepping outside myself, however, I recognize that this approach is not fair. If my mother was so horrible and my childhood was so lacking, how am I here? I sit in my home office facing a wall containing four college degrees (a Bachelor's and a Master's each for my husband and I), constructing this essay on one of our four computers. I own this home. I have a rewarding and well-paying career. I am pursuing my PhD and will have completed all criteria for

completion short of the dissertation within the next few months—less than six months after my thirtieth birthday. Should an at-risk child, with hardly a chance of graduating high school (Britner, Balcazar, Blechman, Blinn-Pike, & Larose, 2006), have achieved all of this? Again, if my childhood was so lacking, *how am I here?*

Glesne (2011) suggests that researchers must not try and suppress their feelings, but must use them to re-examine their own perceptions and to generate new questions. Contradictions like the ones mentioned above provide opportunities to challenge our individual and collective thinking. As I struggle to reconcile societal perceptions with my personal, professional, and scholarly experiences, I am led to ask myself the following questions:

What does my experience tell us about students and families?

What lessons can teachers and researchers take away from my story?

Methodology

Looking at my own experience required me to be able to move in and out of myself to examine what time and acquired knowledge has taught me about the events in my life. I found that the best way to do so was to divide into multiple selves: my child self, my teacher self, and my scholarly self. The resulting format is a multigenre research paper, which “meld[s] facts, interpretation and imagination” (Romano, 1991). Separately, each piece reads as its own genre (Romano, 1995)—the child and the teacher somewhat like memoirs and the scholar like a traditional research paper—but once interwoven, they collectively tell of a journey to my particular positionality.

Many scholars have used autoethnography as a method of exploring complex issues through the lens of their own experience. Ethnography is a methodology that uses observation, interview, and extended stays “in the field” in an attempt to analyze the experiences of people—to tell their stories (Schensul, Schensul, & LeCompte, 1999). Ethnography requires constantly questioning your own assumptions and perceptions (Glesne, 2011). Autoethnography refocuses the direction of traditional ethnography so that the researcher is looking inward, exploring a research question through the lens of her own experience, “prob[ing] the tensions that arise in the interaction between educational research and lived experience” (Majors, 2001, p. 129). An author might consider how instances reaching back as far as childhood affect their interpretations (Cintron, 1997; Majors, 2001), or might analyze how experiences related to one topic (e.g., teaching children from impoverished backgrounds) shape their current practice. Majors explains how autoethnographic approaches force the researcher to recognize the dominance of experience over our perceptions:

Through it, the researcher comes to realize (1) that she is shaped by that which begins long before she ever even enters the field and (2) that she is altered by self-interrogations that persist long after mental pictures fade. What I discovered was that to this initial site I brought to my gaze my own life history and personal experiences which directly affected the research. (p. 116-117)

Embedded in this methodology is the notion of contextualized perception of researchers, participants, and audience. I cannot separate myself from my research (Clandinin & Connelly,

2000). At the very least, most researchers routinely acknowledge their role in the research—confronting their biases and assumptions in an attempt to honestly present their interpretations of the data (Glesne, 2011). The researcher's experience cannot be silenced; “it is impossible (or if not impossible, then deliberately self-deceptive) as researcher to stay silent or to present a kind of perfect, ideological, inquiring, moralizing self” (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000, pp. 61-62). Autoethnography, then, is an outgrowth of this necessity. Since the researcher cannot remove herself from the research, then she must include herself in the analysis and interpretation. There is no universally correct way of seeing the world (Van Maanen, 1988). I contend this applies to the world of the self—my interpretation of the experiences as I lived them differs from the way I see things in retrospect, as this narrative will show (Cintron, 1997; Spradley, 1979). Distance and new knowledge allow me to problematize my experiences and make meaning in ways I have heretofore been unable to. Neither interpretation is wrong. Nor is it wrong that I make meaning through the lens of my own perspectives and beliefs. The truth is shaped by the teller or, as Cintron (1997) asserts, “Knowledge is autobiographical”(p.8).

“We are complicit in the world we study. Being in this world, we need to remake ourselves as well as offer up research understandings that could lead to a better world” (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000, p. 61). I consider myself a *critical ethnographer*, which I loosely define as an ethnographer who considers the world, as Merriam (2009) defines a critical stance, “in terms of conflict and oppression” while seeking to “critique and change society.” A critical ethnographer must be altruistic in nature, possessing a desire to “change the world by helping others” (Schensul et al., 1999). Scrutinizing my own experience through autoethnographic methods allows me to remake myself as a part of the better world I seek to help create.

This desire, coupled with my own experience, has led me to reject deficit perspectives of families, children, and teachers. I believe in education. I believe in children and families. I believe in teachers. As a critical ethnographer, however, believing is not enough; thus, analyzing and redefining my own experience is my first step in attempting to change society (Merriam, 2009; Winn & Behizadeh, 2011). Winn and Behizadeh contend that critical literacy is “essential to the redefining of the self and the transformation of oppressive social structures” (p. 149). In this paper I explore my experiences as a child, a teacher, and a researcher, combing these happenings for the connections that have brought me to this time and place. I redefine my childhood, rejecting society's perceptions of me and children like me. I add to that what I discovered as a teacher and how my experience shaped my practice. Perhaps what I have learned, what I have seen and done, will empower other educators to reject the status quo by thinking and seeing their work, their students, and their communities in new ways. Though this seems a lofty goal, and ethnographic work will undoubtedly be flawed (Van Maanen, 1988), it is worth the attempt for, as Cintron (1997) says,

This way of imagining ethnography—as something that tries so hard to be exact and complete but remains always a failed expectation and a target for the sweetness of critique—is very humbling, yet it contains, finally, so very much that is worthwhile. (p. 232)

The Child

When I was in elementary school my mother, undoubtedly perplexed by what she considered non-childlike behavior, would constantly force me to “go outside and play”. Obediently, I would put on my play shoes and leave the house. Once outside, however, I would find a quiet place and retrieve a book from its hiding place under my shirt or stuffed down my pants. I read voraciously amidst the distant sounds of other children laughing as they chased one another, squealing as they raced their bicycles down the street.

My friends were in Terabithia, Narnia, and Middle Earth. Unlike the Black faces all around me, the other girls in my babysitter’s club were White and Asian with interests beyond our block and, like me, they dressed and talked funny. And if they were ever hungry or cold or painfully abused, it was usually for some greater cause and would all be okay in the end.

The Teacher

I started my teaching career in January of 2006, a fresh December graduate who had expected to continue my job with an educational theatre company until at least the fall when schools would be hiring in droves. To my surprise, however, my college advisor knew the principal at a “good school” in Louisville’s affluent East End of town. A 2nd grade teacher was retiring over the Christmas break and the principal was hoping for a replacement rather than a long-term substitute.

This principal—who I’ll just call Principal K—was a shrewd businesswoman who knew how to get her way. If she hired someone mid-year, she could avoid the list of tenured transfers that would come her way in the fall and, thus, have control over her school’s hiring. How she avoided the “last hired, first fired” rule in the fall when she did receive that list, I’ll never know. Regardless, I started my career at Stepford Elementary, excited and hopeful and as green as could be.

I took over halfway through a school year for Ms. M—a teacher who had been in the same classroom for twenty years, and in the school itself for her entire career. They threw her a parade, put her name out on their marquee (the first time any teacher’s name appeared there), and generally made a big to-do about saying goodbye to her. I certainly had big shoes to fill.

Here I was, quite literally fresh out of college, and I was walking into one of the best elementary schools in the state (according to test score rankings) as a replacement for one of its oldest and most beloved teachers. The children had spent the first half of the school year becoming accustomed to the way she did things and their parents were watching me closely. Would they expect me to keep things the way they were? Was I supposed to try and emulate Ms. M’s teaching style?

We couldn’t have been more opposite. Besides the considerable difference in age and experience, Ms. M just fit the East End in a way I didn’t. Middle class and blonde with adorable blonde grandchildren, Ms. M was from the community and could talk home improvement projects and Bunco. I was young and Black, with an afro and a newly rented one bedroom apartment nearby. I’d grown up in the parts of town these people avoided completely and I had never even heard of Bunco. I felt out of place and fraudulent.

It wasn't just because I didn't fit that I felt uncomfortable; it was also because I didn't feel as though I should have been trying to fit. I had gotten into education to help kids like me—poor, minority, classified as “at-risk”—yet here I was in the center of WASP country, working with children whose mothers visited them at lunch wearing stiletto heels and cardigans and bearing fresh sushi. Unlike my colleagues in poorer neighborhoods, I had no shortage of volunteers to help with parties, come on field trips, or to just come in a few days a week to help out with whatever I needed. Though most of my kids had no trouble buying everything on the lengthy second grade supply list, I still had a triple digit annual allowance from the PTA for additional classroom expenses, while other teachers spent their own money to buy the most basic supplies like pencils and copy paper.

I felt like a sellout.

The Scholar

The start of my teaching career was not an easy one. I felt so out of place in the affluent, predominately White school that my first-year teacher anxiety was exponentially compounded. I'd harbored lofty goals of helping children like me—children who were “at-risk” or, in other words, poor, possibly mistreated or abused, and from a minority background. Yet, here I was, far away from the part of town where those children were concentrated.

Back then I didn't have the language to discuss critical literacy, but the theory was at the heart of who I was as a teacher. I knew that children like me came to school at a disadvantage, but I couldn't quite articulate the factors involved in that condition. I knew it was my job to help the students overcome that disadvantage, but again, I didn't know what doing so would entail. I did know, however, that the majority of students I worked with were the opposite of me and the other at-risk kids. The very structure of school was designed for the success of most of my students (Lareau, 1987).

I was supposed to be helping students who, by dint of their cultural background and socioeconomic status, lacked power. In Critical Literacy Theory, literacy is viewed as power, and, thus, an unequal distribution of educational opportunity is an unequal distribution of power (Finn, 2009; Morrow & Tracey, 2012). Through what Ladson-Billings (1995) calls “culturally relevant teaching” students are empowered “intellectually, socially, emotionally, and politically by using cultural referents to impart knowledge, skills, and attitudes” (p. 382). Critical Literacy Theory seeks to empower families from disadvantaged populations with the “cultural capital” that their middle class counterparts already possess (Lareau, 1987; Lareau & Horvat, 1999; Rogers, 2002). The concept of cultural capital draws on the idea that traditional schooling is not designed in such a way that it encompasses the social and cultural practices of lower class families. Instead, schools draw more on the cultural and social resources—including linguistic structures, authority patterns, and types of curricula—of the middle class, meaning that children from middle class families come to school at an advantage as they are already more familiar with the social structures (Lareau, 1987; Lareau & Horvat, 1999; Morrow & Tracey, 2012; Rogers, 2002). A Critical Literacy perspective requires questioning and changing such structures, making learners and their families aware of these structures and the power of literacy, encouraging home-school partnerships, and valuing the funds of knowledge inherent in their social and cultural practices (Auerbach, 1989; Compton-Lilly et al., 2012; Ladson-Billings, 1995; Lareau, 1987; Morrow & Tracey, 2012; Rogers, 2002).

Despite the hopelessness that society would have assigned to my position, there were people in my life who did not hold to that perception of my future. These caring adults pushed me, encouraged me, supported me, guided me, and believed in me. These caring adults included my mother, grandmothers, aunts and uncles, friends' parents and, most often, teachers. In spite of the weight of poverty and neglect in my life, the influence of a caring adult was still able to break down barriers. Their support strengthened my resilience—my ability to “achiev[e] positive outcomes despite risk” (Brooks, 2006, p. 69). This is in keeping with resiliency literature which suggests that caring adult relationships can serve as protective factors for at-risk youths (Brooks, 2006; Laursen & Birmingham, 2003). In a study of middle-school students, researchers found that “perceived caring from teachers predicted motivational outcomes, even when students' current levels of psychological distress and beliefs about personal control, as well as previous (6th grade) motivation and performance, were taken into account” (Wentzel, 1997). I met my most caring teacher in sixth grade and she changed my life. Her name was Ms. Cissell.

She is who I wanted to be when I grew up. She is why I became a teacher. I feared that by teaching in an affluent school, I'd betrayed those intentions.

The Child

I entered sixth grade an awkward runt of a girl with bad hair and poor fashion sense. Even the required uniforms couldn't hide the fact that I was poor and clearly behind the times. At what would typically be called a “rough” middle school, I was soon heartily bullied and afraid to go to gym class.

My knight in shining armor soon intervened. Miss Cissell, my English teacher, noticed that I was often ill on Mondays (coincidentally, the day I had gym). Miss Cissell noticed a lot of things. She noticed when I was haggard from staying up all night hoping my mother would finally come home or when I was reluctant to leave school at the end of the day to return to an empty house and its empty refrigerator. Though she didn't know the reasons behind the feelings she sensed, she took a particular interest in me. Soon, I was out of gym and serving as her aide during that period—a treat usually reserved for eighth graders. I spent these periods writing, mostly—a practice she nurtured and encouraged. She even paired me up with local author Roberta Simpson Brown (of *Scary Stories to Tell in the Dark*), who gave me feedback on my work and my newfound love of short scary stories.

Sometimes, Miss Cissell would take me home with her. I remember marveling at the seeming miles and miles of open land around her home. There I touched a horse for the first time, read her my stories, and ate my weight in spaghetti. I loved this sweet little blonde pixie of a woman. I love her still.

Soon, I cashed in on these stories. I got a reputation for being smart and, by doing the homework of the more popular kids, I was spared further persecution. I was even somewhat cool by association.

The Teacher

It seemed that unlike Miss Cissell, I had chosen the easy route. As I looked across my classroom of well-cared for, mostly White students, I thought of all the children out there like me. Children who needed me to understand them, to push them, to show them it could all be overcome.

However, it didn't take long for me to realize that, as usual, God placed me exactly where I needed to be. These children needed to see me as well. They needed to experience what I had to offer. And I needed to experience the challenges of working at the opposite end of the spectrum. I needed to see the full picture of our educational system to truly understand the disparities and contradictions that would drive me to continue my education and to push back against a system that is fundamentally flawed. Had I been in a classroom of children like me, would I ever have fully known what the system was denying us? Would I have ever been able to pull myself away from the immediate needs in front of me in order to look at things on a larger scale? Would I now be working to change things beyond the world of my classroom?

Stepford Elementary also housed a small group of children who were more like me. These children, especially, made me feel more like I was where I was supposed to be. Because our city itself is still very much racially segregated, Louisville created a bussing system to integrate our schools. What that meant at Stepford was that a small contingent of poor Black kids was bussed in from the other side of town—most from the same housing projects. A long, sleepy bus ride each morning brought them to a school many of their parents had never seen or heard of. Due to lack of reliable transportation, many of the parents never would see the school, or even know where it was until a member of the school staff picked them up for parent-teacher conferences. (And since some parents didn't take that opportunity, the mystery often remained.)

These kids tumbled into the school, bringing their rambunctious personalities and neighborhood rivalries with them, and most of the teachers—despite their best efforts and intentions—just couldn't identify with them. They children got into trouble regularly, struggled academically, and stuck together as a raucous and sassy clique. Teachers tried in vain to keep them apart because of the trouble they usually got into together, but when I looked into classrooms full of White faces with one or two brown faces planted here and there, I couldn't blame them for seeking one another out on every opportunity.

I certainly don't believe that my blackness inherently made me more equipped to teach or support these children. I do think, however, that seeing themselves in the teaching staff made a difference. Further, there were simply aspects of their lives with which I was more familiar than my White counterparts because of my life experiences as a Black woman.

When the only Black boy in my class got in trouble on the playground for referring to a White classmate as "my nigga", I understood the use of the phrase in certain parts of the Black community when referring to one's circle of friends. More importantly, I wasn't made so uncomfortable by the forbidden word that I was afraid to discuss it frankly with the boys, as my politically correct colleagues feared to do. Rather than fussing at Kevin for using a "bad word" and sending him the message that his primary discourse was wrong or bad, I could talk about the differences between the language and behaviors we use at home in informal settings and what was more appropriate to school settings. Just like we didn't, for instance, kiss and hug freely at school, we addressed one another differently.

When Malcolm was on the verge of getting a referral for refusing to remove his hood in class, I was able to discover his embarrassment that his mother hadn't finished his hair and his fear that his schoolmates would ridicule his half-Afro, half-twisted 'do. More importantly than that, because his teacher was kindly sympathetic, I could offer a solution. I spent my planning period twisting the rest of Malcolm's hair. The ease and familiarity of him sitting on the floor between my legs as I twisted and talked felt like home to both of us, and a lasting relationship was formed with a child I'd hardly talked to before.

I remember a candid conversation with a Black mother during my first full school year. Shelley wasn't one of the students bussed in, rather she was more of a rarity—a Black student with affluent parents. Her mother was one of the active PTA moms who were always helping around the school. The spring when I took over for Ms. M, I would often see Shelly's mom hovering in the doorway watching me teach. Parent scrutiny wasn't unusual at Stepford, so I'd smile and continue teaching, sometimes inviting her in if I could do so without interrupting my instruction. It wasn't until the following year when I actually had Shelley in my class that I realized she was collecting evidence to assist her in making a difficult decision. Late in the school year (which went very well for Shelley, despite the challenges of my first year) her mother confided in me. She explained that she would soon be moving Shelley to a local private school. She understood the numerous educational opportunities their family's wealth could offer Shelley, but she knew that would come with a price. She said that this might be Shelley's last chance to have a Black teacher and she wanted her to experience a positive relationship with a teacher who shared her background. She explained that so many of Shelley's friends and neighbors were White and that this would likely continue once she began private school. She had worried about my inexperience but had watched me enough to be confident in my abilities and to conclude that this was best for her daughter. Again, I realized how important it was for me to be at Stepford.

I combed a lot of heads (goodness, those biracial children with White mamas needed help!) and mediated between primary and secondary discourses often, but I know I was no savior and certainly not the only one making a difference in the lives of impoverished and minority students at Stepford. The Stepford teachers were doing their best to reach all of our students. They stayed late and came in early. They offered parents rides and made home visits. They bought clothes and books and Christmas gifts. They loved our kids. I was surrounded by Miss Cissells and that, more than anything, assured me that I was where I was supposed to be.

The Scholar

Ms. Cissell recognized the intelligence and potential behind my dark skin, secondhand clothes, and awkward demeanor. She obviously knew of my challenges and did what she could to meet my basic needs, but she didn't focus on those "deficits"; she didn't let my troubles define me. She knew that the complexities of my life couldn't be reduced to a narrow perception of strengths and deficits (Compton-Lilly et al., 2012). Moreover, she took the time to get to know me—to learn my strengths and interests—and used what she learned to support my academic development (Bloome, Katz, & Solsken, 2000; Ladson-Billings, 1995).

Rather than trying to force me to fit into the school's curriculum, Ms. Cissell molded the curriculum to meet my needs. She didn't completely deviate from the school's expectations—few teachers have the power to make broad curriculum decisions—but she found a way to allow me to coexist between my home and school literacy practices. She essentially created a "third space" (Bhabha, 1990) in which I was able to thrive and be my true self, combining the funds of knowledge that I brought with me in ways congruent with the accepted practices of school, and thus creating some new and confident hybrid of school and home (Bhabha, 1990; Moll, 1992). She creatively circumvented the rules, taking away something I strongly disliked and replacing it

with something I loved, felt good about, and *wanted* to learn. She used her community resources, placing me with a great mentor, to provide me with expertise perhaps beyond her time or abilities. The result of her venture was far more valuable than making me trudge through physical education as an act of compliance. I learned to be a better writer and to love it more—gifts I still carry and use today that have made me very successful. More importantly, I learned that I had something to offer the world, that I was valuable and smart.

It is not my intention to paint Ms. Cissell as a savior—a benevolent White woman who swooped in to rescue a poor, disadvantaged Black child from certain doom. Ms. Cissell could not help her Whiteness or that she came into my life at a time when I needed a particular sort of person to help me through the awkwardness of adolescence exacerbated by my own challenges. Nor do I attribute all of my success to her. Many hands touched my life—my mother and grandmothers, my aunts and uncles, the families of friends and neighbors, and many others. This story, however, is about teachers, about what I learned from teachers and as a teacher, and what other teachers can learn from my experiences. Ms. Cissell is the person in my life who epitomizes the impact teachers can have.

The larger problem is that it is highly unlikely that a Black child in American schools will have the opportunity to find herself in a relationship with a teacher that is *not* White, because she is highly unlikely to have non-White teachers. Our teaching force is largely homogenous, with only about 16% of practicing teachers being people of color; conversely, over 40% of the student population is non-White. The majority of America's teachers is White, middle-class, and speaks only English (Banks, Cochran-Smith, Moll, Richert, Zeichner, LePage, Darling-Hammond, Duffy, & McDonald, 2005). Perhaps a Black teacher could have served Ms. Cissell's role in my development, but in our flawed system I had less than a one in five chance of encountering such a person.

In my own practice, I was able to help students from poor and certain minority backgrounds to navigate the space between their home and school discourses (Bloome et al., 2000; Gee, 2013; Ladson-Billings, 1992). As in the story of the “n word” on the playground, I understood some of the complexities of those primary discourses because they were my own. I knew what it was like to acutely feel my “otherness,” and how difficult it was to reconcile home and school selves without feeling like a fraud or sellout (Majors, 2001). In a school full of White faces (most of whom were from middle class or even affluent families), being poor, Brown, or Black was definitely an othering experience. Majors explains the necessity of my presence in that place well: “Trying to hang on to that sense of self is hard when self has no mirror of affirmation” (p. 129).

The Child

With Miss Cissell's encouragement, I applied to a “better” school. Consequently, I left her in seventh grade and went to a traditional school. There, I continued to write and flourish as a “smart kid.” I wrote stories featuring my classmates; these were circulated throughout the day and then returned to me after last period to take home and add to at night. I wrote love poems and sold them to boys, who then gave them to girls. I wrote period

pieces, tales of gangs (we were all fascinated with Crips and Bloods at that time), poetry, and still the occasional scary story.

I didn't, however, connect to these teachers. I lost interest in school under the more traditional instruction. My mother was happy to have me stay home and play video games with her all day. She taught me to forge her signature so I'd always have an excuse note on hand. I went to school maybe twice a week to turn in and collect more make-up work. Finally, I got my first and only "C" ever. I'd missed too many science labs. I sat my mother down and told her I'd have to go to school more. She was disappointed, but acquiesced.

My mother was like this. She thought education was important and always encouraged me to do well in school, but she never pushed me or worried about my grades. She made sure I did my homework every evening before playing, but she didn't check it or do it with me. On the rare occasions that I had issues with teachers she stepped in on my behalf, but otherwise stayed away from the school. She seemed to take my academic success for granted and spent most of her school-related energy on curbing my perfectionism and getting me to relax. I remember vividly the day she ran back and forth past my door making lots of noise until I lifted my tear-stained face from some frustrating assignment and saw her, stark naked and grinning broadly. I couldn't help but laugh. She was always doing things like that.

Our silliness around schooling started when I was quite young. One of my favorite literacy memories is of my little typewriter. In preschool, I had a Fisher Price typewriter that I absolutely loved. The bright orange keys were not individual, but rather big chunks that all moved together when you pressed one. It showed a word for each letter of the alphabet and, as you "typed", the carriage slid over like a real typewriter. When I was about four years old my mother had a new boyfriend over to meet me for the first time. I sat on the floor with my little orange typewriter, "typing" quite diligently and announced, "Elephant. E-L-E-P-H-A-N-T. Elephant." The typewriter dinged and his mouth fell open. My mom and I exchanged a conspiratorial grin. We played this trick a lot.

My mother spent lots of what little money we had on books for me. She bought me every single book in the *Shivers* series (Spenser, 1997)—a dollar knockoff version of the popular *Goosebumps* series (Stine, 1992). She watched scary movies with me and let me read her my scary stories. I didn't always

recognize it, but she let me be my quirky, creative self. Though I often felt alone and ignored, she never tried to make me into something I wasn't.

My grandmothers were another source of academic support. My grandmothers were the epitome of all that grandmothers should be. Grandma H worked and fussed and cooked and fussed and wrote poetry and fussed and read books and fussed and watched soap operas and fussed. Because I could be quiet, I could spend time on the couch with her during her lunch break, while she watched the soaps she had recorded the previous day. She took me to the library every week, but my insatiable consumption of books had me raiding her bookshelves as well. I must've read something like 200 Harlequin romance novels over those summers.

I blame those novels for my childhood daydreams of being a tortured author someday. I dreamed of living in a cabin in the woods with my cats and strings of lovers, sitting in my papasan chair furiously pecking at my typewriter and staring moodily out of my library's glass wall. I wasn't quite certain about the purpose of the string of lovers, but they seemed an important part of the persona.

Grandma J was sweet with a southern accent that I loved and a vocabulary sprinkled with words like "reckon" and "yonder." She cooked and sang hymns, and I listened through the window as I played in the backyard in the shade of the weeping willows. She was the only person who took me to church as a child. I'd listen joyfully to the singing and then fall asleep in her soft lap during the sermons. After church we always went out to eat.

Both of my grandmothers loved to listen to the stories I wrote or to me talking about the books I read. Grandma H shared her poetry with me and seemed to enjoy my attempts to write my own. Grandma J let me gather the neighborhood children into her garage for "school" and would even make us treats for lunch time. Both of my grandmothers delighted in my intellectual pursuits and validated me in ways I craved. I loved the summer.

But I always missed my mother dreadfully.

I loved the long drives from Texas to Michigan. I'd navigate while she drove. It was just the two of us. We'd laugh and play I Spy and stop at rundown motels to sleep and we'd jump on the beds and eat junk food. We'd count license plates and cows and horses and get truck drivers to honk their horns. And when she dropped me off at Grandma's and left, I'd always cry. No matter

how happy I was to be there, I'd always ache for her when she left. She was my best friend.

The Teacher

My first full year of teaching introduced me to two students who really made me consider the influence and importance of students' home lives in the classroom. Despite the fact that I had students with extremely involved parents—sometimes to the point of being overbearing—it took Liam and Tyree's unique experiences to impress upon me the magnitude of the influence of families. They were two very different situations, but pretty equally challenging for a neophyte still trying to navigate the mysteries of teaching.

Liam had been at Steppford for his entire school career and had earned a reputation for being a behavior problem. Liam was small for his age, with dark curly hair and big eyes framed in long lashes. Born of a White mother and Black father, his skin was golden brown and lovely. During good moments, Liam could be downright charming. He was witty, with a sense of humor beyond his years and a knack for sarcasm that eluded most second graders.

Unfortunately, his good moments were rare. Liam's emotional issues remain beyond my comprehension. His mother was very responsive to my concerns and would come to the school often. Somewhat selfishly, however, I found her attempts to help to be superficial. It seemed to me she was trying to find some cause, some excuse, something out of her control on which she could blame Liam's issues. He was already on medication for Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder (ADHD), and during his year in my class he was subjected to extensive testing. I remember her bringing him to school one day after an absence and explaining that he hadn't slept in over 24 hours because he'd participated in a sleep study to assess the cause of his poor sleeping habits. Needless to say, he did not have a good day that day.

In retrospect, I wonder how fair I was to Liam's mother. She had another son (who was as opposite from Liam as wet from dry) and a new husband. She was quite young—early twenties at the most. How could she know what to do with a boy like Liam? I only had him for six hours a day, and he kept me at my wit's end. He would lie in the floor of my classroom and scream for hours that he hated me, that he hated himself, that he wished he was dead. For fire drills I would have to physically carry him out, kicking and screaming that he wanted to burn and I should let him die. My students soon learned to at least to pretend to ignore him, but I imagine their nerves were frazzled as well. He had trouble making friends with them, and I couldn't really blame them for being confused by his mercurial nature. I was just as confused when, after a day of obstinate refusals to work and endless screams expressing his hatred for me, he would beg me not to put him on the bus and would cling to me saying he loved me and wanted to come home and live with me.

Tyree was different. Where Liam was more whiny and pitiful, Tyree was all fire and rage. He transferred into our school mid-year with a spotty record that told of a transient family, new to Kentucky and not likely planning to settle. Tall and thin and dark, he was also Liam's physical opposite, though equally lovely physically.

Tyree rarely smiled. Though he seemed to enjoy some of our activities, anything challenging would send him into a teary, paper-crumpling, desk-tipping fit. He was completely unpredictable—the proverbial ticking time bomb that could unexpectedly explode at any minute into a furious cloud of swinging fists and barreling body. As he was bigger than the other students, these outbursts were extremely dangerous and nerve-wrecking. Not surprisingly, the other children kept their distance—except for Liam.

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I was terrified that one of these children would cause me to lose my job—would hurt another student or frighten a visiting parent who would have me reported. By what some would call luck or chance and I call the grace of God, this never happened. When Tyree threw my heavy tape dispenser across the room in a fit of anger, miraculously it missed the group of children reading and collided with the bookshelf. (Even more miraculously, the visiting Stepford mom offered me nothing but sympathy and even took some time with him to try and help him cool off.) When he heatedly ran from the building, we managed to catch him before he reached the busy street. Again and again, his fists missed the other children. And each day I held my breath, hoping that today wouldn't be the day that changed.

Liam's (and Tyree's) behavior showed me a different side of Principal K, who was suddenly stern and insistent that I handle my own classroom and not pester her for assistance. She concluded that she could "bitch" at the boys until she was blue in the face and it wouldn't make any difference, so I would have to figure it out. I was all but forbidden to seek her or the counselor for help during their outbursts. (Later she smiled and told me that she knew I could do it, I just needed to realize that for myself. Apparently she'd been teaching me a valuable life lesson for which I should be grateful.) Despite her so-called faith in me, I didn't feel I had any allies. I was on my own.

But I wasn't. There were people who wouldn't—couldn't—wash their hands of Tyree and Liam: their families.

I reached out to Liam and Tyree's families and was surprised that they responded positively to my advances. There were difficulties, frustrations, and near-arguments, but the benefits far outweighed the difficulties of maintaining the relationships. I learned a lot about the boys from their families; for instance, Tyree loved children. I found that pairing him with younger students—whether as a reading buddy or to help out for a while in a kindergarten classroom—served as a great incentive for him. Not only did it motivate him to good behavior to earn the reward, working with the younger students calmed him, built his confidence and helped me and other teachers to see him in a positive light for a change.

When I started to look at this whole child, my compassion was able to overcome my frustration more and more often. His mother told me heartbreaking stories of abuse, bringing back my own childhood memories. I wondered if that anger bubbling just beneath the surface of this boy's stoic façade was a result of holding in pain and confusion about what had been done to him. I was able to remember that his misbehavior was not about me, not a reflection on my teaching. I was able to regard him as his teacher should—as another child who needed me.

The five of us (me, Liam, Tyree, and their mothers) survived that year. Because of our collective effort, both Tyree and Liam were eventually placed in our self-contained Emotional and Behavioral Disorder (EBD) unit where they remained through the rest of elementary school. They got the attention and support they desperately craved and began to transform. They both made enough progress to be mainstreamed for parts of the day. When I saw them each week in the Arts and Humanities class I was teaching when they reached fifth grade, they were completely different boys. They were calm and composed, thoughtful and engaged. Tyree laughed and smiled. Liam brought me kind, hand-written cards. They grew into the kind, hard-working boys they always wanted to be.

*(*In middle school, Liam is no longer in a self-contained room. I've lost track of Tyree.)*

The Scholar

Like Tyree and Liam, my family certainly did not reflect the middle class ideals valued in schools. Schools, including those I attended and taught for, draw more on the cultural and social resources—including linguistic structures, authority patterns, and types of curricula—of the middle class, meaning that children from middle class families come to school at an advantage, as they are already more familiar with the social structures (Lareau, 1987; Lareau & Horvat, 1999; Morrow & Tracey, 2012; Rogers, 2002). How, then, was I successful? A deficit perspective of families would suggest that my troubled home life should have made it all but impossible for me to achieve. I could've easily been shuffled along through school, overlooked, while teachers blamed my poor performance on my family. I could've been pitied, given lower expectations, and been an example of the statistics that scare young teachers (Britner et al., 2006). This would not have been a true depiction of my family or an adequate portrayal of my ability. In truth, I possessed many skills that would lend to school success, as Ms. Cissell demonstrated, and something more: a resilience and perseverance that grew out of my difficult home life and was nurtured in the third spaces I shared with my caring adults and their high expectations for me (Benard, 1995; Bhabha, 1990).

I've heard well-meaning teachers who, still operating from a place of pity, talk of students' homes in sad and hushed voices. One such teacher mentioned to me that she was distraught about a student who struggled to sit still and eat lunch. She'd learned that at home his family never ate at a table together and she thought it was *such* a tragedy. Through the lens of her experience, she simply could not see the different lifestyles of her students as anything but deprived, deficit, and less than her own.

I can imagine how my story would sound to her. How irresponsible my mother must seem to encourage me to skip school and play Nintendo or run errands and window shop with her! Still, I can't help but remember this with a pang of nostalgia. During this period we achieved a closeness that wouldn't reappear until many years later—only a few years before the moment at which I type this paper. It was during one of these video game days that I first plucked up the courage to tell my mother about the sexual abuse I'd endured at the hands of my babysitter of many years before. We'd moved to Louisville from Killeen, Texas and I was far out of her reach and much older by now, but I still remembered and struggled with conflicting emotions about the teenager who earned extra money staying with me while my mom worked third shift. In these moments together, when we were doing something my mother understood instead of something as intimidating as school work (which is, according to many researchers, intimidating for many parents), we were able to have difficult conversations and share a closeness for which we didn't always have time or energy (Anderson & Minke, 2007; Handel, 1992). Is that experience less true, less wonderful, less right because we weren't sitting around a dining room table?

Pushor links the position teachers often take toward families to the concept of a protectorate (Memmi, 1965 in Pushor, 2012). Within this structure, those in power take it upon themselves to protect those they see as having little or no strength. Pushor posits that within our educational system, teachers play the role of protector, believing their professional knowledge and experience qualify them as the sole decision-makers in schooling. They do this with the best

of intentions and with the best interests of children at heart, but in doing so they further marginalize parents and position them as periphery elements in student learning (Pushor, 2012).

In all that she did for me, did Ms. Cissell ever engage my mother in my learning in meaningful ways? The child in me does not recall, but I can only imagine that the role my mother had was that of many parents—that of volunteer, spectator, and homework helper (Pushor, 2012). I imagine that my teachers explained to her how I was doing without soliciting her input on my learning and growth, my strengths and weaknesses, my hopes and dreams. Like Mikkaka the Teacher, I imagine that Ms. Cissell had my best interests at heart; but, like me, she likely sought a “partnership” that served to support school needs, rather than one in which there was reciprocal gain for parents (Pushor, 2012). If she and I accomplished so much with our students despite our unknown shortcomings with their parents, how much could we have attained if true parent engagement was at the heart of our practice?

The truth of the matter was that my home life wasn't all bad any more than any one person is all good or all bad. My mother, despite her shortcomings, was still my mother and my best friend. Dichotomies such as “good home” and “bad home” are artificial (Compton-Lilly et al., 2012). We are complex beings interacting within complex systems. My home was my home, my experience was my own, and I am shaped by the good and the bad. The author of my favorite book series says it best in the film adaptation of *Harry Potter and the Order of the Phoenix*: “We've all got both light and dark inside us. What matters is the part we choose to act on. That's who we really are” (Rowling, 2007). I wouldn't want to be anyone else than me—this child of dark and light.

Conclusion

The Woman-Child

I walk into the school building surrounded by a chattering throng of soon-to-be kindergarteners and their parents. Little hands are clenched tightly in larger ones and the buzz engulfing us all is a combination of nervous excitement, wistfulness and eager anticipation. The lobby is welcoming and warm, full of smiling volunteers holding maps, paperwork, nametags and directions.

Beside me, my brother holds my hand firmly in his and clings to my mother with his other. 16 years my junior, my brother is my baby boy. He's lived a life very different from mine—he has always lived in a house with two parents, plenty to eat and all the video games, movies and entertainment his heart could desire—but he is not without his own problems. Everything has come slowly for him; he was late to talk, to potty train, to learn his alphabet and colors. I am concerned that he may have something more serious wrong with him, but my mother brushes off my concerns, assuring me boys are different. She doesn't listen to my teacher judgment and so I just worry on, silently.

I am worried now. He is a year late starting kindergarten and I know he is still far behind the children surrounding us. It is still difficult to understand what he says if you're not around him as much as we are. He rarely speaks in complete sentences. He still has potty training accidents.

But he's the most tenderhearted child I've ever met. He thrives on physical contact—often silently entering a room just to give me a hug, a kiss, or simply lay his head against me for a few minutes. He loves to go to the zoo and to the park and to church with me. Every night he spends with me at my apartment, he insists I read *Where the Wild Things Are*, even though he knows every word.

He is my baby. How will I release him to these people who cannot possibly understand him? How can I trust that they will do what's best for him? I know how much patience it will require to teach him; I know he is another poor Black male who will struggle academically. How can I leave him here?

Then I see her. She stands in the lobby, smiling and greeting parents. She looks exactly as I remember her: blonde, petite, and beautiful. Ms. Cissell.

I've searched for her ever since I became a teacher to no avail, yet here she is standing in the lobby of my baby brother's new elementary school. When I say her name she looks at me for a moment, then calls me by name, hugs me, and leads me into her office. On her desk, she shows me a picture of little me sitting astride one of her horses. I can't believe she remembers me. I can't believe she has kept this picture. I can't believe she is my brother's principal.

But I can believe he's going to be alright now.

The Teacher

I soon learned that building relationships with families affected not only me, but my class as a whole. My Stepford moms (and dads) were always in my classroom and happy to do whatever I asked. They shared their stories and hobbies, bringing in interesting artifacts—like the dad who dressed up and shared objects from his Revolutionary War reenactment group. They read with kids and helped them with assignments. They helped with parties and field trips. They'd even make copies and do filing. Some of them had regular hours each week that I could count on them to be there. It was amazing and my students were reaping the benefits of individualized attention and varied expertise.

Amazingly, the parents began to know and build relationships with one another. A prime example is the story of Alexis. Alexis was admittedly one of my favorite students. She excelled academically, worked hard, was kind to others, and had a smile that just lit up the classroom. She was also bussed to Stepford and, since they didn't own a car, her family never came to school. Her mother kept in touch via notes and occasional phone calls, but she'd never even seen the actual school.

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One day, one of our mothers overheard Alexis and I talking about our upcoming holiday party. Alexis mentioned that she wished her mom could come, but that they didn't have a car. Later, when the children went to Art class, the other mother approached me with a plan. Tillie's mother was as fond of Alexis as I was, and she wanted to help. All I had to do was give Alexis' mother her phone number and ask her to call. On the day of the holiday party, the two mothers walked in together, beaming. Alexis' answering smile was all we needed in return. After that, I started setting up parent phone trees and email lists at the start of the year in an attempt to keep fostering such relationships.

When I look back over my teaching career, I remember some of the parents as vividly as the children. I remember Nate's Nana (which is what we always called her) coming in every week and becoming so familiar that the children seemed to forget she wasn't all of their nanas and mine too. I remember picking up Rhianna's mom for conferences and how proud Rhianna was to tell everyone that the teacher had been to her house. There are parents I still talk to now, who still check on me and are ecstatic when we run into one another. These relationships are what education is about—what life is about. They taught me that, when children are your business, you have got to know your clients intimately.

The Scholar

So, once again:

What does my experience tell us about students and families?

What lessons can teachers and researchers take away from my story?

I began to recognize the truth and power of my experiences as I started studying family literacy in my PhD program. It wasn't long before my reading, and the experiences they brought to my memory, led me to reject the deficit perspectives I unknowingly harbored. I was able to recognize that the blame did not belong on the parents or the teachers, but that *doing right by our children would require a collective effort* (Auerbach, 1989; Morrow, Paratore, Gaber, Harrison, & Tracey, 1993; Porter, 2008). This truth must be embraced by all who are involved in the education of our children, which means *all of us*. This greater lesson from my experience also requires accepting a few supporting ideas:

1. We must accept that it won't just happen, nor will it be accomplished without great effort.

Making parents feel a welcome part of the educational process is essential to promoting involvement. As parents construct their beliefs about their roles, one of the largest factors in their decision to be involved in their children's education is their perceptions of being specifically invited to participate (Anderson & Minke, 2007; Porter DeCusati & Johnson, 2004). This may be especially true for low-income parents. Policies and practices that create an atmosphere of acceptance such as an "open-door" policy, transportation assistance, and flexible scheduling can counteract barriers to involvement and offset negative feelings parents may have toward schools based on their past experiences (Auerbach, 1989; Neuman, Caperelli, & Kee, 1998; Porter DeCusati & Johnson, 2004). Another way to create a welcoming atmosphere is through personal contact, such as friendly phone calls and individual notes, rather than traditional one-way communication like newsletters (Anderson & Minke, 2007; Auerbach, 1989; Linek, Rasinski, & Harkins, 1997). Parents seem to appreciate communication from teachers that is "good news"—not about a behavior issue or problem with their child (Handel, 1992). This relationship must be

maintained beyond that initial contact (Biggam, 2003; Neuman et al., 1998; Porter DeCusati & Johnson, 2004).

Building these relationships certainly wasn't easy. Alexis' personality made the communication between home and school simpler than in many situations. She could be relied on to carry information to and from school. In many cases, students (especially younger students) aren't as reliable as Alexis. It complicates matters more when notes home often carry bad news—who would want to share information that would get them in trouble? It's so much to require of a small child. Some of my students didn't see their parents regular due to conflicting work schedules; I had to talk to them about establishing a safe place to leave things that needed to be signed and then remember to retrieve them when they got themselves ready for school. It seemed a lot of responsibility, but these students took on a lot in their little lives and often surprised me with their resilience and abilities.

Not every relationship flourished. I had parents I never managed to talk to or those too angry or hurt or intimidated by past experience to trust me (Bloome et al., 2000; Rogers, 2002). With time constraints and the demands of 26 students and families, *maintaining* contact was difficult. I learned firsthand that one-way communication did not make for two-way relationships. I had to be very intentional about creating a welcoming environment and contacting parents more often than the times when there was trouble; with students like Liam and Tyree this was a particular struggle. I had to carefully pick my battles and approach our interactions with the intention of finding positives to share. I didn't want to pester parents with constant contact, so finding the balance of good news and challenges was essential. There was a lot of trial and error, some hurt feelings, and a fair few tears. But, more importantly, there were bridges built and children who benefited from the effort.

2. We are not doing enough to engage parents.

This is a hard truth to swallow when you are stretched thin and working tirelessly. I think back with pride on the amount of time and effort I dedicated to working with my families, but through the lens of my researcher knowledge I recognize the limitations of my exertions. I still saw myself as the expert, still often only provided parents with a superficial role in student learning. We must redirect our efforts toward more meaningful interaction with parents. We must stop perpetuating the myth of school as protectorate, as authority on all things educational and as the sole center of learning (Pushor, 2012).

Parents not only are the experts on their children, but are their children's first teachers. Literacy development begins with exposure to reading, writing and language in the home (Bauman & Wasserman, 2010; Dudley-Marling, 2009; Morrow et al., 1993; Morrow & Tracey, 2012; Taylor & Dorsey-Gaines, 1988). Taylor and Dorsey-Gaines view literacy learning as “part of the very fabric of family life” (p. 87). Parents are models of literacy behaviors that children seek to emulate, suggesting that even children's earliest experiences of being spoken and read to are crucial to their development of literacy skills (Dudley-Marling, 2009; Haynes, 2010; Morrow & Tracey, 2012). Though often lower income families do not have the time (due to inflexible work schedules, childcare needs, etc.) or resources (such as money, materials or transportation) to create the literacy experiences educators deem ideal (Anderson & Minke, 2007; Bauman & Wasserman, 2010; Biggam, 2003; Dudley-Marling, 2009; Porter DeCusati & Johnson, 2004),

these families still engage in regular literacy practices (Auerbach, 1989; Biggam, 2003; Compton-Lilly et al., 2012; Duke & Purcell-Gates, 2003; Morrow et al., 1993; Rogers, 2002).

Educators must empower and involve parents in order to reach the goal of greater student achievement. This requires sensitivity to cultural and social factors, and understanding and respect for the strengths of families, and an examination of beliefs and perceptions of both parents and teachers (Anderson & Minke, 2007; Auerbach, 1989; Handel, 1992; Linek et al., 1997; Lynch, Anderson, Anderson, & Shapiro, 2006). Pushor (2012) contends that most efforts to involve parents keep them on the periphery of their children's education, asking them to complete only the tasks the school deems worthy (e.g., helping with homework and volunteering for parties), limiting conversation to fifteen minute conferences twice a year, and providing programming intended to bring them into line with the school's ways of thinking, rather than soliciting actual ideas and feedback from them. What do these actions communicate to parents about their role, their value, and the ownership of student learning? As parents and educators begin to question underlying epistemologies, challenge the status quo, and value and build upon the funds of knowledge intrinsic to the home environments of students, they can begin to counteract the barriers to effective home-school relationships that plague the school system and can discover and implement practices that benefit all students.

3. We have to make the time because our children are worth the effort.

In my career with the Kentucky Department of Education I often encounter schools and districts looking for magic bullets and quick fixes to increase test scores. In the era of the *Common Core State Standards* (NGA & CCSSO, 2010) so many educators are missing the potential of such high ideals and narrowing the scope of their curricula in attempts to pour as much knowledge as possible into the heads of their students. They don't have time for the complexities of an "at-risk" child like me sitting in their classroom, let alone time for her family. In the face of these misguided efforts I, through the lens of my experience, see the necessity of what I have learned and what I must add to the field. There will never be more time. As we do for all we value, we must *make* the time to holistically educate our students. There is no better time than right now to change for the better.

Partnership with parents is critical in supporting children's literacy development (Biggam, 2003; Lareau, 1987). Parent involvement has been associated with a multitude of desirable outcomes including higher grade point averages, better attendance, lower dropout rates, fewer retentions and special education placements, higher levels of social skills, and increased ability to self-regulate behavior (Anderson & Minke, 2007; Porter DeCusati & Johnson, 2004). Considering that each of those areas is of major concern to a system focused on college-and-career ready students, how could we possibly ignore the importance of families?

After taking this opportunity as a scholar to truly analyze my own experience, it is evident to me that to deny children a similar opportunity to reflect on and connect to their own experiences as they learn is doing them a great injustice. Over a hundred years ago, John Dewey wrote about the necessity of connecting subject matter and personal experience (Dewey, 1911). There can be no one-size-fits-all curriculum, no disconnected dissemination of facts and figures if we hope to reach the 21st century learners in our classrooms. To truly meet the needs of our students we have to care about them and to care enough to learn who they are; this will require

the collective effort of schools and families. Hopefully, we are finally ready to integrate school and life in ways that facilitate learning, instead of clinging to the artificial barriers between school and the real world. When we do so, we will find our children waiting for us in this new space, ready to see themselves and to be truly seen.

When nature and society can live in the schoolroom, when the forms and tools of learning are subordinated to the substance of experience, then shall there be an opportunity for this identification, and culture shall be the democratic password.

-John Dewey, *The Child and the Curriculum* (p. 25)

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