

Remembering the Teacher:

An autobiographical reflective journey through the memories of a teacher and his former students

Matthew Nardoza

Department of Integrated Studies in Education, McGill University
Education and Society
McGill University, Montreal, Quebec
September 2015

A thesis submitted to McGill University in partial fulfillment
of the requirements of the degree of Masters of Arts

©Matthew Nardoza, 2015

Abstract

This study explores how interviewing and gathering feedback from former students can benefit in the professional development of a teacher. Although there is an extensive amount of literature concerning teacher reflection focusing on the perspective of the teacher, this study places importance on both the perspectives of the teacher and his former students. Building on the works of Dewey, Tyler and Aoki concerning educational experiences, Korthagen's approach to teacher reflection, Eakin and Graham's ideas concerning autobiography and Barone and Yoder and Strong-Wilson's views on learning from the stories of others, the author takes existing literature and builds on it, suggesting a unique approach to further his own development as a teacher. Using an autobiographical narrative approach, the author represents the memories of both the teacher and student(s) in a series of vignettes. The sample of students interviewed covers a spectrum of six years of experience that the teacher has been teaching. These vignettes highlight the memories of the teacher concerning his former students and the memories/feedback of the students concerning their former teacher and the time spent in his class. Furthermore, each vignette is written in the third person to create some distance between the author and the data gathered. The analysis consists of looking for common themes that arose while gathering the data among the nine former students interviewed, and aims to describe what the teacher learned during the research process to better himself for future experiences in his teaching. By conducting the research in this way, the teacher can dwell in a rich reflective practice that combines unique perspectives of firsthand accounts belonging to those who his teaching affected directly: himself and his students.

Résumé

Cette étude explore comment des entrevues avec d'anciens élèves de même que la collecte de leurs commentaires peuvent être bénéfiques au développement professionnel d'un enseignant. Malgré le fait qu'il y ait une très grande quantité de littérature qui concerne ce sujet du point de vue de l'enseignant, cette étude met l'emphasis autant sur le point de vue de l'enseignant que sur celui des anciens étudiants. S'appuyant sur les travaux de Dewey, Tyler et Aoki portant sur les expériences éducatives, sur l'approche de Korthagen face à la réflexion de l'enseignant, sur les idées de Eakin et Graham concernant l'autobiographie de même que sur les points de vue de Barone, Yoder et Strong-Wilson sur ce qu'on peut apprendre des histoires des autres, l'auteur prend la littérature existante et propose une approche unique afin d'approfondir sa propre évolution en tant qu'enseignant. Utilisant une approche narrative autobiographique, l'auteur présente les souvenirs de l'enseignant et des élèves dans une série de vignettes. L'échantillon d'élèves interviewés couvre un spectre de six années d'expérience de l'enseignant dans son domaine. Ces vignettes mettent en lumière les souvenirs de l'enseignant face à ses anciens élèves de même que ceux que les étudiants ont par rapport à leur ancien enseignant et à leur temps passé en classe. De plus, chaque vignette est rédigée à la troisième personne de façon à créer une certaine distance entre l'auteur et les informations recueillies. L'analyse consiste à rechercher des thèmes communs qui sont ressortis durant la collecte de données effectuées avec les neuf anciens élèves interviewés et aussi à décrire ce que l'enseignant a appris durant le processus de recherche qui pourra par la suite l'aider à s'améliorer dans de futures expériences d'enseignement. En effectuant la recherche de cette façon, l'enseignant se retrouve dans une pratique réfléchie qui combine les perspectives

uniques de ceux qui ont été directement touchés par son enseignement: lui-même et ses élèves.

Acknowledgements

First, I would like to acknowledge the contribution of the nine former students who participated in this study. Thank you all for helping me reflect on my teaching career up to date and for taking the time to meet for this study. Thank you all for offering your memories and feedback on our teacher-student relationship in and outside of the classroom. Without you, this study could not have happened and I am truly grateful for your willingness to be part of it.

To my supervisor, Dr. Teresa Strong-Wilson, thank you for facilitating the vision I had from the beginning and guiding me in the process of piecing it all together. Your dedication and wisdom regarding this research has inspired me to become a better teacher and has opened my eyes to seeing curriculum in a fresh, new, exciting way. Thank you for your commitment, long hours of editing and making the time to meet with me when needed. Thank you for expecting the best from me.

To my wife Daria, thank you so much for your unconditional love, your patience and for your understanding of the time away from home needed for this study. Your support is greatly appreciated and I love you. Without your constant encouragement and motivation, this study would not be possible. Thank you for pushing me through and for always being there for me.

To my son Gabriel who was born during the time of this study. Thank you for giving me a new perspective on life and for opening my eyes to the joys of fatherhood. I love you my son.

To Donna Thornton, thank you for all your help and for your advocacy towards professional development in teachers who wish to further their studies. Your hard work and encouragement is much appreciated.

Finally, I would like to thank my parents for loving, supporting and encouraging me in every endeavour I have ever set out to achieve. Thank you for instilling positive work ethic and values in me and for being amazing parents throughout my life. I love you both.

Table of Contents

Introduction.....	6
Chapter One: Literature Review and Theoretical Framework.....	14
Chapter Two: Methodology.....	30
Chapter Three: VIGNETTES (The Early Years).....	41
Chapter Four: Vignettes (the Recent Years).....	65
Chapter Five: Analysis of the Data.....	99
Conclusion.....	112
References.....	120

Introduction

I started my teaching career nine years ago at a high school in the English speaking suburbs of Montreal, Quebec, Canada. Looking back on the beginning of my career, I remember my first official day as a high school teacher and how nervous I was to stand in front of my students for the first time, explaining to them my class rules and the course objectives of the year ahead. My first group of students was a grade eight math class and certain students still remain strong in my memory today. There was the wide-eyed skinny boy who sat in the front row seemingly eager to learn from me. There was the smiley girl sitting in back of him whose level of eagerness was equal or maybe even more so than the boy in front of her. There was the boy who sat on the side of the class next to the window who didn't smile until a few weeks later and who seemed to look down on life; maybe he was just upset about being back at school and returning to the classroom after a summer of fun. There was the curly-haired student with a supposed reported learning disability and also the cynical student who questioned my knowledge right from the beginning.

Nine years later, I wonder if these students from my first years of teaching actually remember anything from the classes their teacher taught them. Do they retain any of the topics in the curriculum I presented to them? Do they remember who they were as students back in those years of their social and academic development? Do they remember any situations or incidents that happened in our class? Do they remember anything about me as a teacher: my teaching abilities (good or bad)? Can I say that I influenced them in any way through my teaching of not only the curriculum but of life skills in general? All these questions are thoughts

that I (along with many other teachers) have from time to time. Sometimes former students get in touch with me via email or social media to see how I am doing and ask if we can catch up. I remember one summer when a former student who was then in university contacted me to see if I wanted to go out for a beer with him and his friends some of whom I had also taught in my early teaching years. It was interesting to hear his and his friends' memories of my teaching and what they took away from my classroom. Some of the math concepts I taught had stuck with them but it was more my personality and character traits mixed with distinct incidents in our class together that they remembered with greater accuracy. This meeting took place between two and three years after the inviting student had graduated so one could assume that the memories were somewhat fresh. My level of patience was also a common topic and he asked me repeatedly how I did it. How did I have patience for some of the characters that played an important role in the story of our class? I told him I guess it just comes with the job. That and the fact I worked my way through university selling women's shoes at a department store. I always joked with my students that my sales job prepared me for patience in the classroom. While it was flattering to hear the positive memories of these former students, it was also disconcerting to realize that some things they considered funny at the time were not funny to me and I remembered how in my early years of teaching, sarcasm and calling out certain students in front of the class maybe wasn't the best technique I could have used to shape my students into good classroom citizens. In my defence, I was always very selective about which students could "take" a joke pointed towards them however, looking back, these techniques I used in the past are not something I am proud of today. After my fifth year of teaching, the responsibility of being married, moving out of my parents' house and owning my own home

made me feel a bit wiser and more mature, so I made a conscious effort to tone down the sarcasm.

What would happen if instead of teachers' reflecting themselves on what they could have done better or trying to guess the effect they have had on their students, they go straight to the source? Why not ask former students the same questions that teachers try to answer themselves about their own teaching abilities? Furthermore, instead of asking these students right after their year with the teacher is over (i.e., through course evaluations) why not ask them years after their classroom experience with that teacher? What memories will have stuck with them? What memories will have played a role in their development as people? What lasting impressions do they hold of their teacher and of the shared classroom experience they had together? I became interested in finding out what I could find out about myself as a teacher through reconnecting with former students. How might such an inquiry shape my own teaching methods in present and future experiences in the classroom?

Upon entering my first year of teaching at the Lester B Pearson School Board, the chairman of mentoring who was my former principal when I was in high school, gave all new recruits a few inspirational books on how to be effective teachers. One of those books was Todd Whitaker's *"What Great Teachers Do Differently"*. In it he states that "one challenge in any profession is the ability to self-reflect accurately. Those who know how they are coming across to others, how their behavior is received, work more effectively" (Whitaker, 2004, p.5). Former students' opinions and memories of my teaching and professional relationship with them can serve as useful resources in the effectiveness of my self-reflection. Whitaker also

mentions that good teachers must recognize their own need to improve in their profession (Whitaker, 2004, p.14) which provides the premise for this study and for taking steps toward improving my teaching abilities for years to come. Whitaker sums up his book by saying: “Every teacher has an impact. Great teachers make a difference” (Whitaker, 2004, p.126). Have I actually lived up to Whitaker’s idea of being a great teacher? Did I make a difference in students’ lives? Did I play a role in them choosing their present academic programs or in decisions they have made that are non-academic or was I simply another teacher who delivered the curriculum and exited their lives/memories as quickly as I entered it? If I didn’t meet Whitaker’s standards, how can I reach other students one day in my future teaching experiences? What are some suggestions on how to achieve this from former students? All of these questions and more will hopefully be answered during this study to help in my professional development and can possibly also serve as a useful tool for other teachers to maybe one day conduct the same exercise for themselves. The desire to improve my teaching provides the fuel behind the study and hopefully, the process can be useful in future research in other teachers’ self-reflection processes. Looking back on my own teaching career, I believe that every student I have ever taught has played a role in my own story as a high school teacher in the suburbs of Montreal. Will I be the influential character in the autobiographical stories of my students’ lives that they have been in mine? Only they can tell me.

While reflective practice is common among teachers, and many scholars and professional development research encourages this method for teachers to “better themselves”, the practice rarely takes into account the perspective of students, let alone former students who have graduated years before the teacher’s act of reflection may take

place. According to Schwab (1978), those who wish to take on the task of curriculum revision must take into account their experiences with and knowledge of the learners and see learners as a valuable resource in effective revision: “Knowledge of the children should include a range of information about their present state of mind and heart treated as a stage in development toward their probable destiny as adults” (p.366). Instead of looking at students and their probable destiny though, which Schwab recommends, this study situates the student in the *future* in relation to their past time spent in my class. For the purposes of this study, the student is also seen as a valuable resource in revising curriculum based on the present, longitudinal perspective they offer of education experiences situated in their (and my) past. Concerning the importance of students in curriculum theory, Barone (1982) sees the value in gathering student perspectives in order to better curriculum: “the kind of curriculum theory I envision will arise from the real qualities of students’ experiences of, and their interactions with the ongoing activities, and from the meanings that facets of the curriculum hold for them” (p.333). His ideas can be seen as a basis for this study, where student perspective will hopefully play a role in the bettering of my teaching and the delivery of curriculum.

For my research, I was able to interview nine former students who were chosen from different years and different classes I have taught. The nine students consisted of five girls and four boys. Among the nine there were characters such as friendly Rachel, rebellious Sean, sweet Isabel, quiet Tristan, eccentric Toby, eager David, turbulent Jess, charismatic Danielle and placid Shanila. The interviews with these students regarding their memories were audio recorded, transcribed, read over numerous times and then finally written as autobiographical third-person narratives which were distilled and edited into vignettes consisting of the relevant

information for this study. Seeing how I taught most of these students in the subject of Math, one might ask why I chose an autobiographical narrative approach in gathering my data instead of, for example, specifically focusing on Math education and its implications for former students? According to Grumet (1991), narrative can be seen as the starting point in the process of curriculum development, negotiation and teaching. In more current research, scholars such as Pinar (2012) and Grumet (2006) believe that autobiography serves as a valuable tool in recording a present perspective of the past and that this perspective “employs the past to reveal the present assumptions and future intentions of the story teller, an elaborate detour that travels through once upon a time in order to reach now. Its truth is provided in its fictions” (Grumet, p.73). Furthermore, Pinar (2012) believes that with autobiography, “the present has been historically conceived, and so it is in the past we begin to seek the meaning of the present and our way to the future” (p.47). These ideas of narrative and autobiography lend themselves to being an effective medium for exploring this study’s questions as well as representing the data. A present day reflection of the past both from my and my former students’ perspectives can influence my future teaching career in how I reach students generally, regardless of the specific content of the curriculum (in this case, Math).

Each of the students interviewed can be seen as cast members of my ‘teacher story’ narrative, all playing a role in who I am today as both a teacher and a person. Some of the students were ones I got along with and who were considered ‘good students’ among my colleagues while others were ones I (and others) found a bit more difficult to deal with. This wide spectrum of students was chosen because of its potential to provide me with a variety of

responses and memories and to represent different levels and kinds of relationship that teachers may develop with their students.

In chapter one of this study, I will look at the literature concerning topics related to the study at hand. Even though there is a lack of research directly related to teachers interviewing their former students for the purpose of professional development, research exists on the educational experience and the teacher's role in those experiences, the importance on teacher reflection and inquiry, the benefits of writing autobiographically and how reading the stories of others can help in the development of a teacher. These are all topics that will also be considered in developing the theoretical orientation for this study. Key ideas from certain theorists helped in this journey of teacher self-reflection.

In chapter two, I will look at the theory behind the methodology of conducting such a study and what methods can be deemed as appropriate when trying to achieve the study's desired goals. I will also explain why the data is presented the way it is and the method behind the analysis and presentation of the findings.

The third and fourth chapters will consist of vignettes, one for each former student I interviewed during this process. The vignettes are organized chronologically, from my earliest days of teaching to my later days. Chapter three consists of four vignettes concerning students who I taught in their graduating year during my second, third and fourth years of teaching. The fourth chapter consists of five vignettes concerning students who I taught in their graduating year during my fifth, sixth and seventh years of teaching. Each vignette is written in the style of third person narrative and is divided into two sections. The first part consists of my own

memories of the student (written in the third person, by Mr. N) and the second part is based on student responses to the interview questions concerning their memories of my class, the curriculum and my teaching, also written in the third person (of the student).

In chapter five, I will present the findings of these interviews by presenting common themes that were brought up on multiple occasions across my own stories concerning the students, the memories of the students concerning my class, teaching and the curriculum learned and lastly, common themes that arose across both perspectives. Finally, chapter six will consist of final thoughts and why I believe this study was successful in achieving its goals.

Chapter One:

Literature Review and Theoretical Framework

Little research exists on autobiographical teacher reflection on curriculum through former students' memories/stories. Related research I found was on education as experience, implementation of curriculum, teacher reflection and the positive effects of autobiography, which served as useful starting points. First I will look at theories about how a teacher contributes to the student's experiences of the curriculum, going back to the foundational ideas of Dewey and Tyler. Then I will look at the relationship between the planned curriculum and the curriculum as lived experience through the eyes of curriculum theorist Ted Aoki and how as in Dewey, a teacher plays an important role in shaping this relationship for students to experience. Next I will address teacher reflection and inquiry and their usefulness through the works of Korthagen, who centers his ideas on teacher education, reflective practice and how the development of the two can be seen as increasing the effect a teacher has in the classroom and on curriculum. Finally, I will explore ideas concerning the role of autobiography and its positive effects in writing reflectively and reading the stories of others/ourselves in the works of Barone, Eakin, Graham and Yoder and Strong-Wilson.

Education as Experience

According to John Dewey (1963), "the immediate and direct concern of an educator is ...with the situations in which interaction takes place" (p. 45). These situations and interactions that Dewey writes about can serve as windows into what former students remember and

prompt the self-reflection process of the educator. If the educator, years later, can hear these memories of situations and interactions from former students, he or she could use them for his or her own development and learn from the past situations that have taken place: “The individual, who enters as a factor... is what he is at a given time. It is the other factor, that of objective conditions, which lies to some extent within the possibility of regulation by the educator” (p. 45). A reflective process can help the educator see the influence they had over the learning experience of former students and help shape their future abilities in how they teach their class including choosing the objective conditions of teaching and learning such as the method of teaching, materials used and the social set-up of the learning situations: “when it is said that the objective conditions are those which are within the power of the educator to regulate, it is meant of course, that his ability to influence directly the experience of others and thereby the education they obtain places upon him the duty of determining that environment which will interact with the existing capacities and needs of those taught to create a worthwhile experience” (Dewey, 1963, p. 45). This process of self-reflection through former students’ memories can also allow teachers to see the need to change their practices. It can spur their involvement in creating a suitable educational experience for the student by attending to how the teacher him/herself interacts with his/her surroundings, something that might not have been apparent before: “Above all, they should know how to utilize the surroundings, physical and social, that exist so as to extract from them all that they have to contribute to building up experiences that are worthwhile” (Dewey, 1963, p. 40). All in all, former students’ memories of their educational experiences, not only of lessons learned but collateral learning, may develop new ideas that lead to the enhancement of the educator’s practices: “Collateral learning, in the

way of formation of enduring attitudes, of likes and dislikes, may be and often is much more important than the spelling lesson that is learned” (Dewey,1963,p. 48), and may be defined as both the learning done in the classroom outside of the course/planned curriculum and whatever a student learns that a teacher may not have intended to teach, which can be seen as having both positive and negative implications.

Along with teachers reflecting on their educational practices, the memories of former students can help the educator see the impact they may or may not have had on students’ behaviours and how changes if they did occur, have shaped the path that these students have been on since being a participant in the shared classroom experiences. According to Tyler (1949): “since the real purpose of education is not to have the instructor perform certain activities but to bring about significant changes in the students’ patterns of behaviour, it becomes important to recognize that any statement of the objectives of school should be a statement of changes to take place in students” (p. 44). Tyler’s idea is not only related to shaping educational experiences, but also to creating and implementing curriculum , both planned and unplanned, thus generating shared experiences between the educator, the student and the curriculum itself. According to Ted Aoki (2005), curriculum as plan are “the works of curriculum planners, usually selected teachers from the field, under the direction of some ministry official often designated as the curriculum director of a subject or a group of subjects” (p. 160). Basically, the curriculum refers to the content of a course decided in advance, which teachers must cover through the course of the school year. On the other hand, curriculum as lived experience (unplanned) is described as the day to day life of a classroom. It’s the everyday, face- to- face living with students, addressing the uniqueness of every student

and where the teacher's personal life and life as a teacher "shade into each other" (Aoki, 2005, p. 160-161). Eliciting memories from a student's perspective of the interaction of the three (student, teacher and curriculum) would be beneficial in helping the teacher see what has worked and what has not worked in influencing change in former students, years after the original experiences have occurred; students would bring the benefit of insights from hindsight, experience, even greater maturity and wisdom, as would the teacher.

The works of curriculum theorist Ted Aoki consistently revisit the relationship between the curriculum as plan and the curriculum as lived experience. Aoki argues that teaching, when understood as the implementation of the curriculum as plan, generates students without uniqueness, physically (freckles, missing teeth etc.) and emotionally (private hopes and dreams) (p. 161). According to Mangrini (2014), Aoki urges us not to ignore the curriculum as lived experience because by doing this, we create a disservice to our students as well as ourselves as teachers in our self-reflection on this lived curricula (p. 5). Instead, we should be looking at the "zone of between", creating connections between the curriculum as plan and lived curriculum: "the teacher knows that whenever and wherever she can, between her markings and the lesson plans, she must listen and be attuned to the care that calls from the very living with her own pupils" (Aoki, 2005, p. 161). Furthermore, Aoki believes that effective teachers know that indwelling in the zone between planned curriculum and lived curriculum is not so much a matter of overcoming the tension between the two but instead, being comfortable dwelling within that zone (Aoki, 2005, p. 163). According to Aoki, teachers sometimes don't know how to handle this tension between the two kinds of curriculum. Some are not mindful of the lived situation in the classroom and instead try faithfully to reproduce the technical side of

curriculum as planned, while others see dwelling in the curriculum as lived experience as merely surviving period to period, keeping the students busy and occupied so that they (the teacher) can make it through the prescribed content (Aoki, 2005, p. 162). One method for a teacher to find out if they are actually dwelling in the zone of in between is to reconnect with former students to see if students actually learned more than just the curriculum as plan during those shared educational experiences in the classroom. This process is important because it allows the teacher to discern how much of an impact he/she has had on students and if their teaching of the curriculum (lived) has actually affected those students years after their shared experience of the classroom. It also can allow the teacher to see if they were successful in helping students connect to the lived curriculum and ultimately learn from it in a tangible way through the course of time, long after the lessons were taught. Curriculum theorist Maxine Greene, whose ideas inform Aoki's supports this idea. She writes:

If the student is content to admire the curriculum or simply accept it as given, if he is incapable of breaking with egocentrism, he will remain alienated from himself and his own possibilities; he will wander lost and victimized upon the road; he will be unable to learn....The student may even have some rote memory of certain elements of the curriculum; but no matter how well devised is that curriculum, no matter how well adapted the stages of his growth, learning (as disclosure, as generating structures, as engendering meanings, as achieving mastery) will not occur. (Greene, 1975, p. 313)

Furthermore, the idea of education as being a place open to many possibilities and a practice that should be lived in terms of opening new thoughts and ideas (Mangrini, 2014, p. 11) can resonate as lasting impressions through time in the memories of former students. This can allow the teacher to realize if he or she attained these goals in creating the best educational experiences possible for these students:

The teacher in becoming involved with his students, enters into their world as he allows them to enter his and engages himself with students mutually in action-reflection oriented activities. He questions students as well as himself as he urges students to question the teacher and themselves. Mutual reflection allows new questions to emerge, which, in turn, leads to more reflection. In the ongoing process, which is dialectical, and transformative of social reality, both teacher and students become participants in open dialogue. (Mangrini, 2014, p. 12)

According to Aoki, this occurs during the time where both the teacher and student share in the classroom experiences as they unfold. However in this study, the same could be argued for mutual reflection years after these shared classroom experiences have occurred thus leading us to take a closer look at theorists of teacher reflection and inquiry.

Teacher Reflection and Inquiry

Historically, teacher reflection has been seen as an effective method in the development of a teacher for different reasons. For example, Dewey believed that reflective thinking served as a means of instilling habits of thought, nurturing self-discipline in social betterment and in converting impulsive action into intelligent action (Fendler, 2003). He also saw it as a way to replace “appetites and impulses with scientifically rational choices” (Fendler, 2003, p. 18). On the other hand, theorists such as Donald Schön thought of teacher reflection as more intuitive in nature and less scientifically rational while emphasizing the “value of uncertainty as a desirable aspect of professional reflective practice” (Fendler, 2003, p. 19).

Fred Korthagen, a leading scholar in teacher reflection navigates between these two poles and addresses the question of how we can help people become good teachers by offering

more structured examples of how teachers should reflect. According to Korthagen, one of the struggles with teacher reflection is that, even though there is a major emphasis on it within the field of teacher education and professional development, it is not always clear “what” teachers should be reflecting on when wanting to better themselves in their profession (Korthagen, 2003). Korthagen’s main contribution to this problem is what he calls the “onion model” of teacher development and reflection, creating multiple layers based on levels of change that can be modified through teacher reflection. In his onion model, teachers should be reflecting on aspects of teaching such as their behaviour, competencies and beliefs around teaching. Beyond those three outer layers, core reflection takes place, stressing importance on a teacher’s identity and mission as they continue their career. Korthagen stresses that within this model, all of these layers can interact with one another while also having the capacity to be affected by an outside factor known as the environment such as the group of students, the class room, the community or circumstances outside the classroom (Korthagen, 2003). In the present study, gathering data from former students will act as a basis for a process of self- reflection in myself (their former teacher) but what is also noteworthy is that these former students will not only contribute feedback but also memories and stories about their time in my class, adding to an overarching story which is my own teacher story. Korthagen mentions this notion of “teacher stories” in his research saying that: “more recently, many researchers have turned to the stories of teachers. This approach is based on the premise that the ways in which teachers think about education is embedded in the stories they tell....Today, more and more attention is being paid to the beliefs people have about themselves” (Korthagen,2003,p. 81). According to Korthagen, teacher stories play an important role in the development of a teacher however in

this study, my teacher story may also be affected by the students' stories, creating a hybrid of reflection that will allow the teacher to reflect on not only his/hers perspective of a class, incident or student, but also take into account the perspective of the student who was involved in the shared experience.

Korthagen (2003) also argues that for far too long, the psychology behind the self-reflection process has focused on "learning what is broken so we could fix the problem" (p. 86). Along with fixing what is broken, self-reflection is meant to also nurture the good and bring out the best qualities in a teacher, something we tend to often overlook in this process (Korthagen, 2003). In this study, I hope that this idea will become apparent, where students will be sharing memories of good times as well as struggles in my classrooms so that I may reflect on how I contributed to their overall experiences and learn from them. What will be difficult for me to remember is that even if most memories are of a positive nature, these positive memories are just as useful as those which offer critique of my teaching: "positive psychologists look at people's strengths, capacities and resources, the key attributes and assets that have allowed them to survive and in some cases flourish, despite the obstacles they have faced" (Linley & Joseph, 2004, p. 8). Within these memories, there could be reminders of what I have been doing right for the past nine years; positive psychology tends to be overlooked by teachers in their everyday self-reflection process: "if we look at closely at how teachers generally reflect, we see that the pressure of work often encourages a focus on obtaining a "quick fix", a rapid solution for a practical problem....Thus structured reflection is important in promoting sound professional behavior and also in supporting the development of growth competence" (Korthagen & Vasalos, 2005, p. 48). By structured reflection, Korthagen encourages teachers to

use a more systematic approach when reflecting on their practice instead of scraping over surface issues that arise in their classrooms in that very moment a problem arises. In this study, the data will be structured question by question so as to look for common themes among the students interviewed. Furthermore, since the reflection will be centered around memories of the past, there will be no need to create a “quick fix” or rapid solution to solve a problem occurring at the moment a teacher usually reflects.

Along with his layered “onion model” approach, Korthagen also refers to the ALACT (Action, Looking back on the action, Awareness of essential aspects, Creating an alternative method of action, and Trial) model of teacher reflection. In this cyclical model, Korthagen explains a structured process of reflection where firstly, the teacher does an action followed by the teacher then looking back on that same action. This is followed by the process of the teacher reaching a certain awareness of essential aspects of that action such as empathy, genuineness, concreteness and confrontation which generates the conditions for creating an alternative method to that original action and then finally going through a trial of that new method (Korthagen & Vasalos, 2005). This cyclical method can be useful in this study because the awareness that former students will bring to me concerning my teaching will hopefully help me in developing new techniques and well thought out strategies in confronting similar situations in the future. By gaining insight into the past through a different perspective other than my own, the lessons I will learn will hopefully affect my future and the way I handle situations or students that I haven’t yet encountered. According to Marilyn Cochran Smith and Susan Lytle (2011), inquiry into teaching and teacher reflection is a “practice that carries across professional careers and educational settings” (p. 20) thus promising that the inquiry done in

this study can affect future educational settings throughout my time as a teacher or any other profession that may come my way. While Cochran Smith and Lytle also encourage the process of practitioners working “together to uncover, articulate and question their own assumptions about teaching, learning and schooling” (Cochran Smith and Lytle, 2011, p. 21) and there is an extensive body of research on teacher collaboration however little research exists on autobiographical teacher reflection through eliciting former students’ memories/stories. Teacher reflection is a process which many educational scholars find to be beneficial in the development of a more effective teacher thus creating a strong connection to the study at hand and where reflection on student memories promises to make a further contribution to this scholarship. One method in expressing the results of this reflective process is through autobiographical narratives.

Autobiography

Many scholars within and outside of education believe that writing autobiographically could be a useful tool in the process of self-reflection. In literary scholar, Paul John Eakin’s article “Living Autobiographically”, he argues that at a very young age, we are trained to see our surroundings through the focus of “I”: “we learn as children what it means to say “I” in the culture we inhabit, and this training proves to be crucial to the success of our lives as adults, for our recognition by others as normal individuals depends on our ability to perform the work of self-narration” (Eakin, 2005, p. 3). This idea lends itself to building a foundation for a self-reflective process being recorded through autobiographical writing. Eakin (2005) believes that

our physical body carries stories which it has lived through. The benefit in writing autobiographically is that these narratives that our brain records serve as “important insight into their (our stories) function and value as maps of our lives in time” (p. 3). By tracing the past with this map, we could also see where we are headed in the future and where we are in the present: “thinking about autobiography as an expression of homeostatic regulatory activity has given me a new sense of the interplay between past, present and future in the autobiographical act” (Eakin, 2005, p. 4). Furthermore, by asking former students to help in this map-making process, there is a possibility that the teacher might begin to see hidden paths that the teacher himself has not been consciously aware of, or even more importantly, future paths that might be mapped out that would not be there if only one person was remembering the times in those specific classroom scenarios. Eakin often refers to the contributions of scientist Antonio Damasio’s work to understanding the benefits of autobiographical writing and how it should not only be seen as being a record of the past. Quoting Damasio, Eakin writes: “the changes which occur in the autobiographical self over an individual lifetime are not due only to the remodeling of the lived past that takes place consciously and unconsciously, but also to the laying down and remodelling of the anticipated future. I believe that a key aspect of self-evolution concerns the balance of two influences: the lived past and the anticipated future” (Eakin, 2005, p. 6). This idea of self-evolution balancing the lived past and anticipated future is significant to this study because by reliving past experiences brought forth by former students through their memories, the teacher can use the data as reference points in future teaching experiences of similar nature.

Furthermore, Eakin writes about the deeper lessons in reading and by default writing our own autobiography: “autobiography is not merely something we read in a book; rather, as a discourse of identity, delivered bit by bit in the stories, we tell about ourselves day in and day out, autobiography structures our living” (Eakin, 4, p. 122). By writing autobiographically, the process becomes intertwined with the way we live our lives, becoming part of our stories and shaping our future. This notion of the future playing a role in the outcome of autobiography is crucial to Eakin along with his counterpart Damasio. In quoting Damasio, Eakin stresses the importance of realizing the power that autobiography has in shaping who we can be in our future: “autobiographical memory permits a constantly updated and revised aggregate of dispositional records of who we have been physically and of who we have usually been behaviourally, along with records of who we plan to be in the future” (Eakin, 2004, p. 127). In this study, the creation of an autobiographical account or “narrative” of my teaching experiences shared with the memories of these former students will help in the process of developing the “self” as a teacher and according to Eakin (2004): “self and narrative are so intimately linked that to speak of the one is reciprocally to speak of the other (p. 129).

Curriculum scholars such as Robert Graham, although somewhat critical of teacher reflection through story, sees benefit in teachers writing in this genre while reflecting on their own experiences they have encountered in and before their teaching careers. He explains that: “one commonly voiced justification for this narrative outpouring (teacher stories as a means of reflection) is that teachers, dealing as they do with the development and nurturing of young minds, ought at least to have more than a rudimentary understanding of who they are and how they have become who they are” (Graham, 1995, p. 195). This idea can lend itself to the

importance of connecting with former students because of the new layer that may be created in understanding who the teacher is and how they have become the teacher who they are now in the present. Graham also argues that through this process of self-reflection and self-understanding, the teacher takes risks in his/her development. This kind of risk-taking was felt in the current study when soliciting feedback from former students because of the potential of any negative feedback that could have been taken personally or seen as stemming from my belief that the student was partly responsible for my behaviour in the classroom. However, Graham states that “a link has been clearly established in the minds of teachers and researchers between the telling of stories and the exploration and development of personal and professional voice and identity” (Graham, 1995, p. 196) which in the end, is the ultimate goal of this study. Graham sees how autobiographical “teacher stories” could be seen as one aspect in the development of a teacher: “if storytelling is...central to the conduct of life...and if the story is the medium through which we construct as well as understand our personal and professional lives, then it clearly matters how stories of teaching are told, which stories are told and who gets to tell them” (Graham, 1995, p. 197). Choosing to include student voices as part of autobiographical teacher self-reflection was a conscious choice made on the part of the teacher/researcher in the present study, leading to the reader/author of the study being introduced to the stories of both the teacher and his students.

Reading the stories of others and stories of ourselves

Other education scholars profoundly believe that reading the stories of others plays an important role in the development of the reader/author. In the case of this study, this aspect is

important to look at because even though the primary goal of this study is to contribute to the development of the teacher conducting the interviews, other teachers who read it can also benefit by reflecting on similar situations they have encountered while also potentially seeing the benefit in conducting such an exercise themselves. In a similar study, Barone conducted interviews with former students who were taught by another teacher and wrote: “Readers of this book may find themselves asking a number of questions. Questions about whether the selves reconstructed do indeed resemble any characters observed outside the text. Questions of what a broadened and deepened sense of educational possibilities might mean for their own pedagogy” (Barone, 2001, p. 180).

The act of teachers writing down narratives of their own experiences allows them to take a step away from the classroom and discover themselves in relation to their profession. Yoder and Strong-Wilson (2015) describe this narrative process by saying:

As teachers, we feel every day the nearness of “not ands” and “no-things” in the most visceral ways- in our chests, in our hearts. Our lives are attended by penumbræ of unpredictable and potentially volatile pathways. To bring these ‘shadowy’ pathways to light seems only right and just. Narrative and narrator might thus recover in its/our narrative bones some sense of “the possible”, and in so doing give the lie to any sense of inevitability in teaching or in the narrating of teaching. (Yoder & Strong-Wilson, p. 23)

This shedding of light on the ‘shadowy’ pathways (Yoder and Strong-Wilson) and the transformative potential of narrative for teachers is accentuated in Barone’s idea of how the strong storyteller revises his/her life story continuously in relation to their own experiences and imagination (Barone, 2000, p. 125). This study sets out to show that in reflecting on these pathways/experiences, teachers are also able to continuously revise their lives in the classroom in relation to their experiences with former students including their own imagination in

recalling events surrounding these students, while experiencing glimpses into the students' perspectives of their time in his/her class.

Barone (1982) believes that such a method, of addressing teacher and student perspectives, is beneficial to the teacher because it offers the perspectives of those who live and use the curriculum on a day to day basis, namely, students. According to Barone, this exercise of reading/writing the stories of others can be a valuable method in accurately serving the purpose of curriculum theory by "helping practitioners in planning and using actual curricula" (Barone, p.332) which is also a hoped-for outcome of this study.

Conclusion

Writing autobiographically about my own memories along with my former students' experiences in my classroom is, I believe a valuable method in paving the road to my own self-reflection about my teaching over the past years I have spent in the classroom. I see this process as an effective method in assembling data on what I have done wrong and what I have done right (according to former students) and what impact I have had on my former students throughout my career to date. Furthermore, this data can then serve as a guide to finding answers to the questions of what I should be doing both now and in the future as a teacher. From historically prominent educational figures such as Dewey and Tyler to more contemporary scholars such as Barone, Eakin and Korthagen, the reflective, autobiographical and narrative nature of this study lends itself towards gathering the kind of data I have set out to gather and in the way I set out to do so. Also, the complexity of the idea of lived curriculum in works like

Aoki's and Greene's can play an important role in seeing what students actually took away from shared experiences in the classroom, something that teachers might forget about over time concerning their former students. Concerning the effects of this study, I hope that it can be seen as playing an important role in the development of not only me (as a teacher), but also the development of other teachers who might be inspired to set out to do the same sort of exercise in the future. The literature reviewed in this section has opened my eyes to the complexity of theoretical frameworks behind such an endeavour and I only hope that this study can add to the richness of such ideas that have been previously mentioned. I also hope that this process of gathering the memories of students' experiences, their memories of the curriculum, writing down my findings as autobiographical narratives and then reflecting on the data can serve as a useful tool in shaping my future as a teacher and the way I affect students who I will encounter in years to come.

Chapter Two:

Methodology

For my research, I have decided to use a qualitative research method approach consisting of autobiographical third-person narratives based on interviews between myself and my former students. This approach was used in service of reflective practice and to explore my research question on how reconnecting with former students/eliciting their memories of my teaching can help in the development and self-reflection process of a teacher. According to John Creswell (2003), qualitative research uses a multitude of methods when gathering data and is more interactive and humanistic than gathering data in a quantitative manner.

Qualitative data gathering usually involves the active participation of participants, researchers looking to build a rapport with participants and involves methods of data gathering that are based on open-ended observations or in this case, interviews (p.181). Also, Creswell notes that within a qualitative study, the research questions may change or be refined and doors may open and/or close as the study goes forward in the data collection process, a characteristic of qualitative research which lends itself to the fact that the research is in fact interpretive.

According to Creswell, this means that the researcher makes an interpretation of the data which includes creating descriptions of participants and settings, analyzing data into themes or categories and lastly, creating conclusions about the meaning of the data and using these conclusions to answer the research question at hand (Creswell, 2003). Finally, within this process, Creswell notes that “the qualitative researcher systematically reflects on who he or she is in the inquiry and is sensitive to his or her personal biography and how it shapes the

study” (Creswell, 2003, p. 182). This last characteristic can be seen as pivotal in this study where I (the teacher) will be conducting the interviews and will be central to the data collected seeing how the data will be a collection of the memories of former students within the class in which I taught them and will be used for my own self-reflection.

Within qualitative research, one way to gather data is through the use of interviews. According to Creswell, advantages to conducting interviews with participants is the provision of historical information which is central to this study in that former students will provide their version of past classroom experiences (Creswell,2003). Limitations to using interviews are mentioned as well in that interviews can be seen as providing “indirect” information filtered through the views of the participants, the researcher’s presence may create bias in the responses given by participants and that there may not be the same level of articulation or perception between participants (Creswell,2003). In this study, different perspectives of my teaching are encouraged for the ultimate goal of the study. All former students being interviewed were informed that there would be no repercussions (academic etc.) for responses to the interview questions, thus reducing bias in articulation and perception of their memories. In his defense of qualitative research and the validity of the interview process, Steinar Kvale (1992) argues that the interview is indeed reliable in the scientific research process because “science becomes the creative search to understand better and it uses whatever approaches are responsive to the particular questions and subject matters addressed. Those methods are acceptable which produce results that convince the community that the new understanding is deeper, fuller and more useful than the previous understanding” (p. 5). Kvale also defends against criticism of the use of leading questions in interviews stating that “the interview is a

conversation where the data arise in an interpersonal relationship, co-authored and co-produced by the interviewer. The decisive issue is then not whether to lead or not to lead but where the interview questions lead, whether they lead in important directions, yielding new and worthwhile knowledge” (p. 12). In this study, the questions were designed not to be leading in nature however, given the past power relationship between teacher and student that was established in the classroom years ago, it is important to be concerned about the potential of the questions being viewed as leading students to answer a certain way. To address this, the questions were deliberately framed in a broad way and students were encouraged to take time to think about their answers in order to offer a variety of responses. Finally, Kvale praises the use of qualitative interviews as opposed to traditional scientific hypothesis testing saying that the qualitative method rarely follows a linear process between the hypothesis, data collection, the analysis of the data and the construction of a theory. Instead, there is a constant back and forth process that exists between observation and interaction, describing and interpreting and conceptualising and theory; “particularly in the grounded theory approach, there is an interplay between discovery and verification, between data collection, interpretation and theorising with a continual formulation of new hypotheses and reinterpretation of old data” (Kvale, 1992, p. 21). Lastly, Elliot Mishler reminds us that interviewing is “an ancient yet extremely efficient method of obtaining information from people by asking questions” (Mishler, 1986, p. 156). An interview according to Mishler is more of a behavioural event centered on verbal exchange rather than simply a linguistic event consisting of meaningful speech between the researcher and the participant who possess a shared language (Mishler, 1986, p. 156). Mishler goes even further in promoting the flexibility in the conducting of interviews arguing that accurate

interviewing should have an “aim of which is to adapt the pattern of our questionnaire to the structural pattern of the experience of the respondent” (Mishler, 1986, p. 162) and that there should also be an attempt to fit questions to participants’ different experiences even if this act is in conflict with the traditional method of interviewing where the same wording and supplement questions must be used for every interview conducted. He places more importance on the meaning of the questions rather than the wording (Mishler, 1986), a view which lends itself to this study where there is a diverse academic and personality range among the students that were interviewed.

These students and I have had an educational relationship in the past where I have tried to display what Van Manen (2008) describes as the goals that a caring teacher has towards his/her students in providing positive experiences and a good, safe atmosphere in the classroom involving successful learning activities. Because of this, Van Manen writes how it is inevitable then that teachers develop personal relationships with their students (Van Manen, 2008) and because of this, I was able to reach out them to participate in this study. As the former teacher of the students involved in the study, my memories also invariably played a role in trying to bring up their memories of experiences which occurred in the classroom and on which I seeking different perspectives than only my own. However to try to offset this somewhat, the core interview questions concerning their general memories of the class, curriculum and my teaching remained consistent across students, with only minor variations.

The Study

For the purposes of this study, the participants were former students of mine who had graduated from high school between the years 2008 and 2013. I interviewed nine students, who were between the ages of 18-24 at the time of interviewing, and who were either in my Math class, Media Studies class or both. The Math classes that I taught were grades nine and/or eleven. I tried to choose a range of students from those who did well in my classes to those who struggled and from those students who I got along with very well to those who I found a little harder to deal with in the classroom setting. Some students (five) took more than one of my classes, e.g. a Math class and a Media Studies class, or had me as a Math teacher for more than one grade level.

I contacted the former students through social media, most notably Facebook, where I asked them if they would be willing to meet with me in person for two interviews concerning their memories of my class and teaching methods. Because social media tends to be used by students outside of their studies, it is seen more and more as a useful tool in both professional development and networking opportunities within academia, being increasingly incorporated in formal and informal learning situations (Donelan, 2015). In this case, because I was already connected to their social media pages, social media served as a starting point in establishing contact between the researcher and the participants and was a valuable tool in beginning the interview process. Without social media, contacting these students would have proven to be more difficult.

If the student agreed, we would meet in a public setting (coffee shop, library etc.) to conduct the first interview where before starting, the student would sign a waiver form so that I could gain their consent to be part of the study, use their legal (first) name or pseudonym if preferred (some wished to remain anonymous), audio record the interviews and finally, so that the information they provided could be used in the research. I also responded to any questions or concerns they had about participating for example, how long the interviews would take to conduct, when and where to meet and if their real name could not be used if they wished. After completing the form, we conducted the interviews which were guided by the following four interview questions which were centered around memories of the class, the curriculum and my teaching:

- 1) What do you remember from the time you spent in the class that I taught?
- 2) What do you remember about the curriculum? What did you learn? Can you give examples?
- 3) What do you remember about my teaching? Any positive memories? Explain.
- 4) Is there anything I could have done differently to have improved your learning?

For question three, I gave ample time for students to respond to the first part of the question and if nothing came to mind that was of the positive nature, I asked the second part. I included the second part because question four dealt more with a critique towards my teaching. I never lead students to only think of positive memories when it came to my teaching. My role as the researcher was to reassure students to be as open and honest with me as possible; even if that meant that their answers could hurt my feelings. I also reiterated with

them that they should not feel threatened at all by their opinions because the purpose of the study was to gather honest memories and opinions on my teaching. I also made them feel at ease before the interview process started by asking them about their current lives and if and what they were studying, where they were working and what their goals for their future were. Because I felt that students would be more willing to answer questions honestly due to the time passing between our previous teacher-student relationship and because I felt it would be more beneficial for me and my reflective process to hear their feedback first hand, I did not feel a need for someone else to conduct the interviews.

On average, these interviews lasted anywhere between 20 to 45 minutes and were audio recorded so that I could transcribe them later on. The purpose of the first interview was to elicit the students' initial memories, on the spot, of my class and teaching without much time for them to reflect or filter out memories. During this first interview I took notes on their answers and at the end of the interview, I emailed the participant their responses so that they could look them over. I then used them as a prompt for the second interview. Also, during this first interview, if prompted and if it seemed fit, I would share my own autobiographical memories of them and the class they were in to encourage other memories to resurface. After the first interview, I would write these autobiographical thoughts down so as to use them in the presentation of the research, linking my teacher stories to the memories of the student.

After at least one week, I would meet with the student again for the second interview which on average lasted between 15-30 minutes. The purpose of the second interview was to gather other school memories after giving the student further time to reflect both on their time

in my class and the answers they gave in the first interview. I also reviewed their answers with them in person so that they agreed with their answers from the first interview before starting the second interview process. The two questions in the second interview process were as follows:

1) After taking the time to reflect on your answers in the first interview, is there anything you would like to add or change?

2) How do you think this research and interview process can help teachers?

After the second interview, I again reviewed their answers to the questions so that they could approve or change anything they wanted to. No students changed any of their initial responses but instead, most added to them. I also offered to share my thesis once it was completed so that they could read it and see the end of the result thanks to their participation in the study.

During the period where I was scheduling and conducting interviews with the students, I was also composing my own narratives concerning my memories of the students and I only began analyzing a student's interview once my own narrative was complete concerning that specific student. When analysing the data, different techniques were used. Firstly, the audio recorded interviews and the interview notes served as the base for the transcripts which were produced after the interviews had taken place and which were read and re-read many times to identify relevant information and themes for the study: "Qualitative analysis requires that the researcher go back again and again over the accumulated log material in a process that for many has a cyclical feel" (Ely, 1997, p. 177). Because responses were initially given to each question asked, the data was then organized into notes concerning each of those questions.

Common themes were then derived among responses within the data for that specific question: “data segments are categorized according to an organizing system that is predominantly derived from the data themselves” (Ely, 1997, p. 166). For example, my use of music and how I brought in my keyboard to play for the class was commonly remembered as something that stood out among the students. Another example was the theme of how I taught “from the heart” and how I seemed passionate about teaching as something they remembered about my teaching in general. Also, autobiographical notes of my experiences with the student and the class they were in served as useful tools in analysing the data from an autobiographical perspective.

The combination of all of these tools led me to consider presenting the findings from each student in the form of vignettes. Vignettes are described as “compact sketches” that are used for the introduction of characters, the foreshadowing of analysis, to highlight findings in the study and to possibly summarize specific themes or issues in the analysis and interpretation of the findings (Ely et al, 1997, p.70). Basically, they can be seen as narrative investigations of the participants and their experiences, which the writer describes (Ely et al, 1997). Barone used vignettes in his research which centered around interviews and included vignettes about former students of a specific teacher in studying the effects that a teacher has had on his students long after being in his class: “This literary approach also means that the lasting influences of Forrister (the teacher) perceived by his students are generally nestled unobtrusively within the storied texts” (Barone, 2001, p. 36). In the present study, each vignette includes: my own memories of the student (an autobiographical teacher story) and the student’s memories of my class/teaching based on the answers they gave in their interviews.

Both are written in the third person. Originally, individual vignettes (one per student) were written in the first person but after editing and re reading them numerous times, writing in the third person seemed to be a more appropriate method in helping distance myself from the data. According to Barbara Kamler (2001), this process of writing autobiographically in the third person is one where the writer focuses on a construct which gives “greater power (vividness, engagement) to a narrative” (p.68). I found (re)writing in this way allowed me to engage more with the data and made it easier to find common themes in the stories due to the lack of direct personal attachment and perspective that would have been present if writing in the first person. I became like a character in a story, as the students did as well. It is also important to mention that the vignettes are presented in chronological order from the earliest student I have taught to my most recent so that the differences and potential progress in my teaching that have occurred over time might be more apparent when reading the stories from first to last.

After the vignettes, a section appears where the data is broken down and analyzed according to themes found in my own teacher stories, themes found in the memories of the students (including their suggestions for improvement of practice) and common themes that arose across both perspectives. The impact of using this structure can be seen as being a more effective representation of the juxtaposition between my memories and those of the students, creating space for my own critical reflection between the two perspectives.

After listening and reading the transcripts of the interviews many times, themes were found among the stories/ memories of me and my former students and were also found from their suggestions: “if themes reside anywhere, they reside in our heads from our thinking about

our data and creating links as we understand them” (Ely et al, 1997, p.208). For example, my use of humor in the classroom was brought up many times across answers given by different students so in the analysis of the themes found amongst students responses to the interview questions, this theme of humor is acknowledged.

The next two chapters will contain the individual vignettes as has been described in this chapter: my memories of the specific student and the time I had taught them followed by the memories of the student. All students’ names are pseudonyms. I call myself “Mr. N”. The nine vignettes are broken into two chapters, the first of which contains the vignettes of students who I taught in their graduating year through my early years of teaching (years two, three, four and five) and the second containing the vignettes of those who I taught (graduating year) in my more recent years of teaching at the time this study began (years six and seven). They are ordered chronologically so to see any possible development or changes in my teaching over a span of six years over my teaching career.

Chapter Three:

VIGNETTES (The Early Years)

Danielle

Mr. N's memories

Mr. N's second year of his teaching career was the first time he had the chance to teach grade eleven, the oldest students in the school. When he originally embarked on this path of becoming a teacher, he always pictured himself teaching grade eleven, especially the higher level math courses. It was his own math teacher in high school who served as one of his inspirations to become a teacher. This teacher played a major role in piquing Mr. N's interest in mathematics in general. Grade eleven was a grade that he thought would be a perfect fit for him because he always felt that he would be able to relate to the students more so than younger, more "immature" students and he always felt that he would be able to have meaningful conversations with students around the age of sixteen or seventeen because of their insight, maturity and future aspirations in post-secondary education. In summary, this was an important year for him. However, the class he was assigned to teach was not one of high academic standing. It was considered a rough class. In fact, by the end of the year approximately six students had been expelled from the school for behavior reasons. There were many different characters who were either weak academically, rough around the edges in terms of past suspensions and alternative learning environments (planning room regulars or former alternative school customers) or both. To add to this, he was also given four students

with downs syndrome, who were provided with an in class aid and were following a modified math program. Basically, they were just sitting in the class to be integrated with their peers but he was their teacher and he fell in love with them instantly, especially, when they would come up and show him with great pride the work they had completed in their workbooks. They were great to have in his class. All this to say, when he got his class list at the beginning of the year and went over the names of his students with other teachers, he was overwhelmed with the negative energy that surrounded the group in general however, being a second year teacher who was young and enthusiastic, he was up for the challenge.

One student on his list who stood out among other teachers as a potential troublesome case was Danielle. Her reputation was one that was not in good standing with many of the school's staff members. She was known as loud, obnoxious, weak academically thus not having any hope of graduating and being rude towards other students and teachers alike. Lo and behold, the first day arrived and upon meeting his students, Mr.N realized that there were much bigger problems that awaited him in this group than Danielle. For one, many of the students had a history of being very weak academically. Out of around thirty students, maybe fifteen had passed math the year before thus there were many students who really needed to get through this course in order to collect the credits needed to graduate. Secondly, this group was very rough behaviorally. There were students sleeping in class on a regular basis, students facing the back wall of the class because they were high on drugs, students consistently calling out while he was teaching (either cracking jokes about the course or just drawing attention to themselves) and others just making fun of each other in a rude manner. In general, the first few weeks were rough but with time, the class settled down and after a very rigorous testing period

aimed towards Mr.N, the rough students started to respect him and began to settle down. Their behaviour started to improve and even if they weren't interested in succeeding, they respected those who did by keeping to themselves. In the end, a few of those students even ended up passing the course but in all, the class was quite the experience day in day out. The group sure kept Mr.N on his toes.

As for Danielle, she did end up living up to her reputation. She would be rude to others, rather loud at times and she seemed to be weak academically but, Mr.N liked her. She had a strong personality which definitely stood out yet Mr.N saw it as something in her that he could work with. Within the first few months, after causing a few stirs in the class with her loudness and lack of filter, she began to tell others to quiet down when he was teaching and on her tests, he would see that she was so close to passing time and time again. Mr.N asked her to move to the front of the class where he paired her with a stronger student and she willingly agreed. Also that year in his second year of teaching, Mr.N tried a new strategy where when giving class time to work on problems, he would open up his desk space as a working station for students who wanted more one on one help. Lo and behold, the desk strategy started to take shape and seemed successful and one of his frequent regulars was Danielle. One day a teacher stopped Mr.N in the hallway and asked how Danielle was doing in his class and what strategy he used to get her to work because this teacher had walked by earlier in the day and saw Danielle working at his desk with other students. The teacher was shocked she was doing work in Mr. N's class because in hers, Danielle was causing a lot of trouble. All in all, Mr.N liked Danielle and even though she didn't do well academically in his class, to him, she was great to have as a student.

Danielle's Memories

Getting a hold of Danielle and setting a time to meet was a challenge from the beginning. She had added Mr.N on Facebook many years back and so he messaged her to see if she was interested in being a part of his research. She initially said yes however; they could never seem to set a time and place to meet. Then one day when Mr.N was working on his thesis at Starbucks, she walked in to grab a coffee. She then offered to take part in the interview right then and there and so, they conducted an impromptu interview. Their second interview also took place quite randomly where approximately one week later, Mr.N ran into her at the local library where he had just finished tutoring another student so, before heading home, they touched base if she had anything to add to her previous answers. The second interview was very brief because she admitted that she had provided Mr.N with all the memories she could and was unable to recall anything else.

Danielle's memories of Mr. N's class were how she was always laughing and how he was so nice because he let her sit at his desk to do her work so that she would be less distracted then if she was sitting at her desk next to some of her peers. She also remembered how even though she failed the course, it was the best grade in math she had ever received: "I think I went from a 16% to about a 40% because you let me sit in the front of the class so I wasn't distracted by my friend and her sense of humor".

Something that surprised Mr.N was how she remembered what he had written in her yearbook. He wrote that she should "never stop smiling" which to her, was a nice memento. She told him that his "niceness" really impacted her because she felt that the class which he

taught was a comforting environment. He asked her what she meant by that and she told him that the year before being in his class, her mom had passed away and in that grade eleven year, everything was crazy at home: “I just remember you and another teacher were the very few teachers who made their class a comforting environment and even though I wasn’t gaining math knowledge per say, I was gaining comfort and I knew that you were there if I needed it. It was 50 minutes a day where I could forget everything”. This information about her family life was something Mr.N was not aware of at the time when he had taught her. She also admitted that things at home were always on the downside that year and that school was a great escape for her, especially having him as a teacher.

When it came to the curriculum, Danielle did not remember any math at all. She remembered attending adult education for math the year after grade eleven and succeeding in that learning environment but when it came to the class he taught, no memories of the course content itself came to mind.

When it came to Mr. N’s teaching, she remembered how he wasn’t like other teachers who always seemed to be angry and even when he was trying to get control of the class, he did not use anger but relied on humor instead: “you weren’t angry like every other teacher and you had a funny way of telling us to shut up but not in a mean way”. She also remembered Mr.N sitting her next to the smartest girl in the class so that she could help Danielle and be a good role model in demonstrating proper behaviour which was conducive to learning.

Finally, when he asked Danielle if he could have done anything differently to improve her learning and maybe for her to pass the course, she simply replied: “I don’t think that there was anything you or God could have done to get me to pass”.

Isabel

Mr. N's Memories

Mr.N first met Isabel in 2009, a time when it was his first year teaching a grade eleven enriched math class, a course he had always wanted to teach. His previous experience teaching grade eleven was with weaker math students, most of who were never going to continue with any type of studies involving math again. He was used to students who didn't work too hard and who wanted to squeak by in their courses just to be able to graduate. This year was the first time where he was dealing with students who were keen on continuing in studying math and who were applying to competitive math based programs in CEGEP such as commerce and sciences. The content of the course was difficult not only for the students but for him as well because it had been a while since he had looked at topics such as trigonometry, logarithms and conics. These were topics he had last dealt with when he himself was in grade eleven almost ten years earlier, so he definitely had to brush up on his math in order to teach these students and help them to succeed.

Isabel was a quiet, short, petite girl with long brown hair who sat close to the front of the class and who always seemed keen on learning and succeeding. She would be very attentive when the notes were given, she would ask good appropriate questions that dealt with the topics at hand and she would come see Mr.N for extra help if she didn't understand something. She was never out of line and even when other students would act silly or try to get Mr.N off track while he was teaching his lesson, she went with the flow, laughing at their

attempts yet she got back to focusing very quickly when Mr.N would get back on track. She was eager, polite and in general, a very sweet girl.

That year, she was one of Mr. N's favorite students (even though he shouldn't have any favorites) and their bond got stronger when he was one of the chaperones on the grad ski trip. While on the trip, Mr.N and his friend joined Isabel and a group of her friends going down some ski runs together over and over again. She was a beginner skier and so was Mr.N and so they stuck together as a group, sharing life stories and experiences on the chair lift to the top of the hill, grabbing hot chocolate in the cafeteria at the bottom of the hill, and communicating more as equals rather than teachers and students. Yet, she never crossed that line and she and her friends were always respectful keeping in mind that Mr.N and his friend were still in fact teachers and deserved to be treated as such.

When it came to academics Isabel was not the strongest student in the class but she also wasn't the weakest. She consistently got grades in the low to mid seventies; grades that were good enough for her to get into any program she wanted to. Math wasn't second nature to her but she continuously worked really hard to achieve her grades and she succeeded because of her consistency in her work habits and in her completing the practice examples Mr.N gave to prepare the students for the tests. She always seemed on top of her work, something not every student was doing in the group she was in.

When Mr.N would tell stories to the class, she would be the one who seemed to listen the most intently and he could see it in her eyes that she was genuinely interested in his stories,

advice he would give and lessons he would try and pass on to his students; lessons that were not only academic based but life based.

Mr.N and Isabel always had a positive teacher-student relationship. He saw her as a great student with much potential to succeed in whatever she wanted to become later in life. He saw her as a student who had the drive, the personality and the character to enrich any group of people she would be a part of in her future.

Isabel's Memories

After Isabel graduated, Mr.N asked her to attend his first annual graduating class barbecue, where he invited around ten students (whose characters really stood out to him) over to his house for a final gathering of sorts at the beginning of their summer vacation. That was the last time he had seen Isabel: around five years ago. They met for both her interviews at the local Tim Horton's coffee shop and he recruited her for the interviews via Facebook, where she responded with eagerness to help out in his research.

When Mr.N asked her what she remembered from the time she spent in his class, one memory really stood out to her and he felt like she had to get it off her chest. She remembered a specific situation where for some reason she was not prepared for a class test, how she then got overwhelmed and began to cry, ultimately leading to her leaving the test blank. She was in no state to write the test and she knew she would fail. After class, she remembers Mr.N approaching her because he had noticed her situation and telling her to come see him at lunch time. During lunch hour, he sat down with her and went over each question and re taught the material to her because according to her memory, she had missed a previous class lesson

where the material was covered. In the end, Mr.N gave her a low passing grade which was better than the fail she would have gotten by leaving her test blank. That situation and the way he handled it meant a lot to her and still does until this day.

When it came to general memories of Mr. N's class, she remembered him being very welcoming and how it was fun going to his class. She mentioned how he was always very funny, not too serious but was able to maintain control of the class and remind the students that work had to get done in order to complete the course. She also remembered how he was very lenient in a way that if he knew a student was on drugs or misbehaving for another reason, he wasn't the type of teacher to report them but instead, he would make a joke about the situation. She also remembered Mr.N sharing personal experiences with the class, for example, what he was going through in getting engaged and planning a wedding. She believes these anecdotes played a major role in students seeing his class as being a fun class to go to. Based on these memories, he asked Isabel if he was too lenient but she assured him that he was not. She remembered Mr.N getting upset too and how he was strict when he had to be.

When it came to the curriculum that was taught, Isabel did not remember anything at all. She remembered some vague mathematical topics, none of which were covered in Mr. N's class and she felt awful not remembering any topic they covered in grade eleven.

Her memories of Mr. N's teaching was that he was personable and approachable and how she never felt embarrassed to break down in class like she did that day when she put her head down and left her test blank. She also reiterated that he was funny and how he would always crack a joke in the middle of a lesson, making things never too serious but fun. She also

remembered him as being an understanding person who was not too strict and who was able to adapt the rules to specific situations depending on the students' needs.

His final question for her in the first interview was if there was anything he could have done differently to improve her learning experience in his class. She didn't really have a specific suggestion for him but for math teachers in general: if math could be related to more realistic situations that are relevant to the students, then it would be a lot easier for students to retain it. Life skills like doing your taxes or finances would be more useful than memorizing formulas and sequential steps in solving problems: information which is forgotten once the final exam is over. She also acknowledged that if she had gone into math-related studies after high school, she probably would have thought differently in answering the question.

Before ending the interview, Isabel brought up one last memory outside of school that has stayed with her through the years: "I will never forget when you invited us to your house for a barbecue. That to me was special. None of my friends were invited, I was the only one in my group of friends and you said that you saw something in me and that was the first time a teacher had ever said that to me. I know this memory wasn't in the classroom but that was the first time a teacher had ever noticed me."

After the first interview, Mr.N sent Isabel her responses via email and so when they met for the second interview, she was ready to add some other memories that came to mind. She mentioned how she remembered that the class he taught was one where students saw results if they worked hard and how he was a teacher who was always to the point. Also, she remembered him having control of the class, having the respect of the students and not

wasting time when getting the class started. She concluded by saying: “I think you were seen as a cool teacher that people wanted to impress and I remember people would talk about their grades and the class outside of the classroom which to me, showed they enjoyed it. There was also a good balance of work and you gained student’s respect by using stories a lot. Again, you were very personable.”

Finally, because of Isabel studying to become teacher, she saw value in conducting research this way and how if she could go back and interview former students who she has had in her field experiences, she would. She saw this exercise as a being very valuable in the development of any teacher including herself.

David

Mr. N's memories

It was at the beginning of Mr. N's third year of teaching when he first met David. From day one, David sat in the front row of the classroom, wide-eyed, with his best friend sitting and working by his side and Mr.N could tell from the beginning that David wanted to succeed. He seemed to genuinely care about his academics and he seemed to have a sincere interest for math. They got along really well and connected in the classroom. David would often raise his hand, eager to ask good questions and the majority of his homework was often getting done. David would also go see Mr.N for extra help at lunchtime, where they would not only discuss the math problems assigned but also talk about a passion that they both shared: music. David knew that Mr.N was a part time musician outside of the school walls and Mr.N knew that David was an aspiring musician himself, so they would often talk about songs they liked and artists that inspired them while David usually bragged to Mr.N about what songs he was learning and those he already knew how to play. Every year since Mr.N started teaching, he would usually bring in his keyboard (electric piano) and play and sing for his students and in that year, when he brought his keyboard into the class, he told David to also bring his guitar. David took him up on the invitation and they played some songs together that David himself had chosen. In the class, Mr.N would observe the stronger students helping those who were a bit weaker in math and David was always eager to jump in to help others as well. David finished the year off in the 80's in math and so Mr.N recommended him for a more difficult math class in grade ten, where he thought David would have no problem succeeding.

Fast forward two years later and Mr.N had David as a student again in his grade eleven class. The year was 2010 and David had in deed changed. When Mr.N saw David's name on his class list, he thought to himself how this was going to be the same David he had two years earlier and how David himself could be such a valuable asset to the success of the class as a whole. Mr.N also couldn't help but wonder why David was back in the regular stream of math in grade eleven after he had recommended him for the higher math in grade ten. However, Mr.N was excited to have David in his class again so Mr.N didn't really think anything of it at the time. Lo and behold, David began the year similar to the way he had back in grade nine. He was polite, personable and seemed eager to learn. He started the year off strong and he participated in the class quite often those first few months. However, as the year went on, Mr.N noticed many changes in David's demeanor in and outside of the class and these changes were for the worse. For one, David started to move further and further away from the front of the class. Not only that, but he started to be less and less involved in participating during both the teaching time and when it came to class work. His books weren't opened all the time; he seemed disengaged with the course and Mr. N's teaching and it seemed like David was shutting Mr.N out more and more. David went from always saying hi to Mr.N in the halls and coming to see him outside of class to only acknowledging him sometimes and rarely coming to see him to talk about school or even music for that matter. Mr.N wasn't offended and he didn't take it to heart and he did realize that students should interact with other students but this was a big change happening very quickly. It seemed like David's character was changing not only from grade nine, but within the first few months of grade eleven.

David also seemed to be either losing or changing groups of friends and in general, he seemed like a less sociable person. Mr.N even started to notice that the students he was interacting with most of the time, were ones that were not in good academic standing while also being those students who had poor attitudes towards authority figures and the curriculum altogether. It almost seemed like David was trying to fit in with a certain crowd of students who were more occupied with partying and having a good time than attaining success in their studies so that they could get into CEGEP and continue their studies. David went from being one of Mr. N's strongest, most outgoing students to one who was not reaching his fullest level of potential, who was struggling to get by on his tests, who became very reserved, snappy and sarcastic at times and who was lethargic when it came to his demeanor and behavior in the classroom.

Mr.N pulled David aside a few times telling him that he was better than what his academic performance was becoming in the class and asking David if everything was ok. He consistently assured Mr.N that everything was, but it didn't seem so. David was going through something but he didn't really seem to want to open up to Mr.N and for his part, Mr.N didn't want to push David into doing something he wasn't comfortable with. Mr.N kept on trying to encourage David to study, for him to get his work done and tried talking to him one on one a few times but David seemed reserved around Mr.N now and even though he was still polite and there were glimpses of the student he used to be, David was in a phase that was not conducive to his success. In the end, David passed the class but he struggled more and more as the year went on and Mr.N just couldn't understand how someone who was so bright and who was one of his strongest students back in grade nine became someone who seemed like he didn't really

care about his academic success anymore, especially in a year as important as grade eleven was.

All in all, Mr.N and David had a positive relationship, especially with the student Mr.N knew in grade nine. However, even though David and Mr.N remained on good terms and friendly throughout his time in Mr. N's class in grade eleven, David's attitude, demeanor and distance from Mr.N left negative memories in his mind. Was there more that Mr.N could have done in helping David succeed during that seemingly turmoil filled time in his life?

David's Memories

After David had graduated from high school, he added Mr.N as a friend on Facebook and through the social media outlet, Mr.N contacted him. Between David's graduation and the interviews for this research, Mr.N met with David once for coffee to catch up and see how he was doing but that was a while ago. For the first interview, they met at Tim Horton's while the second interview was conducted over the phone.

David's memories of Mr. N's class were based on how he was very different than other teachers David had. He described Mr.N as being outgoing and very passionate about teaching and it showed he was more interested in the act of teaching than seeing his time with the students as merely a job. He remembered Mr.N as being funny and because of his sense of humor, it made both the class more enjoyable and the curriculum more fun. He told Mr.N that he had a great time in his class, that math was one of his favorite subjects and credited Mr.N as being the teacher who opened his eyes to a nicer way to see math, something that lead to him wanting to further his studies in the subject.

After David's initial memories, Mr.N asked him about his shift in attitude and behavior from grade nine to grade eleven. David remembered that how in grade eleven, there were a lot of personal things going on his life. He felt as though he was going through major changes in his life outside of school and in his circle of friends that affected his demeanour inside the classroom. He admitted that he was trying to be more of the "cool kid" back then and that socially, he was trying to find his way. He also thought that math was too easy so he started to be disengaged with the course and started to take his ability for granted by not working as hard and admittedly being "young and doing silly things."

David hardly remembered anything from the curriculum Mr.N had taught him. He remembered parts of the Pythagorean theorem back from grade nine and he remembered doing complex word problems in grade eleven which had numerous pieces of information that he had to piece together to solve the overarching question. He joked saying that there are so many memes (humorous images) on the internet these days on how information given in a math problem has nothing to do to with the final solution. He felt those humorous images accurately depicted the course in grade eleven.

David remembered Mr.N making complicated concepts and complex problems simple and interesting, so much so that students would forget how hard the problem was because Mr.N made it exciting and relatable to them. He remembered Mr.N grasping the interest of most of the students; which was nice to see because he mentioned that not many teachers did that. He also mentioned how other math teachers didn't seem to care how their students did and how they seemed like they had a hidden agenda to trick the students and see them fail.

Lastly, he mentioned how he thought that students at high school level age are looking for someone who is outgoing, who has both confidence and energy and who makes the class an overall positive experience; qualities that he found in Mr.N.

The last part of their interview dealt with what Mr.N could have done differently to improve David's learning and Mr.N specifically asked David to reflect on his time in grade eleven. David reiterated that during that time, he was going through personal struggles that weren't related to Mr.N in anyway however, he felt that many struggles he faced in grade eleven were common to many students of that age. He said: "I think at that age, everyone is going through the same thing. Students are trying to fit in, trying to find themselves, be more sociable, trying to get a girlfriend or boyfriend. I wouldn't say your style changed because you were still funny and all this but, building relationships is very important. I actually remember you pulling me aside a few times and asking me "what's the matter?" You could have done better at that. It's a two way street, I can't really say you didn't do something right because out of all the teachers I had in high school, you were probably the one I admired the most but building that relationship with the students is very important because it shows you care. Keeping in mind that grade eleven students are going through major changes in their lives like broken families, when the teacher shows that he or she cares, that goes a long way in trying to get them (students) to succeed. I think the social aspect and being a "people person" is necessary in succeeding as a teacher while keeping in mind that it takes a while to realize that school is important but, the teacher plays an important role in getting that message across. Basically don't forget that grade 11's go through major changes and don't take that for granted. Don't think they have it all figured out".

The second interview was brief and over the phone. David was happy with his responses and didn't have much to add. He reiterated how Mr.N was passionate and how that was something that he and his friends still look for in choosing teachers in university. He also added how he remembered Mr.N as always touching base with his students, asking them about their interests and current trends in teenage culture which made him more of a friend than a teacher. David thought that was a positive approach in reaching students in general.

Shanila

Mr. N's memories

Mr.N first met Shanila in a grade eleven math class that he taught in 2010. He knew nothing about her. When looking through his class lists with other teachers, no one pointed her out as being a student to watch out for. She flew under the radar. In his first week of teaching her group, she was polite, personable and got to work when he gave the class examples to try on their own. She seemed bright, task-oriented and as if she was going to do well in the course. Early on, Mr.N saw that she had the potential to be one of his top students if she kept working hard to achieve.

However, as the year progressed, Shanila's work and attitude deteriorated. Slowly but surely, she began not doing any work in class, she started to rarely complete her homework and from time to time, she would even go as far as to pull out the latest magazines and read them while Mr.N was teaching, something he found extremely rude. Those moments where she had the magazines out were some of the only times in Mr. N's teaching career where he felt anger and rage towards a student because of their lack of manners. He never lost his temper outwardly but in his mind, this behavior really upset him. Shanila went from being a promising student, to someone who failed the year in Mr. N's class. Even when Mr.N coached her to apply herself and tried to motivate her by telling her that she was more than capable to succeed in the course, she pulled away more and as the year went on, her behavior and rudeness also grew. She was even standoffish at times and she sometimes ignored him when he tried to keep her on track. They never got into a full-blown argument nor did things ever get so out of hand

that he needed intervention from an administrator. However, their relationship in the class was not a pleasant one. It seemed as if there was always tension and a level of conflict between them that never escalated but was ever present. There were times where she seemed to care about her studies and success, but those moments seemed few and far between.

Even to this day, Mr.N does not know what caused her to shut down. Shanila is a student where he always wondered why things turned out the way they did. Was it him? When he had asked other teachers what she was like in their classes, they would say that she was shutting down in their courses too but not to the extent that he was describing in his own class. Maybe she was trying to maintain a reputation and image amongst her peers? Mr.N saw her hanging around a rougher group of students who didn't seem to care about their academics too much; was that a factor? Her boyfriend was also in the same class as her yet they never sat together in class. He was also a bit rough around the edges but at least he tried to succeed in the class and with just enough effort, he passed with a mark in the low sixties. If he was putting in a little bit of effort, why wasn't she?

These are questions Mr.N hoped could be answered with the interviews. He was even surprised that she even accepted to participate in the study. By her agreeing, Mr.N wondered if her lack of motivation had more to do with other circumstances and little to do with himself. Maybe he was taking things too personally? Mr.N hoped to set the record straight so that he could learn from Shanila about his past experience with her.

Shanila's Memories

After Shanila graduated from high school, Mr.N had not kept in contact with her. She had added him on Facebook but they had never messaged or emailed until he contacted her for this research. After numerous attempts to set up an interview, they finally connected and set up a time and place to meet. They met at a Tim Horton's coffee shop close to her house and for the second interview, they corresponded through email; she confirmed that she was happy with her responses from the first interview and that she didn't have anything to add to what was already said.

Shanila's memories of Mr.N's class were of times when he didn't teach. She vividly remembered watching the movie "A Beautiful Mind" (a math related movie that he usually showed to his students) and she remembered when he brought in his keyboard and sang to his class. She remembered having lots of time in class to do the homework assigned and she remembered working in groups a lot. Interestingly, she remembered liking math, how it was relatively easy for her and how she enjoyed doing the work. She also mentioned how she liked working on word problems dealing with real-life situations.

Shanila admitted she had a hard time recalling what was learned in which grade. She remembered a few topics from the grade ten Math course she had taken before Mr. N's class. However, she remembered lots of word problems where he would take the names of students and incorporate them into Math lessons. She remembered Mr.N using students' hair and eye color in examples involving probability and statistics. She recalled how many people struggled in the class, leading to her believing that it was not easy material yet she remembered that her

class was not the enriched math course, thus making it not as difficult as the other math classes. She also remembered doing a lot of examples in the workbook and how Mr.N would walk around the classroom to see if people's homework was done.

Shanila mentioned how Mr.N was not a boring teacher and how, since he himself was close to the age of the students, it helped in making the class exciting. For example, she liked how he incorporated fun anecdotes and activities like watching a Math-related movie in class, something she could not recall doing in any other math class. She also remembered not doing her homework and how Mr.N wasn't particularly strict with her. She wasn't ashamed to show him her empty workbook when her work wasn't done and she didn't really remember him getting mad at her or the other students and yelling at them, something that she recalled other teachers seeming to do a lot at the time.

Mr.N then proceeded to ask Shanila why she did not complete her homework at the time. Her response was interesting: "it was easy to get away with not doing it. You get pushed forward whether you do your work or not. I mean, I'm one of the ones who did really minimal work and I wish seeing now how it is in CEGEP and university, I wish I had taken the higher math and paid more attention in science and I wish I would have worked harder in general." She also mentioned how it wasn't only math class where she was not putting in any effort but how she was acting like this in almost every class at the time. Looking back, she mentioned that her and her friends wish they had seen the importance of succeeding in their academics so that they would have more options opened for their future academic pursuits. She also mentioned how at the time, she and her peers took for granted the relevance and interest of some of the

material covered in certain subjects and how they just saw class as a waste of time: just another fifty minutes in their day.

When Mr.N asked her about why she was reading magazines in his class, she again reassured him that her behaviour was not only like that in his class but in all of her classes. She remembered really appreciating the time he had gave in class to get work done instead of assigning it all to be done at home.

When he asked Shanila if there was anything he could have perhaps done better in improving her learning or if there was anything he could have done to get her to be more interested in succeeding, she responded: "I don't think so. It's like no one could force you to quit smoking. It's the same thing. No one could force you to do your work; you have to see the importance in it yourself. It's not like you were letting me read magazines, you were trying to get me to work but, I had to see the importance in it myself."

She concluded the interview with how at the time, she was not planning to continue her studies in Math so to her, doing well in his class seemed of little importance. Looking back, she felt that if she would have been placed in a class with students who wanted to succeed, she would have done better herself because she felt like she had the skills to do so. She was just really lazy at the time, something which she now regretted.

Chapter Four:

Vignettes (the Recent Years)

Sean

Mr.N's Memories

Mr.N first met Sean in his fourth year of teaching. Sean was in his grade nine math class: a generally well-behaved class. Sure, there were a few students with distinct characters but in general, the group was pleasant, attentive and most students were eager to do well. The only thing that really stood out from a behaviour perspective was Sean himself. He drove Mr.N crazy that year. Sean's behaviour was very inconsistent. Some days he would disrupt the class by being loud and behaving like the class clown. Other days he would constantly talk while Mr.N was teaching. On other days, he would constantly whisper to his neighbour and giggle while Mr.N was either presenting course material or going over homework with the class. Basically, Sean did not seem to want to be there. When it came to homework and classwork, Sean never got to any work at all. His homework was hardly ever completed and when Mr.N gave students time in class to work on problems, Sean was hardly ever focused enough to get started. His motivation was non-existent and no matter what Mr.N tried, Sean often refused to do any work at all. When Mr.N taught new topics, Sean wouldn't write down the notes. When Mr.N checked homework, his was never done and when it came to his test grades, they were usually abysmal.

Mr. N met with his mother on parent teacher interview night and both he and Sean's mom expressed disappointment with Sean and his lack of motivation, seeing that they both saw

potential in him to succeed. His mother didn't know what to do with him. She seemed deeply affected by her son's decisions to neglect school work. According to his mom, Sean was more concerned with his friends, having a good time and pursuing his activities outside of school. She seemed overwhelmed with his life outside of the school walls, a life Mr.N didn't see firsthand. Sean was a hard case to handle. When he got too out of hand, Mr.N would either place him outside the class or send him to the planning room (a small classroom where a behaviour technician works with certain students at the school), just so that Mr.N could get through lessons without getting distracted and frustrated with Sean's behaviour. These techniques didn't seem to work well because Sean continued his ways throughout grade nine. Frankly, Mr.N didn't like Sean and he basically gave up on him, seeing him as just another student who had potential but who would end up going nowhere because of a lack of maturity and ambition.

Even though Sean and Mr.N did not connect academically, there was never any "bad blood" between them. They never got into arguments or any major confrontations and Sean would still say hello to Mr.N in the hallways. Mr.N didn't like Sean as a student but deep down, he saw potential in hi. He felt that he had a good character. Maybe that's why Mr.N was so disappointed in him.

Fast forward two years. Mr.N was now teaching grade eleven math. When he received his class lists at the beginning of the year, Mr.N saw Sean's name. He became upset. A sense of being overwhelmed came over him knowing that he would have to deal with Sean once again for an entire school year. Mr.N secretly hoped that Sean would eventually get expelled or move to an alternative school. Mr.N dreaded the first day of class. However, on the first day, Sean

came into class wearing a big smile on his face. Mr.N thought: “oh great, he’s happy because his goal this year will be the same as the last time and he knows that I know the way he is.” Sean walked in smiling, he shook Mr. N’s hand, said “hi sir” and continued with saying something positive like “looking forward to your class sir”. Mr.N thought to himself, this was not the same Sean. It proved to be just a glimpse into the new Sean. Throughout the year, Sean was polite, attentive, motivated: a completely different student. On numerous occasions that year, Mr.N felt shocked and he constantly asked himself what had happened over the past two years that this student had changed so much. That year, Sean became one of Mr. N’s favorite students. Sean was personable and, had a great sense of humor while knowing that there was a time to work and a time to have fun. He was also was a leader in the class, helping others with their work, keeping others staying on task and gaining really good grades for all of his efforts. Sean worked hard, he cared about his education and he still remains the student who Mr.N has seen the most change in from one year to another throughout his teaching career.

One day, because Mr.N was so shocked by Sean’s complete change, he pulled him aside after class, congratulating him and commending him for his achievements and strides in his behaviour and attitude. Sean appreciated the compliments and then Mr.N asked him: “What happened over these past two years to cause such a change?” Mr.N was expecting some philosophical, life-altering answer where in Sean realized the errors of his ways because of deep thought and reflection. Also, selfishly, he was kind of hoping that Sean would say how Mr.N had served as a catalyst in Sean’s quest for academic success and how he played a major role in his sudden change of heart and mind. Well, it turned out once again that Mr.N was wrong about Sean. Sean then surprised Mr.N even more when he said “Oh it’s because I want a car.” Mr.N

was confused so he asked him to elaborate and that's when Sean starting telling him about how he and his parents made a deal that if he did well in school and changed his behavior by getting his priorities straight, that they (his parents) would help him purchase a car. In the end, it seemed that four wheels were all it took to get Sean on the academic straight and narrow and thankfully, that motivation made Mr. N's life a whole lot easier as well.

Looking back even before his interview for this study, Sean taught Mr.N a lot in his teaching career. He taught him not to judge a student based on past experiences because a lot could change in a teenager's life within a span of two years. Mr.N didn't think a change like that was possible before, but Sean taught him that it was. Sean also taught Mr.N that to have hope for a change in students is not a false hope and that it is possible that the potential teachers see in their students can come to fruition before their very own eyes. Finally, Sean taught him that students are motivated by different things; some want to do well for their parents, others for themselves and others like Sean, need some sort of "dangling carrot" that will lead them to seeing the bigger picture in the importance of academic success. These lessons were ones Mr.N learned from Sean before catching up with him years later and Mr.N looked forward to what else Sean could teach him in their interviews.

Sean's Memories

Sean and Mr.N met at the local Tim Horton's for both of their interviews. When Mr.N asked Sean to recollect on Mr.N's class, the first words that came to Sean's mind were "happy environment". Sean remembered that in grade eleven, Mr. N's class was one of his favorites and how he felt that everyone in the class were his friends and because of this, the class was

enjoyable even though Math was not his favorite subject. He also remembered the class having a very “supportive atmosphere”, where Mr.N would ask him if he really understood the concepts when he circulated around the classroom. Sean felt that not many teachers actually followed up with him to see if he truly understood and made sure that everyone in the class was on the same page, something he appreciated in Mr. N’s teaching style.

When it came to Sean’s memories of grade nine, he didn’t remember much other than he got in trouble a lot. When Mr.N asked him if he remembered getting in trouble in his math class, Sean said that he sure did however he didn’t remember Mr.N ever taking any severe actions into disciplining him. He remembered how Mr.N would send him to the planning room quite often, how he sat in the back of the class talking to his fellow classmates and how interestingly enough, the layout of the class was not conducive to his learning. He enjoyed the grade eleven classroom set up better where groups of students would sit around larger tables rather than sit at individual desks grouped side by side in pairs. Sean was never upset with Mr.N because when he would kick him out of class and send him to the planning room, Sean always knew that he was being a jerk; he was completely aware of his own behaviour. Even though Mr.N seemed to have given up on him at times, Sean never held anything against him. He remembered always thinking Mr.N was cool even to the point where he thought it was cool how Mr.N didn’t go overboard but instead, took a reasonable approach to dealing with him.

When it came to Sean’s memories of the curriculum, he remembered using Cartesian planes, two and three dimensional objects, and vaguely remembered algebra and geometry. One thing that really stood out to him was studying probability in grade eleven and how Mr.N

incorporated gambling, specifically the probability of winning the Lotto 6/49. He remarked that even now, he doesn't gamble thanks to that unit.

Sean remembered Mr. N speaking with a loud and clear voice. He remembered Mr.N facing the class a lot and how again, he would walk around the class while students did their work. He also reiterated how it was rare how teachers would stop and ask how everyone was doing and if everyone understood a concept but he remembers Mr.N doing that quite often. He felt that such a technique was useful in the success of the class because everyone was learning at a different pace.

Finally, Sean and Mr.N concluded their first interview with any suggestions Sean had on how Mr.N could have acted differently to improve his learning, especially through the difficult grade nine experiences. Sean suggested how Mr.N could have been more diligent by making him sit in the front row, away from distractions, because that is the best strategy for him now in staying focused in his current classes. When Mr.N asked him if he was too relaxed with him, he replied by saying "not at all" and continued: "In fact, I thought you didn't like me in grade nine. I still thought you were cool so I didn't want to get too much on your bad side, which was good. You weren't too nice but I had a good time. You were one of my favorite teachers in high school. Math has gotten a lot harder without you."

After the first interview, Mr.N sent Sean his responses and before beginning their second interview, they reviewed his responses together. Sean once again reiterated that he had a lot of fun in Mr.N's grade eleven class yet felt disconnected in his grade nine class. In his grade nine year, Sean remembered feeling like teachers didn't really care if he passed or failed but

again, he didn't blame Mr.N for that feeling but instead blamed himself for being a troubled student at the time. Sean also brought up a suggestion on how to reach students like that by saying that if he was a teacher, he would have played on students interests more and would have tried to tie the subject matter to those interests. He also brought up how teachers should use the importance of school in relation to students' future salaries and how by going further in your studies, increases your chances of making more money in your future. He feels that if this relation was dwelt upon, it would have made him more eager to do well even back in grade nine.

Jess

Mr. N's Memories

Mr.N first met Jess in 2011. It was during his sixth year of teaching and it was his first year teaching a new subject which was considered an elective course for grade eleven students. The course was 'Media Studies' and it was a course which he had designed and had free reign on what topics to cover. Late in the previous year, he had proposed the course to his principal and because of his background in media arts during his time in college, she agreed that he could teach it; she would offer it as an option to the students. Because enough students registered for it (32 students), it was approved and was now an official course. That year, his media class was also his homeroom class which meant that he would always see this class at the same time every day: first period. Jess was part of both this class and his math class, a unique situation in his teaching career because it was the first year that he taught some students twice in one day. At the beginning of the year, he began looking over his class lists and sat down with the vice principal because the principal had wanted to share some warnings with Mr.N concerning certain students. Apparently, with the vice principal's experiences dealing with the grade ten students from the year before, there were a group of girls now in grade eleven who were considered very rude, obnoxious and mean towards others and who teachers should be aware of and lo and behold, Jess was labeled as being part of this group. These girls were known for starting drama around the school amongst both students and teachers and lucky for Mr.N, he had four of them in his homeroom media class and two of the four were also in his math class.

As previously mentioned, Jess was one of the two whom he saw twice a day. Nevertheless, he was warned and rightfully so. Among the four in his media class, two were quite obnoxious and hard to deal with. One of the two got expelled at some point in the year and the other ended up failing almost every class she was in because of basically not doing any work and giving attitude to most of her teachers, Mr.N included. Then there was Jess, who was probably the loudest and most opinionated of the four but who was also the brightest. She had such good insight in media class and she really seemed to enjoy the class as a whole. She participated well, seemed eager to learn, had great opinions which she often shared openly with the class and was very well spoken in her written work and presentations. When it came to math class, because she wasn't surrounded by as many friends as her other classes, she was very quiet and kept to herself; getting her work done and sometimes even asking for extra work to get ahead in the course. Again she participated well in class, was attentive and did really well on her tests and exams. She actually ended up being one of Mr. N's strongest students in that Math class. Mr.N saw her as being different from the other three in her group of friends who were also in his classes. As the year went on, Mr.N and Jess got closer and closer and maintained a great rapport between them. While other teachers were complaining about her attitude, her argumentative persona and her lack of respect towards authority figures, Mr.N and Jess got along just fine. She actually ended up being one of his favorite students he taught that year and when other students got out of hand, including those who were part of her circle of friends, she always was the one who stood up and tried to talk sense into those who were being rude. It felt as if she was on his side and she ended up being a valuable ally in his attempts at maintaining control of the class.

Teaching Jess was generally a positive experience for Mr.N however, there was one incident where they clashed. It was during the beginning of a homeroom class right after he had handed out the report cards. Jess received her report card and all of a sudden, Mr.N began hearing her use offensive language quite loudly. She was clearly upset at something. She then approached him and proceeded to tell him that she had to leave the class or else things were going to get out of hand. She was visibly upset almost as if she was shaking and her face began to turn red with anger. He asked her calmly why she needed to leave (at this point the whole class was listening because Jess wasn't the most discreet student) but her response was incoherent at the time. He decided that she shouldn't leave the class in this state and advised her to sit down. She did not listen and she ended up leaving the class anyways in a very aggressive manner. She never came back to any of his classes for the rest of that day.

Later in the day, Mr.N was in the main office and his friend who was a gym teacher was there talking to a few other colleagues about a student who had stormed into his class that morning and who had started to yell at him over the mark he had given her on her report card. He was telling his other colleagues how crazy she was acting and how she looked like a "lunatic" to the other students he was teaching because she would not stop yelling at him in front of his class. Mr.N then put two and two together and realized that the student was in fact Jess. He had already written an incident report that morning because of her defiance but he apologized to his friend how he could not contain her in his class. There were no hard feelings between Mr.N and his friend and he understood that there was nothing Mr.N could have done. Jess ended up getting suspended and upon her return, Mr.N confronted her about the situation. He told her that it was his duty to write that incident report and that is one reason how the office

heard of the incident. He was expecting her to maybe hold a grudge against him or act aggressively towards him because of his decision but to his surprise, she said that she understood. She didn't seem upset at him at all however, he kind of felt for a few days that their relationship was a bit different than before the incident. Maybe she was just acting tough in front of him? Did he truly upset her or was she genuinely over it? Other than that one time, Jess was a great student who had a lot of sass but with Mr.N, her reputation and "bark" was much more threatening than her "bite". They both always got along and even after she graduated, they remained in contact.

Jess' Memories

After Jess graduated from high school, she added Mr.N as a friend on Facebook. She agreed to be part of his research and so they decided to meet at the school where he had taught her three years earlier.

Jess began the interview by recalling memories of the time she had spent in his class. The first thing that came to her mind was that there were a lot of laughs in the class. It was a good time. She felt it wasn't a stressful environment. She described Mr.N as not being too easy going but how he wasn't too strict either. She described him as being "on the level of the students" and not condescending, something she had experienced with other teachers throughout her time in high school.

When it came to her memories of the curriculum, she remembered vague topics such as algebra, dealing with fractions and word problems. She specifically remembered the probability chapter they had covered in grade eleven but every other memory were topics covered

throughout high school and dealt with in every grade level (not specific to his class). When it came to her remembering his media class, she vividly remembered an activity in which the class went to a grade seven classroom and asked the students what their initial thoughts concerning the concept of “Christmas” were, something Mr.N had done with his own class minutes before and then how they compared the two thought processes between grade seven and grade eleven students. She also remembered dissecting the meaning of songs, analyzing and watching films and learning about Charlie Chaplin by watching his film “Modern Times”. She also added how she remembered Mr.N bringing in his keyboard and singing for the class.

When he asked Jess about what she remembered specifically about his teaching, she answered how she remembered him as being very straightforward and to the point. She also said that he made things fun. Even when he gave formulas and explanations of certain topics, he made lecturing fun because he was very lively and funny.

Finally, they concluded their first interview with him asking Jess if there was anything he could have done differently to have improved her learning. He also asked her if she was ever upset at him for anything because he remembered Jess having a tough personality who was confrontational at times. She didn’t remember being upset at him at any time and she found they got along well. For her, his style of teaching and methods of discipline were conducive to her learning and she acknowledged that she learned very well from him and that they worked well together.

After the interview, Mr.N emailed her responses to her so that she could review them before the second interview, giving her a chance to reflect further and add anything she deemed important for the research.

In their second meeting, Jess seemed happy with her description of her memories of the classroom. She did however remember more of the curriculum that was covered. In Math, she remembered moving shapes on a Cartesian plane (a specific topic that was taught in grade eleven) and how Mr.N showed the class the movie “A Beautiful Mind”, which was about a famous mathematician named John Nash. In the Media course, she recalled playing the game “Name that Tune” and learning about World War II propaganda and how political leaders used the media to persuade the public into thinking how they were superior and how their own people would end up winning the war.

She also added how she remembered Mr.N as being very organized and prepared for each day’s lesson, something not every teacher seemed to be. She told him that many teachers were disorganized and seemed to be lost when it came to teaching certain courses.

Finally, he asked her about the incident where she left his class and lost her temper on the gym teacher who had gave her a bad grade and if she was ever upset at Mr.N himself for the disciplinary repercussions handed down by the administration because of the report he had written. She retold the story in her own words and then said how she was never upset at him for what had happened. She assured him that she left the class not out of anger towards him but because she didn’t want to explode in his class and make a scene in front of other students

because she liked and respected him too much. She also understood that Mr.N needed to write the report on what happened and was not bitter towards him at all.

Toby

Mr. N's Memories

Mr.N taught Toby twice, once when he was in grade nine and once when he was in grade eleven. Mr.N really enjoyed teaching Toby because of how funny he was. He was always smiling and laughing; but not at the expense of others. He seemed to be laughing more at himself and the silly things he would do with his friends. If Mr.N had to choose one word to describe his personality it would be “jolly.” However, along with his “happy go lucky” nature, he was also extremely nervous, this when it came to social interaction with teachers and when writing tests. This nervousness would reappear in his grade eleven year.

In grade nine, Toby was consistently late to Mr. N's class. After the bell had rung, Mr.N would look down the hall and he would usually see Toby either running or speed walking to his class. Other times, he wouldn't even see Toby in the vicinity of the classroom but then five minutes later, there would be a knock on his door and lo and behold, Toby appeared. Toby was so nervous around Mr.N when he had to explain himself but out of all his muttering and the nervous jumble of words, Mr.N figured out that Toby's locker was far from the classroom and because Toby's schedule was a tumbling one (the classes rotated times each day), it was hard for him to get from his previous class, to his locker and then back to Mr. N's classroom in time. However, as the year went on, Toby did get better at attending class on time.

The grade nine version of Toby was also goofy. He would laugh a lot, seemed clumsy and if something could go wrong in his daily plans, they probably would. On the other hand, Toby aimed high to succeed in Mr. N's class. He was in a very weak group surrounded by many

students who had learning and behavioural challenges, but Toby was a hard working student who achieved grades high enough to be in the top quarter of the class because quite often, Toby and his nervous self, would go see Mr.N for extra help at lunch and during class time so they could work through problems together. On the other hand, if Toby wasn't at Mr. N's desk, he was usually laughing or telling stories to his friends; stories that seemed so fantastical they made Mr.N laugh when he circulated around the class. Mr.N would try to guide Toby and his work partner but if Toby's imagination ran wild, there was no returning to his math problems; he would run with it and Mr.N didn't really mind most of the time. He didn't mind because he knew Toby would get the work done eventually, probably at home because he did want to succeed at his academics and because he was such a good-natured student that Mr.N knew didn't mean any harm. It was just who Toby was; he loved to entertain and did so with a good heart and no disrespect to any teacher at all. Mr.N learned to accept Toby for who he was and even though Toby himself was nervous around Mr.N, he was still able to share his distorted humor and even recommended Mr.N watch some of his favorite movies, one in which a psychotic turkey goes around killing humans for Thanksgiving.

When Toby was in grade ten, he asked Mr.N if he tutored math on the side. Toby was struggling in the higher math that Mr.N had recommended he take and he wanted a tutor to help him outside of school hours. Mr.N agreed and so once a week for the remainder of the school year, he would drive Toby home after school to tutor him at his house. Toby was easy to tutor because he always wanted to try more examples in order to fully grasp the concept; basically his work ethic was outstanding. Even if Toby didn't fully understand a concept before meeting with Mr.N, by the end of their sessions he would have a better understanding. Mr.N

laughed so much during their tutoring sessions, more than with any other student because Toby's jokes and comments in between problems and explanations were hilarious. Toby would say things like how his grade ten math teacher was "a dangerous guy" who had plans to take over the world and how he and another teacher in the school were strategizing on how to take care of the homeless population in Pincourt, an off island suburb of Montreal that didn't really seem to have a homelessness problem at all. His ideas and jokes were so over the top yet he and Mr.N connected through laughter and they constantly built on each other's jokes and comments, easing the tension and making Toby less nervous around Mr.N, which served to be useful seeing how Mr.N ended up teaching him again in grade eleven.

By the time grade eleven rolled around, Toby seemed comfortable with Mr.N and because of his success in the grade ten higher level math program, he had Mr.N as a teacher once again. Toby worked hard and joked less than in grade nine yet he remained friendly, humorous and a bit eccentric. His jokes were less juvenile and more sophisticated, weaving humorous insight with philosophical thought. His test anxiety however had gotten worse. As the year progressed, he seemed to need more and more extra time for his tests. Sometimes, when Mr.N gave him most of the lunch hour to finish his tests after having a full fifty minutes in class, Toby still struggled to finish. In order to have extra time for class tests, Toby was supposed to have medical clearance but he didn't. Mr.N felt at the time that he used his professional judgement and gave Toby what he felt was a reasonable amount of extra time to finish his tests just to keep him at ease. Mr. N's goal in doing so was to try and get Toby to a point where he was confident enough to get through a test in regular time (like most of the other students) but in the end, the goal was never reached. Mr.N reasoned that Toby was a

thinker, so Mr.N gave him time to think. All in all, Toby was a great student whose wittiness made Mr.N look forward to teaching him.

Toby's Memories

Toby was actually the first student Mr.N interviewed for this process. They conducted the first interview at Toby's parents' house, where Mr.N had tutored him years before. Toby remembered how hard the course was, not because of Mr. N's teaching methods but because of the curriculum itself (he was describing the grade eleven course which was an enriched math class). Toby remembered not having many friends in the class, which made him feel isolated. However, he felt Mr. N's presence proved to be a major incentive in him getting his work done. Even though he wasn't doing very well in the class, he thoroughly enjoyed coming to class because of Mr. N's eccentric sense of humor and different methods in making dry material more exciting. Toby remembered Mr.N as having a lively personality, being very personable and supportive. He concluded by saying that Mr.N was one of the most supportive teachers he had ever had.

When it came to Toby's memories of the curriculum, he jokingly said that "it fell through the cracks. I repressed it." From grade nine, he remembered the Pythagorean Theorem and the use of Cartesian planes. Other than that, he didn't remember anything specific but moreover, how he was in a constant state of struggling. He felt that he had something to prove to Mr.N and that in some ways, he didn't want to let him down.

Toby remembered how it seemed like Mr.N taught from the heart. He also remembered how Mr.N was not reluctant in giving lessons that were more related to life than math. Toby seemed to enjoy that.

Finally, Mr.N asked Toby if there was anything he could have done better in improving his learning experience in class. Toby didn't seem to have anything to suggest however, he did remember how even though he felt he didn't necessarily need to be monitored for having his homework done, other students could have maybe benefitted from some type of homework check in grade eleven.

Mr.N met with Toby for the second interview at Toby's house again and he began by asking him if he wanted to add anything from the answers he had given last time we had met. At first Toby didn't really have anything to add but then he remembered a bit more of the curriculum he had covered in the grade eleven math class. He remembered how Mr.N incorporated architecture as examples of different mathematical functions such as parabolas and square root functions. He came to the conclusion that the only concepts he could vaguely remember were those related to philosophy (Pythagoras, Cartesian Planes, Functions etc.), the subject he was currently studying in CEGEP and which interested him the most.

Mr.N asked Toby if he had any suggestions concerning his teaching and his effectiveness in the classroom. Mr.N asked him to especially recall the grade nine class because from his own perspective, that group was a very tough class to teach. Toby recalled how he walked around the classroom a lot to maintain order and then continued to say: "if you don't create some personal bond with a student, they will not want to work for you and this provides students

with an incentive to respect the curriculum to a greater extent. They will associate the curriculum with the teacher presenting it to them so if that connection is there, it will be beneficial for everyone.” He felt that Mr.N had achieved this bond with him and tried to establish it with others as well and that is what, in his mind, made Mr.N a teacher who he respected.

Rachel

Mr. N's Memories

Mr. N met Rachel in his fifth year of teaching. The year was 2010 and this was a memorable year for him because it was the year he got married. His wedding was on September 3rd. During the first week of school, he went into his classes and told his students that he would be missing the following week; the school board gave a newly married teacher five days off paid. He found it interesting at the time that this benefit was only good for a teacher's first marriage. He told his students that his replacement would be his cousin (who was in fact his wife's cousin) and that they should be well behaved for any replacement, but especially for members of his own family. All this to say that his first week after meeting Rachel was a blur, but when he returned from his honeymoon, he began to get to know his students better. Rachel was in grade nine at the time and Mr.N was teaching her math. He was also one of the coaches for the juvenile girls' soccer team and even though tryouts were held while he was away, when he returned, the final roster was made and an assistant coach had chosen Rachel to be on the team. Having students both in his class and on the team that he coached really helped him get to know those students better while allowing them to see him in a non-academic setting.

Rachel was one of the shining stars of the class: a student who showed that she cared about doing well and succeeding in her academics. Her class was one of the toughest classes he ever taught in his career. Ten or twelve out of approximately 30 students ended up either switching into the alternative program within the school, going to the school board's

centralized alternative school for troubled teens, getting expelled from school or dropping out altogether from secondary education. They were students who had rough home lives, struggles with learning or were so far behind in their academics that they did not stand a chance in grade nine Math before the course had even started. One student refused to bring a pencil to class and just thought he would pray that he could get the right answers on the final exam without writing any of the notes, class tests or doing any of the classwork/homework. Another student brought in a list from the internet of famous people who never went to high school to prove to Mr.N and the class that you don't need high school to be successful in life. The list included names such as Jesus, Kurt Cobain and the prophet Mohammed amongst others. Rachel stood out in other ways. Her long brown curly hair, freckles and big smile and laugh were always a nice sight to see when Mr.N entered the class: one which he dreaded almost every day. Because of Rachel's character and positive attitude, they developed a rapport where they could chit chat about "grade nine" current affairs and where she felt comfortable asking him questions and working through problems when he gave the students class time to do so. There was one time she came to Mr. N's office at lunch crying and needing to talk to someone. He told her to meet him in his classroom where she opened up to him about problems she was having at home and with boys; typical grade nine issues. Mr.N listened, and he listened some more and eventually he offered some insight and tried to guide her into thinking through her own solutions on what she could do to rectify the situations she was facing. Throughout Mr. N's nine years of teaching, those moments where students came to him for personal advice have happened once in a while but to him, they mark occasions for giving the most meaningful

lessons he could give to any young person: stories of his own past that could help them in their present day dilemmas.

Rachel got through grade nine Math with around a 75-80 and succeeded in completing grade 10 when Mr.N had her again as a student in grade eleven in his Media Studies course; this was an elective for grade eleven students. In grade eleven, she seemed more comfortable either because it was an elective course or because she had known him for two years now (he had coached her in soccer while she was in grades nine and ten and then again in grade eleven), but she was not as enthusiastic and eager as back in grade nine. Mr.N would add humor to his lessons, but his jokes didn't seem as funny to her anymore. Instead it seemed like she thought they were just cheesy. Sometimes he even caught her rolling her eyes. Was it him or was it a normal grade eleven thing where she had to seem less of a "goodie goodie" in order for her to fit in with the "cool" kids? Yet, she maintained her traits of wanting to succeed in school. All in all, Mr.N enjoyed having her in his classes and he saw something in her that encouraged him in that he knew one day, if she kept her positive attitude and drive to succeed, she would achieve whatever goals she would set for herself.

Rachel's Memories

Rachel is currently studying at John Abbott College and that is where the two of them conducted the first interview for this study. They met in the library where she updated Mr.N on her life and then shortly after, they moved on to the questions at hand.

Rachel remembered that Mr.N told a lot of funny stories and she remembered laughing a lot in his class. She also remembered him bringing in his piano at the end of the year to play

for his classes (a tradition that he started when he was even student teaching). Rachel liked it when he would lecture, give time to work and then if the work was done, how they would have fun: telling stories, jokes and interaction between him and his students. She remembered that Math wasn't her strongest subject but that she still enjoyed it. Mr. N's attitude towards the students was positive and she felt that he genuinely cared about how his students did in his class.

Rachel had no recollection of the grade nine Math course but she did remember units they had covered in her grade eleven media class such as World War II propaganda, the relation between our society and body image and why certain elements are strategically placed in shopping malls, fast food restaurants and other media environments.

Rachel brought up more than once how laid back Mr. N's approach was yet how he remained concerned about both the content they needed to cover and about his students' success. Because she brought this up again, he asked her to elaborate. Rachel thought that his sense of humor really helped students relate to him. Students wanted to pay attention; they wouldn't want to miss a funny moment. Rachel thought his humor also helped students focus and prevented them from floating off into their own world, doodling on a piece of paper or texting. The humor also made students see him as a younger teacher who was close in age to the students but at the same time, she saw him as maintaining respect that students should have towards their teacher.

When Mr. N asked Rachel if there was anything he could have done differently to have improved her learning, she brought up how by already having him as a teacher in grade nine,

her grade eleven experience was more fun. Mr.N then reminded her of the class she was a part of in grade nine- a difficult class to teach- so he asked her if there was anything he could have done differently. Rachel started to remember how he was always trying to separate the students from each other but how he didn't send them to the office. She then said, "I don't think you're the type of teacher to do that anyways because you're the type of teacher that would face the problem as it is instead of having someone else come in. I think that's good because even though a principal would handle it differently than a teacher would, you're trying to handle it in a more of lower consequence way because you didn't tolerate that type of student. It impacted me a little because I knew that if I didn't do my work right, I wouldn't be on good terms with you and I didn't want that because you seemed to be a decent teacher so I was trying to be respectful."

After a few weeks, the two of them met again at the local Starbucks coffee shop to conduct their second interview. She remembered how in class, he would never give a student the answer right away but instead, he would help guide them towards figuring it out on their own. He wasn't a teacher to say "here is the answer, now go do it". Another thing she remembered was that he was the type of teacher that if the students didn't hand in their best work, he would give it back because he knew that they were capable of doing better.

She also acknowledged that with Mr.N being her soccer coach for three years, it made him more trustworthy than any other teacher because he taught her to keep going and push herself which made their student teacher relationship stronger. She felt that even though she had him twice as a teacher, more importantly she had him as a soccer coach for three years,

thus she got to know him better on different levels: as a teacher, as a soccer coach, as a “cool guy” and as a friend. Rachel also remembered the personal difficulties that she encountered that affected her a lot in grade nine and with everything that went on, how Mr.N was the one she went to. She remembered him guiding her to do not necessarily the right thing but the better thing for her own well-being. Even though he didn’t remember guiding her in that way, she certainly did. She also admitted that when he asked her to participate in this study, she was a bit hesitant because she didn’t really remember that much concerning the teaching. Instead, she remembered more the friendship they had developed over those three years in high school. She concluded by saying that: “I find getting to know a teacher on a deeper level (not too personal because you have to keep it spacious) is good.”

Tristan

Mr. N's memories

Mr.N first met Tristan in 2012 in his grade eleven Technical and Scientific Math class (T&S Math for short). The course was a middle level course between basic math and high math (science math), high math being the course which a student needs to enter the sciences program in CEGEP. On the first day of class, Tristan immediately sat at the back of the class. He seemed like a quiet student and Mr.N didn't know much about him. As the first weeks of the school year passed, Tristan remained quiet, getting his work done and doing well on the first few tests and class assignments. In the classroom, Mr.N started to notice that Tristan started moving closer and closer to the front of the class while sitting with different groups of students. All of the students seemed to get along with Tristan thus leading Mr.N to conclude that even though Tristan was quiet in class, he was quite popular. Mr.N also started to notice Tristan in the hallways where he would see him always sitting in the same place at lunch, with a group of people including his girlfriend at the time: a girl Mr.N had been coaching in soccer for three years.

That year, about a month into the school year, Tristan's class had to change rooms because of issues with the teaching equipment in the original classroom. The only other room available belonged to one of Mr. N's friends: a Science teacher. That year, Mr.N moved around from class to class like a nomad, bringing only what he needed for teaching. Mr.N and his friend would always joke around in front of the students at the beginning of class: about how math was superior to science or vice versa. It was always in good fun and the students seemed to

anticipate their exchanges. Once the class made the switch to the Science room, Mr.N noticed that Tristan started sitting right in the front row, as close to the chalkboard as possible. Mr.N got to know him a bit more and he realized more and more as the year went on that this student reminded him of himself back when he was a high school student.

As previously mentioned, Tristan was a quiet student who wanted to succeed in his academics but who was also popular and sociable with a variety of groups of students. He was attentive in class and seemed to grasp the concepts easily thus resulting in great marks on tests. He was also athletic, playing basketball on the school team and following professional sports much like Mr.N did. Even though Mr.N was not a huge basketball fan, Tristan and Mr.N would often talk about professional basketball and who they thought would win the playoffs that year. Tristan's move to the front also brought out his sense of humor, which was witty and sarcastic at times. When students would act immature or silly, Tristan and Mr.N would send each other looks because they knew exactly what the other was thinking. As time passed, Tristan changed from being a quiet, shy student, to a student who really seemed to enjoy Mr. N's classroom environment and who took an interest in Mr.N and his life experiences. All this to say that the description of Tristan just given could also be applied to Mr.N when he himself was a grade eleven student. Mr.N himself was a shy and quiet student yet he got along with almost everyone. Even though he was seen as one of the smart kids, he was never labelled as a nerd or geek. He was sociable and connected with his fellow students in ways other than academics like through sports and music. Mr.N always wanted to do well and get the highest grades possible yet he didn't stress himself out to achieve these grades. Also, he found some of his teachers hilarious. He found himself genuinely wanting to learn from them, something he thought

Tristan was feeling towards him. Even though Tristan didn't laugh at all of Mr. N's jokes, he would have a witty comeback which forced Mr.N to be on his toes. As the year went on, their bond grew stronger.

One incident that occurred between Tristan and Mr.N was when Mr.N stopped seeing Tristan sitting in the hallway with his girlfriend in their usual hangout spot. Mr.N always had to walk through this specific part of the hallway to get to his office at lunch time and one day, Tristan wasn't there. Mr.N thought that it was odd but as the days passed, he started to realize that day after day, Tristan wasn't there anymore. At the same time, Tristan was also being very quiet in class and seemed both emotionally drained and less focused. Mr.N was curious about these sudden changes in behavior so one day after class, Mr.N asked Tristan if everything was ok. Tristan said everything was fine and then Mr.N brought up how he didn't see him in the hallway in his "spot" at lunchtime anymore. Tristan then proceeded to tell Mr.N that he and his girlfriend had broken up. Mr.N felt bad for Tristan because he seemed genuinely upset. Mr.N was sensitive to his situation because of experiences he himself had gone through in his own past. Mr.N offered for Tristan to come see him anytime if he needed to talk. Tristan said thanks and then went on his way. A few weeks passed and Tristan seemed to be getting back to his regular self in his behaviour however, his grades began to suffer. He went from grades in the 90's and high 80's to getting low 60's and even failing some tests so one day Mr.N asked Tristan to stay behind for just a few minutes after class. Mr.N then proceeded to give Tristan a pep talk on how he was better than what he was achieving. Mr.N spoke to him firmly like a sports coach would to motivate his players and also told him to try and not let his ex-girlfriend bring him down. Even though Mr.N was being stern with him, his tone was also sensitive to Tristan's hurt

and he told him that he himself knew how hard it is to go through what he was going through however, he should try to not let it affect his academics. Mr.N suggested he focus on other things and use his academics or other activities to help him get through this tough time in his life. Tristan listened intently and seemed motivated; thanking Mr.N for taking the time to talk with him. During the next few weeks Tristan was back to his normal self and achieving his usual grades and from that point on, he maintained the highest grades in the class on his way to winning the math award at his graduation ceremony.

This situation is one where Mr. N's motivation seemed to play an important role in turning this student back on the right path concerning his work and well- being. From Mr. N's past experience, teachers don't always pull at the right strings when trying to motivate certain students, but in this case it worked. He will always remember this moment and will always remember Tristan because he is probably the student who most reminded him of himself.

Tristan's Memories

Mr.N had kept in touch with Tristan both through Facebook and over the phone and invited him over for his annual graduation barbecue. They had gotten together on different occasions to either grab a beer or watch a hockey game and Mr.N also had sold Tristan his old car a few years back. Due to their consistent contact after graduation, when Mr.N asked Tristan to participate in his research, Tristan did not hesitate. Their first interview was conducted at Starbucks coffee shop and their second at Tim Horton's.

One of the first memories that Tristan had of Mr. N's class was how comfortable he felt. There were so many other teachers who made him feel nervous to speak but with Mr.N, he felt

at ease when he had questions or when he needed to talk to him in general. He saw Mr.N as being very approachable. When Mr.N asked Tristan what exactly made him feel like that towards him, Tristan said he remembered how Mr.N would speak to the students more as if they were friends as opposed to keeping a rigid “teacher student relationship”. Tristan felt that he had experienced so many teachers assert themselves as being in charge and giving a demeanour of not really wanting to be there however he saw Mr.N as a teacher who cared for his students and that put him at ease when we had questions and when he felt nervous in class.

He also remembered Mr. N’s teaching style and how he liked how Mr.N gave notes when introducing new topics. He liked how Mr.N broke down a new topic, going step by step and he felt that he made things very clear. He also remembered how he wondered why Mr.N didn’t use Power Point for his notes because his other math teachers but as the year went on, he felt that it was better because too many teachers just projected the slides for the class without taking the time to go through them thoroughly like Mr.N did. He also remembered Mr. N’s sense of humor with the students and his colleague with whom he shared a classroom with and he also mentioned how he was impressed with Mr. N’s patience with certain students because he remembered how they required a lot of it when it came to asking questions in which the answer had just been given had they only been listening.

Mr.N then asked Tristan about how Tristan once told him how the beginning of the year was different than the end of the year and why Tristan had felt that way. Tristan responded by saying how he remembered at the beginning of the year sitting in the back of the class and moving around the first few weeks trying to figure out who he could be friends with. Tristan

also remembered Mr.N seeming annoyed the very first day of class when he walked in, took attendance and when he had to distribute the textbooks. To Tristan, it seemed like it was a tedious task for Mr.N and that he was more annoyed than anything. That was Tristan's first impression of him. However, as the year went on, he became more comfortable with Mr.N and moved to the front of the class where he ended up staying for the rest of the year.

When it came to the course material, Tristan remembered using graphs a lot. He remembered specific functions the class had graphed like parabolas, step functions and rational functions and how he needed to learn the properties for each function. He came to the conclusion that if he were to return to Mr. N's class right now and write a test, he would probably fail. He also admitted that he would study and memorize things for one test and then when that test was done, he would forget that information and start memorizing the next topic.

Tristan remembered liking how Mr.N found balance between teaching and giving space to "breathe" in a class lesson. He remembered Mr.N answering math questions but then showing interest in the students and their favorite books, movies or sports. He also liked how Mr.N didn't spoon feed answers to students but encouraged them to find them in the notes he provided them with. He even remembered Mr.N stressing to students the importance of copying down the formulas properly however, students still made mistakes when writing them in their notebooks. He also thought that how Mr.N gave take home assignments instead of quizzes was a good method in assigning grades. He found the take home assignments valuable because they gave students an opportunity to figure out what they didn't understand before

the actual test. While they were also less stressful than quizzes, they taught him to see the importance in practicing the material enough to understand. He also mentioned how he liked how Mr.N didn't force students to do homework yet he assigned it almost every day. When Mr.N asked Tristan if he thought that was a beneficial teaching method for the class, Tristan replied that it worked for him so yes, and how assignments forced students to do some work but it was more for them to see if they truly understood before the actual test. However, he also remembered how some students took advantage of Mr.N never checking their homework outside of the assignments but also how that neglectful tendency was reflected in their grades.

In their second interview, Tristan didn't really have much to add however he did reiterate how he liked that Mr.N did not use Power Point for his notes because he found that now in CEGEP, the teachers who are the least effective are those who run through their Power Point slides very quickly without much explanation and then tell the students to consult the notes if they have any problems. He also mentioned how nowadays, it seems as if teachers try and get through their courses as fast as possible, not taking the proper time for explanation and for questions to be asked by the students, something Mr.N did well as a teacher. In general, he remembered Mr. N's class as being fun and how he felt smarter once the class was over.

Conclusion

These vignettes offer the perspective of both teacher and students concerning past educational experiences they have shared. Common themes can be drawn out across the teacher stories, the memories of the students and between both perspectives. Finding and analyzing these themes are what can be seen as being the most useful outcome of these

vignettes in the reflection and professional development of the teacher. These themes can help the teacher see what they have done right and what they need to improve on in their teaching for future educational experiences to come.

Chapter Five:

Analysis of the Data

After reading and re-reading through the data, certain themes resurfaced again and again. The following section explores some of these common themes. The first part of this section deals with some of the common themes found in the memories of the teacher, the second with some of the common themes found in the memories and feedback amongst the students' perspectives and the third explores themes which were common to both perspectives. Lastly, a brief section addressing my own personal reflection on this experience appears in order to add anything missed in the other sections and to tie everything together.

Mr. N's themes

One theme that appears again and again in Mr. N's memories of his students was the potential he saw in them. On multiple occasions, Mr. N remembers what he saw as the positive attributes of his students, even mentioning them in the memories of the more difficult characters he encountered throughout his teaching career thus far. For example, in the case of Shanila, he saw potential in her as being a smart, successful student who could have done extremely well in his class if only she had applied herself. Even though later in his story he admits that he did not particularly like her because of her behaviour in his class, the root of his disappointment can be seen as stemming from the potential he saw in her at the beginning of the school year and what he thought she could accomplish in her studies. The same can be seen in his story concerning Jess, who was labelled by his colleagues as a difficult student before he

even met her, yet he saw potential and positive attributes in her right from the beginning of their year together. Even though other teachers and administrators didn't like her and warned him about her character and attitude, he continued to see the best in her. For students who declined in behaviour over the course of their time in his classes, Mr. N seemed to cling to the positive he saw in them and showed concern for their change in behaviour, always seeing what they had the potential to be instead of what they had become at the time of his frustration. Finally, Mr. N mentions again and again how teaching grade eleven students allows him to work with the more "mature" students of the school. Even though maturity does not necessarily come with age, he seems to give students the benefit of the doubt that they are at a level of maturity that is conducive to his teaching style. He expects the best from them and also expects a certain level of maturity, which can lead to seeing him as creating potential and a positive attribute (maturity) that he sees in his students before even getting to know them. This can be seen as a positive attribute of his teaching because he is expecting the best from his students but can also be seen as negative in that he is putting expectations on them without knowing anything about their story as a student going through their teenage development years.

Another theme that is present throughout Mr. N's narratives is his use of stories. As seen in the narratives, the act of Mr. N reflecting on his own life experiences and sometimes even sharing these stories can be seen as showing his caring side towards his students. From time to time, Mr. N offers advice and motivational talks to his students and his use of stories seems to play a role in him connecting with them on a more personal level. For example, with all the struggles Rachel faced in grade nine, she confided in Mr. N and the advice he gave her can be seen as stemming from him reflecting on his own personal experiences which he had

lived through and which could be related to her situation in some way. Similarly, Mr. N's motivational talk with Tristan concerning his downward spiral caused by the heart break he was facing was concluded by Mr. N letting Tristan know that he himself was aware about how difficult heart break was. Even though Mr. N might not have shared intimate details about his past with Tristan, the fact that Mr. N let Tristan know that he could relate to what he was going through seemed to help Tristan trust Mr. N more. Lastly, Mr. N's openness and stories concerning his experiences in music helped establish a connection with David. This openness can be seen as establishing a deeper relationship between Mr. N and David which allowed Mr. N to feel comfortable in asking the David in grade eleven if everything was okay when it seemed as though something was not right. In general, Mr. N seemed to rely on the reflection and the sharing of his own life stories in helping to connect with his students and because students like Isabel noticed how open he was with his classes as a whole, one can assume individual students felt more comfortable approaching him or opening up to him when he approached them on a one on one basis.

One last theme that should be mentioned is Mr. N's focus on humor. Throughout his narratives, he seems to place an importance on making his students laugh. For example, his noticing of the grade eleven Rachel not really finding him funny anymore seemed to disturb him and was a cause for concern in his relationship with her. In addition, he remembers noticing again and again if students would laugh at his jokes, roll their eyes at him or simply keep him on his toes with witty remarks of their own. It seems that he places great importance on humor and the response he gets from his students in gauging how successful he is in connecting with his classes and students individually. Furthermore, he seems to look for humor

in situations that students create in his classes. For example, he repeatedly mentions Ryan as being a funny character who he would share jokes with and who was funny in his own way when it came to him being nervous concerning his tardiness to class. Mr. N even uses humor when telling stories that serve as background information concerning certain students. He describes difficult situations with a humorous spin, for example, the student who never brought a pencil to class or the one who thought he would be just as successful as other historical figures by not completing high school. There was also the incident where Mr. N discovered that Sean's motivation to succeed in school was simply to get a car from his parents. Mr. N focuses on how he found it disappointing yet humorous that he didn't play as big a role as he thought in turning Sean's outlook on school around. The act of putting a humorous spin on situations like these can be seen as being part of the first theme mentioned about having a positive outlook on things however humor can also be seen as a common theme which weaves its way through Mr. N's narratives, and the students'.

Students' Themes

One theme that appeared again and again amongst the memories of students concerning Mr. N was his use of humor. When remembering the time spent in his class and his teaching in general, almost every student mentioned how funny he was. Some students remember laughing a lot in his class and others mentioned his use of jokes and funny anecdotes in trying to make the material more exciting. For example, Toby mentions how he appreciated Mr. N's eccentric sense of humor while others like Isabel mentioned how Mr. N would use

humor to diffuse certain situations involving the discipline of students. In general, humor seemed to stand out among students when remembering Mr. N and his teaching techniques.

Mr. N's use of humor can lend itself to noticing another theme amongst the perspectives of students: his easy going and relaxed demeanour. Students mentioned again and again how they felt Mr. N was a relaxed teacher who did not "lose his cool" when dealing with difficult situations concerning certain students. Danielle even mentioned in her interview how he never seemed to get angry, something other teachers did quite often. Yet she remarked how he remained in control of the direction of the class. Students tended to feed off his relaxed demeanour and seemed to feel both at ease and comfortable being in his class. For example, Jess felt that Mr. N's class was not a stressful environment and described him as having a good balance of being easy going and strict with running the class. Rachel also remembered this balance by saying that Mr. N was easy going yet concerned when it came to the success of his students. Furthermore, Tristan mentioned in his interviews that he felt comfortable in Mr. N's class while other teachers made him feel uneasy and nervous to speak. In the end, Mr. N's relaxed demeanour seemed to create a non-stressful environment that seemed to create a more conducive environment for students to succeed. They seemed to respect him for his demeanour and students like Rachel mentioned that this respect lead her to wanting to work hard and do well in his class.

This relaxed and easy going nature that Mr. N displayed in his classes can also be seen as playing a role in what students remembered as Mr. N's supporting nature towards his students. This theme of support that he displayed is one that can be seen numerous times within the

student narratives presented. In Sean's narrative, he mentions that Mr. N's class had a "supportive atmosphere", where he felt that Mr. N was constantly checking up with the class to see if everyone understood, not something that was common among his other teachers. Sean saw Mr. N using such a technique in a caring manner, an attribute that even David brought up in his narrative, where he remembered Mr. N as genuinely being "passionate about teaching and not seeing his time with students as merely a job." In Danielle's interview, she even mentioned that Mr. N took measures in seating her next to a strong student (away from her distractive friends) and also allowed her to work at his desk when it came to "class work time" so she would have a better chance to succeed. These strategies were ones that she saw as "very caring and nice". Furthermore, Isabel vividly remembered an incident where she needed extra help in getting in the right mind set to write a test and how Mr. N was very supportive in helping her achieving a passing grade. This incident really meant a lot to her and was the first thing she remembered about her time in Mr. N's class. In all, the student narratives seemed to show that students appreciated Mr. N's passion, concern and support that he gave them and they remembered these attributes in helping them succeed in his class. Toby even remarked that Mr. N was one of the most supportive teachers he had ever had.

One last theme that came up on numerous occasions was Mr. N's personable nature. Isabel remembered how Mr. N would share information about that specific time in his life concerning his engagement and wedding planning and how he would share stories of other life experiences with the class. Rachel remembered Mr. N telling a lot of funny stories thus laughing a lot in his classes and Tristan remembered Mr. N as creating "time to breathe" in between the curriculum, referring to Mr. N's use of humor and storytelling. Numerous students mentioned

seeing Mr. N as more of a friend than a teacher and one can assume that this perspective of Mr. N can be seen as being rooted in his openness, his sharing of stories and his personable nature with his students

Something that was not a theme but that is worth mentioning is that students seemed to have vague memories concerning the curriculum. Other than a few students remembering the topic of probability, most did not remember specific math topics that Mr. N taught them. However, their five years of high school math seemed to be all mixed together in one vague memory. Their memories concerning specifics of lessons taught were more of the non-academic nature. For example, some remembered when Mr. N showed his classes the movie “A Beautiful Mind” or when he brought in his keyboard and played music for them. On the other hand, when it came to lessons in his Media Studies class, specifics were more easily remembered such as units on World War II propaganda and the Media’s role in the celebration of Christmas. This could be because students saw the Media Studies curriculum as more relevant to their lives than the Math curriculum.

Finally, when students gave suggestions on how Mr. N could improve in his teaching, there were a few common themes which arose, one of which was sensitivity. A few students mentioned that it is important that he should be more sensitive to external factors that students face outside of the classroom and how these factors play a role in their behaviour and overall academic success. David suggested not assuming that grade eleven students have “everything together” and that he found grade eleven to be a difficult year in the life of a high school student, which is something teachers tend to forget. In addition, some students

reminded him that these external factors play a major role in their behaviour and that for the most part, their misbehaviour was not necessarily attributed to Mr. N at all. Therefore, Mr. N should not take things so personally when he notices students not working to their fullest potential.

Other suggestions that are worth mentioning are how he should be more involved in extra-curricular activities in order to have a stronger bond with his students, how he sometimes needs to be a bit stricter when it comes to making sure work is getting done and how he should try and link the curriculum to life skills rather than to topics that seem useless to the average student. Finally, even though students felt he was successful in creating a personal bond with them, some thought there was room for improvement in making that bond even stronger by showing more of an interest towards them and by letting them know even more, that he cares about them and that he is there if they ever need support of any kind.

Common themes

After analyzing the narratives from both perspectives, two common themes seem to emerge as playing a major role in the memories of Mr. N and his students and can be seen as being central to Mr. N's teaching style. The first of these themes is humor. Both Mr. N and his students seem to agree that humor was of great importance in Mr. N creating both a bond with his students and a learning environment that was not as stressful compared to other classrooms the students encountered during their time in high school. Mr. N placed a great importance on humor in the gauging of his connection with students and the students saw his use of humor as both an effective method in making his lessons exciting and in creating a

personal bond between himself and his students. Many of the students' first memories they mentioned were of laughing, having fun and enjoying themselves in his class and one attribute of his teaching that could explain this was his use of humor.

Another common theme that arose between the two perspectives was Mr. N's use of stories. Mr. N saw his reflection and telling of stories as being useful when both connecting with students and offering them advice and motivation. On the other hand, students saw his use of stories as both creating "space to breathe" within the lesson he was teaching and as adding to his personable demeanour with his students. By sharing stories of life experiences and letting them have a glimpse of his personality outside of the classroom, most students felt more connected to Mr. N and some even saw him more as a friend than a teacher in the traditional sense of an authoritative, mysterious figure who stands in front of the class and simply delivers the curriculum . This use of stories can be seen as establishing a stronger bond between Mr. N and his students and both perspectives place certain significance on stories and the role it played in the success of the class.

Personal Reflection

If I begin reflecting on what I see as the positive aspects that the students remembered about me, a number of them mentioned how they remembered my teaching as being "from the heart", passionate and how they felt I genuinely cared about both them (the students) and the subject I was teaching. This was good to hear and has made me more aware on how I should try and keep those traits in my teaching because they have left a long-lasting impression on students while also helping students become more excited about the curriculum. These

traits can be seen as giving students some incentive in trying to succeed and it seems that if I continue to reflect on the importance of the subject, communicate my genuine concern for my students' academic success and show my love of the subject, it will inspire my students to want to succeed, thus creating a positive bond between myself and my students.

Another positive memory that was not mentioned in the themes but that I took away from the interviews was how students remembered me as taking what seemed as complicated mathematical topics and teaching them in a way that was simple and to the point. I have always seen math in a way that didn't have to be explained in such complicated ways so to hear that I have succeeded on making things simpler and breaking concepts down so that teenagers can understand encourages me. It also reminds me to keep trying to better myself as a teacher and find new ways to explain math in ways that teenagers can relate to.

Along with teaching in a simpler way, students seemed to enjoy the way I incorporated stories, humor and personal anecdotes into lessons, not spending too much consecutive time on the tasks at hand but giving some breathing room between examples and topics that needed to be covered. I still use this technique in the classes I teach today and it seems to make things more exciting for the students, giving them less of an opportunity to "zone out" and lose focus while I'm teaching. I think being personable and telling stories is always going to be a part of me because I love relating to students on that level so incorporating that into my lessons will always be natural but it was good to hear that students enjoyed those breathable moments and how they made the class more enjoyable.

A final memory that seemed to come up a few times was how the students remembered me more as a friend than a teacher who stood in front of the class, relating to the students from a distance. They mentioned how I was more laid back than other teachers yet they felt I was still concerned for their success. A few students even mentioned how that because we were closer in age than other teachers, it was easier to create a personal bond between myself and the students because the students felt that I understood them better than other teachers might have at the time.

In every case that this was mentioned, this memory and lasting impression seemed to be brought up in a positive light however, part of it concerned me. I think in most cases, certain students were mature enough to make a distinction between friend and teacher and even if the lines were semi blurred, their level of respect remained intact. However, this memory could explain why certain students seemed more disengaged when I taught them for a second time; for example, shutting down in grade eleven after I had taught them in grade nine. They may have seemed too comfortable in my class therefore becoming a bit lackadaisical when it came to putting in the same effort they had before. Furthermore, what about students who were not like those who I had interviewed? What if they had blurred those lines too much and began to see me as more of an equal than an authority figure in the classroom and the school in general? What would other teachers think? Is this such a bad thing? Aren't we all in this learning experience together anyways as both student and teacher? These are questions to which I don't yet have the answers however, I believe they are good questions to think about while moving forward in the way I teach in the future.

I think more experienced teachers who have been around the profession for a longer period of time can see this “friendship” as a major issue. In my experience, more seasoned teachers who began their careers before I did, tend to keep a distance and distinct solid line between them and their students without ever crossing over and showing their more human, personable side. I personally believe that students need to see a teacher’s human side in order to feel a connection and to create a sense of wanting to succeed in their class. However, I believe that the role of the teacher must still be maintained during this process and must be respected by both the student and the teacher.

Related to this dilemma is how in my experience, the way I have taught grade nine students is different than the way I have taught grade eleven students; which is something I should reflect on and also something that could explain certain students’ different approaches to my class between the two grades. The students aren’t the only ones who were different and displayed different tendencies, I also did the same. With my grade nine students, I try to be a bit stricter than with my grade eleven students. From my experience, most grade nine students still tend to need some fine tuning when it comes to study habits, discipline and classroom behaviour, more so than grade eleven students whose next step would be studies in the CEGEP system. Grade eleven students seem to be less hormonal, less confrontational and mature enough to handle a teacher relating to them on a more personal level while maintaining a healthy respect that students should have towards their teachers. However, how much of a difference in my style between the two grades is too much? Should I aim to be more lenient, less strict and blur those lines to relate on a more personal level or maintain a tougher stance like the one I use with younger students? I guess these are questions that depend on the group

of students at hand, the level of academics of the curriculum and the maturity and dynamic of the specific group of students.

In conclusion, with regard to the memories of the students who were part of this study, my personal approach seemed to have been beneficial and it seemed to have helped in them enjoying their high school experience with me. Their memories have taught me what I have been doing right and what I could improve on and their insight was beneficial in me reflecting on my past experiences as their teacher. Furthermore, comparing my perspective with theirs created space for critical reflection and also allowed room for insight on how different perspectives play a role in analyzing situations and themes that were common in our memories.

Conclusion

This thesis attempted to examine how connecting with former students could help in the development of their former teacher. It not only took the perspective of the teacher into account, but embraced the perspective of the student, who was also involved in the classroom experiences shared. Each chapter addressed different aspects of the research question and attempted to create a link between theory and practical aspects in carrying out such an exercise of self-reflection. The analysis showed that by conducting interviews with former students, teachers may in fact learn about what they have doing right throughout their careers to date and may also gather ideas on what they could improve on for future experiences in and outside of the classroom.

Data collected from the student interviews was pertinent to the research question at hand. Students gave feedback on what they remembered about the class they were in, the curriculum they learned and what they remembered about my teaching while also offering suggestions on what I could have done better while being their teacher. Because this data was given from a students' point of view, it offered me a different perspective on my successes and failures as a high school teacher for the past nine years. Writing the data in the form of third person narrative also allowed me to have an easier time in the analyzing of the data without maintaining as much of a personal stake in the outcomes. It allowed me to take a step back and not take things as personally and I feel it gave me a clearer lens to find common themes which arose among responses.

Through the data collected, I learned that students appreciate different aspects of teaching that not necessarily have to do with the course being taught. Aoki's (2005) idea of curriculum as lived, the idea of collateral learning and the students' overall experience in my class seemed to be considered more worth-while and valuable to them than the simple learning of the prescribed curriculum. Dewey (1963) writes "it is then the business of the educator to see in what direction an experience is heading" (p.38) and this idea can be seen in the students remembering their time in my class, where they remember me (their teacher) playing a major role in shaping the experiences they had.

From the students' perspectives, they really seemed to vividly remember a teacher's interaction with the class. My sense of humor, how I disciplined and how I structured the class are all examples of key elements that stood out in remembering their time in my class. My laid back feel and my openness to share personal interests (like music) are also things that ended up sticking the most in the memories of students. According to Ryan and Patrick (2001), Math class is seen as a place where students believe that the difficulties they have with the curriculum reflect a lack of ability and because of this, it is a place where students tend to experience more anxiety and nervousness than in other classes. These attributes of my teaching seemed to play a major role in allowing students to feel more at ease in my class, leading to them seemingly having an easier time learning. According to Tyler (1949), the real purpose of education is to bring about significant changes in the students' behaviour and according to the students, the overall environment (through my teaching style) I provided them with seems like it was one factor in working towards Tyler's ideal. These memories can serve as good reminders as what I

have been doing right throughout my career and how I should not change those aspects of my teaching any time soon.

I also realized that the actual curriculum they learned was something which was harder to remember for these students and the specifics that were remembered were brought up only by students who continued to study the subject in which I taught. I learned that fun activities and making links to the real world stand out in the memories of some but in general, if a student does not continue studying math after high school, they tend to not remember many specifics. Instead, vague topics which were taught to them somewhere along their high school journey through the curriculum seemed to stand out when recalling what they had learned.

When it came to the data concerning what students remembered about my teaching, I learned that students indeed sense if a teacher is passionate or not concerning teaching in general and if they truly care about the success of their students. They sense and remember years later if indeed a teacher taught “from the heart”, a common reoccurrence in the responses I got. I also learned that students remember a teacher’s interaction with the curriculum and if they made things more complicated or simplified things for students to understand. Students also remember the use of stories, humor and personal anecdotes dispersed in lessons, a practice that allows students a chance to ‘breathe’ between lesson time. This practice of storytelling and making links between the curriculum and personal anecdotes is something that sticks in the memories of students and leaves an impact in students seeing the teacher as more human and relatable. Because of these things, I learned that a teacher will be respected if they are seen as someone who is more of a friend placed in a role of authority

rather than an authority figure trying to have control of the class by seemingly abusing their power.

Finally, I learned that as a teacher, I need to also do some things to improve the impact I have on the lives of my students. One suggestion is that I be more involved in extra-curricular activities, developing relationships with students outside of the classroom. Students seem to believe that if a relationship is established outside of the teacher-student-curriculum norm, students would respect and want to succeed more in the classrooms of their teachers. Furthermore, I learned that I should be more sensitive to the everyday struggles that teenagers face and I should never assume that because a student is part of the older grades that they have their lives more 'put together' than the younger student population. I should also make myself more available to them in their times of need where they could use sound advice and a person to listen to their issues and concerns. One other interesting thing I learned was that when students seemed to not care about their studies or lacked motivation all together, it was not usually a personal vendetta against me but had more to do with extenuating circumstances either outside of the classroom or a lack of respect for the educational system in general. Lastly, I learned that it is sometimes necessary and beneficial to be more on top of things concerning their school work, something I tend to forget when teaching the older grades because of my mentality of preparing them for more independent work habits they will need in CEGEP or university.

Korthagen's ideas of teacher identity and mission as they continue their careers lend themselves to the outcome of this study. This process served as useful in both my self-reflecting

on the last nine years of being a teacher fresh out of university and in me wanting to improve in my future experiences in how to be the best teacher I could be. It also showed me what I have been doing right (what I should continue doing) and what I need to improve. This process has also has ultimately become part of and thus changed the course of my own teacher story, where conducting and seeing the benefits of this study has and will play a role in shaping me into the teacher I will become. Connecting and getting feedback from former students is something I will continue to do even after this study is finished in order to further my development as a teacher over the course of my career. This process will not end here.

All in all, this was a useful exercise that helped me realize the impact I have had on students and the implications of my teaching methods on present and future groups of students. From the positive change I witnessed in Sean, the trust I established with Rachel and the encouragement I gave to students like Jess and Isabel, it allowed me to see the power teachers have in touching the lives of their students in both a positive and negative way and how a student's time in a teacher's classroom can play such a pivotal role in the their development, motivation and future decisions.

Limitations

Since I interviewed only nine former students, I only have data from a small sample of students I have taught in the past. Furthermore, I was only able to contact students who were reachable through social media, limiting the number of students I could choose from. Even though in this present age almost every student is reachable via the internet, not every one of my former students falls into that category thus this method of contacting former students

could be seen as having its limitations. Lastly, by choosing a certain number of students from almost each year I have taught, this criterion can be seen as limiting my choices in students to interview. Some students who I could have contacted were left out on purpose because I had already met the 'quota' of students who were willing to participate from that graduating year. Another study that could be considered would be to interview former students from the same class to see the differences in perspectives in a shared classroom environment years after the experience occurred.

Implications of the Study

I hope that this study will inspire other teachers to connect with former students and seek out their perspective on what they did right and what they could improve in their own teaching careers. By asking for students' feedback years later, I hope teachers will see how there would be less tension and pressure placed on these students rather than asking for feedback while students are presently in their class. I hope this study allows other teachers to see the power of reflecting through autobiographical narratives of their past experiences and for teachers to see how they could learn from students not only in present teaching moments, but through past experiences told from the perspective of an older, more mature student without anything at stake, years after the classroom experiences they shared have occurred. Overall, I believe that the information and analysis of my findings presented in this study could show teachers that doing this kind of exercise would be worth-while in furthering their professional development and offering a fresh critical perspective of their teaching abilities.

Future Directions

My hope is that in the future, this study can raise issues concerning curriculum and what students retain in their memory from the classroom experiences they encounter. The way that teachers present curriculum and how they tie it into stories or real life situations can also be addressed when analyzing students' memories years after they graduate high school. I also hope the study will lead to creating an importance on teachers reaching out to former students and seeing the effect these teachers had on students' lives and the decisions, regrets and aspirations they have after leaving high school.

Recommendations

The feedback I received in this study concerning my own teaching ability served as very useful in my own self-reflection process. Conversations between teachers and their former students should be recommended by those in charge of professional development at administrative or school board levels as one method for a teacher to self-reflect on their careers and the effectiveness of their teaching so that they may better themselves in future teaching years. Korthagen's (2005) ALACT model should also be recommended for teachers but is focused more towards reflection on actions that take place in present classroom experiences. For the purpose of this study, it is recommended for teachers to begin the ALACT model at step two which is looking back on the action. However, this step would include the perspective of the former student to enrich that of the teacher who is reflecting.

John Paul Eakin (2005) believes that a key aspect of self-evolution is finding the balance of the lived past and the anticipated future. Teacher training programs should encourage the

exercise done in this study as one that could be repeated every number of years so that teachers may see the impact they have had on youth and their development through classroom experiences they are responsible for thus contributing to this balance that Eakin writes about. The memories of students should also play an important role in deciding curriculum and how it is implemented in years to come. By seeing what former students retained and what they really learned through their high school experience, curriculum makers can have a better idea on how to improve curriculum so that it would have an even greater effect on memory retention of the students it aims to reach.

To conclude, the study created a cycle of inquiry among a teacher and his students which could be seen as a valuable tool both in the development of curriculum and the furthering of teacher reflection through autobiographical narrative.

References

- Aoki, T. (2005). Reflections of a Japanese Canadian teacher experiencing ethnicity. In W. F Pinar & R. L. Irwin (Eds.), *Curriculum in a new key: The collected works of Ted Aoki* (pp.333-48). Mahwah, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum.
- Aoki, T. (2005). Teaching as indwelling between two curriculum worlds. In W. Pinar, & R. Irwin (Eds.) *Curriculum in a new key: The collected works of Ted T. Aoki* (pp.159-165). Mahwah, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum.
- Barone, T. (1982). Insinuated theory from curricula-in-use. *Theory into Practice*, 21(1), 38-43.
- Barone, T. (2000). *Aesthetics, politics and educational inquiry: Essays and examples*. New York: Peter Lang.
- Barone, T. (2001). *Touching eternity: The enduring outcomes of teaching*. New York: Teachers College Press.
- Cochran-Smith, M., & Lytle, S. L. (2011). Commentary: Changing Perspectives on Practitioner Research. *Inquiry: Perspectives, Processes and Possibilities*, 4(02), 17-30.
- Creswell, J. (2003). *Research Design: Second Edition*. Los Angeles: Sage Publications.
- Denzin, N. K. (2009). The elephant in the living room: or extending the conversation about the politics of evidence. *Qualitative research*, 9(2), 139-160.

- Dewey, J. (1963). Criteria of experience. In J. Dewey, *Experience and education* (pp.33-50). London: Collier-Macmillan.
- Donelan, H. (2015). Social media for professional development and networking opportunities in academia, *Journal of Further and Higher Education*, (ahead-of-print), 1-24.
- Eakin, P. J. (2004). What are we reading when we read autobiography?. *Narrative*, 12(2), 121-132.
- Eakin, P. J. (2005). Living autobiographically. *Biography*, 28(1), 1-14.
- Ely, M. (1997). *On writing qualitative research: Living by words*. London: Routledge/Falmer.
- Fendler, L. (2003). Teacher reflection in a hall of mirrors: Historical influences and political reverberations. *Educational researcher*, 32(3), 16-25.
- Graham, R. (1995). Stories of teaching as tragedy and romance: When experience becomes text. In H. McEwan and K. Egan (Eds.), *Narrative in teaching, learning and research* (pp. 195-210). New York: Teachers College Press.
- Greene, M. (1975). *Curriculum and consciousness*. Berkeley, CA: McCutchan Publishing Corporation.

Grumet, M. (1991). Curriculum and the art of daily life. In G. Willis, & W.H. Schubert (Eds.), *Reflections from the heart of educational inquiry* (pp.74-89). New York: SUNY Press.

Grumet, M. (2006). *Toward a Poor Curriculum*. Troy, NY: Educator's International Press.

Kamler, B. (2001). *Relocating the personal: A critical writing pedagogy*. Albany: State University of New York Press.

Korthagen, F. (2003). In search of the essence of a good teacher: Towards a more holistic approach in teacher education. *Teaching and Teacher Education*, 20(1), 77-97.

Korthagen, F., & Vasalos, A. (2005). Levels in reflection: Core reflection as a means to enhance professional growth. *Teachers and Teaching*, 11(1), 47-71.

Kvale, S. (1992). Ten Standard Responses to Qualitative Research Interviews. *Journal Of Phenomenological Psychology* (in Press).

Linley, P. A., & Joseph, S. (Eds). (2004). *Positive psychology in practice* (pp. 713-731). Hoboken, NJ: Wiley.

Magrini, J. M. (2015). Phenomenology and curriculum implementation: discerning a living curriculum through the analysis of Ted Aoki's situational praxis. *Journal of Curriculum Studies*, 47(2), 274-299.

- Mishler, E. (1986). *Research Interviewing: Context and Narrative*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.
- Pinar, W. F. (2012). *What is curriculum theory?*. London: Routledge.
- Ryan, A. M., & Patrick, H. (2001). The classroom social environment and changes in adolescents' motivation and engagement during middle school. *American Educational Research Journal*, 38(2), 437-460.
- Schwab, J. J. (1978). The Practical: A language for curriculum. In I. Westbury y NJ Willkof (Eds.), *Science, curriculum, and liberal education*, (pp.287-321). Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
- Tyler, R.W. (1949). *Basic principles of curriculum and instruction*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
- Van Manen, M. (2008). Pedagogical sensitivity and teachers practical knowing-in-action. *Peking University Education Review*, 1(1), 1-23.
- Whitaker, T. (2004). *What Great Teachers Do Differently: 14 Things that Matter Most*. Larchmont, NY: Eye on Education.
- Yoder, A., & Strong-Wilson, T. (2015). "And Yet": Storying complexity in teacher narratives. In A. Ibrahim, N. Ng-A-Fook, & G. Reis (Eds.), *Provoking Curriculum Studies: Strong Poetry and the Arts of the Possible*. New York, NY : Routledge/Taylor & Francis.