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Letters to Myself ~ Reflections of a New Teacher ~ A Curriculum of Self

Sarah Brittany S. Greneker

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LETTERS TO MYSELF ~ REFLECTIONS OF A NEW TEACHER ~

A CURRICULUM OF SELF

by

SARAH BRITTANY SANDBACH GRENEKER

(Under the Direction of Robert Lake)

ABSTRACT

This is a nontraditional, creative approach to dissertation writing. Using reflective poetic inquiry, I reflect on my experiences transitioning from pre-service to in-service teacher in the early childhood classroom offering advice and encouragement to preservice teachers. I explore overarching themes of coworker relationships, undergraduate program preparation, the various responsibilities, classroom environment, teacher evaluation, teacher perspective, and teacher mental health and well-being. This is accomplished through the epistolary genre and letters to myself as a new teacher, building on a wide arrange of works by poets and theorists such as Pauline Sameshima (2017, 2013, 2008), Carl Leggo (2018, 1997), Jonathan Kozol (2007), Robert Lake (2022, 2021, 2018, 2015, 2013) Tricia Kress (2022, 2021, 2018, 2013), William Schubert (2012, 2010, 2009, 1992), Sonia Nieto (2014, 2008, 2005, 2003) and more. Seven letters were written to myself offering scenarios, stories, and advice on what to expect as a new teacher. Each letter is followed by supporting literature and concluded by a poem that brings a rich and diverse set of elements to the table. Through the lens of teaching with passion combined with aesthetic beauty, imagery, and empathy, I bring a new perspective to the understanding of what it takes to be a teacher.

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KEY WORDS: Poetic Inquiry, reflection, epistolary genre, joy, passion, experiences, encouragement, pre-service teachers, perspective, and teaching.

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A CURRICULUM OF SELF

by

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B.S., Georgia Southern University, 2014

M. Ed., Georgia Southern University, 2017

A Dissertation Submitted to the Graduate Faculty of Georgia Southern University in Partial
Fulfillment of the Requirements for the Degree

DOCTOR OF EDUCATION

COLLEGE OF EDUCATION

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A CURRICULUM OF SELF

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May 2024

DEDICATION

I dedicate this dissertation to my Papa, Dave Sandbach, who held the unwavering hope that I would one day achieve a doctorate degree. It saddens me deeply that he passed away before witnessing this accomplishment become a reality.

I also dedicate this dissertation to all teachers who stick with it, who find their reasoning and power through the hard times.

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I want to extend my heartfelt gratitude to Dr. Robert Lake, my dissertation chair, for his invaluable knowledge, guidance, and support throughout this academic journey. I am particularly appreciative of that he has passed the baton and allowed me to take it and run with my non-traditional approach to this dissertation.

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Lastly, I owe a debt of gratitude to my parents, Brad and Benita Sandbach, whose unwavering support has fueled my drive, motivation, and willingness to pursue both a career in education and this challenging program. Their belief in my potential has been a constant source of inspiration.

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PROLOGUE

Poetry as my Happy Place

When I was younger, I would go to work with my dad when I had a doctor's appointment or when I was not feeling well enough to go school. As most kids do, I looked forward to days like this. I loved going to school, but I loved spending time with my dad in the "real world". It was what some may refer to as a "happy place" or a feeling of "home". A place of comfort, security, and "warm fuzzy" feelings. My dad owns a local chain of convenient stores around the area of Augusta, GA. My grandpa started and grew this business until his passing in 2018. When I went to work with my dad, I knew the day would consist of at least three of my favorite things. First, a breakfast biscuit, later that afternoon, TCBY ice cream from one of his stores, and my favorite part, time spent at his office visiting with my Grandpa. I enjoyed time at the office for several reasons. For one, my grandpa was there and he always made me feel like I was the most important thing in the world. For another, the office secretary always commented on how much I looked like my dad, and I grasped to those comments with all the pride in the world. And finally, at the office, I could always count on finding things to read. My grandpa labeled everything. From cabinets, to files, to boxes, to reminder notes. You could always expect to see mini faded yellow sticky notes with words in all capital letters written with a black sharpie marker taped everywhere. Looking back, I am not sure if this was his way of being organized or helping with my grandmother's failing memory. Regardless, I loved it. My grandpa used to write letters to my grandmother that I would find, and on certain occasions he would even write poems. I found a poem he wrote for his sister for her birthday once. It was the most heartfelt and sincere piece of writing I had ever read. I was awestruck with the fact that words could have so much meaning and that by using them to create poetry, you could send a deeper message.

At the office, my grandpa had a shelf with Daily devotionals, bibles, novels written by Max Lucado, C.S. Lewis and John Grisham. This was my favorite, another “happy place” or feeling of “home”. My whole life up to this point I had always been told writing in books was destroying books. It was discovering my grandpa’s shelf of books that taught me this was one hundred percent inaccurate. He highlighted, questioned, and wrote his thoughts in the bible, in his devotionals, and even in the novels. As bookmarks, he used letters and poems that he had written to his wife, and letters she had written to him. I used to love to read through them. I later found that my dad wrote poems, cards, and letters to my mom just the same. And this is where it all began for me; my love for poetry, and discovering poetry written out of love.

From Dr. Seuss to Shel Silverstein to Edgar Allen Poe to Emily Dickinson; my passion for poetry is diverse and has evolved over the years. Beginning with the poems I found written by my grandpa, and by my dad, I started to do the same. As I wrote, I discovered the same “home” feeling that I had when going to work with my dad, or being at his office would come back to me. It was as if I could carry that feeling with me. It was a part of me when I focused on writing poetry. Lake (2018) describes a time of returning to a place that meant so much to him as a child but no longer looked the same. It was in the moment of return that he realized “” place” had become a matter of “being” instead of “having” and that the delight, the peace and joy created by my experiences there, that I took for granted as a child, was now a permanent part of me wherever I find myself” (p 7). *National Geographic* (2024) defines place as being a “space with meaning” (para 1). Whereas Tim Creswell (2015) suggests this concept has changed over time and states that the “meaning of place can vary with context” (para 6). Margaret Somerville (2010) says, “Place is productive as a framework because it creates a space between grounded physical reality and the metaphysical space of representation” (p. 330). In other words, a “sense

of place” (Agnew, 1987) which is one of the three fundamental aspects of place as a meaningful location. This is what I am referring to in this case. Yi-Fu Tuan writes in his 1977 book *Space and Place* that “place is security and space is freedom” (p. 2345) And if we “think of space as that which allows movement, then place is pause; each pause in movement makes it possible for location to be transformed into place” (Tuan, 1977, p. 6). A pause. A moment. A feeling. A place. And in this case, a happy place. When place becomes a part of you it becomes your sense of belonging. Of being. Kress and Lake (2018) write, “Place is not simply a physical location, but rather an experience of self in the world” (p. 5). Deeper still, “Place is not simply about geography or ecology; place resonates in our bodies, and it anchors our family histories that are passed down through generations” (p. 6). They emphasize here that place has a deeper, more personal significance. It resonates within our bodies, indicating a profound connection and emotional attachment to a particular location. Furthermore, the statement highlights that these places serve as anchors for family histories. They are not just physical spaces; they carry the stories, memories, and legacies of generations, creating a meaningful connection between individuals and their familial roots. In essence, it underscores the idea that place is a repository of personal and familial identity that transcends the physical attributes of a location, transforming into a state of “being”. Martin Heidegger describes language like this in a sense when he writes “Language is the House of Being. In its home human beings’ dwell.” (1978, p. 202). Pauline Sameshima takes the idea of place and being further when she writes “The atmosphere we create for ourselves and the way we meld our bodies into the land reveals what we see and develops the embracing we feel” (Sameshima in Kress and Lake, 2013, p. 231). And poetry as Rita Dove says, “is language at its most distilled and most powerful” (The Heinz Awards, 1996). In terms of poetry as place or as a state of “being”, Kress and Lake (2018) write about the strong poetry of

place, describing it as being “both rooted in and an expression of the experience of being in the world; as such it is a conceptual tool with which to deconstruct the neoliberal concept of man as disembodied and disconnected from the world” (p. 10). Aristotle covers the concept of “being” in his work of *Categories in Organon* (1938). In this he writes of 10 categories of being and explains the meaning in the sense of the Greek verb, *to be*. He identifies different ways in which things can exist or be said to be. Aristotle (1938) provides an understanding of the nature of reality through these categories. He encompasses the various ways in which entities can exist and relate to one another. (Aristotle, 1938). Poetry, to me, is not merely a literary form but a profound and pervasive aspect of my existence.

Early elementary school, I discovered Young Georgia Authors. This is an annually writing competition for students in the state of Georgia. The Department of Education organizes it each year and aims to recognize and celebrate the writing talent of students across the state. All grade levels Kindergarten through 12th grade is eligible to participate and submit original pieces of writing. The entries can be various genres such as poetry, essays, short stories, or other literary works. Winners of this competition are selected at the school, district, regional, and state levels. In 4th grade, I submitted a poem written on the terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001. It won 1st place for my school and was sent on to regionals! This accomplishment was one that truly stayed with me. The validation that I felt knowing my poetry was being recognized beyond my thoughts and outside the confines of my personal journal, was something that could only be described as a gratifying and valuable experience.

Poetry has transformed from being my “happy place” to being a place of joy. Happiness is an emotion based on circumstance. Joy is binding and constant. Specifically, with this dissertation, poetry, and my ability to free my thoughts has brought me much joy. I have never

been much of a runner. It takes me about fifteen minutes to finish a mile. My husband, on the other hand, can run miles at a time. He says it is how he is able to “clear his head”. This is where I turn to writing; to poetry. Not only can I free my thoughts, but I can express them. It is where emotions, thoughts, and imagery come together to form a unique and meaningful place that provides reflection, exploration and possibility. As a teacher, this is an outlet that I have found to be more useful than journaling. It also provides a new perspective. I had not published any of my poems until I wrote one about the students in my first-grade class. One of my students brought markers out to recess. He stacked them on top of each other from end to end until he had six markers measuring about two feet. This student and another decided to have a “sword fight” with the stacked markers. Of course, this did not last long as I stopped this as soon as I realized what was happening. But it got me thinking. The imagination, the innocence, the novelty of simplicity in children. A child’s view of the world is unparalleled. I wrote and published this poem as a children’s book titled, *Through Children’s Eyes* (Sandbach, 2020). In this poem, I explore just that; the way in which children see the world. From the “floor is lava” to old potato chips in the car seat being a fun surprise and “practically brand new”. The reviews and feedback I received from this poem all fell within the realm of how they could so easily relate. They could “see” their lives and experiences within *my* poem. Poetry allows the reader to feel the described experience. My students were able to pick out the stanzas that they had experienced themselves. And as someone who has always dreamed of becoming a teacher, the moment when poetry and my students aligned was a moment of true accomplishment and genuine happiness. By embracing poetry as a state of being, I live with a heightened sense of awareness, creativity, and expression. In its own way it is how I see the world through a different lens; a poetic lens.

Teaching as my Calling

I was *almost* a statistic. I was *almost* a quitter. As much as I loved being a teacher and loved my students. I was exhausted mentally and emotionally, and quite frankly, physically too. At age 23 I started teaching 1st grade. It was an inclusion class with 24 students. There were 14 boys and 10 girls, and 6 IEP's (Individualized Education Plans). These plans consisted of speech and language impairments, attention deficit hyperactivity disorder, autism, emotional disorders, physical disabilities, and vision issues. I did not have a teacher aid, and the special education teacher was scheduled to "push-in" twice each day for 45 minutes. It was *hard*. But even still, I loved being a teacher. Looking back, maybe it was my idea of being a teacher. I spent weeks setting up my classroom. I looked forward to greeting my students each day, our morning meetings, read alouds, small groups, the lightbulb moments, and even the "questions" that would end up being five-minute stories that had nothing to do with the topic of our discussions. It was exactly what I knew I would do from a very early age. And these were the moments I wished were the main focus of my days. Unfortunately, what I had great difficulty with was everything "else". There was too much of everything else to even get to enjoy the moments I looked forward to the most. The pressure, the benchmark testing, the data collection, the preparation but lack of time to do it, but ultimately, the emotional rollercoaster that was every single day. I was not prepared for the emotional toll this job would take. I was not prepared for the frustration and defeat I would feel when my principal asked why my students scored so low on their benchmarks. I was not prepared for the exhaustion of paperwork to complete or lessons to plan. I was not prepared for the utter disbelief in the parent who asked the principal to remove the student from my class simply because she "has clothes older than me". And I certainly was not prepared for the helplessness I would experience when a student slept through the school day

because they were up all-night listening to their parents yell at each other. I was not prepared. However, the number of tears cried during my first years teaching did not add up to the confidence I felt that I was vocationally being called to the profession. This is not to be confused with vocational educators; teachers in the career or technical field. What I am referring to is the term *calling*. “Typically, the terms calling and vocation are used to refer to a sense of purpose or direction that leads an individual toward some kind of personally fulfilling and/or social significant engagement within the work role” (Dik & Duffy, 2009, p. 427). I choose the term calling because of Dik and Duffy’s working definition which implies a transcendental call “experienced as originating beyond the self, to approach a particular life role in a manner oriented toward demonstrating or deriving a sense of purpose or meaningfulness and that holds other-oriented values and goals as primary sources of motivation” (Dik & Duffy, 2009, p. 427). I overlap the two terms because the field of education is a whole-life encompassing profession. The relationships built with students and their families overflow outside of school hours and have greater impact on a teacher’s personal lives. And in today’s world of education, Bigham and Smith (2008) question if teachers could teach without a calling with the overwhelming demands and challenges. “With such negative elements as low pay and prestige being attributed to the field of education there must be motivating factors that lie beyond normal criteria for choosing a career path” (p. 9). In this dissertation, I focus on the transition between preservice teachers and in-service teachers and the gap that exists between the two resulting in new teachers quickly reaching the point of being overworked, overwhelmed, and underappreciated. I write a series of letters to myself as a new teacher on topics of what I wish I would have known prior to entering the field. Each letter is followed by a poem that helps to emphasize my point through a multitude of experiences, emotions, and perspective. Through imagery, rhyme, and figurative

language, I can express my experiences in other ways readers can relate to and understand. This dissertation combines two of my greatest passions; teaching and poetry. I incorporate the epistolary genre as a relative way to share my story. Teachers are compassionate, dedicated, and ultimately hard workers who are changing the world. Dave Burgess published, *Teach Like a Pirate* in 2015. Not that pirates are compassionate humans, but they are fearless. In Burgess's description of why we should teach like a pirate, he writes, "Teaching like a pirate has nothing to do with the dictionary definition and everything to do with the spirit. Pirates are daring and adventurous and willing to set forth into uncharted waters with no guarantee of success. They reject the status quo... they are entrepreneurs who take risks and are willing to travel to the ends of the earth for that which they value (2015, p. 2). With that mindset, I write this dissertation. To empower, to encourage, to remind teachers of their decision to teach. This dissertation will hopefully serve as a small contribution of appreciation to the field of education, but ultimately as a form of encouragement to new teachers entering the profession.

To end this prologue and transition you into this study, here is a poem written in hopes of capturing the experience as well as the intimacy and closeness I feel when writing. This will hopefully put into perspective my passion, my reasoning for following poetry for this study, and my need to write.

I Write

A rush; a thrill
Discovery still
I write.

To release; to free
I let it be.
I write.

Joyful or sad
Overwhelming or mad.
I write.

For you, for me.
For anyone to read.
I write.

Encouraged, or self-led
All to clear my head
I write.

Place of joy
Metaphorically employ
I write.

Syllables or Rhyme
Reflect, rewind.
I write.

Emotions explored,
My Faith restored.
I write.

CHAPTER 1: A TEACHER'S HEART

*An Introduction to and Understanding of a Non-traditional Dissertation*The Heart of a Teacher

A heart that is *kind*.

A heart that is F R E E

A heart that is *adaptable*,

Open to flexibility.

A heart that is genuine

A heart that is **strong**.

A heart that *understands*,

A metaphorical song.

A heart that holds *truth*.

A heart that calms **fear**.

A heart that whispers *safety*.

Accepting. - Welcoming. - Near.

A heart that **breathes life**.

A heart PRESSURE.
under

A heart **filled with students**.

The heart of a teacher.

Purpose and Heart

The purpose of this qualitative study is to explore my personal experiences of transitioning between being a pre-service teacher and my first years as a full-time teacher. I will share these experiences through both, a poetic and epistolary writing style. Through poetic inquiry and letters to myself as a mode of expression and having identified what I wish I had known prior to entering the field, this study will hopefully inspire and encourage new teachers in the field of education and help better prepare them for the classroom. I have selected seven themes that played a significant role in my time as a new teacher and the discouragement I felt during that time. I strongly believe these encounters, or something of this nature would have been beneficial to know before entering the field and bring to light the passion behind teaching. As the review of literature will illustrate, there has been research done on similar topics, mostly in the form of narratives for teachers entering or those new to the field. However, an inspirational approach through poetic inquiry and the epistolary writing style, with a lens of teaching with compassion has yet to be explored prior to this study.

This dissertation will address my experiences as a new teacher through the aesthetic and creative medium of poems and letters to myself. Specifically, the transition from student teacher to being fully employed as a classroom teacher. The poetic and epistolary genre approach offers guidance and encouragement to young teachers who are experiencing similar feelings upon graduating from the education program and accepting a position as a teacher. The letters and poems will be based on my experiences during this conditional period, gathered from journal entries I kept over the course of the seven years that I taught. I will offer transparency in ways

that I feel only poetry can convey in this dissertation. The letters to myself will provide a way to clearly express specific situations of what I wish I had known prior to entering the teaching profession while also offering inspiration to other readers. As previously stated, these will hopefully serve as a resource for others to overcome common obstacles that are not the primary focus of undergraduate education programs. I am suggesting that pre-service teachers are not provided with real-life scenarios and examples of different encounters that they will face during their years in the classroom that will, in fact, better prepare them, especially their first years. Therefore, they are not fully prepared for the field. A poetic approach utilizes language differently and, in some ways, is more profound than a typical conversation or narrative can convey. Poetry gives ways to truly visualize, enhance, and bring to life an experience that may otherwise not be possible to put into words adequately. In addition, the epistolary genre allows for clarity as I am writing to myself in a relaxed manner, offering guidance on a sensitive topic. I can remain transparent through this method while also reaching different audiences who could benefit from reading such experiences. Both poetry and the epistolary genre allow me to bring to light Martin Heidegger's statement that "language is the house of being". (1947, p. 217). Heidegger's perspective on language goes beyond mere communication; it goes further into the ontological implications of how language structures our understanding of the world and our place in it. When he refers to language as the "house of being", he is suggesting that it is through language that we come to inhabit and make sense of our existence. Basically, we live in our language and live our lives determined by it. He even goes as far to say that "Thinking is the thinking of being" (p. 2020) And our thinking brings being to language. Heidegger believes that thinking is likely the most important action of all. And if thinking brings our being to language and language is what shapes our perception then thinking and language are all but separate from

each other. Language frames our experiences and allows us to articulate our understanding of being. This is especially important and true for teacher experiences and reflections. Language is not a transparent tool, but a dynamic force that influences our perceptions and interpretations of reality and is useful in this dissertation with the self-reflections developed and offered through letters and poetry.

I have written poems and journal entries for as long as I can remember. I participated in the Young Georgia Author's competition throughout my years in school. Additionally, I self-published a poem I wrote and turned into a children's book in 2020, titled *Through Children's Eyes*. For the sake of being introduced to my typical poetic writing "style", I will share that here:

Through Children's Eyes, 2020

When looking through children's eyes, innocence is pure.

When looking through children's eyes, the answer is so sure.

The sunrise is made of cotton candy, the sunset of mashed potatoes;

The floor is made of lava, using furniture to escape volcanoes.

Food is more fun when it's a plane, and humming as you chew

Top bunk.. no, bottom bunk! Children will always argue.

Bed linens are for building forts. Markers, for building towers.

Sticks in the woods are swords for knights, that could be played with for hours.

Old chips found in the car seat, are practically brand new.

Halloween candy a whole year later is practically the same too!

Laughing is contagious and dancing because you can.

Road trips are for 20 questions, or as many as mom can stand.

Making videos to different songs, and made up dance routines.

Performing as if they're famous and ice cream breaks in between.

Everyone is their friend, no matter the skin color.

Magic is reality and smiles are given freely to others.

Love others with all your heart, and dress up just for fun!

Made up games are clearly better, new rules for everyone!!

The world is such a happy place, and as life is passing by...

Everyone will enjoy it so much more, when looking through children's eyes.

The specific reflections for each letter will be organized thematically based on situations that arose and experiences that were encountered during my seven years in the classroom. They will not be in chronological order, as I am not including dates and times for each situation. The letters are based on dated journal entries during my time as a teacher. "A powerful way for individuals to give accounts of their experiences is through journal writing" (Denzin & Lincoln, 1998, p. 166). I wrote in journals daily during my field experiences and time as a full-time

teacher, which is where these significant stories come. According to Denzin and Lincoln (1998), teachers use journals “to weave together their accounts of the private and professional, capturing fragments of experience in attempts to sort themselves out” (pp.166-167). I will sift through these entries to decide on overarching themes of my time in the classroom. I am choosing to leave out dates and times given that some of the circumstances could occur at various points within one's teacher career. Each letter will be followed by a poem that will give a different, and in some cases, deeper perspective of the experiences and the transition from pre-service to in-service teaching.

Everyone has their own reasons for choosing their career path. Teachers are often asked for their “why?”. Why “put up with” the unreasonable demands and expectations? “It is sometimes tedious and demanding, confusing and uncertain, and yet it is as often creative and dazzling: Surprising splashes of color can suddenly appear at its center; unexpected patterns can emerge and blend the whole affair a sense of grace and purpose and possibility” (Ayers, 2001/2010, p. 1). This is one of many answers to the overarching societal question of, why teach? Most educators will encounter this question during their career from those in the field attempting to remember their reasoning for becoming a teacher and those outside who do not understand why anyone would choose to be a teacher. Nieto (2005) writes, “Teaching is hard and stressful work, and it provides relatively low compensation and, in most cases, little autonomy or support” (p. 3). She continues, “Teachers work countless hours in the classroom and out: The average teacher spends 50 hours a week on all teaching duties, more than those in many other professions, and they get to an average 32 minutes for lunch” (Nieto, 2005, p 4). Those outside of the field of education hear this and question why anyone would choose teaching as their career choice. Those in the field of education hear this quote and nod in complete agreement as to what

is expected of a teacher. So, why teach? The traditional answers vary. “Because I love children”, “because I can make a difference”, “because it’s a rewarding career”, are all answers that could be used for a variety of careers; pediatricians, nurses, behavior therapists, counselors, day care providers, etc. More often than not, the term “love” will be used in the answer, as if to love teaching is the ultimate justification. Sonia Nieto (2005) writes, “In a survey of nearly 1,000 new teachers (with 5 years’ experience or less) conducted by Public Agenda, 96% said that they loved teaching and 72% declared that contributing to society and helping others was paramount to them. In most cases, they became teachers out of a sense of mission, for love more than money” (p 3). Now, the very elements we love about teaching are no longer present. Author Dana Goldstein (2014) wrote of a story of a teacher who left the profession in her work, *The Teacher Wars: A History of America's Most Embattled Profession*. This teacher’s rationale for leaving was expressed as follows: “Everything I loved about teaching is extinct. Curriculum is mandated. Minutes spent teaching subjects are audited. Schedules are dictated by administrators. The classroom teacher is no longer trusted or in control of what, when, or how she teaches” (pg. 3). While this represents just one viewpoint, it is one among several that are similar.

Being a teacher today demands more than just love. You can love to teach, but that leaves out the majority of the teacher’s job description. You can love children, but that certainly does not mean you will make a good teacher. Love cannot be the only reason we teach. Not to mention, “The more one loves teaching, the more heartbreaking it can be. We became teachers for reasons of the heart, animated by a passion for some subject and for helping people learn” (Palmer, 2016, para 45). Teaching is a profound career path. The day-to-day of a teacher consists of more than solely the intellectual process of delivering content. This profession is designed for the teacher who educates with a higher purpose, driven by passion or in response to a calling.

“To love teaching does not imply vague sentimentality. The wise teacher knows how to encourage and how to criticize, how to praise, and how to uncover areas of weakness. He never allows smugness and self-righteousness... The wise teacher is aware of the importance of good habits without which success cannot be achieved". (Mayer, 1963, p.15). Being a teacher is not only to love, but also to understand. It's not only to sympathize, but also to empathize. It's not only to deliver content, but also to invest yourself in the lives of your students and build relationships that allow them to experience and retain the information necessary to be a productive citizen in our society. Freire (2005) attempts to describe the task of a teacher when he writes:

“The task of the teacher, who is also a learner, is both joyful and rigorous. It demands seriousness and scientific, physical, emotional, and affective preparation. It is a task that requires that those who commit themselves to teaching develop a certain love not only of others but also of the very process implied in teaching. It is impossible to teach without the courage to love, without the courage to try a thousand times before giving up. In short, it is impossible to teach without a forged, invented, and well-thought-out capacity to love” (p. 5).

However, I think teaching requires more than love. Sonia Nieto (2005) captures why teachers choose to teach by first attempting to “understand the context they enter" (p. 4). Public schools are faced with difficult times. There is lack of accountability with families and students. The idea of what a teacher should be responsible for and schools in general has shifted dramatically over the years. “In the current context, there is also an increased focus on schooling as job training, and education as a vehicle to serve limited self-interests and consumerism. Less attention than ever is paid to education as a way to expand the human spirit and create a better

world” (Nieto, 2005, p. 4). Tackling the context of the uncontrollable, understanding the students, seeking compassion, and identifying their needs is how teachers continue to teach. In a letter written to Paulo Freire in response to his *Letters to Those Who Dare Teach*, Mary Ginely writes about how she knows she and her class will make it through the school year. She writes, “We’ll make it because I know it isn’t *their* job to meet my expectations but *my* job to meet theirs. We’ll make it because I know that *I’m* the one who has to find out what they care about, what they worry about, what they wonder about, what they want to know, and help them find the answers to their questions” (Freire, 2005, p. 32). This is having a passion for teaching, for learning, and for students. Ashley West (2019) writes in her dissertation about teaching with passion. She writes, “The act of teaching is one that requires dedication and perseverance. Today, teachers are oppressed by testing, accountability, CCRPI scores, school safety, racism, poverty, and much more... All of these oppressions can kill teachers’ passion for teaching” (p. 7).

Teachers often consider themselves to be teachers at heart. This implies that they are essentially born to teach and only teach. With that comes much confusion when the field becomes overwhelming and difficult. There are teachers who leave the field simply because they cannot handle the demands and expectations. This field has become more than just “teaching”. Teaching comes with various complexities. Parker Palmer (2016) writes, “If students and subjects accounted for all the complexities of teaching, our standard way of coping would do-keep up with our fields as best we can, and learn enough techniques to stay ahead of the student psyche. But there is another reason for these complexities: we teach who we are. (para 4). As we teach we project our souls onto our students. Palmer (2016) continues this explanation by saying “The entanglements I experience in the classroom are often no more or less than the

convolutions of my inner life. Viewed from this angle, teaching holds a mirror to the soul” (para 4). By knowing ourselves, we are able to build a solid foundation and get to know our students. This in-turn allows us to be better teachers. As a better teacher who can exemplify good teaching, Palmer (2016) suggests three paths to be taken - “Intellectual, emotional, and spiritual - and none can be ignored. Reduce teaching to intellect and it becomes a cold abstraction. Reduce it to emotions and it becomes narcissistic; reduce it to the spiritual and it loses its anchor to the world. Intellect, emotion, and spirit depend on each other for wholeness” (para 6). This study focuses on the emotional connection to teaching; teaching with passion.

Through the lens of teaching with passion and compassion, this study uses poetic inquiry to reveal my personal reflections and experiences of my time as a new teacher. Through our experiences, we gain our knowledge. I believe poetry and the epistolary genre are the most beneficial modes of expression to interpreting reflections and representing emotions of personal experiences within the classroom. I am extremely interested in poetry and letters as a means of communicating and telling stories. Gulla (2020) writes, “Poems can be a way of engaging in a dialogue with something I am trying to understand. The process of writing poetry is very often a process of discovery” (p. 209). Further, Pauline Sameshima (2008) states, “Teaching and learning occur everywhere, not only in the classroom. Learning occurs in the in-between spaces of liminality, between the lines of the poem...” (p. 49). These reasons contributed to the justification of the use of poetic inquiry as method and theory and the epistolary genre as a mode of expression. Both are quintessential to understanding and transferring my lived experiences into words. If new teachers are able to read this and find inspiration by picturing themselves in the same scenarios and envision a way to move forward without completely leaving the field of education, then I consider it a success. A teacher is aware of their actions, their place, and their

purpose. Aside from the delivery of lessons and content, some situations are very trying in the classroom-students pushing boundaries and lessons that go differently than planned. It is the teacher who leads the students and the students who look to the teacher to be held accountable, offer guidance and maintain a safe environment where learning can and will continue to take place. Through these letters and poems, will hopefully identify the criticality of experiences within the field, while also providing advice, encouragement, and inspiration that will allow new teachers to rediscover their reasoning for wanting a career in the field of education, to be confident in their “Why?”.

Dissertation Aspirations

I aspire for this study to serve as a resource for young teachers to refer to before entering the field of education. I also want it to serve as a resource for these same teachers when they feel overworked, exhausted, and underappreciated and when they question why their experience is not something they were introduced to during their undergraduate courses. I hope pre-service teachers can place themselves in the situation as if it is their own experience, and appreciate the teacher’s heart as well as find empathy with their current situation. Poetry sows the seeds of emotion and transparency. Poetry has a way of building empathy. Through the lens of teaching with compassion to compile a series of poems and letters written to myself as a new teacher, I hope to offer something different to help and support teachers.

Poetry is both a form of literary work and a genre. The term “poetry” comes from the ancient Greek work *poieo* which means, “I create” (Obsidian, 2023, para 1). “Poetry is a method of creation and manifestation, a method of memory and preservation” (Obsidian, 2023, para 1). As for poetic inquiry, it was Toni Flores who used poetry in her work in anthropology back in

1982 (Roulston, 2022). However, in the early 1990's, it was sociologist Laurel Richardson who first "used found poetry to depict interesting stories she heard from her participants" (Roulston, 2022). Granted, poetic inquiry can take various forms, found poetry included. Faulkner (2017) says that poetry "embodies experience to show truths that are not usually evident" (p. 211). But Fernandez-Gimenez, et al. (2018) furthers this thought when they write, "Poetic inquiry may foster reflection on the researcher's experience in the research process, her relationship with participants and colleagues, and issues of power in scholarly production" (p. 3). In this case, my experience, given that I am the researcher and the participant. Maria Fernandez- Gimenez describes cases of poetic inquiry in her work, *Poetic Inquiry as a Research and Engagement Method in Natural Resource Science* (2018). In a qualitative research study, she used a transcript from a single interview to create seven poems. This analysis resulted in revealing "much about the lived experience of one individual in relation to place, community, and occupation, including his emotions" (p. 4).

Poetic inquiry has been defined in numerous ways; however, "Regardless of what we call poetry used as/in qualitative research, all of these labels describe a method of turning research interviews, transcripts, observations, personal experience, and reflections into poems or poetic forms" (Faulkner, 2020, p. 12). Carl Leggo (2018) writes, "Of course, poetry is also deciding what to put in. According to Jonathan Culler (1997), one of the four tropes, or "basic rhetorical structures by which we make sense of experience" (p. 73), is irony"(p. 80). But then Rilke writes, "Irony – do not let yourself be governed by it, especially not in uncreative moments" (1934, p. 24). In a part of Leggo's (2018) poem, he writes,

“...I wrote a poem

because a poem

always seems
 an apt way
 to respond to any text" (p. 84).

In addition, Leggo (2018) shares another poem about how poetry may not be able to solve the world's problems, but, "A poem reminds us language is at the heart of everything we do. A poem reminds us the alphabet is the most powerful invention we know..." (Leggo, 2018, p. 92). There is a fine line between research and poetry, but poetry can offer an honest representation of experiences. Which brings us back to Heidegger's thoughts on "Language is the house of being" (1947, p. 217). Valerie Janesick (2016) writes, "Poetry is a way to find out what a person means to say" (p. 31). She then says, "Poetry maximizes meaning" (2016, p. 32). Pauline Sameshima et al. (2017) write, "The pulse of poetry is also found in its precision, admittedly more lyrical than analytic. Poetry endeavors to understand phenomena- whether living or inanimate, statistical or spiritual– through pinpoint word choice, alluring metaphor, decisive facts, and evocative language that can bring alive even the most inert stone" (p. 356). A further explanation for using poetry as a product of my research can be found here:

"Words can be a blanket, slightly suffocating, or a wall, dividing. The exception is poetry, which illuminates, touches down, and continues along filaments and in bright spots, or curves around us, or comes in the back door. Poetry is the way to describe and distill but remain porous, and oxygenated. Poetry lets the light in".

(Aitken, quoted in Faulkner, S., 2020, p. 38)

Poetry serves as a means to convey significance when language alone proves inadequate. An example is found in Emily Dickenson's "'Hope' is the thing with feathers". This specific poem echoes Faulkner's assertion that "Poetry lets the light in" (Faulkner, S., 2020, p. 38). With the use

of a metaphor, the poem compares hope to a bird. Through poetry, clarity emerges, as suggested by Faulkner's metaphorical use of light. Emily Dickinson skillfully captures the essence of hope, a concept often challenging to articulate. It represents a difficult sentiment that many struggle to comprehend and express.

“Hope is the thing with feathers
That perches in the soul,
And sings the tune without the words,
And never stops at all,

And sweetest in the gale is heard;
And sore must be the storm
That could abash the little bird
That kept so many warm.

I've heard it in the chilliest land,
And on the strangest sea;
Yet, never, in extremity,
It asked a crumb of me” (Dickinson, 1891).

Within the field of education, teachers are leaving due to the receding focus on essential values. There's an overwhelming amount of responsibility, pressure, testing, and other tasks that are not what a teacher signs up for. It is through poetry, I have the capability to not only explore why teachers choose their profession but also communicate effectively and artistically the

distractions that drive them away. Through poetry, I have also chosen to communicate my research questions that guide this study, and kept me grounded and focused throughout.

Research Questions

To *guide* my research

To *guide* my thoughts

Open ended questions are used.

Altered often.

Finally settled.

A teacher's heart imbued.

F.u.t.u.r.e. *teachers*.

NEW *teachers*.

I intend to reach both.

I n S p I r A t I o N.

E n C o U r A g M e N t.

Providing a **d-a-s-h** of hope.

So *why* poems?

Why letters?

To gain teacher **insight**.

Q~u~a~l~i~t~a~t~i~v~e.

C~r~e~a~t~i~v~e.

Restriction of binaries; a **fight**.

Before accepting.

Before entering.

Prior to a career in this field.

What experiences?

What is beneficial?

To what will they yield?

Another question

Another inquiry

How to better prepare?

To take lead.

To run a classroom.

A smooth transition to bare.

What factors?

What can help?

To close the g.a.p. between

Pre-service teachers.

and *NEW* teachers.

To avoid challenges unforeseen.

To *guide* my research.

To *guide* my thoughts.

THESE questions are used.

Though, altered often.

I finally settled.

My teacher's heart imbued.

Teaching: A Far Cry from Easy

"It's so easy; even a teacher can do it."

The conference presenter said loud and clear.

TO TEACHERS, at that!

I couldn't believe my ears.

It took me a minute to process

Why did he think this was OK?

Is this the perception others have?

No wonder teachers walk away.

The implication that just anyone...

Can do what teachers do

Manage, facilitate, model, teach

The audacity... it. is. not. true.

At what point was teaching deemed *easy*?

When did it all start?

The mental, *emotional* and physical toll.

It's a task to protect our heart.

Undergraduate preservice teachers

They need to be aware

A far cry from easy.

Know. - and prepare.

Rick Ayers explains his thoughts on when he first started teaching in a letter he wrote to his nephew, a new teacher. This letter was published in Kress and Lake (2013) *We Saved the Best for You*. Ayers writes, “I remember how amazed I was when I first started teaching: I could get paid for reading, writing, talking, and listening? What a delight. And it was the most intellectually and ethically challenging job I could imagine” (Ayers in Lake and Kress, 2013, p. 82). Sonia Nieto (2005) discusses a survey in her work *Why We Teach*, where nearly 1,000 new teachers with less than 5 years of experience stated, “96% said they loved teaching and 72% declared that contributing to society and helping others was paramount to them. In most cases, they became teachers out of a sense of mission, for love more than money” (2005, p. 3). Together Nieto combines this group and identifies a quality they all have in common, “They have a passion for teaching, a quality that... is “palpable, vastly unappreciated and a valuable asset that money can’t buy”.” (2005, p. 3). These are the teachers who choose this career path for a purpose, their purpose. Even still, teachers are leaving the field even if they do have a passion and love for teaching. M. Catherine Connery (2013) explains it best in her letter to her students, “Within you, I see the promise of spring. You are the arc of a dancer, crouched in a position of trembling uncertainty. In time, you will twist and rise into a tower of confidence.” (Connery in Kress and Lake, 2013, p.239). Ideally, this work, this study will remind educators of when they were once newly graduated, “fearless” with the “spunk of an emerging professional” (Connery in Kress and Lake, p. 239).

Educators experience a sense of being overworked and underappreciated and are emotionally exhausted. But emotions are of little importance when it comes to teachers because after all, it is part of their job. Right? Though it should not be, especially with the daunting shift

from student teaching to assuming sole responsibility for the development and success of 20+ students can be daunting without the requisite support. Debbie Storrs (2012) states, “By explicitly attending to emotions, teachers are afforded opportunities to learn about and respond to underlying conflicts and can enhance student learning through dialogue and curriculum adjustments” (p. 11). Teachers with a high sense of moral perform better and are happier with their career choice (He, Cooper, & Tangredi, 2015; Herman, Hickmon-Rosa, & Reinke, 2018). The Council for the Accreditation of Educator Preparation (CAEP, 2022) emphasizes in Standard RA. 1 that teacher education programs “ensure that candidates develop an understanding of the critical concepts and principles” (para 1), as well as being “intentional in the development of their curriculum and clinical experiences for candidates to demonstrate their ability to effectively work with diverse P-12 students and their families” (para 2).

Jonathan Kozol (2007) writes, "There are too many stories about "super-teachers" who walk into hopeless situations and instant world miracles. Those stories make good movies but do not often happen in real life;" (p. 11). These stories make the profession of teaching out to be as though just anyone can do it. This profession is not intended for just anyone. Anyone *can* indeed be a teacher, but only those people with a proper understanding and training of the field, children, schools, and content can educate and *stick with it*, for lack of a better phrase.

In the world of education, there is this saying of "closing the gap." The gap refers to the fact that there is a "hole" in need of closing for students to be successful and for public education to continue to produce affluent and competent citizens. There are a variety of situations where this metaphor can apply. However, in this case, I am referring to the barrier between these unattainable expectations of teachers and the reality of teaching. As an undergraduate student, I participated in the International Study Opportunity (ISO) through the College of Education.

Georgia Southern University partnered with Sheffield Hallam University and sent pre-service teachers to observe their approach to teaching. (An incredible opportunity that allowed me to notate several ideas that I would later implement in my own classroom.) While traveling in the United Kingdom, we took the train several times. We often heard and saw signs that said “Mind the gap”. This was a cautionary reminder for passengers to be aware of the space between the platform and the train when boarding or alighting. The purpose is to prevent accidents or injuries that may occur if individuals are not mindful of the gap between the train door and the platform edge. The voice sounding through the station would often play on repeat in my head after hearing it. When obtaining my own classroom and realizing the various missing pieces between college and teaching, I felt we should have had this warning as we crossed the stage at graduation: Mind the Gap!

My autobiographical significance in this study lies in the fact that I spent seven years in the classroom teaching first-grade general education, first-grade inclusion, and third-grade gifted math and reading. I served on several committees and as committee chair for most. I have been in the field and seen firsthand the many directions teachers are pulled in and the unattainable expectations required. Being a teacher is anything but easy; if anything, it is the most intricate blend of challenging and rewarding. I aim to shed light on this complexity through my reflective approach to this dissertation. Through self-reflection. I will focus on how my personal experiences can be told in a way that will positively impact, inspire, encourage, and ultimately support new teachers. I am writing to myself as opposed to the audience of "new teachers" to remain as transparent as possible and offer the option of the reader's use of imagination to put themselves in the same position. Hopefully, this will allow the reader to read with their own interpretation and self-reflect on their own experiences or prepare for those in the future.

My story is similar to the journeys of many educators who have consistently held the certainty that they desired a career in teaching. From an early age, the aspiration to become a teacher has been ingrained within me, inspired by the fact that my mother is also a teacher. I vividly remember afternoons spent in her classroom assembling various Beanie Babies and other stuffed animals; and diving into the imaginary world of teaching. Using numerous teaching materials, including her dry-erase board I enthusiastically conducted lessons, adoring the role of an educator in shaping young minds. Not even my younger brothers were exempt from these impromptu teaching sessions; they unintentionally became my first "students." This early fascination with teaching laid the foundation for a lifelong passion. and as the years unfolded, my dream of becoming an educator only grew stronger.

My passion for literature, particularly poetry, began with the discovery of poems written by my grandpa to my grandmother, and poems written by my dad to my mom. It was in elementary school that I was introduced to the poet and author Shel Silverstein. At an early age, I received a journal that served as a constant companion for my prayers, poems, lists, make-believe lesson plans, and diary entries containing my secrets, thoughts, imagination, and dreams. As a student, I participated in the Young Georgia Author's Competition. In the fourth grade, I submitted a poem. It centered around the devastating attack on the Twin Towers. To my delight, it earned first place! I always knew how poetry made me feel, whether reading or writing. But it was in that moment that I felt validated and indebted to the enchantment of poetry and its ability to articulate feelings into words.

This study will hopefully leave a profound impact given that I will be reflecting on my past experiences. I anticipate a similar effect on pre-service teachers within their teacher education programs, influencing their transition into becoming new teachers. While exploring

autoethnography, the epistolary genre, and poetic inquiry with this dissertation, I found there was a significant amount of research in each area. However, there appears to be a gap in the literature, particularly in the synthesis of these elements, and not to the extent or depth that I intend to provide for Curriculum Studies or for the benefit of new teachers.

The greatest challenge with autoethnography as a method I fear will be a personal challenge in how I aim to expose my particular experiences to understand the cultural experience of new teachers in the field of education. To overcome this challenge, I am integrating poetic inquiry as it serves as a familiarity to me as well as a mode of reflection, analysis and an influential research tool. As previously mentioned, a significant portion of my life has been dedicated to capturing my thoughts and emotions through various forms of poetry. Whether for birthdays, special occasions, or simply for personal reflection, poetry has been my chosen avenue for expressing feelings with words. The classroom can be an emotional rollercoaster for a teacher. By incorporating a form of art and literature that feels familiar, and integrating letters where I address my former self directly, I can maintain transparency. This approach allows me to emphasize specific feelings or experiences with greater clarity. Faulkner (2020) reinforces this idea when she writes, “Poetry can be used as a tool and method for presentation of research data, as a source of data, and as a source for data analysis” (p. 39). Further, “Many researchers consider poetry as an excellent means to present data about the human experience” (Faulkner, 2020, p. 40). Faulkner (2020) continues, “A good poem has something that is said in a way that gives us insight we haven’t had before, or it invites us in to participate in an emotional way or makes us see the world again; we learn to see in art and in poems” (p. 43). Of course, this is a challenge in the sense that some believe poetry only *works* for certain occasions and topics. I originally questioned whether or not poetry was the right method of inquiry for this particular

topic. Sullivan (2009) asks, "What happens when the material is right in front of us and we have to decide what to do with it, how to make sense of it, whether or not to make poetry of it?" (p. 111). Faulkner (2020) reminded me that, "Sullivan (2009) considers poetic occasions to occur when we can address concreteness, voice, emotion, ambiguity, and associative logic; this is more important than a reliance on line breaks and the use of space to call our work poetic. Knowing if there is an occasion for poetry means being "alert, attentive, and attuned";" (p. 43). I believe this particular topic lends itself to the utilization of poetry as a product. The emotion and voice underlying my classroom experiences are best represented through poetry, while the inclusion of letters serves to form a connection, allowing readers to resonate with these shared experiences.

Ultimately, I do not wish to replicate or substitute previous studies, but to expand the research on the transition between pre-service teaching to full time educator. This is transformative period in a young educator's life. I trust that this dissertation will serve as a comprehensive display of my understanding and insight into the demanding journey of becoming a new teacher and the essential elements for achieving success in this field. In addition, I believe this research will contribute a different perspective, new insights, and supporting literature on this particular topic within the field of Curriculum Studies. Overall, my hope is that it will become a concrete and tangible source of hope, inspiration, and guidance for individuals beginning a career in education.

My study follows the qualitative method of poetic inquiry while also developing a product classified within the epistolary genre. Qualitative methods were selected as it primarily draws upon my personal reflections and experiences in the classroom, and is supported by my research findings. "A theoretical framework is a reflection of the *work* the researcher engages in to *use* a theory in a given study." (Varpio, et al., 2020, para 7). The subjectivity of the study

conforms with how qualitative methods offer in exploring individual perspectives and contexts. “Self-reflection, or reflexivity, is a common strategy used by qualitative researchers to enhance the rigor and transparency of research” (Ortlipp, 2008, p. 699). Further, “Qualitative researchers are interested in understanding how people interpret their experiences, how they construct their worlds, and what meaning they attribute to their experiences” (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016, p. 6). By utilizing qualitative research methods, I am able to examine my experiences and generate outcomes through the expressive forms of language. “The most basic definition of qualitative research is that it uses *words* as data... collected and analyzed in all sorts of ways” (Braun and Clarke, 2013, in Merriam and Tisdell, 2016, p. 6). Merriam and Tisdell (2016) continue, “The overall purpose of qualitative research are to achieve an understanding of how people make sense out of their lives, delineate the process (rather than the outcome or product) of meaning-making, and describe how people interpret what they experience” (p. 15). In this instance, it is the experiences a teacher encounters within the classroom conveyed through the creation of poems and letters. Qualitative methodology in terms of Creswell (2012) is “an inquiry process of understanding based on distinct methodological traditions of inquiry that explore a social or human problem” (p. 12). It is through the qualitative methodology that I intend to conduct my research, specifically through poetic inquiry.

Poetic Inquiry; an Expressive Approach

Poetic inquiry is a qualitative research method that uses poetry as a means of exploring and expressing knowledge. Sameshima and colleagues (2017) highlight several strengths associated with this approach, particularly emphasizing the act of creating poems as a unique avenue for both generating and mobilizing knowledge. The key strengths and reasoning for my

choice of poetic inquiry is that it will allow for aesthetic expression, subjectivity, relatability, emotional understanding, holistic exploration, and reflection. In doing so I will also be able to engage multiple senses through language, rhythm, and imagery.

Poetic Inquiry will allow me to tap into the expressive and aesthetic qualities of language. By using poetic forms, I can convey emotions, experiences, and complex concepts in a way that goes beyond traditional academic prose. The aesthetic dimension adds depth and nuance to the exploration of lived experiences. The use of poetic inquiry encourages me as the researcher to embrace subjectivity and incorporate my personal voices into the research process. This enables a more authentic representation of my perspective and allows for a deeper connection with the day-to-day of teaching. I can engage readers on a more visceral level with the use of evocative language and imagery to make my findings more accessible and relatable to a broader audience. I say this because often the use of evocative language is generally avoided in educational research and in understanding the candid experiences of teachers day-to-day and the intricacies of the school environment for teachers. I believe there to be a direct impact of the obsolescence of education research and conversations on new teachers and their experiences in the classroom. I find using this language to be more effective in some forms regardless of the expected upholdings of principles, objectivity, and professionalism. I argue that the use of this particular language, by stating the obvious and sharing the undisclosed encounters that many teachers face, I am offering more clarity and fostering more of an inclusive and respectable environment conducive to constructive dialogue and collaboration.

Through the crafting of poems, I can delve into the emotional and embodied aspects of teaching. This approach provides a richer understanding of phenomena that may be challenging to capture through more conventional research methods. The use of poetic inquiry encourages a

holistic exploration of teaching. By incorporating creative and imaginative elements, I am able to uncover hidden nuances and connections within their data, contributing to a more comprehensive understanding of the ins and outs of teaching.

In addition, the process of composing poems allows for me to engage in reflective and reflexive practices. This self-awareness enhances the quality of research by helping me to critically examine my assumptions, biases, and the impact of my own experiences on the research process. Overall, this multisensory experience can deepen the impact of the research, allowing participants and readers to connect with the material in a more profound and memorable way. Sameshima, et al. (2017) argue that the strengths of poetic inquiry lie in its ability to harness the creative and expressive power of poetry, offering a unique pathway for researchers to generate, convey, and mobilize knowledge in a more emotionally resonant and holistic manner.

Poetry itself is an aesthetic approach to expressing thoughts and experiences. In the world and specifically through art we immediately perceive what our senses gather and that gradually evolves into what we consider to be our seated knowledge. The way the mind is formed and cultivated is through one's individual experiences. It is through the arts that we can reach our full potential. According to Elliot Eisner (1998), "Knowing, at base, is a personal form of human experience." (Eisner, 1998, p. 15). Eisner frequently refers to the sensory system and the development of sensory skills when discussing the educational value of the arts. In Plato's *The Republic* (375 BC), he introduces The Allegory of the Cave in Book VII, a dialogue between Glaucon and Socrates. It aims to illustrate the effects of education on humans by exploring the hierarchy of knowledge. Eisner refers to this metaphor in his 2009 speech at Vanderbilt, by considering the prisoners that were weighted down as trying to reach the sun, which stood as the

source of knowledge light. He states that the weights and chains were like the senses. The “senses” were distracting and kept people away from knowing the truth, just as the chains kept them away from leaving the cave and reaching the sun. Eisner connects this to his point by saying that “A sensory system is a way of getting in touch with the world... There is nothing in the head, that was not first in the hand” (Eisner, 2009). By saying the hand, it is in reference to all senses. “The perceivable boundaries of the Proximity Context are everything we can see, touch, hear, smell, and taste with our naked senses”. (Schiller, 2011, p. 292). However, Gibson (1986) writes, “We must, of course, learn to see what things really are... and this can be very difficult (1986, p. 142). Schiller (2011) references Gibson’s psychology of environmental values by stating that he “Made a distinction between perceptual cognition, or knowledge OF the environment, and symbolic knowledge ABOUT the environment” (p. 293). The argument asserts that our minds are shaped by the sensory and aesthetic experiences that form our understanding of the world.

Why Poetry and the Epistolary Genre?

Poems and Letters

Expressive

Subjective

Emotionally resonant

Poems

Letters

Research is evident

Language

Imagery

Experiences filter

Communicate

Encourage

To be a new teacher

The decision to use poetic inquiry as a method in this study stemmed from the necessity to take on a more expressive, subjective, and emotionally resonant approach to comprehend and communicate the unexpected challenges teachers may encounter in the duration of their first years. Poetry and letter writing can both be methods when considering the broad scope of research and communication. Poetry serves as a method by offering an expressive way of communication that can convey difficult emotions, ideas, and experiences through the use of creative language and imagery. Letter writing serves as a method by offering a narrative structure as a means of communicating experiences through my individual perspective. The personalized nature allows for a more intimate expression of thoughts and emotions. Both poetry and letter writing can evoke emotional engagement and can tap into the emotional aspects of these teaching experiences.

Using both poetry and letter writing in research captures the complexity of my experiences as an educator. I can immerse myself in the intricacies of the classroom environment while also engaging my audiences. Both are memorable and offer accessible ways of sharing such experiences that may be more challenging to articulate. This intentional choice to combine

the two reflects a commitment to authentically represent and comprehend the emotional, personal, and multifaceted dimensions inherent in the experiences within the classroom.

Robert Frost wrote *The Road Not Taken*, published in 1916. This poem has been interpreted as a metaphor for choices in life and the impact our decisions have as well as the uniqueness of each of our journeys. In this poem, he is faced with the two paths in which he has to choose between. Frost writes,

“I shall be telling this with a sigh
somewhere ages and ages hence;
Two roads diverged in a wood, and I-
I took the one less traveled by,
And that has made all the difference” (Frost ln.16-20).

This particular poem is an example of poetry as methodology because of the open interpretation for readers to reflect on their own lives and the concise verses to convey such a profound and self-reflective aspect of decision making, in this case. Similarly, teaching is an introspective and complexing career. Through poetry as a means of methodology I can express my experiences in a way where the readers can reflect on their own experiences.

Letter writing or the epistolary genre as a methodology offers a means for intimate communication and expression. The structure of purposeful written language to convey messages, share information, and express thoughts and emotions is powerful. Several examples come to mind when considering letters as methodology. One of which is Rainer Maria Rilke’s *Letters to a Young Poet* (1934). A young aspiring poet writes to Rilke who is providing advice on life, love, as well as the creative process of poetry. Another is the *The Letters of C.S. Lewis* (1966). These letters reveal the intimate thoughts and beliefs of C.S. Lewis. It covers a wide

range of topics, including literature, theology, and personal reflections. I intend to combine both poetry and letters to share my story during my first years teaching. By offering letters to myself I can intimately convey the message of what happens in the classroom and out of the classroom that make teaching so demanding and an emotionally daunting experience at times.

This particular approach to research was not one that I originally decided on when planning. I felt far more comfortable with narrative research. I knew I wanted to study other's experiences in the transition from pre-service to new teacher and craft poems based on insights gathered from their interviews. It was not until after reading about ethnographic research that I discovered autoethnography. "Ethnographers recognize the innumerable ways personal experience influences the research process. For instance, a researcher decides who, what, when, where, and how to research" (Ellis et al., 2011, p. 274). In the context of poetic inquiry, an autoethnographic approach allows me to turn inward and explore and express my personal experiences through poetry. It entails a deep and subjective engagement with one's own lived experiences. This essentially allows me to combine personal narratives with cultural and social contexts. Autoethnographic poetic inquiry will not only capture my unique perspective but will also seek to understand and communicate the broader implications of these personal experiences within a cultural or societal framework. This method acknowledges the researcher as an integral part of the research process, intertwining the personal and the cultural to create a nuanced and authentic representation of the subject matter. By furthering my understanding of ethnography, I realized that my own experiences could be equally, if not more powerful than my interpretation of someone else's. Stephen Brookfield (1995) says, "Our autobiographies as learners in childhood, adolescence, and young adulthood frame our approach to teaching at the start of our careers..." (p. 50). Moreover, there have been several research studies on various teaching

experiences. By focusing on my own, I aspire to contribute something new and potentially transformative to the field of curriculum studies, education, and pre-service teachers.

Carolyn Ellis et al. (2011) explain why autoethnography could be chosen by scholars when writing, "[Many scholars] turned to autoethnography because they were seeking a positive response to critiques of canonical ideas about what research is and how research should be done. In particular, they wanted to concentrate on ways of producing meaningful, accessible, and evocative research grounded in personal experience, research that would sensitize readers to issues of identity politics, to experiences shrouded in silence..." (p. 274). Several experiences in the classroom that I have gained over the last 7 years would have proven valuable had I been aware of them when entering the profession. This study will seek to understand these personal experiences through the aesthetic approach of poetry.

Elliot Eisner's view of teaching is that it is a form of art, and curriculum should be approached aesthetically (Eisner, 1985). The same can be said for ways of encouragement and motivation for teachers. With any form of autobiography comes deep self-reflection, especially when hoping to encourage and inspire new teachers. Ellis, et al., (2011) explains that "Autoethnography is one of the approaches that acknowledges and accommodates subjectivity, emotionality, and the researcher's influence on research, rather than hiding from these matters or assuming they don't exist" (para 3). Furthermore, they write, "Autobiographers can make texts aesthetic and evocative by using techniques of 'showing' (Adams, 2006; Lamott, 1994), which are designed to bring 'readers into the scene'—particularly into thoughts, emotions, and actions (Ellis, 2004, p.142)—in order to 'experience an experience'" (Ellis, et al., 2011, para 11). This is where autoethnography as a product comes into play. The series of letters exploring the experiences of my time as a new teacher looking back on my time as a pre-service teacher will

play a significant role in this as well as the poems that follow each letter. The poetry will be more of the aesthetic touch to the letters of experience. It is the altering perspective that impact this study. Through my personal encounters, I am able to discuss these experiences in my own words. Ellis, et al., (2011) go into greater detail with written autoethnographies when they describe that researchers, “Seek to produce aesthetic and evocative thick descriptions of personal and interpersonal experience. They accomplish this by first discerning patterns of cultural experience evidenced by field notes, interviews, and/or artifacts, and then describing these patterns using facets of storytelling” (para 14).

A further understanding of autoethnography is supported by an understanding of William F. Pinar’s idea of the *significance of self* (Pinar et al., 2014, p. 577) is beneficial. Pinar asserts that the self is a central and essential element in the educational process. He argues that one’s personal values, beliefs, and experiences are crucial to their understanding of the world. The self is shaped by educational experiences. This series of letters and poems will hopefully liberate the individual by breaking down conventional patterns of thought in order to make way for personal experiences and discoveries which will enable [the student; or in this case the teacher as the student] to see his own potentialities and limitations" (Gropius, quoted in Padgham, 1988a, p. 369, quoted in Pinar et al., 2014, p. 577). By reflecting on personal experiences in the classroom and recognizing the necessity behind sharing these experiences with new teachers, the aim is for them to acknowledge their potential and understand the limitations within the classroom.

Marla Morris writes about Curriculum understood as a life story, in that any form of autobiography is narcissistic (Morris, 2008, p. 3). “But isn’t narcissism necessary in order to understand the Other within the self as well as the self within the Other? How else do you understand Others if not through understanding yourself?” (Morris, 2008, p. 3). In this quote,

Morris brings in Emmanuel Levinas's idea of "the other". This term represents an entity that exists outside the self and challenges the self to recognize and respect the subjectivity of that other. Levinas (1982) focuses on the ethical responsibilities that come into play when encountering "the other". By incorporating this idea, Morris (2008) identifies a critical point for any autobiographical study.

William Pinar developed an autobiographical method, that is often associated with the currere method. It is a distinctive approach to the curriculum theory that encourages educators to reflect upon their own life experiences as a critical part of the curriculum development process. Pinar, et al., (2014) write, "by means of which the mature student works to locate his or her current intellectual interests in his or her life history, research by means of which the student might hope to discover himself or herself more fully and thereby enliven one's intellectual life" (p. 578). In this case, the term "mature student" is in reference to the teacher reflecting on the years spent in the classroom. Pinar encourages teachers to self-explore and reflect on their past experiences, memories, and narratives. By doing so, the teacher can bring a unique perspective into the classroom. This concept supports the chosen path of offering an authentic approach to the curriculum for pre-service teachers training to one day have their own classroom.

Schubert and Ayers (1992) write, "Although [reflection] is invisible, teacher educators have recognized that an invited discussion of past experience, through consideration of either an artificial or a real experience, can lead to increased understanding and professional growth (p. 27). They continue, "Conversations with teachers who are invited to walk back through their past professional experiences are a means by which we might enter teachers' minds and note their thoughts as they talk about their work and practice" (Schubert and Ayers, 1992, p. 27). In a way,

this is what I hope to do, but all the while examining my own past experiences and offering the outcomes and professional growth to my audience.

A Way of Knowing

“Writing is a way of knowing, a method of inquiry. Consequently, writing personal stories can be therapeutic for authors as we write to make sense of ourselves and our experiences” (Ellis, et al., 2011, para 25). They continue, “Writing personal stories can also be therapeutic for participants and readers (Ellis, et al., 2011, para 25). I am taking this way of knowing and expanding by using poetry to portray the experiences of the classroom.

In regards to the method of currere, Pinar (1975) writes, “It is regressive - progressive - analytical - syncretical. It is therefore temporal and conceptual in nature, and it aims for the cultivation of a developmental point of view that hints at the transtemporal and trans-conceptual” (p. 1). Pinar (1975) describes the four steps to this approach. Regressive - “To observe functioning in the past” (p. 23); progressive - “to think of the future” (p. 24); analytical - “photograph the present as if one were a camera, including oneself in the present taking the photograph, and your response to this process (p. 26); and syncretical - “Look at oneself concretely, as if in a mirror. Attention on the breath, to underline the biological concreteness of being” (p. 26). With this method, Gulla (2020) writes, “In my own experience, writing poems can be a way of engaging in a dialogue with something I am trying to understand. The process of writing poetry is very often a process of discovery” (p. 209). This is why I am choosing poetry as a form of process and product. By writing these poems that will follow each of the 7 letters, I am able to reflect and process my time as a teacher and put words to the feelings and experiences as a result. “By examining the past experience in a considered and focused way, one could learn

and grow (Schubert and Ayers, 1992, p. 27). Furthermore, “Poetry can transform our pedagogic imaginations by creating possibilities for conversations about curriculum in the diverse communities that constitute our human living. In response to Ted Aoki’s (1993/2005b) call for “a playful singing in the midst of life” (p. 282), I write poetry as a way to research how diction, syntax, and semantics shape and shift our stories” (Ng-a-Fook, et al., 2016, p. 2). This is a great explanation as to why I have chosen poetry as a form of inquiry. Eisner states, “It is noteworthy that the syntactical structures of poetry, music, and visual art are open-ended and depend upon the creating of figurative relations” (Eisner, 1998, p. 17). Faulkner (2020), continues with an explanation of why poetry should and could be used in research when she writes, “Poetry is a valuable research tool and method for researchers and practitioners in fields such as anthropology, communication, education, nursing, psychology, sociology, and social work who wish to channel the power of poetry into their work” (p. 14). I feel this particular form of inquiry will open doors for inspiration and offer new teachers a different perspective of the world of education.

Finally, as Robert Lake (2021) stated in his letter to teachers healing from the pandemic, “I chose to write in the “epistolary genre” (Freire, 1996; Nieto, 2015; Kress & Lake, 2012) because for me it is less constrictive and more personal in expressing matters of the heart” (Kress et al., 2021, p. 99). He continues in this same letter explaining how those familiar with his teaching approach are aware that he has “asked students and colleagues to write in this fashion ... on crucially important issues such as critical pedagogies of care, hope, and imagination” (p. 99). Teaching is a matter of the heart. The teaching profession is “crucially important” in numerous ways. (Kress et al., 2021, p. 99). Teachers choose to go into teaching because they genuinely care about their students. James D. Kirylo (in Kress et al., 2021) writes,

“To be a teacher is to respond to a call from the heart” (p. 62). Any form of writing acts as a time capsule. By writing these letters from my journal entries, I am able to write to convey emotions and to empower. These words written in an epistolary format offer an easy way for others to interpret and picture themselves in similar situations. Particularly in the field of education, we are so engulfed in our own classrooms, our own worlds. Scenario-based writing allows us to place ourselves in the narrative. Although these letters will be written to myself back when I was a new teacher, letters alone offer a sort of “flow”. They open a door and breathe life into words.

Two of America’s most revered poets, Elizabeth Bishop and Robert Lowell exchanged letters to each other spanning several decades. The complete correspondence between the two was edited by Thomas Travisano and Saskia Hamilton and published in what is titled “Words in Air” in 2008. The letters were a record of their lives, their hardships, and ultimately the strong, but platonic relationship between them.

Elizabeth Bishop and Robert Lowell first met in 1947 at a dinner party, and their connection quickly evolved into a deep and meaningful friendship. Both poets were significant figures in 20th-century American literature, and their letters offer a fascinating glimpse into their personal lives, hardships, creativity, and the time period in which they lived.

The title “Words in Air” suggests the delicate and intangible nature of their communication, highlighting the transformative power of language and the written word. The letters between Bishop and Lowell were more than simple exchanges of information; they were a way in which these two poets could share their thoughts, struggles, and successes. In their correspondence, Bishop and Lowell discussed a wide range of topics, including their creative works, personal challenges, travels, and the greater cultural and political issues. The letters

provide valuable insights into the poets' artistic processes, influences, and the development of each of their work.

The friendship between Bishop and Lowell had its ups and downs. Both poets dealt with personal demons, including mental health issues and struggles with alcoholism. Their letters reflect a deep understanding and empathy for each other's challenges, and the exchange of words served as a form of support and understanding. The "Words in Air" between Elizabeth Bishop and Robert Lowell is an incredible resource for scholars, readers, and enthusiasts of poetry. They each provide a unique and intimate perspective on the lives and minds of two influential poets, capturing the essence of their enduring friendship through the written word.

It is through the written word that we can envision a new world. It serves as a gateway to a novel realm. In doing so, the imagination grows and the prospect to take a step back becomes more feasible. I do this by incorporating stories and experiences. Robert Coles writes about the art of storytelling. It requires a "teller's thoughtfulness, canniness, sensitivity, and talent" (Coles, 1997, p. 93). Storytelling is rich and timeless. Similarly, the epistolary genre continues to be a versatile and engaging form of storytelling, allowing the exploration of various themes. In addition, letter writing creates a sense of realism and intimacy within the storytelling. Dana McCullough (2016) ponders the art of storytelling in her dissertation. She considers it to be "stories cubed: Their story, your story, and my story - all intersecting, each of us carrying our own subjective and personal histories, each of us being an "other"" (2016, p. 14). McCullough (2016) quotes Coles (1989) when she writes, "It's what we all carry with us on this trip we taken and we owe it to each other to respect our stories and learn from these stories (p. 30) (Coles in McCullough, 2016, p. 14). Further she writes,

“Our personal stories are part of us. These stories help us make connections as we journey through life. As we travel, we add to our story, making meaning by connecting our stories to new knowledge we acquire as we live our lives” (McCullough, 2016, p. 14).

Ming Fang He (2003) examined stories of teachers in her book *A River Flowing*, herself being one of them. In this book she uses a metaphor of a river to explain the journey of three teachers through a cross-cultural narrative perspective. He (2003) writes:

“The reason for telling, and retelling, these complex and fluid narratives is to encourage teachers, teacher educators, and many others who live cross-cultural lives, to search for their cultural roots, to reflect upon their background and experiences, to examine their values and beliefs in order to understand the ways in which their personal histories, cultures, and experiences affect who they are, how they perceive the world, and how they interact with other in an increasingly diversified world” (p. xix).

By telling and retelling, He and her participants were able to fully understand their experiences. Granted He took the narrative inquiry approach which allowed her to incorporate her experiences of teaching. I have taken my stories and will convey them through letter writing and poetic inquiry. By telling my story and reflecting on my experiences, my readers will feel a closer connection to me as the character as they read through my innermost thoughts and experiences as a teacher in the classroom.

Two classic examples of the epistolary format to tell a story is “*Dracula*” by Bram Stoker (1897) and “*Frankenstein*” by Mary Shelley (1818). *Dracula* uses a collection of letters, journal entries, and newspaper articles to convey the narrative. The letters create an intimate connection between the characters and the reader. *Frankenstein* begins with a series of letters written by a

man named Robert Walton to his sister. By allowing the readers to access the characters' inner thoughts, fears, and emotions fostering a more immediate and authentic engagement with the story, in both cases. Granted I am the only character narrating in these letters, the intimacy and authenticity will be the same. The epistolary format also allows for temporal flexibility. An example of this is how Stoker (1897) is able to explore different timelines through this format which enhances the complexity of the story and reveals details gradually. I am able to write these letters at different points in time. Though I will not be piecing together one narrative, but the overarching idea of what the experience of a teacher entails.

By choosing poetic inquiry, the epistolary genre, and certain elements of autoethnography as methodologies, I will tell stories in hopes that this study will offer a path for new teachers to navigate their story and their chosen profession without feeling overwhelmed. The goal is to help them find a way forward and refocus on the initial reasons that led them to become teachers in the first place.

The Development of the Poems and Letters

As for the construction of the letters and poems, I intend to do this through a series of steps. As these letters and poems emerge from my reflections and past encounters in the classroom, the primary focus of the planning process will involve delving into my journal entries and discerning overarching themes within my own written reflections. Upon reflection I felt like teachers will most benefit from my input about relationships, necessary courses and content for teachers, the teacher's perspective of day-to-day classroom experiences, and evaluation. I will write these categories down and list things I remember as a new teacher that I think will be beneficial to preserve and new teachers in the field today. I will develop the letters from these

ideas. Upon completion of each letter, I will sum up my reflection and thoughts with a poem. Ultimately, I will adhere to the following steps.

First, I will begin with reflection. I intend on using my personal journey during my time as a new teacher. I will consider the key moments, challenges, and inspirations that shaped my experiences. I will use my journal entries that I kept during my 7 years to stimulate my recollections. Similarly, to how one decodes an interview in a qualitative study, I intend to do the same with my journal entries. I will identify words, phrases, and thoughts written and group them together into categories. By consolidating and refining the categories, I will then determine overarching themes of the classroom that I feel are important that I want to convey in the letters. I will include stories about teaching with passion, personal growth, challenges, and the reason for initially going into the field. All of which will contribute to the support and encouragement I wish to provide to new teachers.

After determining themes, I will create an outline for the structure of each letter and following poem. The letter format will be the classic introduction, body, and conclusion. This will briefly differ with each letter. I will then determine the tone I want to convey within my letters based on the theme I am writing. For example, a grateful tone, professional tone, informal tone, or persuasive. The idea that I have chosen the letter format already lends itself to the personal tone I wish to put forth, but the themes will differ allowing flexibility in tone. For each letter, I will bring in the codes found from my journal entries (quotes, anecdotes, and experiences) that align with the chosen themes. It will include memories from my interactions with students, colleagues, and mentors. As well as the moments that fueled my passion for teaching. This is necessary so that I am able to reach the readers for which I am writing.

I will reread and edit each letter for clarity, coherence, and flow, while also tailoring it to the specific audience of new teachers. Although these are letters to myself (as a new teacher), I want them to make an impact on the community and those in the field of education as well. Ideally, new teachers will refer to this when preparing to hold a classroom of their own. I intend for these letters to convey messages that resonate with the readers and with the human teaching experience. By writing to myself, I can hold a stance of transparency and not feel as though I need to hold back thoughts, feelings, or advice. In this step, I will pay close attention to grammar, spelling, and punctuation.

After constructing the letter, I will then select literary devices that I feel will best enhance the expression and theme. My default is simile and metaphor. I will include symbolism and alliteration as well. I intend to use impactful and clear language when developing the poems. This is much of why I feel poetry to be so powerful. The theme and construct of the letter will determine the development of each poem. A serious tone in the letter, will have a following poem that is solemn to match the mood. I will review and revise by ensuring I have used a consistent format and that both the poem and letter align with my ultimate vision and purpose.

I will write the letters and poems separately from one another. This is a process and will be a creative journey. I want to allow myself the freedom to express my thoughts and emotions authentically so I will use these steps as a guide as I write. Upon completion of the letters and poems, I will have constructed a tangible reference for new teachers to lean on in moments of hardship and despair. It will be a manual for encouragement with a focus of the true reason for why we become teachers. Similar to Robert Lake's letter to teachers after the COVID-19 Pandemic. Lake (2021) published *Songs in the Key of Healing Hope: Listening as Soul Care* as an offering to teachers as they find ways to heal from the impact the pandemic had on their lives.

Lake writes, “My hope is that in sharing my journey that you will be reminded of the ways you have found to renew yourself wherever you are at this moment” (Lake in Kress, et al., 2021, p. 100). Likewise, my hope is that by sharing *my* journey and my stories during my time in the classroom, that the readers will remember their reasons for choosing the field of education and encourage them to move forward.

Structure of this Dissertation

I have taken a non-traditional approach to this dissertation. This study consists of several meticulously crafted chapters that comprehensively explain the study from start to finish. I have woven the review of the literature throughout the chapters to further theorize and support the themes of each letter and poem. Following chapter 1, each chapter will identify a distinct theme of the transition between pre-service and in-service teachers. The chapters will begin with a letter to my past self, moving into the supporting literature, and conclude with a poem. This structure aims to enhance the poetic structure of this dissertation and bring the focus to the importance of supporting pre-service and new teachers.

Chapter 1 begins with an authentic approach to introducing the overarching theme of this dissertation through poetry. The overall phenomenon of teachers leaving the field within their first few years of teaching is dissected and several reasons are explored as to why this statistic remains so high and what may be causing it. A consistent path of new teachers feeling overworked, underappreciated and not feeling supported is identified resulting in the purpose and significance of this study. Staying with the overarching theme, the research questions are presented through a medium of poetry. An explanation of poetic inquiry, epistolary genre, and supporting works are woven throughout this chapter. I inform my autobiographical significance,

concluding with an overview of each chapter, and the contribution this particular study will have on the field of Curriculum Studies.

Chapters 2 through 8 consist of the letters to my former self. These letters each portray a specific topic that is beneficial for new teachers to be aware of before becoming a teacher of their own classroom. Chapter 2 begins with the first letter. This letter discusses the topic of finding friends among your coworkers. Teachers too often seem to be in competition with each other when in reality, we are all on the same team. Chapter 3 moves into the second letter which discusses undergraduate courses in the teaching programs. Chapter 4 covers the theme of teaching being a multifaceted profession. Chapter 5 delves into the influences of a teacher and the importance of creating a safe space for students. Chapter 6 takes a turn and focuses on the subjectivity of teacher evaluation and the necessary flexibility of the profession. Chapter 7 moves into the perspective of a teacher and seeing the world through a teacher's eyes. The final letter is written in Chapter 8 where I discuss the mental well-being of a teacher and the emotional roller-coaster that teachers often find themselves on, metaphorically.

A poem to further introduce the following chapters, letters, and poems:

The Letters

Letter 1 will consist of an overview
After graduation and accepting a new
teaching position;
Student to teacher transition.

Meet the grade level
A new classroom you revel
7 years - that's in the past
You are here, and looking back

A brand new teacher
 Few are excited to meet her.
 Modern ideas no one accepts
 Then she learns *The Marigold Effect*

To summarize
 The plant is a prize
 From weeds it protects
 From harmful rodents and pests.

“If you plant a marigold
 beside most any garden vegetable,
 that vegetable will grow big
 ...strong and healthy, protected” (Gonzalez, 2013, para 4.)

"Marigolds exist in our schools as well –
 encouraging, supporting... growing teachers” to excel.
 “Find at least one marigold in your school
 and stay close to them, you will grow” too.

“Find more than one, and you will thrive”
 Said Jennifer Gonzalez in paragraph 5.
 It’s the one essential rule to abide.
 Get “the positive, supportive, energetic teachers” on your side. (Gonzalez, 2013, para 5).

Following this letter and all the rest
 Supporting research and a poem that explains the point best.
 The first is titled *The Beginning*, it focuses on why
 Why choose this field? Why even try?

Letter 2 discusses the undergrad

The courses, the choices, is teaching a fad?
 What is required? What is chosen?
 What is missing? It's what I am proposing.

Standards, purpose, requirements and more
 Tips, tricks, influence of human behavior.
 Another Poem follows Letter 2.
 This is titled *What I Wish I Knew*.

Theories, behaviors, what I now know
 Beneficial for me then, to help students grow.
 Human development theories; social aspects too
 Piaget and Vygotsky... to name a few.

Letter 3 highlights meaningful interactions
 Day-to-day life; how a student impacts and
 affects a teacher. And their heart.
 Two particular stories - that's how I will start.

A missing pair of glasses.
 A student's parent passes.
 Two stories that come to mind.
 A teacher's understanding is what you'll find.

A multifaceted profession...
 Wearing "many hats" and
 Still manage to teach the content.
Hats is the poem that follows it.

A fourth letter maintains a similar theme.
 The various roles of a teacher; emphasizing

A safe, open, welcoming space for all.
Different experiences and backgrounds overall.

From sleeping in a car or sharing a room.
A fight with a sibling, we can only assume.
The baggage, the extra, the barriers between
The poem that follows is titled, *Hiding*.

Letter 5 focuses on teacher evaluation.
The content delivery and framework for observation.
Teacher Keys Effectiveness System
How to overcome lessons that deviate from expectations.

The key to move forward, to move past.
Be flexible, be prepared, but know how to adapt.
The Plan is the poem that follows this.
Though rarely adhering, how ironic?

An authentic account of the subjectivity
Reflects of a teachers morale, but not ability.
A touch of encouragement. Embrace and accept.
All feedback can help - choose to reflect.

In *Letter 6*, I explore a teacher's perspective.
How they see the world, somewhat introspective.
A sequence to a book I published before.
Through Children's Eyes - It's now sold in stores.

Through Teacher's Eyes; a poem that follows behind
Giving specific examples of a teacher's mind.
What they see; how they feel; a view through their lens.

Compared to any other, nothing transcends.

The mental-well being of a teacher
Letter 7 and poem features
Reasons why we even chose this field
And reasons that lead us to leave it still

Overworked and underpaid
Good, bad, some overwhelming days
The emotional toll that teaching can take
With 20 + students; it's not easy to fake

This 7th letter covers many situations
Accountable for each of them
Being sure that they are *each* cared for
Emotionally a rollercoaster - *a metaphor*

The poem that follows holds the truth
Behind teaching and leading, it delves into
What happens in a teachers day-to-day
Would you be a teacher? Or walk away.

A profession that gives back
A profession that means more
To mold a young mind
Something to live for.

I know it's hard, I know it can be tough.
Some days are incredible, some days are rough.
These letters and poems are written for you
Will you be a teacher? Or give up too?

The purpose of all seven letters is to encompass a broad spectrum of a teacher's daily life. Through the candidness of addressing myself and offering poetry as another form of expressing my experiences, my aim is to connect with audiences in elementary, middle, and high school faculties at the collegiate level. Ideally, these letters and poems are intended for publication and can serve as a valuable resource for pre-service teachers in teacher education programs across the state or country.

Chapter 9 will be the final chapter of this dissertation. A further examination of the crafting of the letters and poems can be found here. I will explain how I used my journals from my time as a pre-service teacher to code and identify themes. I will present a table that defines the codes and illustrates the process of deriving the seven themes corresponding to each letter. Implications for future research and the transformative process of writing a dissertation will also be revealed. Ideally, readers will understand my actions, the reasoning behind them, their significance, and why they are important.

The dissertation will conclude with an epilogue; a letter to my future self. I will bring themes from the prologue full circle and capture how and why I chose to use poetry and letters as a medium to send this particular message. The message that we need teachers who are in the profession for more than the basic reasons of teaching, We need teachers who find joy in the little things. We need teachers who realize the difference they are making by showing up for their students. In the epilogue, I reveal how transformative writing a dissertation has been and continues to be in my life.

CHAPTER 2: MIND THE GAP

Letter 1

Dear Sarah Brittany (at age 23),

Congratulations! You are a REAL teacher! I know you faced many challenges in deciding to not choose to teach Pre-K at the school where you student taught. Ultimately, you are certified to teach Kindergarten through 5th grade, so choosing the first-grade position was an excellent choice. Your passion for teaching is evident. Especially, when it refers to the younger grades. During your student teaching experience, you thrived in the well-managed kindergarten classroom for 12 weeks and learned even more during your experience in Sheffield, England. To spend 6 weeks with 6- and 7-year old's, overseas, teaching a different curriculum is challenging. But you learned a great deal to bring back to your own classroom. Your time at Dore Primary School with Year 1 students opened your eyes to the expectations and capabilities of younger students. You also learned many approaches and strategies to teach your students how to read. You will find this to be one of the most climacteric experiences in your teaching career. Although you hoped to start your career in a Kindergarten classroom, life took you in a different direction: to teach first-grade inclusion in a Title 1 school back in your hometown. You will one day realize that this was the perfect opportunity despite the many challenges that you will face. Particularly the struggle to harmonize with your team, the constant feeling of isolation, and the numerous expectations placed on a teacher, and a first-year teacher at that! However, as you discover genuine friendships and utilize strategies to keep yourself afloat, you'll realize this is where you truly belong.

From an external perspective, the teaching team may seem cohesive, but you'll soon discover their struggles with communication and resistance to new teaching approaches. It is funny how things may look from the outside. Around mid-year, a mentor of yours will share an enlightening article about Marigold Trees, emphasizing the importance of surrounding yourself with positive influences. The Marigold Effect compares the marigold's protective role in gardens to supportive school colleagues. It is a term that is used to describe the positive influence of individuals in a collaborative work environment, just as marigold flowers have positive effects on the growth of neighboring plants. Take this advice and eventually, you'll find two invaluable friends. The Marigold Effect suggests that having supportive and encouraging team members can contribute to a more positive and productive work environment. Your dedication to investing time and energy in your students and school will pay off, leading to flourishing relationships and personal growth. Have you heard the proverbial expression, "You get out what you put in"? This expression emphasizes the direct correlation between effort and results. Essentially the outcome or rewards in any endeavor are proportional to the amount of effort, time, or resources that you invest. Up to this point you have heard about how critical relationship building can be. This is true. But it is just as important to put forth effort, whether in lesson planning, friendships, professional development, preparation, or mindset. Teaching is a very challenging career, but there are ways to "lighten the load". One critical way is understanding that teachers need each other. They need each other to grow professionally, share resources, provide support, and to enhance the whole experience for both themselves and their students.

Consider the challenges inherent in this chosen field. As humans, we all have our limits. Do you know the ancient folktale of Androcles and the lion? Androcles was a slave who escaped and formed an unlikely friendship with a lion. In short, troubled and agitated Androcles

encountered a lion in the forest. Recognizing that the lion posed no threat, Androcles observed a thorn in its paw. He removed the thorn with compassion and continued caring for the lion over the years, providing food and support. Later, both were captured, and Androcles faced a dire fate – thrown to the same lion by the Emperor, who had been deprived of food. Contrary to expectations, the lion, recognizing its friend, refrained from attacking and licked Androcles' hands instead. The Emperor, astonished by this display of loyalty, pardoned Androcles and released the lion.

This tale draws a parallel to the challenges you may face as a new teacher. Sometimes, you might feel like the lion, lashing out in pain, yet the root cause may be unrelated to your immediate circumstances. In this analogy, your friend, who introduced you to the Marigold Effect, takes on the role of Androcles. She provides a different perspective, akin to the thorn's removal, offering insights that help remove your challenges and enable personal growth. It's a reminder that in challenging moments, it's crucial to seek out those who can be your Androcles, offering perspectives that may not be immediately apparent. Their support can be instrumental in navigating difficulties and finding a path forward. You will find companions, your mentor will become your “work mom,” and you will learn to trust her fully. Remember, you do not have to agree with every teaching approach. Focus on your students, but share your ideas. Take criticism as a learning opportunity and move forward. Do what is best for you and your class.

Several times administrators and other leadership roles will compare data from students across a grade level. I never found this to be very accurate because we are essentially comparing “apples to oranges”. This is a metaphorical way of saying all classes on the same grade level are still so different. The comparison between them is both inappropriate and illogical. Similar to comparing the academic performance of students in a mathematics class to their performance in

an art class. This wouldn't be done because of the inherent differences in the subjects and the challenges in making a fair comparison. It should be the same across grade level classes. Every student learns different. Whether through their approach to learning a concept or the pace in which it "clicks". Some students do not test well. Some students require accommodations for their assignments or tests. Though it may be interesting to see the data collected across grade levels, teachers should not be solely held accountable for their performance because there are many factors that contribute to their effectiveness in the classroom.

You will encounter numerous challenges during your first years teaching. Not only will The SPED teacher's personal issues will leave you alone with your inclusion class of 22, requiring additional attention and supervision. This challenging environment may bring tears and moments of questioning, but you know what they say? "What doesn't kill you makes you stronger." Of course, I would hope this job does not come close to ending your life, it will, however, make you stronger and build resilience. You will adapt and learn more about yourself in this year than you thought there was to know. A few key tips for how to help make this transition to becoming a full-time teacher run as smoothly as possible: utilize a calendar to record your commitments, ask questions, and plan ahead. These three strategies will help you to stay organized, hold you accountable, open your lines of communication with your coworkers, build relationships, and ultimately will allow you to grow professionally.

By recording dates, commitments, and ideas in a calendar or planner, you are providing a visual representation of your schedule. You can be sure you are aware of upcoming events, deadlines, and commitments, allowing you to manage your time effectively. This will help you to allocate specific time slots for tasks, meetings, and activities to ensure nothing is overlooked, missed, or forgotten. This will also help you to not rely on others to remind you of what is

important. But always remember to ask questions. In the school setting, a lot of times teachers are so busy, they forget too. “Out of sight, out of mind” really does exist. This suggests that when someone or something is not visible or present in your immediate surroundings, it is easily forgotten or not thought about, and can easily be overlooked or neglected. This happens in the school often. By asking questions, you are prompting others to remember too. Doing this you are also growing your ability to communicate effectively. This will demonstrate your engagement, curiosity, and proactive approach to becoming a better teacher and growing professionally. This can lead to better collaboration with other teachers, students, and your administration. You will also show initiative by doing this too. It will help you in the long run as a teacher, a planner, and a coworker.

Lastly, by planning ahead, you are able to anticipate challenges and be prepared for upcoming lessons and events. This proactive approach can reduce stress, enhance your ability to handle unexpected situations (which often occur in the classroom) and contribute to overall success in your professional and personal life. Essentially, these practices contribute to efficiency, effectiveness, and a more streamlined approach to both your professional life as a teacher and your personal responsibilities. Our lesson plans were expected to be uploaded into Google Drive by the end of the school day of Friday, the week before. I always heard teachers complaining about not being able to submit in time. One of my coworkers and I managed to be two weeks ahead of schedule. This meant that each Friday I was submitting lesson plans for the upcoming 2 weeks which was very helpful, especially in the event of an emergency. Planning ahead is beneficial in many aspects of one's life, but particularly in a teacher's life. It creates a sense of preparedness and foresight which are two factors that are critical in the classroom.

Many people will tell you teaching is hard. These people are not wrong. But there are various decisions you can make to make it less challenging. Your mindset determines your experience. Marigolds exist everywhere. Find the marigolds in your school and hold onto them. Your chosen path may pose challenges, but it's essential to find your marigold, surround yourself with positivity, and embrace modern ideas as additions rather than replacements. Give your all. When doing so, the energy and optimism you invest will be reciprocated. You chose this path purposefully; don't let minor details overshadow your beginning. Lessons learned from personal experience will shape your journey positively.

Best wishes,

Sarah Brittany (age 32)

A Teacher's Transition - Supporting Literature

I have heard it said that new teachers feel they were “thrown” into the field. This is in reference to feeling they have been quickly placed in a teaching position without extensive preparation or experience resulting in teachers feeling overwhelmed. The expression also suggests a sudden introduction to the challenges and responsibilities of teaching, without a gradual acclimatization or sufficient training. Ashley West (2019) explains how teachers enter the field and the expectations in the introduction of her study in her dissertation with the following:

“Many teachers begin their careers blind sighted. Teachers embark on a journey that is blind to the obstacles that will come from being an educator. Teachers are often limited in what they are allowed to do and say. Teachers are unaware of all the injustices within education, such as attempts to colonize. Teachers often attempt new things only to fail and have to try again. Teachers often do not see entirely what is going on, or they see things as bigger than what they appear to be. Teachers are left alone and must rely on building relationships to provide support and guidance. Teachers must continue on the journey if their passion is the career. Teachers must take on the obstacles and persevere on the journey, making their own way and finding out who they are” (p. 6).

This explanation puts how teachers begin their career and what they are faced with in layman's terms. I came across this along with many other literary works spanning various genres that discuss teacher demands and what a teacher should know, yet none truly capture the secrets, the gritty truths, and the authentic life of a teacher while preserving the framework of a passionate educator. Otis Kriegel (2013) published, *Everything a New Elementary Teacher Needs to Know; and Did Not Learn in College*. He writes, “The systems and secrets experienced

by teachers all seemed to be learned the hard way" (p. 2). Specifically, "Did no one think to mention that it would be a good idea to keep a spare change of clothes at work if I unexpectedly found myself covered in glue— or maybe paint, dirt, vomit, or pee? Why didn't any of the books for new teachers cover how to prepare for a new student in the middle of the ninth week of school... What about the big question that every new teacher wonders: What should I do first?" (p. 2). Kriegel addresses a wide array of crucial topics for new teachers, ranging from classroom setup and parent communication to handling new students' mid-year and balancing life outside the classroom. All of which are necessary and critical for a successful career as a teacher. Kriegel touches on many themes and scenarios that are important for teachers to be aware of before entering the profession. His work serves as inspiration for my study, as I identified similar themes and scenarios but presented them through the compelling medium of poetry.

Starting out tough and sticking to the prescribed curriculum" ... is the worst possible advice" (Kozol, 2006, p. 15). Kozol (2006) continues, "Establishing a chemistry of trust between the children and ourselves is a great deal more important than to charge into the next three chapters of the social studies text or packaged reading system" (p. 15). Jonathan Kozol's book *Letters to a Young Teacher* is a series of letters between Kozol and a first-year teacher, Francesca. He shares his visits to Francesca's first-grade classroom in an inner-city school in Boston. He suggests advice in response to the contemptuous questions he receives from Francesca that assist in guiding her through her first year as a teacher. Kozol writes, "Entrap them first in fascination. Entrap them in a sense of merriment and hopeful expectations" (Kozol, 2006, p. 15). Teachers have "to discover motivating factors behind learning practices and to encourage students' interests" (Alhamdan, et al., 2014, p. 495). An educator's role is so diverse in terms of "activities, attributes, levels of commitment to the teaching practice and the

profession" (Alhamdan et al., 2014, p. 492). Kozol (2006) does an excellent job of offering advice in a way that is relevant and useful. This particular work is framed for inner-city school teachers, although it can be referenced for other public, private, or charter schools. His letters are a form of comfort and encouragement in Francesca's time of difficulty and exasperation. Kozol emphasizes the happiness he found from teaching children and the joy and excitement they each brought to the classroom.

By composing the letters, like Jonathan Kozol, I use words to narrate a *story*; *an experience*. By including poetry, I can creatively portray emotion through language to recount the personal experiences within the classroom. As a teacher, we sometimes encounter what cannot be expressed in narratives but can resonate in thought. This intricate interplay of thought and emotion can be expressed through the outlet of poetry. A deeper understanding of the development of poetry can be found in Rilke's (1934) *Letters to a Young Poet*. A young poet writes to Rilke looking for guidance and advice. Rilke writes, "There is only one thing you should do. Go into yourself. Search for the reason that bids you write; find out whether it is spreading out its roots in the deepest places of your heart; acknowledge to yourself whether you would have to die if it were denied you to write. This, above all—ask yourself in the stillest hour of your night: must I write?" (p. 18). Rilke offers this advice to the young poet, emphasizing the importance of not seeking approval from others. Instead, he encourages the poet to find validation within himself and consider whether he could envision living without the act of writing. In addition, in the first letter, Rilke writes, "Things are not all so comprehensible and expressible as one would mostly have us believe; most events are inexpressible than all else are works of art, mysterious existences, the life of which, while ours passes away, endures" (1934, p. 17). Here, Rilke states that most things in this life are inexpressible; it is through forms of poetry

the inexpressible can be expressed, the unexplainable can be explained, and the incomprehensible can be comprehended. Through these letters, Rilke provides a source of inspiration and guidance to all poets through the act of writing. It is my aspiration with this dissertation to achieve a similar outcome, though directed specifically toward teachers.

When contemplating a career in teaching, especially for someone new to the field, seeking advice becomes more straightforward when equipped with the right questions. Teachers readily receive empathy when sharing traumatic stories, with suggested actions provided for specific situations they may encounter. What if you're unaware that you lack certain information? What if you don't know what questions to pose because you believe you're adequately prepared for your future? Jim Burke's *Letters to a New Teacher: A Month-by-Month Guide to the Year Ahead* (2006) offers a literal month-by-month guide to the year within the classroom. Burke (2006) writes response letters to answer questions as he received them in chronological order from August to May. He gives suggestions for overcoming obstacles and moving forward through the year. Burke responds to questions from a first-year teacher, Joy. The questions and letters were not intended to be a book. Burke (2006) explains in his introduction that “While these letters speak to any teacher, they were written to Joy as private letters, as a form of personal professional development, as part of an ongoing conversation between us that became, through these letters, a very rich personal meditation on our work as teachers” (p. 2). Joy asked questions along the lines of, how do you teach students who will not stop talking? How do you teach certain subjects? Are you actually making a difference? These are all questions that I did not think to ask before entering the classroom. It was after being faced with challenging students and obstacles that I had questions and searched for answers and advice. I think all new teachers could benefit from a colleague like Jim Burke, who willingly addressed questions as they arose

during Joy's first year. There are numerous tales of challenging students who consistently disrupt the class, and at times, a teacher might wish that student was not present. It is crucial for teachers to explore alternative approaches to understand the underlying reasons behind a student's behavior. However, a new teacher's initial reaction might be, "Well, that doesn't apply to *this* student." At least, that was always my response. Once the underlying issue is identified, the question becomes, how do you interact with the student differently while still treating them fairly and equally? Burke (2006) mentions rewarding the good behavior and punishing the bad when it comes to students. But what if your county or school has adopted a positive behavior incentive program, and punishing was no longer acceptable? You can no longer give silent lunch, time out, walk laps at recess, or even call parents without an intervention plan. Teachers are under such micromanagement. Whether it pertains to the content we teach, our disciplinary methods, or the expectation to "stay in our lane" and strictly adhere to teaching the standards, these situations and experiences are aspects that pre-service teachers may not have encountered before entering the field. My goal is to pinpoint challenging scenarios and provide recommendations and guidance for moving forward. Dana Goldstein (2014) writes, "It is true that the majority of American teachers have academically mediocre backgrounds... It is also true that one large review of practices within typical American elementary school classrooms found many children - and the majority of poor children - "sitting around watching the teacher deal with behavioral problems, and engaging in boring and rote instructional activities such as completing worksheets and spelling tests"." (pg. 2). This resonates with my previous question: are our teachers genuinely prepared and adequately qualified to teach? If not, what is missing? What do teachers need to know to feel prepared, capable, and supported?

The Beginning

You applied and you got it!
The job you've always dreamed.
Since playing "school" with your brothers..
And stuffed animals in between.

Your mom told you not to do it,
She said, "It's mentally exhausting"
You change your major 7 times...
But teaching was your true calling.

The courses were exciting,
Classroom management and content too!
You studied lesson plan approaches;
And tried to incorporate something new.

The field experiences were the best!
being able to truly see;
what being a teacher is really like
in actuality

Little did you know...
That was a just small glimpse,
a snapshot of a teacher's day,
Not knowing it's far more intense!

Still, you graduated from the program,
applied and were offered the job!
You were hoping for Kindergarten,
but First Grade isn't too far off.

You built your classroom library,
you're ready to set up your room!
The idea of your very first class,
is sending you over the moon!

You visit your school in the summer,
to meet your team and see the space.
The first impression of your new peers,
it's hard not to show it on your face.

One teacher is very sweet,
but the others, you're not so sure.
They stare and refuse to stand,
judging since you approached the door.

You have your first team meeting
You learn that the lesson plans are preset
Little to no room for autonomy
And an unfamiliar blocked format

It's starting to sink in,
what you learned will be hard to use
To do your own thing or be a team player?
Which one do you choose?

Stop. Focus on the standards.
Focus on each new little face.
Don't think about the rest of it,
It will all fall into place.

Meet the teacher day is here!
You're excited to greet them all.
You talk to each one individually.
There's a line going down the hall.

Your students seem sweet,
And they are eager for day one.
This is something you can choose
to really focus on.

It's finally here, the very first day!
You've planned for what it will bring.
Be kind, consistent, and confident.
This is only the beginning.

CHAPTER 3: TEACHING TEACHERS

Letter 2

Dear Sarah Brittany (at age 22),

Upon graduating, I am certain you felt accomplished, prepared, and qualified to run your own classroom. The teaching placements and undergraduate coursework are primary reasons why you feel this way. The significance and rationale behind the undergraduate courses within teacher education programs are important. Because education is ever changing, it becomes crucial to understand the standards, purpose, and requirements outlined by the Georgia Professional Standards Commission's Educator Preparation Rules (2023). This information will help you as you navigate through your first years as a teacher. By understanding the content courses you took, as well as the teacher education courses, you will see how each plays a critical role in your ability to succeed in this field. On the other hand, I want to highlight the significance of certain concepts that should have increased attention and emphasis in an undergraduate, particularly the psychological and social aspects of how students learn. After graduation, it is assumed that teachers are knowledgeable, qualified, prepared, and capable of assuming responsibility for a classroom full of students. It is assumed that teachers are experts in their content area or grade level, per the courses they took and assuming you passed in college. As a teacher who graduated from a teaching program at an accredited university and taught in the elementary school for 7 years, I can say with complete confidence that I was not fully knowledgeable, qualified, prepared, or capable of running my own classroom. Undergraduate placements can only offer a certain degree of experience. Although you are able to teach the students, build relationships, plan your own lessons, observe the supervising teacher, meet

parents, and participate in the school day for several weeks, there are still aspects of teaching that you do not obtain. For example, setting up a classroom, identifying accommodations for struggling students, IEP meetings, grade books, report cards, parent communication, etc. It takes being the lead teacher of your own classroom to fully experience and participate in this. Not to mention, if you are student teaching in the spring semester, you miss open house, or meet the teacher night, the first day of school, the implementation of rules and procedures in the classroom, and so much more. If you are student teaching in the fall semester, you see these things, but you miss the entire second half of the year where most concepts “click” with students, relationships are stronger, benchmark testing results and data comparison, and more. Ideally, student teaching would be for an entire year. But that is a conversation for another time. Some believe that good teaching is a complex process that can be mastered through years of classroom experience. Others believe that experience is not crucial to teacher effectiveness. I was once told that by year 7, I would no longer find teaching to be difficult. This implied that I would have mastered teaching by my seventh year. Given that early childhood education graduates are certified to teach grades Kindergarten through 5th grade, I did not see how this could be possible. Especially, if the administration changed the grade taught each year. I spent 6 years in a first-grade classroom and 1 year in a third-grade classroom. Every year, I felt as though it was the beginning. In a way, it was. The students were different. The team I taught with changed. And often, the key terms or important acronyms changed year to year. One year we focused on essential questions, then that changed to “I can” statements. The following year we were instructed to adhere to John Hattie’s Visible Learning (2008) where every student was expected to know what they were learning, why they were learning it, and how they will know they had learned it. *Do you know how hard it was to teach a 6-year-old the answers to each of these*

questions for every lesson? This was a challenge in of itself. Our administrators would come through and ask 1 or 2 students these three questions and expect them to answer. This is a perfect example of the pressure put on teachers. But none of this was taught in our undergraduate courses. How could it have been if our professors did not know it was going to be the “new fad” or the newest initiative?

The structure of most teacher education programs reflects a comprehensive approach to preparing educators for the diverse challenges they may encounter in the classroom. The curriculum is meticulously designed to align with the specific needs and expectations of different educational levels, including elementary and middle grades education programs, secondary education programs, and P-12 field programs. Content courses lay the foundation for these programs, providing aspiring educators with a deep understanding of crucial concepts such as child development, identity development, moral development, and family and peer influences. These courses delve into the psychological and social aspects of learning, equipping teachers with the knowledge needed to comprehend their students' diverse backgrounds and experiences. This is true, and yet there are still teachers who struggle to manage their own classroom. This is for many reasons, some of which are a result of undergraduate courses.

During your undergraduate education courses, you were introduced to several theories in education, all of which pertain to student development and how they learn. These theories embody the very concepts I am referring to when stressing the need for increased attention and emphasis. By comprehending the learning processes and cognitive development of our students, we, as educators, can tailor our teaching approaches to the individual child. Consider Erik Erikson's psychosocial development theory as an example, which consists of eight distinct stages. Erikson proposed that everyone goes through a series of psychosocial stages throughout

their lives, each characterized by a conflict that must be successfully resolved for healthy personality development. What someone can reconcile within themselves as opposed to not. The stages are as follows:

Stage 1: Trust vs. Mistrust (hope, birth - 18 months)

Stage 2: Autonomy vs. Shame and Doubt (will; 18 months - 3 years)

Stage 3. Initiative vs. Guilt (purpose; ages 3-5)

Stage 4. Industry vs. Inferiority (competence; ages 6-11)

Stage 5. Identity vs. Role Confusion (fidelity; ages 12-18)

Stage 6. Intimacy vs. Isolation (love; ages 18-40)

Stage 7. Generativity vs. Stagnation (care; ages 40-65)

Stage 8. Ego Integrity vs. Despair (wisdom; ages 65- death)

(Cherry, 2022) (Hogan, 2022)

“If we think about it in terms of when people walk. We don’t all develop and walk at the exact same time” (Hogan, 2022). There is an average time in which we all learn to walk, but the development varies based on the individual. This theory discusses how we “reconcile and how we grow in terms of development” (Hogan, 2022). By understanding this fully, a teacher is able to understand that not only do their students learn differently, but develop at diverse rates. Jean Piaget was a theorist who supported this idea. He was the first theorist to identify learning as a developmental cognitive process. He believed students learn by interacting with their environment, creating their own knowledge. While it's true that Piaget's research had its limitations and may not be perfectly generalized to every child, he made substantial contributions to the understanding of cognitive development. On the other hand, Albert Bandura was a theorist who focused on the importance of social interactions and observational learning in shaping

behavior. Bandura conducted a series of experiments based on observational learning, known as the Bobo doll experiments. (McLeod, 2023). He believed students can acquire new behaviors and information by observing others. Furthermore, Urie Bronfenbrenner's Theory of social ecology is a framework used to understand people and their surrounding environment, essentially theorizing that multiple layers shape our development and impact us as a whole (Cherry, 2023). It emphasizes our relationships with others and is known as the Ecological Systems Theory. This theory consists of five systems, or ecological forces that impact an individual (microsystem, mesosystem, exosystem, macrosystem, and chronosystem). These systems are a way of essentially stealing relationships of people and the influences and impacts had on an individual based on how they are connected.

The microsystem includes relationships with family members, peers, or others in one's immediate social circle. These interactions directly influence the development of an individual. The mesosystem considers the relationships and connections between various microsystem elements. These effects can influence not just the individual but also those the individual interacts with. The exosystem includes aspects that do not directly affect the individual but are in the same network (i.e., your child's school or spouse's workplace). The macrosystem focuses more on the larger picture, encompassing the societal and cultural context of an individual. The chronosystem includes time and how transitions and changes affect a person's life (Cherry, 2023).

By understanding this theory, teachers can better understand themselves, and especially their students, and the environmental factors that should be considered when teaching. By doing so, we are able to understand our social constructivism as well as social capital. Social capital is an important social determinant of health. Sadhana Pasricha (2014) states in her ted talk that

social capital is “A sociological concept that refers to the intangible, invisible resources and assets that emerge from our social interactions and our relationships. Some examples are networks, norms, trust, reputation, and goodwill” (2014). Pierre Bourdieu (1986) defined social capital as the “aggregate of the actual or potential resources which are linked to the possession of a durable network of more or less institutionalized relationships of mutual acquaintance and recognition” (p 21). Constant awareness and acknowledgment of these theories allow teachers to truly put their students at the forefront of their teaching, while also being able to understand themselves and reflect on their own health behaviors. There are several studies that have shown social capital to be significantly correlated with individual health status and health behaviors, it serves teachers to be aware of how social capital plays a role in the lives of their students (Pattussi, et al. 2016; Lin X, et al. 2019). And while we learned these theories in college, it is not a concept that teachers refer back to often. Teachers should recognize the significance of understanding these various educational theories. By incorporating these theories into our teaching practices and engaging in reflective processes, we can use strategies with a better chance of effectively reaching each of our students. It is our job as teachers to bring in research, observation, background, and personality to identify and implement the proper approach.

Another fundamental aspect of the teaching profession is self-reflection. In a ted talk led by James Schmidt he discusses the value of self-reflection. Specifically, Schmidt (2015) explains one's self-awareness on their thoughts, words and actions when he says it is important for us to “Examine what you thought, what you think, and what you're going to think; what you said, what you say, and what you're going to say; what you've done, what you're doing, and what you're going to do” (Schmidt, 2015). Imagine if all educators did just that! Imagine if these theories were a larger part of our preparation for becoming a teacher! By examining these

aspects in a comprehensive manner, we can gain insights into our own patterns, identify areas for improvement, and make informed choices for the future. It aligns with the idea of self-awareness and the continuous process of personal development.

Encouraging students to pay special attention to these content courses is key. More so, by helping them understand that this information is critical to a teacher's and student's success in the classroom. By grasping the respective details of human development, teachers gain insights into the unique needs and challenges students may face as they navigate various phases of growth. This knowledge fosters a more empathetic and practical teaching approach, contributing to a positive and inclusive learning environment.

In addition to content courses, there is a necessity for management and experiential courses, such as field experiences. These components are essential for translating theoretical knowledge into practical skills and helping future educators develop effective classroom management strategies and behavior management techniques. The experiential aspect of the program ensures that students are well-prepared for the dynamic and real-world scenarios they will encounter in their teaching careers. In one of my field experiences, a course assignment was to teach an entire lesson that I created to the class. I had to open with a hook, introduce the standard, break down the standard, model "I do, you do, we do" teaching approach, and assess their knowledge whether through formative or summative assessment styles. I also was required to introduce my own classroom management strategy that was relevant to the lesson topic. A class that was typically very off task, and difficult to reign in, participated in the entire lesson with little to no redirection. To me, it seemed as though these students were excited for a change of pace in the classroom. It did not give me the "real-life" teaching experience that I think practicum students learn best from. I felt that I could have had the same experience teaching the lesson

to a classroom of my peers. My biggest issue with this particular assignment was the classroom management strategy. The guidelines indicated that it needed to be relevant to the lesson; essentially themed. I read *Cloudy With a Chance of Meatballs* (1978) by Judi Barrett, and taught a lesson on prediction to a group of 2nd graders. Their classroom management strategy was based on their engagement, participation, and behavior, they could potentially earn 5 meatballs for the bowl of spaghetti (velcro meatballs and a hand-drawn bowl of spaghetti on a triboard). This was one of my very first experiences teaching, but as I reflected on the lesson as a whole, I realized that as a teacher, we do not change our classroom management strategy for every lesson. That goes against any research that supports consistency within the classroom. It would have been more beneficial to take on the supervising teachers management style and stick with the *Student versus Teacher* game. This is what I mean by “real-world” scenarios.

As we prepare the next generation of educators, it is crucial to emphasize the holistic approach taken by teacher education programs. The synergy between content courses, management and experiential courses, and adherence to professional standards create a well-rounded educational experience. This integrated approach equips teachers with the tools they need not only to impart academic knowledge but also to foster their students’ social and emotional development. I encourage our students to approach their education with diligence and an open mind. Taking thorough notes during content courses, understanding the significance of psychosocial development, and actively participating in experiential learning opportunities will contribute to their growth as compassionate and effective educators.

Sincerely,

Sarah Brittany (at age 32)

A Teacher's Training - Supporting Literature

Many previously published resources aid in preparing for a career in education. Examples include instructions on teacher conduct and classroom management strategies (Ayers & Alexander-Tanner, 2010), (Brophy & Evertson, 1976), (Kriegel, 2013). Published novels exist containing letters of advice addressed to new teachers, providing answers to questions and suggesting actions to navigate specific situations and challenges (Kozol, 2007), (Burke & Krajicek, 2006). Moreover, there are countless instances outlining what teachers should be acquainted with before stepping into the classroom. When preparing student teachers for the field of education, many institutions have a course of study that includes experiences in the classroom. The process differs with each institution, but upon completing the undergraduate teaching program, students have the opportunity to experience the day-to-day dynamics in the classroom of their choice. The purpose behind these field experiences is to enable students to participate and practice the role of a teacher.

"Typically, when they begin student teaching, they find that little of what they learned in their teacher ed courses is clearly applicable, so that they end up imitating what their supervising teachers do. This is of more practical usefulness than their earlier experiences, although the quality of what they learn in this apprenticeship role is directly dependent upon the skills of the supervising teacher. Furthermore, most student teachers get to work with only one supervising teacher, so that they do not get to see a wide range of teaching styles or have an opportunity to rationally select styles that are most suitable to them." (Brophy and Evertson, 1976, p. viii)

However, research indicates that these students require additional support. Field experience programs have been in place for decades. In addition, "Teacher competence is a topic

that has been increasingly discussed in the last decades” (Laas, 2020, p. 35). I felt fully prepared and ready to teach on my own after my student teaching field placement. I completed my student teaching semester in Kindergarten. I planned and taught all the lessons for 4 weeks straight and completed all requirements of the teaching program. I essentially took on the role of the teacher. My supervising teacher observed and helped as an aid might during the day. This same semester, I was accepted into the International Study Opportunity (ISO) program where I was an exchange student at Sheffield Hallam University in England and placed in a Year 1 class for 4 weeks. Upon graduation, I felt that I was fully prepared and ready to teach Kindergarten on my own. However, the position offered was first grade. When teachers graduate from an accredited university, they are certified to teach a specific range of grades. For early childhood, this range is Kindergarten to 5th grade. For middle grades, the range is 4th through 8th grades with a focused content area. For high school, most often, these teachers have a degree in their content field and receive a Master's degree in teaching. Regardless, if the 12-week student teaching field placement is not the exact grade that we are hired to teach as a full-time teacher at that same school, are we really prepared to teach our classrooms? Even though “accreditation requires an institutional commitment to student learning and achievement” (SACSCOC, p. 5); unless every pre-service teacher was hired to teach in the same school and same grade where they student taught, can we say these students are fully prepared to take on their own classroom? Not that all teachers should be trained exactly the same, as no school is the same, but even the teacher preparation programs across colleges differ. “For example... some programs in the United States have sought to prepare teachers specifically for urban schools; some have focused on preparation for schools serving particular ethnic cultural, or language groups; some have taken up a social justice mission; and some have concentrated on preparing teachers who are certified in content

shortage areas such as math and sciences. Still other programs are grounded in innovative partnerships with local schools, responding to the needs of particular communities or regions” (Connelly, et al., 2007, p. 264). But still “Teachers who are satisfied with the education they received are more likely to remain in the profession” (Laas, 2020, p. 36). Kini and Podolsky (2016) write, “The possibility that the teachers with more experience are simply more or less able as a group than those with less experience—demonstrate the complex dynamics of the public education system that researchers try to account for to ensure their estimates are accurate and minimally biased” (pg. 7). So, again I ask at what point are teachers prepared to teach?

What I Wish I Knew

Finally! My very own classroom, here I come!
 I officially passed the GACE and the Graduation ceremony is done.
 I accepted a teaching job, it's time to start anew!
 Student Teaching taught me everything! ... Oh, what I wish I knew.

Being a teacher – Oh it requires so many things,
 Patience and perspective, and being a player on a team.
 Being a teacher means you are not proud, but you are humble and you are true
 Self-reflection is critical in this profession... Oh what I wish I knew.

Self-reflection is more than looking in a mirror,
 It's observing from a distance, regardless of your fear.
 It's knowing what you've thought, what you're thinking, and what you're going to think,
 It's contemplating actions and identifying the missing link.

Self- reflection is knowing your purpose. It's knowing your why.
 It's an understanding of yourself and it can be challenging at times.
 The introspection of how we think and feel allows us to see through,
 To help us truly understand others... Oh what I wish I knew.

When understanding oneself, we see how we're influenced by others,
 Whether our parents or our students, our mentors, sisters, or brothers.
 Bronfenbrenner's Theory explains it (Micro, Meso, Exo, Macro, and Chrono System too),
 Our individual systems impact our day-to-day in the classroom. Oh, what I wish I knew.

His theory is put into effect in the classroom in various ways,
 Utilizing data to understand students is an example of how it is portrayed.
 Observations of student responses and interactions with each other too.
 This theory has brought to light knowledge of my past students, oh what I wish I knew.

Social Cognitivism is another theory; it's significant to know,
 Albert Bandura influenced history, and the experiment with Bobo.
 Observation and modeling are crucial in how and why we learn,
 Our behaviors are a choice and the consequences are firm.

We, as humans, self-regulate our learning; we balance all that is going on.
 Behavior is determined by 3 factors, and through each, we can learn from.
 Our students observe our behavior, their parents and guardians too.

It's used to demonstrate what they have learned... oh what I wish I knew.

Social Constructivism is a whole other component when it comes to teaching,
The forms of social learning are examples of teamwork and outreaching.
Competition, Cooperation, and Collaboration combined,
Create a healthy workspace, and the environment becomes aligned.

Spencer (2016) articulated it well when he said as follows:
"Cooperation minus collaboration equals disunity" ... and it shows.
He further explains when to use each approach in his discussion video of these two,
Cooperation vs. Collaboration; Shared goals vs. shared values... oh what I wish I knew.

Further along the social train we're introduced to Social Capital.
It's all in who you know, mentality – Relationships should be actable.
Investment in others, become our success according to Paricha in 2014.
We can learn from other communities. We should want them on our team.

Social Capital requires a contextual approach, with those outside our own field.
If we listen to others, we can learn from them, new truth can be revealed.
Although it may look different in other areas, one thing holds true,
We cannot be successful on our own accord... oh what I wish I knew.

All in all, these make so much sense - thinking back on my own class,
Teachers benefit from understanding their students and the connections each one has.
The way they interact, their behaviors and how they learn too
It would make anyone a better teacher, oh what I wish I knew.

Circling back around, self-reflection involves each of us,
Our Ego Network identifies our resources and those we trust.
Our support systems are how we become successful in all that we do,
These people deserve more than "Shout Outs", oh what I wish I knew.

Our undergraduate degrees teach us the basics of what we need to know,
But it's the deeper understanding that we get, the further in education we go.
We learn from additional degrees, our community and experiences too,
If only preservice teachers understood this at first, oh what I wish they knew.

CHAPTER 4: MULTIFACETED PROFESSION

Letter 3

Dear Sarah Brittany (age 23),

Until now, the topic has centered on transitioning from pre-service teacher to first-year teacher. I am eager to shift our focus to the day-to-day intricacies of life within the classroom. As a teacher, the expectations are borderline unrealistic. The expression “teachers wear many hats” is a metaphor that describes the diverse roles and responsibilities that a teacher takes on in their profession. Educators are expected and often times required to perform various tasks beyond their contracted role of delivering subject content. From teacher to mentor, counselor, advocate, and even clerical worker the tasks are many. A large part of being a teacher is interacting with students and their families. This aspect of teaching is what I find to be the most rewarding, most meaningful, and most enjoyable. In this letter, I will share two personal stories, each detailing meaningful interaction with students and their families. Both stories provide a unique glimpse into my passion for being a teacher, the connection I feel toward my students, and how this job goes beyond simply delivering instruction.

The first of these is a heartwarming incident that will unfold at school involving one of your first-grade students. This particular year will, in time, stand out as your most cherished year of teaching. You will have very sweet and very bright students this year. Among them will be the student to whom this story belongs, Audrey. (I have altered her name to respect this student’s privacy.) I am not exaggerating when I say Audrey arrived at school each day with the biggest smile on her face, eager to learn. She loved school! I remember the very first time I met her at Open House. Open House is the term used for the night students and parents are able to meet the

teacher before the school year begins. Audrey came in with the utmost enthusiasm. She immediately found her desk and her face lit up when she realized she knew other names on the desks around hers. Audrey sat down and started swinging her legs back and forth under her desk. Her feet barely reached the floor. She had the biggest smile on her face as she looked all around the classroom, wide-eyed. I looked at her and said, “You must be Audrey!” She looked at me and said, “And you must be my very own first-grade teacher!” Audrey was clever, quick-witted, and very kind-natured.

One day, Audrey came to school with her brand-new glasses. I had been hearing about her anticipation of getting glasses for weeks, and how she was “impatiently” (her word) waiting on her mom to save money to buy them. She was so excited to be able to see, “without fuzzies” (her words). Audrey took excellent care of her glasses. We made sure they were in the case when we left the classroom for breaks or recess. We cleaned the lenses with the proper cloth and were very careful when taking them off and putting them back on. One day, Audrey wore her glasses to lunch. This was not uncommon, but often times, she would choose to leave them in the classroom so as to not accidentally leave them on the table. Unfortunately, on this day Audrey accidentally left her brand-new glasses on her lunch tray when she took it through the scullery. In the hustle and bustle of the many trays coming in at once, the glasses were unknowingly dumped into the trash by the staff member emptying trays. When Audrey realized she did not have her glasses, once we got back to the classroom, we began the search. (Any teaching attempt would be futile until the glasses were found.) It was not until the end of the school day that we realized what might have happened. I not only felt compelled but obligated to do something, thanks to the gut-wrenching feeling in my stomach. I’m the teacher. She is 6 years old. I should

have been standing at the scullery assisting with the tray return... But I wasn't. I could have caught the glasses before they made it into the dumpster... But I didn't.

I approached our custodial staff and explained the situation of the missing glasses. Unfortunately, all lunch trash had already been taken to the school dumpster. *Of course.* After school, our school nurse and I meticulously sifted through the garbage in the dumpster behind the school, determined to locate the missing glasses. *That's right. We went dumpster diving.* After a very thorough search, we found them buried among the discarded trays. Covered in food spoiled milk and other trash, unexpected feelings of relief and gratitude came over me instantly. Of course, I do not believe it is in the job description of a teacher to go "dumpster diving". But I do believe to be in the role of an elementary teacher, one must truly find joy in things such as this. *Yes, that's what I said, find joy in sifting through lunch trash for glasses for your 1st grade student.* I did not teach one lesson after lunch that day. We searched and searched for those glasses. We did 2 rotations of intervention and extension groups, went to recess, went to PE, and then packed up to go home. The glasses were immediately sanitized and given back to Audrey once they were found. The smile on her face (and the relief on her mother's) was priceless. I want to end this story with "This is what teaching is all about!". But that would be a misrepresentation. This is absolutely not what teaching is all about, but it is a big part of what makes it worth it.

Another story that offers similar insight of a teacher's compassion ironically occurred during the same school year. Tragically, one of my students, Nancy experienced the loss of her mom. *Lost. Her. Mom. As in, her mom died.* It was undoubtedly an incredibly challenging time for her, especially as a 6-year-old. *Can you even imagine?* I wanted to ensure she received the support she needed both academically and emotionally. *But what about me? I was not at all*

prepared or equipped to handle this. I had only experienced loss a few times, none of which were my parents. How was I supposed to comfort her? I could not imagine what this felt like or what I needed to do. Someone mentioned to me that I was her only constant at that point. This hit hard. I knew I needed to do something, *but what?* I ended up giving Nancy a journal. This journal served as a private space for her to express her thoughts and feelings. She used it as a channel to communicate with her late mom. At first, I was hesitant that she was using the journal in this way but I realized that it allowed her a form of solace and a way to navigate through such an impossible time.

I attended the funeral as Nancy requested. She sang a verse of Amazing Grace in front of everyone. Many who attended the funeral could not believe how brave this little girl was, me included. I wanted to show not only professional support but genuine care for her during this difficult time. Attending the funeral allowed me to express condolences and offer any assistance needed, reinforcing that I am not only a teacher but that I genuinely care for her as well as all of my students. Also, it was devastating. When I think back on this time, I think about how I tried to put myself in this little girl's shoes. I imagined wanting my life at school to understand the difficulties going on at home. I suppose I thought by attending the funeral, I could somehow combine her worlds to make her more comfortable.

As Mother's Day approached, recognizing the potential sensitivity of the occasion, I adjusted the assignments. I aimed to create an environment that considered Nancy's emotions and unique situation. We focused on mothers *and* fathers, on grandmothers, step-mothers, and even big sisters. By modifying assignments and approaching the topic with great sensitivity, Nancy and the other students seemed to really enjoyed the activities. Nancy showed tremendous resilience and strength throughout this challenging period. This situation, along with many other

instances, led to us keeping in touch with each other over the years. (I highly recommend keeping up with students who resonate with you during your time as a teacher.) I just recently saw Nancy, her little sister, and her step mother at a local park. It has always been one of my favorite parts of being a teacher to run into students outside of the school or classroom. The shock on their face of seeing teachers in public never ceases to entertain me. It is as if they expect us to set up camp overnight in our classroom and never leave the school property. Could you imagine?

Thoughtfully,

Sarah Brittany (age 32)

A Teacher's Experience - Supporting Literature

Experience. Hands-on, in the field, full body immersed experience. That is how we prepare preservice teachers to be full time teachers. We learn from our experiences. As simple and obvious as that statement is, it's true. Of course, we learn from videos, lectures, group projects, and independent assignments too, but ultimately for teachers to feel prepared, feel confident, and be successful, they need the "real-life" experience in the classrooms with students doing what they will be doing as a lead teacher. Pre-service teachers need to have the opportunity to learn how the school runs, how their team coordinates, how to follow a pacing guide, and how to create lesson plans based on an adopted curriculum just as much as they need to build relationships with their students.

Schubert and Ayers (1992) introduce the idea of Teacher Lore in their work *Teacher Lore: Learning from our own experience*. Teacher Lore, or effective teaching as Schubert and Ayers (1992) write, is "what we know to be similar in our teaching experiences" (p. 14). They bring to light the concept of teaching as a choice and the categorization of teachers in the field into high-involvement versus low-involvement. "There are differences between high- and low-involvement teachers in both their initial and their current perspectives on teaching as a career choice" (Schubert and Ayers, 1992, p. 151). Ultimately, your success as a teacher is dependent upon your mindset. They further elaborate on these differences, "The present-day attitudes of the low-involvement teachers reflect a disappointment in the difference between the idealistic expectations they held for teaching and the realities of the profession" (Schubert and Ayers, 1992, p. 151). This text introduces the notion that aligns with my intention to explore teachers' mentality and mindset, but with a different emphasis. My aim is to offer hope and inspiration

through the letters and poems. Specifically, I hope to reach teachers with low involvement, especially within their initial years, through this study.

Robert Lake is a curriculum scholar that models the epistolary genre with brilliance. His work is pivotal in my research and truly helped guide my theoretical framework. Lake (2013) published *We Saved the Best for You: Letters of Hope, Imagination, and Wisdom for 21st Century Educators* with Tricia M. Kress. These letters bring just that; imagination, hope, and wisdom to teachers. This guided my choice of topic in achieving the goals I had for this dissertation. One of the letters in this collection was written by Carolyn Ali-khan (2013). She writes to future educators about challenging inexorability, specifically, she writes, “I want you to know that education can be the place where inexorability is conquered by hope” (p. 7). Ali-Khan grounds her belief in the work of Paulo Freire. She considers herself an optimist for several reasons, one being that she “teaches for a living!” (p. 7). “Despite all of its pressures and frustrations, to teach is to journey through hope” (Ali-khan in Lake and Kress, 2013, p. 7). I incorporate this particular letter as an example of how the art of epistolary writing can capture a unique perspective and make the reader feel as though the letter is solely written for that individual. It is a powerful tool and medium for writers to use to convey their idea or communicate an important message.

Within this same text is a letter written by Rick Ayers titled, *Letter to a Young Teacher: Reframing Teaching in No-Respect Times*. Ayers writes to his nephew, Malik who is a six-year sixth-grade math, science, and Spanish teacher. In this letter, Ayers offers encouragement through personal advice that can help new teachers on their lowest days. He proposes ways we could frame our job as teachers: miracles and being an activist. Ayers writes, “We teachers fight for success in the classroom every day and many days we fail - like health professionals, it’s part of the job and we try to learn from the losses. But sometimes we work our magic and it comes

out right” (Ayers in Lake and Kress, 2013, p. 82). It is the moments when everything "comes out right" that sustain many teachers. Why teach? For some, it is simply a chosen career path; for others, it is a calling, a source of fulfillment, passion, and joy.

Many, Many Hats

Not physical; invisible

Metaphorical, if you will.

Many, many hats

A teacher wears still.

Counselor, organizer,

An evaluator too.

Facilitator, problem solver

Or advocate to name a few.

Students need them all

Each day they arrive

To feel at least someone

In their corner and on their side.

A smiling face or confidant

Their biggest fan at that

Although, rarely acknowledged

A teacher's many, many hats.

CHAPTER 5: SAFE SPACE

Letter 4

Dear Sarah Brittany (age 23),

Similar to the theme of teachers' roles, I want to bring greater attention to the multifaceted nature of the teaching profession. Despite the many “hats” we wear, metaphorically speaking. We all share the common goal of creating a safe environment that is positive and welcoming for all students. But we find ourselves more focused on the various challenges as opposed to the bigger picture. We must understand the diverse demeanors our students bring to the door each morning. Some may carry the weight of a recent argument with their brother or sister, while others may still bear the echoes of parental quarreling throughout the night. A few might have spent the previous night in cramped quarters, sharing a bed with siblings, while others were greeted by the warmth of a smiling and loving mother or father in the comfort of their own bedroom. This diversity in experiences is not intended to cast a shadow but to highlight various differences between each of our students. This letter serves as a gentle reminder that our role extends beyond content delivery; we are also facilitators of understanding and compassion.

Have you heard the song *Concrete Angel* by Martina McBride (2001)? Aside from my own experiences as a student, this was my first realization of the crucial role that teachers have the opportunity to play in the lives of their students. This song addresses the issue of child abuse and neglect. It tells the story of a young girl who is a victim of abuse at the hands of her own parents. It serves as a powerful reminder of the importance of recognizing and addressing child abuse, as well as supporting those who may be experiencing it. I remember hearing one of the

verses in this song and promising myself that I would never be *that teacher*. The verses of the song that I am referring to are as follows: “She walks to school with the lunch she packed. Nobody knows what she's holdin' back. Wearin' the same dress she wore yesterday, she hides the bruises with linen and lace. The teacher wonders, but she doesn't ask it's hard to see the pain behind the mask. Bearing the burden of a secret storm. Sometimes she wishes she was never born.” (McBride, 2001, Verses 1 & 2) The little girl in this song did not survive. Teachers are considered mandated reporters. Meaning, they are legally required to report suspected cases of child abuse to the appropriate authorities. In Georgia, teachers became mandated reporters as a result of the Georgia Child Abuse Act enacted in 1969. For some students, the teacher may be their only advocate.

I found myself toeing the line of burnout as a teacher on many occasions. My students, one way or another would always pull me back and allow me to see what truly matters; them. I remember one day in particular when my patience was running thin. We were nearing the Holiday break and my students all seemed to be “acting out”. (We were all in need of a break.) We were running late for lunch because one of my students could not find their lunch card. My class was stopped in the hallway by another teacher because they were “not acting appropriately” almost immediately after leaving the classroom. I then realized the class who typically goes to lunch after us, ended up in front of us in line, which meant our lunch time just went from 25 minutes to 15 minutes. I sent my class ahead of me down the hall and I stopped to tie the shoe of one of my students. I was speed-walking down the hall to catch up when I tripped over the custodian's vacuum cleaner cord. This would have “sent me over the edge”. But as I fell, I heard one of my students call, “Slow down, Ms. Sandbach, you’re gonna blow a gasket!!” *Now, this came from a student I will remember for the rest of my life. He was every bit of genuine as he*

was intelligent. He made all the challenges that came with teaching worth it. I was so tickled, I could not hold in my laughter. It was the funniest moment I have ever experienced with a student at that time. With the laughter came an immediate sense of relief from my short-tempered feelings. It was at this moment when I realized these seemingly “little things” can significantly influence a teacher’s day, and students notice such things. But it does not have to be that way. As trivial as it sounds, this was the only December 5th these students would ever experience in 1st grade, at that school, that year. It was my responsibility to shape it into a positive experience for them. They saw my frustration, and this student voiced what he saw. This helped me to see how my actions were affecting them. It seems unconventional, but this particular day held distinct significance for me, as I realized how my demeanor could impact them. They really do look up to you as a teacher. *Especially* if they like you. I once heard a Ted talk by Rita Pierson (2013). She said “Children don’t learn from people they don’t like”. Something so simple, and yet so true. I bring this up because often times we are so wrapped up in the “everything else” we forget about the most important thing, our students.

As I am writing this, I am reminded of another student who was fascinated with making comics, using me and my co-teacher as the main character. At the time, I was called by my maiden name (Sandbach) and my co-teacher was Mrs. Blumenthal. The comics were titled, *Super Sandbach and Bright Blumenthal*. This particular student did not care to do any other assignments, but he was very passionate about creating these comics. I used this to motivate him. If he could do part of the assignment, and show that he understood the standard or concept being taught, he could then spend the rest of the block on a new comic. He was a very bright student and this seemed to work well. Of course, this had to be our secret from the other students. We also had a very clear understanding that if we had a visitor in the classroom, he had to put it

away. He thought this was a fun *game*. The *little things* really do make an impact. Four years later, I still receive these comics. His mother and I keep in touch and she sends me pictures from time to time. I think he will be a published author one day.

In my journey as an educator, I've gained insights that I believe are invaluable for fostering a consistent, inclusive, and welcoming environment. It's essential to be aware of our students' various backgrounds, understanding that their experiences shape their perspectives and interactions in the classroom. These lessons, gained later in my career, have been instrumental in creating a positive learning atmosphere. Because of these lessons, I am writing this letter to you. I wish I had known this before entering my first year as an educator. It would have helped me navigate the complexities of our students' lives more effectively and with greater empathy. Every day, I would remind myself that even though each day seems to run together into weeks and then years, for most of these students, it is the only first-grade experience they will have. It is up to us to make it a positive, memorable, and enjoyable experience. As you begin your career, try to remember to cultivate an environment where every student feels seen, heard, and valued.

Warm regards,

Sarah Brittany

A Teacher's Responsibility- Supporting Literature

I've never worked a day in my life.” (Hall, 2003/1993, p. 3) This is the beginning of Donald Hall's *Life Work*. He writes, “There are jobs, there are chores, and there is work... When I taught school, the classroom fit none of these categories” (Hall, 2003/1993, p. 4). However, I would argue it fits all of these categories. Teachers do more than a typical job would entail, but teaching is a job and a career. Chores are repetitive tasks necessary to maintain a decent household or daily life.. or a classroom. *Work* as Hall (2003/1993) refers to it, is physical labor, working with “hands or shoulders, or legs” (p. 3). Have you ever had to chase a 5-year-old down the hall, headed for the school's front doors? It was the fastest I have ever run in my life. Teachers, especially in elementary school, take on more roles and responsibilities than the typical job description of a teacher. Teach Georgia (2024) writes the job description of “the perfect candidate” for an elementary teacher to “possess strong instructional and organizational skills, be energetic and enthusiastic for learning, and possess excellent communication and relationship skills” (2024, para 1). A very generic description that does not go into detail about day-to-day tasks because it would be next to impossible to cover every detail of the profession. “From Kindergarten to high school and special education to statistics, one theme runs consistently throughout every great teacher's career: their job does not end with the school day. Although standing in front of the classroom is a huge part of a teacher's responsibilities, they extend far beyond that into the lives of their students, their students' families and their community” (TEACH.COM, 2020, para 1). Of course, first and foremost, a teacher's responsibility is to their students. In addition, “Teachers aspire to educate, to inspire, to learn, and to affect positive change” (TEACH.COM, 2020, para 2). But in doing so, teachers must build relationships with their students which requires mentoring, facilitating, counseling,

advising, motivating, coaching, parenting, mediating, and so much more. Only then can teachers effectively teach.

Hiding

The unwashed clothes.

The quiet smile.

She sits and waits to be approached.

Brilliant.

Kind.

but hiding behind.

The teacher welcomes her

She senses safety.

CHAPTER 6: FLEXIBILITY

Letter 5

Dear Sarah Brittany (age 23),

I am writing to share some reflections on the evaluation aspect of teaching and the necessary relationship with the administration. The state of Georgia uses the Teacher Keys Effectiveness System (TKES) to evaluate certified employees in the education system. I know how important an effective evaluation system is to enhance teaching practices. However, it is important to point out certain aspects that can contribute to subjectivity and its consequences on teacher morale and career development.

TKES is designed to assess and improve teacher performance. It undoubtedly plays a vital role in maintaining and enhancing the quality of education. However, its subjectivity poses a challenge, as assessments can easily be influenced by individual perspectives. Recognizing the diverse teaching styles and approaches of teachers, it is essential to ensure that evaluations accurately reflect the subtle differences in each teacher's strengths and areas for growth.

Subjectivity in evaluations can inadvertently affect teacher morale and career trajectories. Teachers' confidence and enthusiasm can be impacted if they feel their efforts are not adequately recognized. This, in turn, can hinder professional development and discourage teachers from exploring innovative teaching methods. As you continue through this school year, you will be observed through this process. I have found that by reading and reflecting on the standards you will be evaluated, it is possible to be better prepared for these observations. Your evaluators will be your administrators. Strive for open communication with them regarding their expectations. This will help you to understand what they are looking for when they come to see you teach. Most importantly, prepare your students for visitors. You can tell your students that whenever

there is a visitor, it is usually because they want to see the “very best class in the whole school.”

This will help your students understand that whoever comes into the classroom expects to see the best, so they have to act like the best. Had I known this during my first year of teaching, I might have had a better encounter with my first observation.

Recess is scheduled daily from 2:40pm until 3:05pm (Our school day ends at 3:30 pm). We had indoor recess because of the thunderstorm outside. At 3:05pm, instead of having my students clean up indoor recess, my co-teacher convinced me to extend recess to the end of the day instead of cleaning up and teaching my planned lesson in Social Studies. *It was only 25 minutes. Nothing seemed to have gone right today. Our Encore classes were canceled, so I did not have planning to prepare for our math lesson. Another teacher borrowed my math manipulatives so I had to teach without them, the bathrooms were out of order, so we had to send students to another building to use the facilities. Needless to say, we had a rough day up until this point. I knew our administration was making the rounds of observations, but surely, they wouldn't observe at the very end of the day. Right?* Wrong. My principal walked in at 3:16 pm, hoping to watch my Social Studies lesson for 10 minutes. Instead, we were in the middle of indoor recess, where some of my students were watching a video, and others were doing a Valentine's Craft with me at the small group table. My administrator observed this craft for my walk-through observation. At the time, our county was implementing the visual learning initiative, where students are expected to be able to answer the following questions: What are you learning? Why are you learning it? How will you know you have learned it? - My students were well-versed in answering these questions as it pertained to each of our lessons. I am certain my principal knew that we were not on schedule. Before the 10 minutes were completed, she turned to leave the classroom with a look on her face that said *We will try this again another day.*

But before my principal reached the door, one of my students ran to her and said, “Just in case you are wondering, we are learning about Valentines because it is a holiday about love and we love each other in this classroom. I know I’ve learned about Valentine’s Day because I have this (student shows her craft) to take home and show my mommy!” My principal looked directly back at me and offered a smile that suggested it was going to be fine.

That afternoon I received an email from the TKES Platform prompting me to sign in and sign off on a recent evaluation. My stomach dropped at the thought of my principal actually evaluating the lesson she saw that day. Much to my surprise, it was a very good evaluation. My principal chose to find the good that was happening in my classroom that day. She wrote, “This teacher has created a safe and positive learning environment for her students. All students were engaged in the activity as the teacher assisted step-by-step. Students could answer visual learning questions and understood the impact the content had on their lives. The teacher is in constant communication with student families and remains professional in all aspects of her work day.” It could have been just as easy for this principal to take a very different approach to this evaluation. She could have focused on Standard 3: Instructional Strategies or Standard 8: Academically Challenging Environment, instead of Standard 7: Positive Learning Environment or Standard 9: Professionalism and Standard 10: Communication (GADOE, 2023).

After all my students left for the day, I stopped by my principal’s office to explain that afternoon. She told me a very similar story of when she was teaching and her administration came to watch. Her lesson did not go as planned, and she was not given the grace she felt she could have benefited from that day. My principal explained that she had heard me with my students and seen other parts of my day and was confident in my teaching ability. Had she

simply evaluated only the last part of the day, it would not be an adequate representation of my teaching as a whole.

In instances where lessons do not go as planned, flexibility, understanding, and grace in the classroom is paramount. Teachers should be encouraged to reflect on these experiences, identify areas for improvement, and adjust their instructional strategies accordingly. Establishing a culture of continuous improvement, where constructive feedback is welcomed and valued, can contribute to the overall growth and success of our teaching community. Furthermore, lessons that deviate from expectations, whether planned or unplanned, are an inevitable part of the teaching profession. It is crucial to create a supportive environment that allows teachers to anticipate and navigate unexpected challenges. Offering professional development opportunities that focus on adaptability and flexibility can empower educators to handle unforeseen circumstances confidently.

In conclusion, while some may see TKES to be a valuable tool for evaluating teacher effectiveness, it is crucial to address the potential subjectivity in the process and mitigate its impact on teacher morale and career development. By fostering a culture of collaboration, and relationships, and promoting flexibility in the classroom, we can create an environment that empowers educators to thrive and, in turn, enhances the overall quality of education.

Thoughtfully,

Sarah Brittany Greneker

A Teacher's Accountability - Supporting Literature

There have been many evaluation schemes that have been developed with the intent of improving teacher performance and ultimately enhancing student achievement. Beginning with a teachers ability to teach community values and religious beliefs, teacher evaluation has evolved into a more formalized offering feedback to the teacher, but also determining the value, worth, and merit of one's teaching. However, "the trouble with teacher evaluation is that teaching itself is a highly complicated process. No one knows precisely what ideal role a teacher should perform to affect excellent student learning, not even when the context of a classroom is specified." (Shinkfield and Stufflebeam, 1995, p. 9). So, given the highly complex nature of teaching, teachers cannot use identical approaches to delivering their content, which should also indicate that teachers not be evaluated in an identical way. Not to mention, "very successful teachers often displayed quite different characteristics of effectiveness" (Shinkfield and Stufflebeam, 1995, p. 19). Teacher evaluations is necessary, just as any form of accountability for a professional. It's the subjectivity and a teacher's inability to "fight back" or argue an evaluation.

The Georgia Department of Education uses Teacher Keys of Effectiveness System for their teachers. They claim to be "designed for building teacher effectiveness and ensuring consistency and comparability throughout the state" (GADOE, 2023, para 1). It consists of three components: Teacher Assessment and Performance Standards (TAPS), Professional Growth and Student Growth. The observaion portion in the TKES handbook reads, "a minimum of one Walkthrough and one Formative Observation/Assessment is completed as the required observations per teacher. The Formative Assessment Process includes the Formative Observation. All ten Performance Standards shall be rated in the Formative Assessment Process.

Walkthrough Observations shall be at least ten minutes in duration and Formative Observations shall be at least thirty minutes in duration (Woods, 2023, p. 13). This is where the subjectivity is evident. Rating a teacher on a I to IV scale based on 10 standards. Who is to say my version of proficient is better or worse than someone else? For teachers to be anxious and overly focused on their evaluations, (i.e. when it will take place, what they are looking for, if it will check all the boxes, etc.) we miss the main point; teaching our students. It could be the most beautifully crafted and planned lesson, but our students do not retain any of it. It could be the most thrown together lesson, and our students cling to every word. Who is to say that the one or two lessons our administrators evaluate should define who you are as a teacher? It shouldn't.

The Plan

It's funny how we try to plan

Strategically craft and prep so we can

Teach a lesson from start to finish

To emphasize the standards and not diminish

The focus, the topic or the main point

We get organized so we don't disappoint.

So we stay on task, stay in our lane

Student growth we strive to sustain.

In reality, it's out of our control.

A spilled water bottle, fire drill, or student to console.

We try - we fail - we try again.

It's truly so funny how we *think* we can plan.

CHAPTER 7: A DIFFERENT PERSPECTIVE

Letter 6

Dear Sarah Brittany (at age 23),

Imagine this! I was visiting my friend for the weekend in Savannah, Georgia. We sat at a quaint coffee shop and talked about how life has been since we both graduated from college. I reached in my purse for my wallet so I could pay for our coffee and attached to my wallet is an Elmer's glue stick. Somehow, this glue stick managed to make it from a 1st-grade classroom in Augusta, Georgia to a coffee shop in Savannah, Georgia *without the cap*. When my friend saw this, she started laughing, rolled her eyes, and said, "You're such a teacher..." indicating this would only ever happen in the life of a teacher. This encounter prompted my thinking about how teachers, specifically elementary school teachers could easily be a separate entity. I am unsure if it is the unique roles and responsibilities of the day-to-day life of a teacher, the educational focus of the development of the mind, or just the fact that we are surrounded by kids ranging between ages 5 and 10 for 8 hours each day; teachers belong to a distinct and specialized group.

I say this because there are very few people who truly understand the mind of a teacher. I suppose it is the same with any job or career or anything that you spend a significant amount of time doing, but you begin to see the world through a new lens. Think about it. A financial advisor sees every conversation or new person as a new investment opportunity. The moment a dentist meets someone new they are analyzing the smile and teeth of that person. A teacher, however, views things through a lens of how they will impact their students. Simple things like cleaning out a drawer at home or a cabinet and finding containers and immediately thinking about ways they can use them in the classroom. This makes me think of a time when my mom

cleaned out her cabinets in the kitchen. She had several dishes and containers she wanted to get rid of when I was teaching my first year. Among them was a football-themed chip and dip holder. It was a plate with four separated corners and a divot in the middle. I remember my dad using this exact platter for nacho toppings. He would put salsa, cheese, tomatoes, and lettuce in the four corners, with jalapenos in the middle. Aside from this memory of its original use, I had an idea of what I can use it for in the future with my students in the classroom. Have you ever heard of the activity called *Race to a Dollar*? This is an activity that can be used during math groups or as an intervention or extension activity. We played this game in our extension time when I taught first grade. My students loved it! But we used paper that we drew lines to separate the piles of coins, which made it very difficult for the coins to stay in between. Let me explain the game so you can visualize what I mean a little better.

The objective is for students to be able to identify number of pennies equivalent to a nickel, a dime, and a quarter, and determine the value of a collection of pennies, nickels, and dimes whose total value is 100 cents or less. The students will be able to group a collection of up to 100 objects into tens and ones and write the corresponding numeral to develop an understanding of place value. Students will also practice counting forward by ones, twos, fives, and tens to 100 by ones from 30. We used plastic coins that were almost exact replicas of the coins themselves based on weight, look, and size. This activity could be played as a group or just as a partner activity. I liked to use it as a group rotation, so I would have 5 students playing at a time.

First, each group would collect one die, one-dollar bill, and a coin bag containing a collection of pennies, nickels, dimes, and quarters whose value is 100 cents. Next, each group would place its bag of coins in the center of the playing area. The player would then take turns

rolling the die and collecting the number of pennies shown on the die. The collected coins must be appropriately sorted on their mat/recording sheet. After each turn, the player would state the total amount of money that he/she has and the coins used to create the total. When a player is able to exchange a set of coins for a coin of greater value (e.g. two nickels for a dime), he/she must do so with the coins in the middle. The game continues until a player has 4 quarters and exchanges them for the dollar bill. Now that you can imagine this game, hopefully you are able to visualize the football container originally used for nacho toppings, that we used to group the coins together. This is what I mean when I say that teachers find whatever they can to make activities more enticing for their students. This simple container added more excitement to this group than I ever thought possible. All of my students could not wait to go to the “football rotation”. Even though the activity had nothing to do with football, and it was a game they had played several times before, it still added something new.

Another way that I have seen teachers see the world differently is through time. The master schedule of the school day is one that is intricately planned out during the summer and preplanning days. Administrators and teachers work tirelessly to time the day just right so the allotted amount of time for each subject is scheduled along with recess, lunch, and encore classes. Various situations play into this and the administration and teachers must consider necessary scheduling facts for instance, pre-k eats breakfast as a class at 9:30, so they cannot be scheduled to eat first lunch at 10:05am. But also, opinionated scheduling, for instance first-grade teachers believe their students are more attentive first thing in the morning, so that is when reading should be scheduled, and not PE. Because of how daunting this task is, and the fact that the lunches are 25 minutes and scheduled 2 minutes a part, timing is key during the school day. If you are scheduled to go to lunch at 11:02, you must have your class lined up and ready to walk

through the line at 11:02. If your class is running behind, and you are walking out of your classroom at 11:03, that means you will not reach the lunchroom until 11:05 (depending on the distance between your classroom and the cafeteria). If you do not reach the cafeteria until 11:05, then one of two things will happen, either you are now behind the class who was supposed to be behind you and your lunch has just been cut 10 minutes shorter, or you have now put everyone who goes to lunch after you behind schedule. This makes their lunchtime shorter and certainly will not help you make any new teacher friends.

I realized others do not think of time the way teachers do when I asked my husband to bring me lunch one day because I forgot my lunch at home one morning. That year my lunch was scheduled for 11:16am. That meant we stopped groups at 11:05am. I handed out lunch cards and we stopped by the restrooms at 11:12am. It took us 3 minutes to walk from the restrooms to the cafeteria which would put my class walking through the lunch line right at 11:16am. I told my husband my lunch was at 11:15am (I said this, because very few people tell time minute-by-minute) but that I probably wouldn't be able to get to the parking lot to get it from him until my class was settled with their lunches which would be about 11:20am (It really wouldn't be until about 11:22am). My husband brought my lunch at 11:33am that day. By the time I was able to get it from him and make it back to my classroom, it was 11:39am. I had to pick up my class at 11:46am. This left me 7 minutes to inhale my lunch, stop by the restrooms, check my box for notes to go home (because I would not have another break to do this the rest of the day), and check my email (which didn't happen).

Granted all professions base their workday around the time, whether it is for meetings, emails, or planning, but I have yet to come across a profession that is as reliant on the minute-by-minute time as the K-12 school day. I knew someone who worked in higher education as a staff

member in student affairs. She was told her hours were 8am until 5pm. On her very first day she arrived at 7:55am so she wouldn't be late. Not one person in that office showed up until 8:30am. The doors were all locked and the lights were off. So, she waited in her car until she saw someone arrive. Maybe it is because during the school day, teachers are responsible for 20 plus students and other teachers are relying on them to be on time so they can be on time. Or maybe it is because our students are only at school for a certain amount of time each day and in the grand scheme, there is very little time to teach the content they are required to learn. Regardless of the reason, time is at the forefront of our minds as teachers.

I wrote a poem that will help put into perspective just how teachers view the world. I titled it *Through Teachers' Eyes*. I tried to cover several areas of how the perspective of a teacher differs from the typical professional workers in the world. I hope it gives a relative perspective to your day-to-day.

Sincerely,

Sarah Brittany Greneker

A Teacher's Why – Supporting Literature

Sonia Nieto published *Why We Teach* (2005) and *Why We Teach Now* (2014). Both texts explain why teachers continue to teach through the various stories shared in each chapter. One explanation was written by Melinda Pellerin-Duck in Chapter 14 of *Why We Teach* (2005) when she writes, “Our classrooms are windows to the world and our students must learn that they are part of an ever-changing global family. I strive to make lessons memorable for all students so they will learn not only the curriculum, but that they are valued members of the global family” (p. 132). Pellerin-Duck’s answer to why she continues to teach is, “because I see extraordinary possibilities in students. I could not see myself doing anything else but teaching; it is my vocation. It is part of my life, my soul, and my heart” (Nieto, 2005, p. 132). This is a small insight into someone who truly understands what it takes to be a teacher. “Teaching is the vocation of vocations, a calling that shepherds a multitude of other callings” (Ayers, 2001, p. 8). This offers a brief glimpse into someone who truly understands the calling of being a teacher. This mindset is what student teachers should be instilled with, ensuring they are not entirely caught off guard when they step into teaching independently.

Similarly, David Hansen (1995) writes about “teachers’ beliefs, their values and their actions in the classroom. [He] show[s] how the concept of vocation sheds light on why [teachers] continue to teach, and with conviction and success, despite the difficulties and challenges they and their colleagues everywhere face in today’s schools (pg. 6). *The Call to Teach* (1995) dives into teaching as a vocation by focusing on the lives of four middle school and high school teachers. Hansen (1995) chooses to “adopt the perspective of vocation” in order to reveal “productive and personally meaningful ways in which to renew oneself as a teacher. It serves as a reminder of why many persons enter the ranks of teaching in the first place” (pg. 6). Hansen

utilizes the “language of vocation” as a way to bring his readers “closer to what many “ordinary” teachers do, and why they do it” (1995, pg. 8). Another way to express a teachers genuine call to teaching is through one’s passion for teaching. “Those who feel the call to teach, who sense teaching is a profoundly meaningful part of their life, have a passion for teaching (Garrison & Liston, 2004, p. 1). William Ayers writes, “People are called to teaching because they love children and youth, or because they love being with them, watching them open up and grow and become more able, more competent, more powerful in the world (2001, p. 8). Robert Fried (2001) considers a call to teaching as a passionate teacher. This is described as “someone in love with a field of knowledge, deeply stirred by issues and ideas that challenge our world, drawn to the dilemmas and potentials of the young people who come into class each day” (p. 44). Fried (2004) continues by saying, “Passion is not just a personality trait that some people have and others don’t, but rather something discoverable, teachable, and reproducible” (p. 44). Fried (2004) writes about the components of passionate teaching:

“Yet as I look into hundreds of classrooms, watch teachers working with all kinds of students, when I ask myself what makes the greatest difference in the quality of student learning — it is a teacher’s passion that leaps out. More than a variety of teaching techniques. More than being well-organized, or friendly, or funny, or fair. *Passion*.

(Fried, 2001, p. 16).

Fried (2001) continues,

“Of course, some of our teachers, we remember their foibles and mannerisms; of others, their kindness and encouragement, or their fierce devotion to standards of work that we probably did not share at that time. And of those who inspired us most, we remember what they cared about, and that they cared about us and the person we might become. It is

this quality of caring about ideas and values, this fascination with potential for growth within people this depth and fervor about doing things well and striving for excellence that comes closest to what I mean in describing “passionate teacher.” (p.17).

I am utilizing the mode of letter writing as well as the language of poetry to attempt to encompass the understanding of why anyone chooses the field of education, through my own teaching experiences and my passion for teaching. In doing so, I present scenarios that one may encounter to help others genuinely comprehend what teaching is truly like and why it serves well to be passionate about this career field.

Mary-Vaquer wrote *Poetics of Curriculum, Poetics of Life: An Exploration of Poetry in the Context of Selves, Schools, and Society* in 2016. In her work, Vaquer aims to "explore(s) why poetry is important in our lives and how poetry can contribute to opening avenues for new possibilities through imagination and transformation based on phenomenological experience and scholarship” (p. 42). She delves into poetry through Dewey's concept of aesthetics across diverse aspects of meaning-making within a contemporary context. Additionally, she investigates the impact of poetry on the curriculum of our lives and the reciprocal influence that our lived curriculum has on the future of poetry.

In alignment with this, my objective was to write and eventually publish work that contributes to a similar discourse in curriculum theory and poetic inquiry. As previously stated, poetry serves as a form of inquiry in this dissertation, which will be expounded upon in greater detail in the following chapter. Describing the strengths of poetic inquiry, Sameshima, et al., (2017) writes, “through the production of poems as a way of knowing and mobilizing knowledge” (p. 26). They assert that as a method and overall findings in poetry, it is the “vital ingredient for a life well lived in the service of humanity and our greater understanding” (p. 27).

It is through the art of poetry and the communication of letters to my former self that I hope to contribute to the field of curriculum studies as a whole.

In summary, new teachers confront numerous challenges in the classroom for which they are inadequately prepared. Each study in this dissertation provides a distinct perspective on various aspects of these challenges. While the existing literature has shed light on the difficulties faced by new teachers, there are still gaps in understanding how to navigate these challenges and discern the true purpose of the education profession. This review underscores the need for ongoing research in this field to facilitate a smoother transition for teachers entering the profession. Revisiting my initial research questions—namely, the beneficial experiences for pre-service teachers, effective preparation for leading classrooms, and factors bridging the gap between pre-service and new teachers—the literature review has laid a foundation for understanding classroom experiences, motivations for entering teaching, and the supporting experiences contributing to teacher attrition.

Looking ahead, it would be advantageous for researchers to explore innovative strategies to inspire and retain teachers in the education field. In conclusion, the literature reviewed here provides valuable insights into the experiences of new teachers in education, the role subjectivity in teacher evaluation, the gaps between pre-service and inservice teachers, letter-writing as a communication tool, and the aesthetic impact of poetry.

Through Teachers' Eyes

When looking through a teacher's eyes
You'll notice something rare
You'll see a world full of potential,
Full of knowledge to be shared.

When looking through a teacher's eyes,
You'll see things as each person should,
Open and endless opportunities,
Helping others grow and be understood.

Teachers see almost anything and think;
"I bet I can find a use for this!"
Their creative minds constantly at work,
To plan lessons their students don't miss!

They see a board game and wonder...
Can I use it in the classroom?
What standards or skills could it teach?
Do my shelves even have enough room?

Through a teacher's eyes,
One will easily find
that you get out what you put in,
And there will never be enough time.

Enough time to reach each student,
To convey all that is needed.
To unpack and teach the standards,
While ensuring they are equally treated.

A teacher only wants their students
to be the best that they can be.
Encouraging future leaders of tomorrow,
To maximize their potentiality.

But, teaching is more than concepts,
It's far more than right and wrong.
Teaching is observing & perceiving,
And being flexible as you go along.

Teaching is creating minds to think,
And supporting imaginations.
From reading skills to word problems,
To comic book creations.

Their students become their children,
Treating each as their own.
Spending more of their time at school,
Than they actually do at home.

Teachers work endless hours,
sometimes through the night.
On the perfect lesson that must be
timed out just right.

Classroom setup is important too,
Bulletin boards and themes,
It has to be a mix of excitement and learning,
But careful not to be too distracting.

There are a few things that teachers know,
but others will never see
Flexibility is important,
but timing is really the key.

12:29 does not mean 12:30,
Transitioning can get out of hand,
Recess always goes by too quickly,
And restroom breaks must be planned.

Glue stick caps are gone forever,
Pencils are never sharpened.
Capped erasers become chew toys,
And Play-Do quickly seems to harden.

Glitter and paint will be found for days
After a craft is done
“Are there any questions?”
“This one time I...” never questions, not one.

Through the teacher’s eyes
The “light bulb” moments are a true gift
It’s these and teachable moments
They will never soon forget.

It’s why they do what they do
And each year, the faster time flies
It’s a neat place... the world,
when you see it through a teacher’s eyes

CHAPTER 8: WHY *NOT* TEACH?*Letter 7*

Dear Sarah Brittany (at age 23),

Have you ever thought back to when you decided you wanted to be a teacher? What makes you so interested in this career field? Is it working with a certain age group? Or the possibility of shaping young minds? Maybe you just always saw yourself as a teacher and have not really thought of another profession. Teaching is rewarding. But teaching is also hard. Just as with any profession, there are ups and downs, good days and bad, people you will get along with and those you may not. Most teachers, when asked why they became a teacher or what they love about teaching, answer with something along the lines of their passion, ability to work with kids or the lightbulb moments. All true; all wonderful. But now think about the opposite of that same question. Why would you *not* want to be a teacher? I suppose the only reason I have an answer to this question is because of my experience in the classroom. I am confident in my reasons for becoming a teacher. And after 7 years teaching, I actually understand the low teacher retention rates from year to year, the decision to quit teaching mid-year, and even the development of teacher unions. The emotional and mental impact that teaching has on one person is almost more than one can bear, and for some, it is. We know teachers are overworked and underpaid. We know the daunting expectations of teaching the whole child, applying accommodations, incorporating differentiation, scheduling IEP meetings and parent conferences, and finding time to plan lessons with only a 45-minute planning period, all the while trying to “not take work home”. Many teachers have their own family to tend to at the end of the school day. I put quotes around not taking work home to emphasize how teachers are encouraged to do just that. What

many do not understand, is that is close to impossible if you have the slightest care for this profession. Whether tangibly taking home papers to grade, lesson plans to finish, or mentally carrying the emotional weight of that day's experiences home with you. In 2015, Georgia Professional Standards Commission teacher retention reported "44% of public-school teachers in the state leave within the first five years of employment" (Owens, p. 1). In that same report, 53,000 Georgia teachers responded to a survey that questioned why this was happening. Richard Woods, Georgia's superintendent explained this survey. He wrote,

"Ask almost any teacher, and he or she can tell you who inspired them to go into teaching. For me, it was Mrs. Phillips. Our survey asked teachers: "If you had a student about to graduate from high school, how likely would you be to encourage teaching as a profession?" Only 2.7% of teachers said it was very likely they would encourage their students to go into teaching, while 33.2% of teachers said it was very unlikely they would encourage their students to pursue teaching. This tells us the crisis will only get worse if action isn't taken" (Woods, para 5).

Of course, this was close to 10 years ago. There are far more recent reports on teacher retention. For example, 4,583 members of the Professional Association of Georgia Educators completed the 2022 PAGE Legislative survey in the fall of 2021. "Approximately 31% of all responding educators report that they are unlikely or highly unlikely to remain in education for another five years" (para 4). Teachers remain unhappy. The American Federation of Teachers (2022) survey results indicated a massive rise in the percentage of Pre-K to 12th-grade teachers who are dissatisfied with their jobs. Unhappy teachers plan to leave their posts, resulting in more vacancies and adding to the magnitude of the teacher shortage crisis (Knudson, 2022). Underpaid, overworked, undervalued, the list goes on. But I believe a large reason why teachers

leave the profession is because of the lack of mental health support and awareness. Following the findings of the 2015 survey conducted by Georgia's Department of Education, measures were taken to address the identified concerns. The reduction of high-stakes testing, elimination of Student Learning Objectives, limited observations for veteran teachers, and lowering the weight of testing results in the teacher evaluation system (TKES) are just to name a few (GaDOE, 2022, p. 6). Monetary compensation was also put in place for classroom supplies (GaDOE, 2022, p. 6). Then the pandemic of COVID-19 hit and hit hard. It certainly did not help the teaching profession as it put more pressure on teachers. The Georgia Superintendent, Richard Woods partnered with the 2022 Georgia Teacher of the Year to organize a Task Force on Teacher Burnout. It was through this task force that a framework for action was created. The Mental Health and Wellness: Best Practices and Essential Questions was the third action formed (p. 34).

From my experience, most undergraduate programs fail to mention the emotional aspect of teaching. One of the keys to success as a teacher is to develop relationships with your students. But what you are not told is the emotional and mental toll those relationships will take. For example, when you find out a student of yours loses their parent and you have to be there when she is told. Or when your student's father calls you and asks for money because he and your student are stranded at a gas station in another state with nowhere to go. Or what about seeing your student shows up to school in the same clothes they wore the day before and tells you they had to sleep in the back seat of the car the night before because their grandmother made him and his mother leave? What about when your student sleeps through your entire math lesson because they share a room with their newborn sibling who cried all night? These are the moments can be most challenging as a teacher. These are the moments when your students need grace, need understanding, and need support. These are the moments that are not often spoken of

in the world of education. Unlike someone who chooses child protective services, counseling, or social work as a career path, in addition to learning about certain circumstances, teachers still have to teach. Teachers still have to ensure their students receive quality lessons, meet the standards, perform proficiently on their assessments, and reteach those who do not. Teachers still have to enrich and support, scaffold and facilitate, assist and lead. This is not what I learned in college. I think that is why teaching is so emotionally draining, because teachers go into the field unprepared for the devastating encounters that are completely out of their control. The lack of control takes a toll on the emotions and mental well-being of teachers because it is paired with the various tasks that are also a teachers responsibility while carrying the weight of the emotional situations of all of their students.

Richard Woods, School Superintendent of Georgia wrote in his letter preceding the Teacher Burnout Report, “The most important thing you can provide in the classroom, if you want students to be successful, is an excellent teacher. That is where success happens – not through off-the-shelf programs or silver-bullet initiatives, not through high-stakes testing or rigid accountability, but through the efforts of our highly skilled and knowledgeable classroom teachers (2022, para 2). An *excellent* teacher. One who is highly skilled and knowledgeable. He does not mention kind, compassionate, or understanding. Had I written that letter. I would have added that.

Have you seen that cup that says, “I’m a teacher, what’s your superpower?” This makes me laugh each time I see it. Mostly because it is true. It takes a super-human to do this choose this field and choose to stay. The transformative impact that teaching has on individuals and society is that of a superpower. Teachers empower, inspire, foster growth, create change, mold young minds, and heal through education. The positive change they can make in our world is that

of a superhero. Catherine Connery (2013) wrote a letter to new teachers and she states, “To be a teacher is to facilitate super-heroic accomplishments by learners who don’t even know they are wearing a cape.” (p. 240). What a thought! It is both the teachers and the learners who are the superheroes. But with these heroic actions, whether teaching, facilitating, or care-taking, comes the mental and emotional impact that this job can have. It is essential to acknowledge the mental well-being of teachers. It should be of great concern to administrators and leadership within education, just as the mental well-being of students is to teachers. Resources to help cope with stress and promote work-life balance are ways that can help.

In a conversation that I had with a colleague, she revealed some of her thoughts on when she decided to become a teacher. We shared stories and challenges. From that conversation, I wrote a poem. I thought that if I could transform our conversation into something of substance, it may help those who read it to understand why being a teacher isn’t as easy as some make it out to be. The poem is titled *Would You Be A Teacher?* I hope you enjoy it.

Good luck this year,

Sarah Brittany (age 32)

Would You Be a Teacher?

"I knew at an early age"

*"Thought about it for **y e a r s**"*

A love of kids, regardless

Of the ^H_E ^A_R ^T_B ^R_E ^A_K and the T

E

A

R

S....

"Don't do it!

Find something else!"

"Other careers pay more!"

They never knew my concerned thoughts

Should I be a teacher? Or....

Where to even begin...

"It was O V E R W H E L M I N G to start"

A **t.i.m.e.** I choose to forget.

"It was all I could do to not fall a- P- a- r- T"

Observations... **N&W** teachers

COURSES back on campus too -

N&W classes and **N&W** kids

*"I learned what **NOT** to do!"*

Waaaaasting time writing lesson plans

Expectations... unattainable

"It's mostly scripted lessons you teach"

NEWS FLASH You're replaceable.

Student Teaching ----- spoon fed

Graduation - on your own.

You're lucky to be hired before
the school year *starts* -----> all alone.

Assigned to a mentor

What good that did.

Here they all come!

And..... I guess I'll *wing* it.

Failure.. .

Frustration...

Inconsistent....

Unsure...

Relationships!

Excitement!

Light Bulb!

TEACHER.

“College can’t really prepare you

.....*but I wish it could.*”

hold your **why** close by

Seek the opportunities. Be understood.

“*What you give is what you get!*”

Positivity SPEAKS.

Do what **you** can with what **you** have

Be open to the *critiques*.

The PRESSURE is *unbearable*.

The path is tough, it's true.

If given the choice...

to be a **teacher**.. Would you?

CHAPTER 9: ADDITIONAL INSIGHTS

This final chapter discusses the writing process, this study's findings, as well as providing additional insights into the obtained results. I will highlight key trends, codes, patterns, themes, challenges, misconceptions, and significance. In addition, I will place these findings within the broader context of the existing literature and research within this field. I will acknowledge the limitations of this study and the impact on the generalizability of my findings. Furthermore, I will suggest areas for future research based on gaps or unanswered questions revealed by this study. Ultimately, I will summarize my findings and propose potential improvements and modifications and their contribution to the existing field of curriculum studies.

A Transformative Process

Writing a dissertation is a transformative experience beyond obtaining additional academic credentials. It is a significant milestone and is often considered the peak of one's educational pursuits. I was once told that this dissertation is the culmination of formal education and commencement of my independent education. I have essentially proven that I am capable of educating myself. This process is marked by various significances, challenges, and visions, all of which contribute to my scholarly and personal growth as a teacher and researcher. Throughout this process, we (my dissertation cohort) were encouraged to read and then to read more. I found this to be sound advice, but not until after I had begun to write. Robert Lake (2006) writes in the prologue of his dissertation, "In expanding Moffett's notion of "learning to write by writing" (pp.188-210) to the dissertation level, I saw the immense value of working closely with the dissertation committee. In particular, because this form of writing is experimental, I especially sought "feedback" (Moffett, 1968, p.188) from my chairperson, Dr. Ming Fang He" (Lake, 2006,

p. 25). Lake (2006) continues with Moffett's work, "In his elaboration about the writing, feedback, and revision process, Moffett goes on to say:

The fact that one writes by oneself does not at all diminish the need for response since one writes for others. Even when one purports to be writing for oneself, for pure self-expression, if there is such a thing, one cannot escape the ultimately social implications inherent in any use of language. (p.191)

In her novel *Yellowface* (2023), R. F. Kuang articulates my sentiments towards writing. "Writing is the closest thing we have to real magic" (p. 147). She continues, "Writing is creating something out of nothing, is opening doors to other lands. Writing gives you power to shape your own world when the real one hurts too much. To stop writing would kill me" (Kuang, 2023, p. 147). Taylor Swift said it well on *The Tonight Show* in November of 2022 when she said, "The more I write, the more I keep writing." Rick Rubin (2023) states, "A river of material flows through us. When we share our works and our ideas, they are replenished. If we block the flow by holding them all inside, the river cannot run and new ideas are slow to appear" (p. 3). This quote actually reminds me of what Maya Angelou even said: "You can't use up creativity. The more you use, the more you have." I felt that I could continue to write because I kept writing and I kept reading. I learned more because I kept reading and in turn was able to keep writing. "In short, by the educative process of writing this inquiry, I have learned much about learning itself." (Lake, 2006, p. 25). I learned to write and write well by writing this dissertation. I also learned to research and read critically by writing this dissertation. Thirdly, I learned how to learn while writing this dissertation.

Why Pre-service Teachers?

Despite my seven years of experience as a classroom teacher, I do not intend to suggest that I hold more knowledge than these published authors. I am aware and do not conceive that my encounters are of any more importance than any other. Instead, I offer an alternative approach to inform, encourage, and inspire new teachers. Ideally, this will function as a multifaceted resource, providing insights into what teachers should understand about the classroom, strategies for success, and how to prevent teacher burnout. During my time in the classroom, I came to realize numerous aspects that I wish I had been aware of before stepping into that educational environment. Much of my responsibilities as a teacher, oddly, were not actually teaching. It was everything else. This is something that is not taught in undergraduate courses. I graduated, anticipating a career in teaching. Instead, I was expected to do paperwork, data entry, and a multitude of other tasks that were not, in fact, teaching the children. These insights extend well beyond the school and the classroom itself, encompassing elements that are impossible to anticipate or articulate without firsthand experience. The letters followed by the poems are a product of this study. Each letter highlights a unique scenario or perspective, offering a glimpse into the reality of a teacher's everyday life. In addition, these letters offer recommendations on progressing without surrendering to feelings of underappreciation, being overworked, or losing sight of the initial motivation for choosing this profession.

Writing Challenges

On this journey, the challenges were many. My interests are very broad, ranging from cross-cultural learning to parent engagement to pre-service teachers. When I learned of several dissertations that took the non-traditional approach of the standard scientific article format, I

began to think about where my talents and deeper interests lie. This is when I decided to follow poetic inquiry. In addition, by incorporating the theoretical framework of teaching with passion aligned with the vision of fostering compassionate and inclusive educational practices, I crafted the idea of letters to myself. Integrating poetic inquiry and epistolary writing within a research methodology introduces its own set of challenges. Balancing creativity with academic rigor and ensuring the validity of findings may pose unique hurdles. Aside from the methodological considerations and deciding on the topic, research questions, and framework, the overarching challenges consisted of time management and structural organization, developing an extensive literature review, external factors of my personal life, and navigating the misconceptions surrounding the dissertation process.

Writing a dissertation is a time-consuming process. It requires careful planning and organization. This is where I had great difficulty. I did not struggle with the actual act of writing; instead, much of the challenge was carving out time to dedicate to it. Between household responsibilities, keeping up with life events, maintaining a social life, and being an engaged mother, the time was hard to find. Therein lies a problem with society that someone is expected and supposed to constantly be on the go. Once I could carve out a span of uninterrupted time and understood the structural organization of how a dissertation was supposed to be laid out, I could write.

Constructing an extensive literature review for this particular dissertation was overwhelming and strenuous in numerous ways. For starters, there is an abundance of resources available for new teachers. Sorting through the vast amount of literature was overwhelming and took time to identify the most relevant and significant resources. Given my topic, methodology, and framework, I needed to be sure I was covering all bases. I researched collections of letters,

poems, letters to poets, letters to teachers, teacher advice, teacher stories, teacher burnout, accreditation standards, teacher standards and evaluations, and so much more. I was toeing the fine line of staying in my lane while ensuring I covered all areas necessary to support this study. Arranging the literature in a logical and coherent manner was difficult. I wanted to be sure to integrate diverse sources and synthesize the information to present a coherent narrative. Finding the balance between summarizing and analyzing the literature created a challenge for which I was not prepared. A large part of developing a literature review is to determine the existing research gaps. I had a particularly difficult time identifying these gaps while also finding research to support.

Furthermore, a great concern of mine was not duplicating efforts or reproducing work that had already been conducted. My goal was to devise something entirely new that could contribute to curriculum studies, specifically to new teachers transitioning from student to teacher while also incorporating my own passions. To work through this challenge, I conducted a thorough literature search, creating the literature review. I also developed a list of keywords and search terms that I represented throughout my study and used consistently across different databases to find a broad range of relevant literature. In addition, I explored other theses and dissertations that were related to my topic. Although all individual aspects of this study were not entirely original, the reflections and experiences of my time in the classroom were. I chose to research an area that had already had studies done, but not to this extent. This leads me to one of the misconceptions of writing a dissertation, which is that every aspect of a dissertation must be entirely original. Of course, it should contribute new insights, as this does, but building on previous research and filling gaps in knowledge are valuable contributions as well.

Dissertation Misconceptions

There are several other misconceptions that I had worked through when writing. I came into this thinking I would be writing an extended essay from start to finish. The idea that a dissertation is written sequentially from beginning to end is inaccurate. Rather, it is a combination of different sections. For example, I wrote the literature review first (not counting how many times I rewrote, edited, added to, and referred back to it), and it was chapter 2. In addition, writing a dissertation is not a solitary process but actually involves seeking out guidance from advisors and receiving feedback to move forward. Though one must be alone at first. This was a very different experience than what I have been used to in my graduate work. Finally, striving for perfection is a misconception and a hindrance. While it is necessary to have high standards, it was difficult for me to realize this would not be perfect, nor would it reach its full potential. No dissertation is flawless; there is always room for improvement, and accepting that and learning from constructive feedback is all part of the process.

Interpreting the Letters and Poems

“Many researchers consider poetry as an excellent means to present data about the human experience” (Faulkner, 2020, p. 40). Faulkner (2020) continues, “A good poem has something that is said in a way that gives us insight we haven’t had before, or it invites us in to participate in an emotional way or makes us see the world again; we learn to see in art and in poems” (p. 43). Of course, this is a challenge because some believe poetry only *works* for specific occasions and topics. I initially questioned whether or not poetry was the appropriate form of inquiry for this particular topic. Sullivan (2009) asks, “What happens when the material is right in front of us and we have to decide what to do with it, how to make sense of it, whether or not to make

poetry of it?" (p. 111). Faulkner (2020) reminded me that "Sullivan (2009) considers poetic occasions to occur when we can address concreteness, voice, emotion, ambiguity, and associative logic; this is more important than a reliance on line breaks and the use of space to call our work poetic. Knowing if there is an occasion for poetry means being "alert, attentive, and attuned";" (p. 43). I believe this particular topic lends itself to using poetry as a product. The emotion and voice underlying my classroom experiences are best represented through poetry. At the same time, including letters forms a connection, allowing readers to resonate with these shared experiences. The letters and poems served as the results of this study. I reflected on my past experiences with the framework of teaching with passion and compassion in mind to identify themes from my own journal entries and construct poems and letters. I did this by coding my journal entries. I grouped words, phrases, feelings, and emotions into categories. I narrowed and consolidated the categories and formed a table with codes (Figure 1). Each code is then described in Figure 2 with definitions to help clarify why they were categorized with each theme.

This study highlights certain aspects of teaching that are unbeknownst to those entering the classroom, let alone those not regularly surrounded by the field of education. A very small portion of a teacher's day is spent in the actual act of teaching. Of my own reflections from my 7 years spent as a classroom teacher, I identify some of the more common responsibilities, tasks, and expectations of this job. The seven themes derived from my journal entries were as follows: coworkers and relationships, undergraduate preparation courses, day-to-day tasks and the many "hats" teachers wear, classroom environment, teacher evaluation, teacher perspectives, and the mental well-being of teachers. Ultimately, I identified a specific number of *seven* themes to encapsulate the poetic essence of the seven years I dedicated to the classroom.

Figure 1

Categories/ Themes	coworkers and relationships	Undergradua te programs	many jobs (hats) of a teacher	Classroom environment	Evaluation TKES	Teacher perspective Know your “why”	Classroom Experiences & Emotions & Teachers well-being
Codes	Admiration Marigold experience “she definitely motivated me” Mentor Internship Harmonize with the team Not “clicking” first-hand Observation Connections Outside source isolation Resources Mentors that become friends Helpful “Out of sight, out of mind” Challenging Belonging? Teacher facilitation Advice “Couldn’t do it without them” Reliable Coffee runs Friendship Genuine Team	More realistic assignments Commute Living arrangements “Let people teach where they live” ““In my time teaching, I think it’s the same mentor system, and I’m not sure if it’s the best thing”. Development Theories Erikson’s stages Self - Reflection Social ecology Piaget vs. Vygotsky Prepared? Qualified? “Good teacher” “I learned what not to do” Helpful Placement. Waste of time Wish I did more Misunderstood the job “Should have	Care Giver Pressure Parent Coach Mentor Nurse Mandated reporter Counselor Friend Story teller Artist Dancer/actor therapist influence decisions “Too far invested” Alone - no one understands “Thrown in” “Nothing to help new teachers” Experience matters Lack of appreciation Lack of support or help Contribution to attitude participation in extracurricular events	Present Open Honest Safe Unprepared Prepared Anchor charts “Everything has a place, everyONE has a place” Colorful Free Expectations Belong “Good morning” Morning meeting Music Acknowledge ment Classroom Jobs Place Exciting Welcoming “I have a question... one time I ...” Not a question Consistency Cool down corner Overstimulate d	Subjective Connections Unreal expectations Supervisors/ad ministrators make a difference Importance of a mentor system Political environment Frustration “Start over fresh every day” Know Your worth Keep trying Focus on your strengths and what you truly want to do. Utilize your time given Find the good Standards Did not go as planned “It was all wrong” Flexibility Schedule Practice Stay in your lane Useful	Acceptance Belonging Understood Appreciation Enjoyment Teach to read Rewarding Experiences that matter Making a difference Confirmation “I love it so much!” “What can I use this for?” “This will look great in my classroom!” Etsy Neet to be successful Care for the job Care for the profession Make sure I am prepared and always teaching positivity perspective Overwhelmed “They deserve this.” Useful	Overworked underpaid Teacher experience vs. Student experience “I never did anything like that.” Lost Interest Participation Helpful Placement “I learned what not to do” “all of those experiences have shaped me to be the teacher that I am” Strive for approval Unnecessary Lack of flexibility All about who you know No guidance or support Hands on learning Student- centered Abandoned Hard Scary “Worst

	“Better teacher than me” “I can learn from them”	been part of more than just faculty meetings”	All about who you know No guidance “Winging it” “What is my job?” “Did I sign up for this?”	Understanding Accommodating IEP’s		“hoarding”	experience of my life” Health Problems Mental health is important Bad experience directs future path Disconnect
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Figure 2	
Code	Definition
Coworkers and Relationships	
Admiration	Worthy of respect
Marigold	A plant that represents energy, good luck, warmth, creativity, positivity and passion
Experienced	To have practice or knowledge in a skill or particular field
“She definitely motivated me”	Refers to a coworker who helped me to want to be a good teacher
Mentor	A trusted advisor
Harmonize with the team	To work together and find balance
Not “clicking”	To not get along with
First-hand observation	To see with one’s own eyes
Connections	To have something in common with another
Outside source	Refers to a third-party
isolation	To feel alone
resources	Refers to tangible items or human connections that are useful in assisting
Mentors that become friends	Advisors who become someone you have something in common with
helpful	To be of assistance
“Out of sight, out of mind”	Refers to the fact that when you don’t see something, you no longer think about it
challenging	To be difficult
Belonging?	To question whether you belong somewhere
Teacher facilitation	A lesson guided by the teacher for students to be more involved with

advice	Information given to help make a decision
“Couldn’t do it alone”	Refers to how teaching
reliable	Consistently good quality
Coffee runs	Refers to taking time to get coffee for our team
friendship	Trustworthy relationship with another
Genuine	authentic
team	A group that works together for a specific goal - in this case teaching students
“better teacher than me”	Refers to how I felt in regards to teachers in my school being more qualified, more outgoing, and all around better than I am
“I can learn from them”	Learning from experienced teachers
Undergraduate Courses	
More realistic assignments	Refers to the need for undergrad assignments to be more practical
Commute and living arrangements	To travel to a place of work and refers to where one lives
“Let people teach where they live”	Refers to the placement of student teachers and not having to travel long distances
“In my time teaching, I think it’s the same mentor system and I’m not sure it’s the best thing.”	Refers to how the same mentor system that was used my 7th year teaching was the same as my first.
Development	Process that creates growth
Theories	System of ideas
Erikson’s Stages	Refers to Eric Erikson’s 8 stages of development
Self-Reflection	Serious thought about one’s character, actions, or motives
Social Ecology	The study of how individuals interact with and respond to the environment around them
Piaget vs/ Vygotsky	Refers to the similarities and differences between learning theories of Jean Piaget and Lev Vygotsky
Prepared?	Questioning whether student teachers are prepared for teaching full time
Qualified?	Questioning whether student teachers are qualified to teach full time
“Good Teacher”	Refers to the idea of a teacher being capable, helpful, warm, kind, and have strong relationships with their students
“I learned what not to do”	Refers to what I noticed in student teaching and how I observed other teachers and made a note of what I did not want to carry over to my own classroom
Helpful	To be of assistance in some regard
placement	Act of putting someone in a specific school or grade for their pre-service teaching
Waste of time	To not utilize time wisely
Wish I did more	How I felt about my time as a student teacher. I wish I played more of a part in extracurricular activities

Misunderstand the job	To not understand the expectations or requirements of the teaching job
“Wish I could have been part of more than just faculty meetings”	Refers to how I felt about my time student teaching. At the time, I did not fully understand the benefit of seeing anything outside of the 8 hour school day, but I think that would have been most beneficial.
Many “hats” of a teacher	
Caregiver	A paid helper who looks after a child or elderly person
Pressure	External force or use of persuasion or influence
Parent	To act as a father or mother
Coach	A person who teaches or trains members of a sports team
Mentor	Trusted advisor
Nurse	A person who is trained to care for the sick
Mandated reporter	People required by law to report suspected or known instances of abuse
Counselor	A person trained to give advice on personal, social, or psychological problems
Friend	Someone who offers support, promotes self-confidence, and helps to improve your quality of life
Story Teller	Someone who tells stories
Artist	Someone who draws, paints, or practices various creative arts as a hobby or profession
Dancer	Someone who dances as a profession
Actor	To participate in an action, whether on stage, in movies, or on television
Therapist	Someone who is trained and licensed to give advice
Influence decisions	To be able to guide someone in their ability to choose
“Too far invested”	To be overly committed to something
Alone- no one understands	To feel as though you are by yourself in a situation that no one else can sympathize with
“Nothing new to help teachers”	Indicates there is no new program to help teachers in the profession
Experience matters	Refers to the fact that having experience teaching is beneficial
Lack of appreciation	To not be appreciated
Lack of support or help	To not have support
Contribution to attitude	When attitude is necessary
Participation in extracurricular events	Refers to the fact that appreciating teachers influences their participation in afterschool events
All about who you know	Refers to the fact that in order to benefit from certain situations, you need to know people in that field
No guidance	To not have someone guiding you through
“Winging it”	To not be prepared but do it anyway
“What is my job?”	To question what the actual responsibilities of ones job are

“Did I sign up for this?”	To question whether the responsibilities that are assigned or given are what you chose or knew you were getting into to begin with
Classroom Environment	
Present	To be aware of your surroundings
Open	To be welcomed
Honest	To tell the truth
Safe	To feel comfortable and out of harms way
Unprepared	To not be ready for something
Prepared	To be ready for something
Anchor charts	Posters of information that align with standards taught in a classroom
“Everything has a place. EveryONE has a place”	A sense of acceptance
Colorful	Varied in color
Free	To not be bound by a set of rules or under the control of another in power - to act as one wishes
Expectations	Rules set forth to be followed or reached
Belong	Refers to a feeling of comfortable place
“Good morning”	A greeting to someone in the mornings
Morning Meeting	To gather together in the mornings and “check in” with each other
Music	Vocal or instrumental sounds
Acknowledgement	To recognize the existence of something or someone
Classroom jobs	Refers to the responsibilities students have in the classroom
Place	An existing state
Exciting	An overwhelming feeling of joy
Welcoming	Polite and friendly way to greet someone - the feeling of being accepted
“I have a question... One time I...” Not a question	A statement referring to a young child thinking they have a question, but instead has a story to tell
Consistency	Acting or done in the same way over time
Evaluation - TKES	
Subjective	Influenced by personal feelings
Connections	The presence of relationships
Unreal expectations	The idea that you are expected to perform a certain way that is not actually attainable

supervisors/administrators make a difference	Administrators have both positive and negative effects on teacher's jobs
Political environment	When the surrounding environment of the workplace has relations or conduct in a particular area of experience that is seen or dealt with from a political POV
frustration	A feeling of anger that is caused by lack of understanding or inability to complete a task because of numerous variables
"Start over fresh every day"	This quote is in reference to the fact that every day is a new day and anything that has happened in the past can be left in the past
Know your worth	This refers to knowing what you as a person are worth and not putting up with anything that you do not deserve
Keep trying	To not give up
Focus on your strengths and what you truly want to do	Essentially do what you can and focus on only that
Utilize your time given	Don't waste time and be strategic with the time that you do have to get things done
Find the good	Have a positive outlook
standards	Refers to the guidelines set for evaluating teachers
Did not go as planned	When a plan that you are following does not happen the way you intended
"It was all wrong"	The opposite of a plan turning out "right"
Flexibility	To "go with the flow" and be able to shift as needed based on circumstance
Schedule	A plan for carrying out a procedure
Practice	To perform repeatedly
Stay in your lane	To stick to what you know or mind your own business
Teacher perspective - know your "why"	
Acceptance	To be received or to feel wanted
Belonging	To feel as though you are welcomed
Understood	To interpret in a particular way
Appreciation	To feel recognized and enjoyed for one's qualities

Enjoyment	To find happiness in something
Teach to read	The ability to facilitate and coordinate one's ability to form letters into words
Rewarding	Providing satisfaction or gratifying
Experiences that matter	Situations that affect someone in a positive way
Making a difference	To change someone's life in a positive way
Confirmation	Verification
"I love it so much!"	To enjoy something to the point of describing it as love
"What can I use this for?"	To question what items can be used to teach lessons in the classroom
"This will look great in my classroom!"	My thoughts when I see certain decor that matches my classroom aesthetics
Etsy	An online platform for selling personalized items
Need to be successful	The internal feeling that I need to meet a certain standard or reach a goal set for myself
Care for the job	Serious attention and concern for teaching
Care for the profession	Serious attention and concern for the field of education
Make sure I am prepared and always teaching	Refers to the mentality when arriving to the classroom each day
positivity	To be optimistic and have an atmosphere of seeing things for the good
perspective	To perceive something
Overwhelmed	To feel pressure to the point of not being able to see past it
"They deserve this."	This refers to how students should be treated each day. Whether it is rewards given, allowing a craft to take place instead of a lesson, or another situation where students receive something "extra"
useful	To be of use
"hoarding"	Essentially keeping many different items in hopes of using them in the classroom
Classroom Experiences & Emotions & Teachers well-being	

Overworked	To be worked to the point of exhaustion
Underpaid	not to be paid enough
Teacher experience vs. Student Experience	The balance of experiences between a teacher and a student in the classroom
"I never did anything like that."	Refers to thinking back on my time as a student and how I acted as opposed to the students today
Lost interest	To lose the ability to pay attention to something
Participation	To take part
Helpful	To be of assistance
Placement	Refers to the act of being put in a specific category or group
"All of those experiences have shaped me to be the teacher that I am"	Refers to my experiences in the classroom
Strive for approval	To work towards being accepted and appreciated
Unnecessary	To not be needed
Lack of flexibility	Rigid, to not bend
All about who you know	Refers to the politics in education and the field - some people get away with certain things in regards to their
No guidance or support	To not have the necessary help for the job
Hands-on learning	To learn with activities that allow students to have tangible items to teach them
Student-centered	When students share the responsibility in the classroom during lessons
abandoned	To be left alone
hard	Challenging or difficult
scary	To be afraid or frightened of something
"Worst experience of my life"	Refers to an unpleasant situation in the classroom
Health problems	Issues with one's physical health

Mental health is important	To understand the criticality of mental health in the classroom
Bad experience directs future path	Refers to the reason teachers quit
Disconnect	To not feel connected
anxiety	A disorder that is characterized by feelings of worry and tension
Power in education	This refers to the ability of a group or individual that influence or exercise control over other people

Theme Explanations

The first theme that resulted in the first letter was coworkers and relationships. Support is critical to the success and survival in this field. Without a positive support system, this career is that much more difficult. My research showed that my coworkers and the relationships I built over the years impacted my well-being. Mentors who quickly turned into friends, people to give advice, who understood the difficulties of certain situations, and helped get me through some of the hardest days. I look back on that time now and realize that I taught with some of the best teachers and best friends. We took turns bringing coffee to each other, ordered lunch, and attended our children's birthday parties and weddings. After long days at school, we would still look forward to time spent with each other in other social gatherings. But it did not appear to be this way at the beginning. This is where the poem's content is discussed, which follows *Letter 1*. When I first accepted the job and met my team, I did not have the "warm fuzzy feeling" I thought I would. It took time, effort, compromise, and cooperation from everyone. It took me finally understanding that I did not know everything fresh out of college, but also that the same lesson plans used since 1996 were no longer the best practice. As a teacher, much of my time was spent at the school. Between the school day, carnivals, extracurricular activities, community

events, and fundraisers, working with people you can get along with is key to a positive work environment. Ultimately, coworkers and relationships among co-teachers were an overarching theme throughout my time as a teacher and only made sense to be the theme of the first letter.

Second, I wrote about the foundational aspects of my education and how my undergraduate academic training impacted my classroom management ability. The longer I taught, the more I realized how necessary it would have been to know theories that pertain to child development. When teaching students at the primary ages, it is critical to understand the developmental as well as learning theories in education. This knowledge is just as important, if not more, critical in the teaching journey than practicum experiences. Erik Erikson's psychosocial theory, for example, discusses how people develop. I remember learning about Jean Piaget's theory but was not taught that most of his research was of his own children. The theories of social interactions are crucial to understanding in the world of education as well, given the behavior management aspect of teaching. Albert Bandura's experiments are essential to understanding how students may behave in our classrooms. Though specific examples did not make it into my journal entries, the common question of, "Why was I not taught this in college?" and "I learned what not to do!" did. From that, I selected theme two: undergraduate preparation courses.

Third, a common wish among most teachers I have often heard is, "I just want to close my door and teach!" or "I don't think I taught but 10 minutes today!" By saying things like this, teachers meant they were pulled in various directions, resulting in very little actual "teaching" time. I experienced this myself, from paperwork and meetings to tying shoes and wiping noses, to the mediator and lesson planner, and everything in between. I had lists in my journal about the various things I did each day that did not fall into the teaching category. In addition, there are

roles that a teacher plays throughout the day that coincide with being the teacher. For example, supporting a student during a time of grief and loss. Another is digging through a dumpster full of lunch trays to search for a student's brand-new glasses. Of course, neither of these is in the "job description" of a teacher, but essentially, if you care about your students and this job, teachers are responsible for ensuring students are taken care of. Empathy and understanding are two key characteristics of teachers. This letter was written to identify the many "hats" teachers wear, but also to emphasize their importance.

A fourth theme I came to find during my reflections and research was the classroom environment. My evaluations during my time in the classroom always had multiple comments about the importance of the positive environment evident in my classroom. Coincidentally, a positive classroom environment has always been one of my top priorities as a teacher. When I was in first grade, my teacher greeted me every morning by name. I looked forward to this moment each day. This same school year, I brought a *My Twin Doll* to school for show and tell. It was a birthday present from my parents. They submitted a photograph of me, and the doll was created to look identical. My first-grade teacher made a huge deal about how much the doll actually looked like me, when it, in fact, did not. I remember this encounter so vividly. That she went out of her way to make it known how much this doll looked like me, meant so much at that age. Furthermore, a classroom consists of approximately 20 students who all come from different homes. The differences vary based on family members, situations, home sizes, food availability, etc. To have a consistent, positive, and welcoming place is in the teacher's control regarding the classroom. Whereas many other factors of a student's life are not. This letter is written to acknowledge the power a positive environment and welcoming teacher have on each student individually. The poem *Hiding* is written with the various backgrounds in which our students

come to mind. It references a scared, lonely student whose intelligence and kind soul are overlooked by her silence and dirty clothes. It ends with the teacher acknowledging her presence, which is all it took for her to know she was in a safe place.

The fifth theme switches gears from the previously written letters. This letter is intended to fully disclose the subjectivity of the Georgia teacher evaluation system. This should not indicate that I have had a particularly negative experience with this system, but rather that it is an excellent possibility that *subjectivity* could play a critical role in one's observations. Much of what I wrote in my journal was about my coworkers and how their observations reflected the personal feelings of our administrators. Instead of going into a classroom looking for the *good* things happening, they were going into a classroom anticipating clutter, unengaged students, or lessons from "teachers pay teachers" (IXL Learning, 2024). I believe mindset plays a large role in the observations of teachers. If the administrators are in a mindset that the teacher is already failing at their job, then this particular observation system is set up to fail them. I included a story in this letter that I carried over into the following poem. I wrote about a time I was observed at the end of the day. I was not teaching what I should have been at that scheduled time, but it was not reflected in my observations. Of this experience, I thought it was important to share with myself and new teachers that it is a system of subjectivity, and sometimes, in instances like this, we are better off just "playing the game." Also, not every lesson or every day will go according to plan.

The sixth theme that is the basis of the sixth letter is a teacher's perspective. This was an overarching theme throughout my journal entries, but also in my everyday life. I would walk through *Target* or any department store and see a container and wonder what I could do with it in the classroom. I have been to garage sales simply looking for games, items, or even decorations

for my classroom. I incorporated two stories in this letter to better paint the picture of what I mean about a teacher's perspective. The first was a story about a time I pulled a glue stick out of my purse. It did not have the cap and was stuck in my wallet. What I did not mention in this letter is the backstory of how the glue stick wound up in my purse to begin with. Earlier that week, we were cleaning up from a cut-and-paste activity. At the end of the cleanup, one cap was unaccompanied by the glue stick. I assumed someone put their glue away without the cap (This often happens with 6-year-olds). So I put the cap on my desk. Fast forward to the end of that day, when I found the glue stick that needed the cap. Somehow, the cap was no longer on my desk. I looked at the clock; it was 4:11 pm. (Teachers are allowed to leave at 4:10 pm.) I needed to leave to beat the traffic and pick up my child from daycare. I put the glue stick in my purse, thinking that when I found the cap, I would know where the glue stick was. I forgot it was there and found it stuck to my wallet at that coffee shop in Savannah, Georgia. This particular situation most likely would only happen to teachers. It has always been very interesting to me to see just how different teachers see the world. Just as any job would, our perspectives differ based on our surroundings. A teacher's perspective seems more all-encompassing, given the amount of time spent physically in the classroom and planning and preparing for lessons. I used this letter to share that perspective. The following poem was written to better understand and visualize what I meant.

The seventh and final theme that I discovered during my time in the classroom is the emotional toll it takes on the teachers themselves. In most professions, you are tasked with your own everyday tasks, problems, and situations. But as a teacher, you add your students as well. The mental and emotional aspect of teaching is one that is of little focus when it comes to the teaching profession. Our student's choices can make or break a typical lesson or day in the

classroom. I found it necessary to discuss the importance of building relationships but also to discuss the reasonings behind why teachers choose this profession, why they stay, and why some choose to leave. The following poem was constructed from a conversation I had with one of my peers. I often wonder if all pre-service teachers knew everything they would encounter as a teacher, would they still choose the profession?

What's Next?

Given the *journey* (Schubert, 2010) of the curriculum field, my journey of writing this dissertation is one that I will not soon forget. I hope to contribute by offering a different, first-hand perspective of a teacher's first years in the classroom. Through poetic inquiry and writing in the epistolary genre, I can directly target experiences that are evident in being successful in the field of education, especially as a new teacher. This profession is truly one of a kind, “As teachers, responding to who we are, in light of our intimate awareness of the decisive relevance of our individual dispositions, we come to realize that the desirable dispositions of a teacher can vary from context, setting, circumstance, student population, and the political, social, and religious landscape, making teaching what Eisner (2006) calls a custom job” (Kirylo in Kress et al., 2021, p. 65). A custom job where teachers wear many “hats” other than the “hat” of a teacher. A custom job where most are not fully prepared and feel “thrown” into the field without support or guidance.

My suggestions for future research would be to bring in other opinions and experiences based on these seven themes, or to identify additional themes. I intend to do this through interviews of teachers, both new and experienced. A qualitative approach is best for this

particular topic. But if expanding the research in search of how many teachers who love the profession still choose to leave the field, a quantitative or mixed methods approach would be an interesting approach. Additional methods of obtaining data would be through teacher interviews, focus groups, surveys, or a combination. New teacher experiences can be collected, coded, interpreted, and analyzed. With these themes, additional letters and poems could be constructed. Specifically, I would be interested in interviewing teachers, coding and categorizing their interviews and developing a poem based on their experiences through interpretive poetry. With this particular study though, I would like to see it published as a book and used in undergraduate courses, possibly the basis of the development of a new course in a teaching program. I would title it *Bridging the Gap*.

My dissertation provides advice, encouragement, and a form of support where it is lacking for new teachers. Whether they are brand new to the field, or have been teaching a few years, this is geared towards them. My contribution to Curriculum Studies will be that of a different and unique perspective and, ultimately, a resource for support. New teachers should know to be considered a *good* teacher, it would benefit them to be aware of their actions, place, and purpose. Some situations are very trying in the classroom, such as students who push the boundaries and lessons that do not go as planned. Other situations are completely out of their control, such as a student's economically disadvantaged family, or life circumstances that result in you losing students mid-year. The teacher leads the students, and the students look to the teacher to be held accountable, offer guidance, and maintain a safe environment where learning can and will take place. The letters and poems that have resulted from this study are an offering to teachers to remind them of the good that can come from teaching, and the reason good, kind, compassionate, and understanding teachers are so needed.

In conclusion, the journey of writing a dissertation, especially one informed by the theoretical framework of teaching with passion and empathy, while also utilizing the methodologies of poetic inquiry and epistolary writing, is a transformative process. By this, I mean that this process has taken me beyond mere incremental adjustments to my ability to write, learn, research, and understand the teaching profession. The time spent reflecting on my past experiences has allowed me to realize my own call to teach. This is not to say that I was unaware of this calling, but that it has not always been at the forefront of my mind. Just as I have written, I was easily distracted by the many other tasks and expectations required of teachers. I remember how easily it could ruin my day to find out that I was losing or gaining another student mid-year because of how it would affect the small groups in my class. Something so simple, so out of my control, so distracting from the bigger picture. This dissertation and this non-traditional study has allowed me the time to self-reflect as I delved into in previous chapters. To draw from my own experiences and create something new for others. My passion for teaching goes beyond job and career expectations and achievements. Just as completing this dissertation and doctoral program goes well beyond academic achievements. It shapes the researcher's identity, contributes to the scholarly community, and envisions a more empathetic and creative approach to knowledge dissemination.

EPILOGUE

Appreciation

Grateful, indebted, pleased

Free

Hopeful, happy, thankful

To be

Alive, able, capable

You'll see

Appreciation - simply put

Is the key.

Dear Sarah Brittany, (age 45)

I am sitting here reflecting on the process of writing this dissertation. Wow. What a transformative journey. I have envisioned this moment for quite a while. I envisioned feeling accomplished, successful, at ease, and relieved. But as I sit here, I do not feel any of those. I actually have an overwhelming sense of appreciation. Appreciation for teachers, for public education, for poetry, for the ability to think critically, communicate effectively, the ability to learn and the ability to write. I have always felt drawn to literature and language; to words. History and Reading were my favorite subjects in grade school. Papa's poems and handwritten notes, along with dad's, have always been so intriguing to me. I think that is actually what gave me the confidence to do the same. Shel Silverstein's *Where the Sidewalk Ends* (1974) introduced me to published poetry. Do you remember that? I would sit and read poem after poem, finding each one to be more clever than the last. Anne Frank's *The Diary of a Young Girl* (1944) and her

written experiences of World War II introduced me to published letters and journal writing. Journal writing is what led me here. I am forever grateful for that. C.S. Lewis's *The Great Divorce* (1945) introduced me to theologically complex insights combined with imaginative exploration. Remember how Papa read this in an hour on the way to the lake for Labor Day Weekend in 2014? He was always a very fast reader. - Jonathan Kozol's *Letters to a Young Teacher* (2007) allowed me to see the deeper insights of what happens in the classroom does not just happen to me. Francesca's questions were something I could connect to. And it was Patrice Buckner Jackson, (better known now as "Dr. PBJ") and her transformational speaking on "teaching educators' strategies for accomplishing purposeful work without burnout" (2022) that made me realize I wanted to do more research on new teachers to the field and how to prevent them from leaving a field where they were making a difference. Dean Jackson is how I remember her best. She was the Dean of Students at Georgia Southern University during my time as an undergraduate. She oversaw the Student Government Association which is where I got to know her better. What a gift to this world. I hope she continues to do great things. - These are a few of the many literary works that played into my educational journey up to the point of being accepted into Georgia Southern University's Curriculum Studies Educational Doctoral Program and ultimately deciding on a topic for a dissertation.

Of course, we know the process of writing a dissertation was one that I anticipated for a significant amount of time. I knew it was inevitable, yet it seemed as if it would never come to fruition. The rigorous and multifaceted process of deciding on a topic and seeing it through was challenging intellectually, emotionally, and professionally. But I learned a variety of skills throughout this process. Specifically, with research, self-discovery, time management, writing,

and discipline. I learned much about myself in this process as I did about my framework and methodology used to complete this study, and am eager to see how I move forward.

The amount of research and literary works that I discovered was critical to my intellectual growth. Prior to this study, you know I was unaware of the non-traditional approach to writing a dissertation, specifically with using poetic inquiry and the epistolary genre as methodology. The familiarity of it made a difference in the excitement of writing. The research used to support my methods and my writing broadened my understanding of the work that has been done previously. Initially, I knew I was going to focus on the *hard* work teachers do each day. I had difficulty deciding how I planned to communicate the specifics of the work to where it stood out against any other *hard* profession. So then, I thought, what do I love to write? *Poems.. Journals.. Children's books ...* But How can I make this interesting, and interesting enough that someone will *want* to read it if it gets published. I wanted to feel connected to my work, so I knew my topic needed to be relative to me and my experiences. When I read Tricia Kress and Robert Lake's *Imagination and Praxis: Criticality and Creativity in Education and Educational Research* (2022) I realized the depth of the epistolary genre. I was also aware that I had only taught in the public-school system for a mere 7 years. I could not replicate works such as Jonathan Kozol's *Letters to a Young Teacher* (2007) due to my lack of experience in the classroom, resulting in my lack of credibility. I decided to take a similar approach to Parker J. Palmer in *The Courage to Teach* (1997) by reflecting on my own experiences and motivations but also informing what the life of a teacher is like day to day. While traditional forms of study often involve external resources and structured curricula, self-reflection is a self-directed and introspective form of study that promotes a deeper understanding of myself and the world. Self-reflection complements formal education and is an essential aspect of lifelong learning and

personal development. This goes hand-in-hand with teaching. Teachers pride themselves on being lifelong learners because the field is ever-changing. Self-reflection allowed me to enhance my self-awareness by exploring my own values, motivations, and emotions. I have been able to understand my own thought processes and identify my strengths and weaknesses as it pertains to the classroom, but also to my overall well-being. Don't forget to continue to do this. If I have learned anything, it is how incredibly beneficial and helpful self-reflection can be. By writing letters to myself, I knew I could convey my thoughts in the intimate and transparent way that letter writing allows for, but also share what I wish I would have known prior to entering the field, resulting in a better understanding of the field of education and teaching as a profession. I could also visit my "happy place" of writing poetry.

Of all the discoveries made while writing this dissertation, the most invaluable was that through writing, poetry became more than a "happy place", but rather, a place of joy. I know what you're thinking, what is the difference between these two? Are they not synonymous with each other? But you will hopefully remember from your past experiences, happiness and joy are not the same. Though they are often used interchangeably, they convey very distinct aspects of the positive emotional experiences that are described. Happiness is a broader and more enduring emotional state. It is influenced by many factors of circumstance. This being, achievements or other external events. Joy, on the other hand, is a more intense emotion. It is a deep and exuberant feeling that is often associated with a sense of inner warmth. Mitchell Landon (2022) says it well when he writes, "Joy is in internal and constant. It is independent of circumstance. Happiness is external and temporary. Dependent on circumstance" (Landon, 2022, para 1). Another way to explain this difference is "Happiness is a *feeling* based on circumstances. Joy is an *attitude that defies* circumstance" (Landon, 2022, para 13). This concept makes acts like

writing poetry more meaningful if they bring joy over happiness. Landon continues with explaining the differences. He writes, “Joy is in the heart. Happiness is on the face” (Landon, 2022, para 4). One can have joy while also experiencing other emotions. M. K. Johnson explains, “It is also possible to experience joy as a mixed-emotional state: it is possible to simultaneously experience joy and other emotions (such as sorrow)” (Johnson, 2019, p. 6). Not all poems are “happy”, and yet poetry brings me great joy. It is ingrained in me; in my heart. George Ella Lyon (2014) wrote, “I believe that's what we're doing when we write or dance, sing or draw or practice any of the arts: we're listening to our hearts and expressing what we hear” (2014, para 10). We are in pursuit of a joy that becomes a constant companion, resilient in the face of any circumstance. That is what poetry does for me, but you know that. Hopefully it still plays the role of constant companionship.

Another way to explain how happiness and joy differ is through experiencing a passion. For example, I have a passion for teaching. Each morning when I walked into my classroom as a teacher, I felt grateful, happy, ready for the day. The day typically brought challenges, obstacles, and a mix of many emotions. I would leave each day feeling physically and emotionally drained. Many times, I felt I wanted to walk out the door and never look back. I was overwhelmed and did not know what to do because teaching caused me great anxiety, but I loved it nonetheless. And every day, I would wake up and do it all over again. This is joy. Despite all of its challenges, I still love to teach. Joy, to me, is like passion. It is the inherent, powerful, motivating force that continues to push me forward.

I wrote about a “happy place” in the prologue. I defined the term “place” and how it meant a space of meaning. I also wrote how Lake (2018) described a time of returning to a place that meant a lot to him as a child but no longer looked the way he remembered it. That was when

he realized “” place” had become a matter of “being” instead of “having”” (p. 7). I no longer have a “happy place” found through writing poetry, but a place of joy that I can go to whenever or wherever I find myself.

During these 4 years of this doctoral program, I married my husband, Thomas, we have had two children, we moved to a new city, and I have left the unintentionally left the classroom. When we moved, I left the city where I grew up and the school where I had been teaching since graduating from college. My original plan was to transfer to a local elementary school, but I was offered a position at the local college as an administrative assistant. I thought I could eventually transfer to their College of Education and teach teaching courses for preservice teachers, and maybe this was my chance to get my “foot in the door”. (Are you doing that now? I hope so.) Writing this dissertation has taught me many things, but one that stands out among most is that I am not ready to leave the classroom forever, just yet. The calling that I described is not something I can simply pretend to not exist. It is a constant voice in the back of my mind that whispers I am supposed to be there. Not like the “callings” the passengers receive in the 2018 *Netflix* series *Manifest*. Those callings refer to mysterious, shared visions or premonitions experienced by the passengers of Montego Air Flight 828. Those visions seem to be a supernatural phenomenon and play a central role in the storyline. I am more referring to the internal, subconscious thought, the “gut feeling” that I am supposed to be teaching. I am meant to be in the classroom building relationships and shaping the young minds of our future. As I wrote, reflected, read, and researched throughout this process I realized how much I genuinely miss teaching. I miss the environment of an elementary school, the comradery of the faculty, the good morning hugs, and innocent conversations. I miss the lightbulb moments, the lunchroom talks, the creative lessons, the goal setting, and even the parent conferences. I miss the way a

student's face lights up when they see me outside of the classroom in places such as the grocery store. I miss the read-alouds, the small group teaching, the brain breaks, and the ability to create a safe, positive space for my students to feel welcomed, accepted, and loved. I miss setting up a classroom, the intricate, strategic development of small groups based on the student's abilities, behaviors, and personalities, and the infinite possibilities of each day. This is why I call it a passion to teach; a vocational calling. It is a strong sense of purpose that I have for teaching. One could assume most teachers feel this way, or they would not remain in the profession. But we know now, the expectations, the pressure, the emotional toll, or the feeling of never being "caught up" impacts people differently. Of course, some schools are different from others, offering more support, professional development, acknowledgement, or recognition. The socioeconomic status, the population, and demographics are different depending on location. Therefore, the demands of the day-to-day in the classroom can be easier or more difficult from school to school. Regardless, I hope you stuck to teaching. I hope you publish your work as a book. I hope you are teaching preservice teachers. I hope you never stop appreciating and never stop writing. Your dissertation! You did it! Congratulations!

With appreciation,

Sarah Brittany Greneker (age 32)

My First Dissertation

Incomprehensible.

Formidable.

How do I start?

A qualitative study.

What will set my work apart?

A new perspective.

A different approach.

To what has already been done.

Incorporating scholars,

An original contribution.

Reflect.

Discover.

My excitement builds..

Poems and Letters!

My teaching heart fulfilled.

To inspire.

To support.

To encourage and motivate.

The demands this profession has...

On those willing to educate.

Experiences.

Stories.

Encounters of my own.

Poetry and epistolary genre.

Offering an intimate tone.

Non-traditional..

But valuable.

A chance to self-reflect.

Mindfulness, awareness,

A form of introspect.

Flowing.

Effortless.

It falls into place.

Defending and explaining.

An expert... in this case

It's true.

What they say.

It takes a village... or more.

How should I know?

I've never written a dissertation before.

Passing the Baton ~ A Poem for a New Beginning

A race. A relay.

Who's next? Me?

My turn. I sprint.

This. Is. Not. Easy.

Self conscious. Second guess.

A doctorate? Me?

My ideas. I research.

Could it be that easy?

Exhausting. Keep running.

A dissertation? Me?

My style. My interests.

Who said qualitative was easy?

To contribute. To inspire.

To publish? Me?

For teachers. I write.

And I'll pass the baton; easy.

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