

# SCHOOLS AS ARTIFACTS: CRITICAL AUTOETHNOGRAPHY AND TEACHER RENEWAL

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**ABSTRACT.** This article examines how past memories can shape how we see the present and future in the context of teacher education and professional development. Using qualitative inquiry, drawing in particular on self-study and memory-work, I explore the ways in which critical autoethnography can serve as a tool for personal and professional growth in the context of teacher identity.

## L'ÉCOLE COMME ARTÉFACT: UNE AUTOETHNOGRAPHIE CRITIQUE ET LE RENOUVELLEMENT DE L'ENSEIGNANT

**RÉSUMÉ.** Cet article s'attarde à la manière dont les souvenirs peuvent façonner le présent et l'avenir dans un contexte de formation des maîtres et de développement professionnel. Utilisant l'enquête qualitative et recourant particulièrement à l'autoévaluation et au travail de mémoire, j'explore les façons dont l'autoethnographie critique peut devenir un outil de croissance personnelle et professionnelle dans le contexte d'identité enseignante.

Over the last three decades, there has been a shift towards competency-based learning in the Western world (Audigier & Tutiaux-Guillon, 2008). Politicians looking for a solution to the high student dropout rate in Quebec decided to revamp the education system in order to prepare students for the modern world. The previous reforms of the 1960s had not foreseen the modern advancements in technology, which, some have argued, may have contributed to more students dropping out because of their technological illiteracy (Bailargeon, 2009).

Critical autoethnography, as I frame it here, is concerned with the understanding of self in relation to the other and culture. Essentially, critical autoethnography allows for the use of data to analyze and interpret one's cultural assumptions and its effect on one's development as a researcher / teacher. Robert Nash (2004) argued that personal writing matters to the academy, particularly to colleges of education, as much as any other kind of writing, especially when it is done well. Other researchers such as Ellis (2004) started by writing field notes organized chronologically into a memoir and then attaching meaning to what they wrote. Critical autoethnographic projects can be formulated and redesigned using various data sources, for example, visual television, photographs, and personal narrative in order to create the context for deeper analyses and metacognition.

This arts-informed study of the memories associated with the elementary school grounds I frequented growing up as a child in the 1980s in and around Montreal, Quebec, Canada enable me to identify and expand on three important Narrative Inquiry approaches: a) looking at memory and story as a pedagogical tool; b) focusing on place as identity markers; and c) doing self-study as a form of professional teacher development.

## PLACE MATTERS

Since rephotography quite consciously forces an engagement with both time and place and a consideration of the placedness of our identities, through it, I sought to render visible, both to myself and to others, some of the storied influences of place, the imprimatur of my childhood landscapes. (Allnutt, 2009, p. 28)

Allnutt (2009) argued that the fusion of memory and imagination with place enables us, as researchers, to study what we remember and why, since, although we cannot retrieve childhood, we can try to establish something of what formed our identity. The process of photography is as important as the product; an auto-photographic study that is arts-informed should value the act of photography itself as well as the photographs so that the study can provide a connection to the author's presence in the photographed places.

Tony Kelly (2008) has also called on memory and place as a way to study the construction of identity. In his study of a rural life teaching in the same area of Nova Scotia where he grew up, Kelly wrote about the commonalities between autoethnographic texts and literary anthropological accounts that both provide narratives to help us understand the presentation of the self in the world. For Kelly (2008), his project was

not quite self-study or fiction, not quite memoir or pure fantasy and which, as a study in reading and culture, stands as a contribution to better understanding aspects of the development and lived experience of a teacher in a rural place. (p. 21)

He argued that teachers who write are involved in a process of identity formation and that these writings provide for a better understanding of commonalities with others, including students. Experience is the stuff that gives rise to language, therefore writing about our memories and addressing the questions that are developed in the process enable us as researchers to begin to identify the feelings that might be attached to a particular place. Producing a study that encompasses several genres related to self-study enables the researcher to go beyond the official policy discourses that are traditionally called upon in order to focus on what is central to the development of the teacher by attempting to answer the question: What am I doing here?

The photographs of these places, these *artifacts*, that I was connected to and remain connected to, along with the experiences associated with them that formed my identity, have helped, even encouraged, memories to surface. As a result of the increasing political and demographic pressure on the English public school system in Quebec, several of the schools I attended as a child closed, so I ended up attending five elementary schools. The change of schools came with a change of residence, as my parents would relocate to areas closer to the school. Often a new neighborhood and the culture of a new school as well as its clientele varied significantly from the previous one.

## METHODOLOGY

Something in the picture will suggest an idea or hint at a link to theory. It is from such moments that insight is born and from such insights that full-blown interpretative and research strategies can be constructed. (Grady, 2004, p. 27)

Following Prosser (2007), I recognize that it is fundamentally important to ensure that my research is concerned with the production, organization, and interpretation of images. I chose to return to the schools I attended and the houses in which I lived in order to photograph their exteriors so as to then have them act as memory triggers, which would allow me to begin to construct a narrative about identity and teaching. I chose to work with these images because images can be used to capture the ineffable, can allow us to pay attention to things in new ways, can evoke stories, can be accessible, and can facilitate reflexivity in research design (Weber, 2008). As a form of inquiry, as LeBlanc (2014) pointed out, this process allows for the opening up of a space from which I can construct and generate more questions about the interpretation of the images. Similar to other visual researchers, Prosser (2007) for example, I have put the focus on the political or economic aspect of the architecture of schools; I focus on their exteriors in order to reconstruct the critical incidents, no matter how trivial, that shaped my professional practice and identity. The schools I attended have become, in a sense, memories hiding in plain sight, accessible but not penetrable without my using memory itself as a tool for extracting past experiences in order to bring them to the forefront

and help to explain my practice. Whereas the use of cameras have traditionally been to describe objects because of their stationary character (Collier & Collier, 1986), photographs can act as evidence to address research questions in a manner that is consistent with a theoretical framework (Rose & Tolia-Kelly, 2012). During the taking and analysis of these images, I followed three critical criteria for visual methodology: I took the images seriously, I thought about the social conditions that affected the objects, and I considered my own way of looking at the objects (Rose & Tolia-Kelly, 2012). Using images in this manner was about my looking at ways that, as a teacher, I can imagine and *re-imagine* myself so that I can have a positive effect on others (Pithouse-Morgan, Mitchell, & Pillay, 2014).

Returning to these sites of learning, even after several decades, can have a profound effect on an individual. When O'Reilly-Scanlon (2000), in her experience, returned to a former school and saw a tree from which she had taken a leaf upon hearing that she would be moving, she rediscovered questions she had had as a child. She wondered how the memories of teachers manifested in our later lives and, through this, in the lives of our students in years to come.

Returning to my past through the study of images has been a more difficult task than I had envisioned. For example, as a child, I constantly felt awkward with my fellow students, possibly because of the fact that I changed schools so often. As a mode of survival, I constructed a system of reading people in the school, so to speak, in order to understand their role there. The schoolyard was a place where social structures amongst student and staff were made apparent. This is where you knew who was really your friend and who was not, and which teacher would help you if you needed help and which would look away. Given the relationship between the construction and understanding of one's own personal identity and one's teacher identity (Kelly, 2008; O'Reilly-Scanlon, 2000; Penny, 2000), I have benefited from this experience, however uncomfortable it was, because it has helped me analyze how I see the schools in which I now work and it has helped me to better understand the students. Looking at my own experiences has provided for an understanding, as Samaras (2002, 2011) experienced, of the social and cultural contexts in which students develop as well as the importance of self-study in building teacher efficacy.

Images have the ability to bring back memories, which, in turn, can be re-analyzed using a contemporary gaze with the goal of learning about the development of one's teacher self. Since "our recognition of cultural phenomena is controlled by our ability to respond and understand" things with which we are presented (Collier & Collier, 1986, p. 1), photography aids in the understanding and reinforcing of one's identity that can then act as the benchmark against which one's teacher persona can be judged. By taking a methodically planned series of photographs in order to document and analyze my own story through text, I have visually constructed, as Rose & Tolia-Kelly (2012) put it, a new

interpretation of the social situations of my lived past. Image-based research, employed as part memory trigger and part visual ethnography, allows for a dialogue within the self, a dialogue that can then be studied from a semiotic perspective. Similar to other researchers who have looked at photographs as both phenomena and method (Mitchell & Weber, 1998), I have outlined the many different interpretations of my past and how my memories are both prompted and shaped by them. I have tried to avoid making the error of using an image to establish meaning in one context at the expense of others (Knowles & Cole, 2008) and have instead focused on the importance of constructing my own versions of events and how they relate to the present. As teachers, we have been schooled to see ourselves in a certain way in relation to schools (Mitchell & Weber, 1998), but my study illuminates the ways in which my teacher identity was both formed and is applied. As Weber (2008) argued, “It is the paying attention, the looking and the taking note of what we see that makes images especially important to art, scholarship and research” (p. 42).

#### WORKING WITH SCHOOL PHOTOGRAPHS

The next step in the process was to photograph the schools I had attended as a student in the order in which I attended them, starting with grade 1 and going up to grade 5. This stage of the process draws on the work of Caroline Wang (1999) on photovoice. Typically for Wang and others, the process of engaging in photovoice involves research populations who are marginalized in some way. In my case, the taking of the photos was a way to re-engage with childhood, somewhat in the same way that Allnutt (2009) did when she returned to photograph her family home. On a crisp Sunday afternoon, 9 September 2012, I went out on a photo shoot, taking pictures of the schools I had attended as well as the houses and apartments I had called home during my elementary school years. My process was very simple. First I made a list of the five schools I had attended as well as the addresses of the four homes I lived in while attending them. I chose a Sunday because it was the day most likely to have the fewest children around. My intention was to take the photos without people because the focus was on the places themselves.

What is remembered and how it is remembered presents some interesting questions in terms of how we construct our memories (Mitchell, 2005, 2013). What I remember is that some of the schools required uniforms and others did not; some were more punitive than others. School spirit was strong in some while virtually non-existent in others. The school clientele varied from school to school, and the manner in which the teachers treated students differed. All these memories had an effect on how I see teaching and the role of the teacher in promoting student well-being and development. Similar to the protagonist of the 1993 film *Groundhog Day*, I began to see patterns and themes between schools that allowed me to predict and adapt to the classroom settings and

school cultures as well as to the neighborhoods in which I lived. I can see now that schooling became a game for me; I was always trying to adjust to what was normal for whatever school I would find myself attending. Looking back at my memories in relation to this time presents some interesting questions such as: Why have the buildings helped me to remember events that I had forgotten? Have my memories changed as a result of looking back or have they just been highlighted? How has trying to fit into what was considered average in the different schools affect my current teaching? I will address these questions (and others that I will go on to raise) in the last section of this article.

My goal in taking the photographs was not to return to the former buildings and interact with their contemporary inhabitants but rather to engage with the physical structures that would help me recall my educational experiences as a child. I looked forward to going to school but when I did, it quickly became routine. This memory made me recognize that my always wanting to make the learning experience the highlight of a school day for my students might well stem from my early experience of school as a disappointing routine. For me, as a child, school was a procedure rather than a learning adventure. Looking back at these photographs and remembering how I longed to go to school triggered a host of memories associated with my educational experience. For me, then, curricula, procedures and people changed but the actual structures remained, usually with little change to their overall presence.

Since “memory is both a material piece of knowledge and an active process by which the knowledge itself is constructed” (Cole, 2011, p. 225) the pictures themselves provide the foundation from which memory is prompted and then analyzed. The criteria I chose to employ for choosing the angle of the photographs revolved around where I had spent the most time as a child outside the schools.

The photographs of the buildings themselves acted as the memory prompts that enabled me to look further into the fundamental thoughts I had regarding my development as a teacher. Photography is an essential tool to ensure that subtleties of artifacts do not elude the researcher (Riggins, 1994). Since it is important for ethnographers to make every effort to make their photographs as close to reality as possible, I took the photographs from the streets without staging the scenes.

Mitchell and Weber (1999) wrote that “teachers are seasoned travelers whose work is informed by travels through their own schooling as well as their teaching” (p. 48). The earliest memory that I have of schooling was walking with my mother and older brother towards Guy Drummond Elementary School (see Figure 1) in order to drop my brother off and then pick him up. I was spellbound by the size of the building as well as by the number of children present. I got to go into the school briefly only when it was parent conference



FIGURE 1. *Guy Drummond Elementary School, Outremont*

evenings or to pick up my brother because he had been sent home for misbehavior. Seeing my brother leave for and arrive from school made me inquire into what he was doing all day. I remember wishing that I could attend school and my mother assured me that I would. As a child, I had been exposed to other children through sports as well as community day camps and I was hoping to be able to continue to make new friends. After two years of seeing my brother leave for school and return alone, I was about to have my first day at school.

It is the first day of school and there is a chill in the air. My father is cooking me his homemade oatmeal and making buttered toast. My brother is leaning against the living room window watching the neighborhood kids walk to the bus stop. I am scared to be leaving the house for the day, leaving my parents. The kitchen is a room that I feel comfortable in; it's where I eat with my family, and it is where I feel the most at ease. Will I feel the same way at school? I leave the house behind, holding my mother's hand. My father must go back to bed since he is working tonight. I turn and look back at the house as I walk to the school. As it gets smaller I feel more hesitant, anxious, and sad.

Once I get to school my mother brings me to the schoolyard fence. A woman with a big smile reads my nametag and welcomes me with a big hug. She tells me to stand in the corner of the yard with the other children as she talks to my mom. I put one hand on the fence and suddenly I feel safe again and, as my mother leaves, the yard becomes my new home. As a little girl waves goodbye to her parents, I wonder why my dad can't be here.

Memories such as this outline some of the events that have shaped my identity. Looking back at the first school that I would go on to attend (see Figure 1) helps me understand that my identity has been shaped by the schools in which I spent so much time. The schoolyard is an important space for me as is being able to physically touch the new environments that I enter. Although I smile when social convention demands it, I realize how important it is to always be as warm to my students as possible, especially when it is their first time meeting me.

I remember arriving at the school on the first day and being sent to the basement of the school. The kindergarten class was located on the bottom floor of the building in what I remember to be a darkened classroom. The first thing that I noticed was how green the school seemed. The walls were painted with various shades of green and the division of the room did not encourage the distribution of light. The windows seemed old and in disrepair, as did most of the structures. The floor, however, always seemed to be clean and I enjoyed sitting on it while playing with the educational toys that the school provided. As a teacher, I try to transform my classrooms into bright places because, in part, of this remembered experience. When I began teaching in high school, I had to share many classrooms with other teachers. I quickly took the opportunity to find ways to ensure that I was given space to make the classroom more cheery. I would ask for student volunteers to decorate my reserved section of the classrooms I was in so that the students could play a part in the construction of their space. In another school, my students were given a classroom with no access to natural light. I noticed that their interest in learning declined in comparison to the other classes I taught that at least benefitted from having a window.

### SCHOOLYARD CONDITIONING

I spent most of my time in the schoolyard near the north end fence (see Figure 2). It was close to the front of the school as well as close to where my parents would come to pick me up. My memories of the student supervisors are much more vivid than those of any of the teachers. I remember that they often made what seemed to me to be arbitrary decisions regarding student behavior. Some gave preferential treatment to certain students while others ignored misbehavior all together. I learned that there were certain people I could go to for assistance, but that most issues that came up needed to be dealt with independently amongst my cohort of students. It was only when the principal walked out of the building during recess periods that the lunch supervisors would become more assertive. I also understood that bringing anything up to the principal without having gone to the supervisor was not recommended since it would result in later repercussions that would affect me. As Mitchell and Weber (1999) suggested, returning to and re-examining the time spent in the schoolyard lends itself to rich, thick descriptions of

situations and moments that might have been forgotten before they were ever remembered. This was certainly true for me. Why did the supervision staff react so differently when the principal made an appearance? As a teacher, I have always been cognizant of the power relations that go on between the various stakeholders in the school. Based on this, I have constructed the belief that the presence of a principal in person throughout the school day plays an important role in ensuring that the school functions smoothly.



FIGURE 2. *Guy Drummond yard (north view)*

## ARCHITECTURE OF TOUCH

I enjoyed sitting in the corner of the schoolyard watching the manner in which the sun hit the school building (see Figure 2). I was enchanted by the way the bricks were stacked as well as with how the reflection of the sun on them exposed the subtle differences in their colors. Whereas our sense of smell can enable us to remember situations and feelings that we have had in the past, touch can have the same effect. Sight might come before words (Berger, 1977, as cited in Knowles & Sweetman, 2004, p. 1) but the act of touching can reinforce the reality of the past and bring it into the present. As a child, I would rub my hand along the wall in order to feel the small bumps along the bricks as well as the smoothed out sections of the mortar that held them together. Although the exterior play area was large, I enjoyed staying near the building, close enough to be within touch but far enough to be able to see as much of it as possible. When I think about my memories at Guy Drummond I begin to realize how important touch was. The new constraints that the school imposed as part of my socialization seemed to prompt me to keep close to hear what I considered to be “real.” The absence of chairs in the yard meant that sitting on the ground was necessary when I needed a break. I enjoyed studying the cracks in the cement and comparing how they changed throughout the year. I followed the path of the leaves in the fall as they gathered in the corners of the yard. I picked them up and admired their colors, shapes, and texture. Some were dry and crisp and needed to be handled sensitively while others were still wet and plump. During the winter, I would sit against the fence, holding firmly onto it as I studied the falling snow or fought against the wind. As I revisited the school to take the pictures, I realized that I still felt the need to touch the fence, sit on the pavement, and run my hand along the brick wall. The sense of connectedness to both my past and the building itself felt real, unchanged, and natural.

Reflecting on my primary school ways of seeing the world through my experiences helped uncover what was hidden within me that has contributed to the development of what Mitchell and Weber (1999) called a “teacher gaze” (p. 7). Going back has helped me realize why I think students in schools need to feel safe and that it is the responsibility of all adults to ensure that their needs are met. This safety does not need to come out of an authoritarian model of supervision but should, rather, be built on a relationship that begins when a student starts school. Unlike the lunch supervisors’ changing responses that were dependent on the student with whom they were interacting, the school’s physical presence remained a constant. This provided me with a sense of security and led to the development of an attachment to my surroundings. Midway through the year, I remember my mother mentioning that I would be changing schools the next year. I was disappointed to have to change school but was excited about getting to take the school bus.

## THE SCHOOLYARD

Prompted by the photo in Figure 3, I remember that my experience of both grades was characterized by the search for friends. At school, I felt different from the other students who seemed to be able to socialize more easily than I was able to. At the end of grade 1, my best friend, Gerald, changed school and I found this very hard. Gerald was the only friend I remember making, and his presence made me feel as though I had someone on my side in class. Losing this friend early on in my school life, in addition to changing schools so often, made me hesitant to make new friends. As a teacher, I always make an extra effort to ensure that students have the opportunity to work with various classmates both inside and outside the classroom so that they can identify with whom they get along best while still having contact with others. I have also developed an aversion to small groups of students and staff members, which I will address later.



FIGURE 3. *Mount Royal Academy, town of Mount Royal*

In the schoolyard, I would remain next to the school fence, looking out into the neighborhood at the school as well as at the various houses that lined its property. I do not remember being interested in moving around the yard, choosing instead to remain close to the entrance doors. I remember one cold and dry winter morning, I was thirsty and decided to lick the pole of the fence I was leaning against. My tongue stuck instantly to it causing me to yell loudly for help. The school bell rang and we were supposed to line up with our respective classes but I could not move. Eventually a teacher noticed what

had happened and with the help of some warm water I was detached from the fence. At that point I realized that being part of a group served the purpose of protection and this influenced the manner in which I then socialized with my classmates. I began to identify different groups of students with a view to befriending them to ensure that I would always have people on whom I could count if needed. This pragmatic approach to relationships also ensured that I would not be hurt in the event of a change of school since I would easily be able to replicate what I had accomplished at one school in another.



FIGURE 4. *Nazareth Elementary School, Montreal*

The photo of Nazareth Elementary School (see Figure 4) brought back a different set of memories. I spent my time in the schoolyard as far away from the school itself as possible. Although the school was constructed of white bricks, all my memories of this school are dark. The schoolyard bordered a busy road and I enjoyed listening to the noise that came from it. Entering the school felt like entering a tunnel that had poor ventilation. The contrast between the light exterior and dark interior confused me. I do not remember anybody from the school. All I remember besides the playground are the numerous lists I was given. I remember the school supply list was two pages long, that I had a list of the assignments and when they were due, and I remember that there was a bulletin board located outside the classroom that listed how well students were doing in various classes. Although I spent half the year there, I felt as if all that I learned was that listing things were important. There were no bars on the school that I can remember, but the list of names outside the

classroom acted in a similar manner since I felt the need to ensure that my name was located in the right places on them. As a teacher, I cannot identify with the need to create large amounts of bureaucracy in place of true student learning. Besides the fact that I disagree with the listing of student names based on formal testing results, teaching and learning should not be reduced to a series of checkmarks and short answer questions. When my mother learned that the school was slated for closure, she decided to transfer me to a larger school in the middle of the year.

As Mitchell and Weber (1999) suggested they might, these memories have influenced my work both in the classroom and in my professional life as a teacher. When I began teaching, I was not hesitant to change schools since I was used to it as a student. I did my best to put everything I had into every class, knowing that I might not get a chance to do it the following year, given that I might move again. I believe that in teaching, we do not always get another chance to teach the same course since the students and classroom realities are constantly changing.

#### **PRODUCTIVE REMEMBERING**

If we look at “productive remembering,” — described by Strong-Wilson, Mitchell, Allnutt, and Pithouse-Morgan (2013) as a form of relearning through critical reflection and a concept further taken up by Kelly (2013) — then self-study brings about the opportunity to make sense of educational practice with the goal of applying what is learned to professional development. Arts-informed inquiry into photography used to extract place markers contributes to an analytic toolbox that is part of the greater critical autoethnographic endeavor. Including the *I* in the journey allows me to become what Carani (2013) referred to as the navigator in my work, encouraging the ongoing work that is required by teachers and teacher educators in order to re-invent ourselves as teachers (Mitchell, Strong-Wilson, Pithouse-Morgan, & Allnutt, 2011). Navigating memories as spaces for the creative process enables the researcher to uncover an understanding of the past and its effect on her or his identity. My experiences throughout the five elementary schools that I attended, when revisited through photography, provided for additional data in two ways (Cole, 2011). This data allows for the fusion between arts and qualitative research which leads to a better understanding of the meaning and development of the teacher self as I will demonstrate in the next section.

## BUILDING ON MEMORY: VISUAL METHODS, CRITICAL AUTOETHNOGRAPHY, AND TEACHER EDUCATION

Photographing the schools, as well as the memories that these photography trips and photographs brought forth, allows for the narrative self-study of a period of lived experience. The examination of the self as teacher as well as one's own self-study in relation to teacher practice in the context of lived, relational educational practice is essential to the development of one's teacher identity (Pithouse, 2007). Returning to the places where my official education took place and photographing these buildings encouraged me, as it did Allnutt (2009), to explore my own identity.

How can photographing the schools one attended be a conduit or tool for studying the self? Following Pink (2009), how do I look at self-identity as being constituted and at its effects on my development as a teacher? As Pink (2007) stated, "visual methods pay particular attention to the visual aspects of culture, the interlinking of the visual with ethnography, culture, and individuals" (p. 21). Therefore, like critical pedagogy, visual methodology is concerned with comprehending how we know as well as the culture in which this knowledge was formed so as to better engage in self-study. Self-study is a process that expresses personal needs and strengths which, when studied, allows teachers to better understand their identity so that they may be better prepared to guide their students (Allender, 2005).

## REFRAMING THE PAST FOR A BETTER FUTURE: WHERE AM I IN THE PICTURE?

Can we revisit the schools we attended? Do we ever leave them behind? In this final section, I come to the questions: Where am I (as a teacher) in the picture? What difference can it have made to my teaching to photograph the schools I once attended and the houses or apartments I once inhabited? Each school taught me important lessons about teaching, as well as about myself. I can place my memories into three main groups: memories of feeling inadequate, different, and lonely; memories of wishing I could do better; and memories of teachers and supervisors.

### *Memories of feeling inadequate, different, and lonely*

It became apparent to me early on that in order to stay out of the way of teachers and other students, I should quickly find out what was considered normal in a school and then strive to achieve that. Every new school made me feel as if I had to forget who I was to become someone that would be accepted. As a teacher, this has affected the manner in which I interact with my students. When I think back on the manner in which I interacted with the first real class I taught, I can see how my past affected how I acted. For instance, I made sure that I got to learn how to pronounce all their names

before they came into my classroom. I also took my homeroom students around the school in order to make them familiar with the different facilities in the hope that the new students would have an opportunity to get used to the layout of the school. Having difficulty learning to read in comparison to my classmates early on forced me to look for different coping strategies to ensure that I maintained the norm. As a teacher, I have to continually look for various solutions in order to meet the needs of my students. I look upon literacy programs that are advertised as universal with much suspicion because of my experiences. Looking back at my earlier education has brought me closer to who I was and therefore who I want to become. Although I ended up being able to find the right strategies for my own learning to take place, I still kept the belief that I was somehow not as strong as my classmates and I still often wonder why this is so.

Part of my teacher identity has to do with feeling connected to the environment in which I find myself. As a teacher, I feel that students must be given the opportunity to feel that they are part of the class. I might have found comfort by holding onto the bus seat when I was taking the bus for the first time, but it was just one of the coping mechanisms that I employed to ground myself. Even today, I sometimes find myself needing to lean on the walls of the classroom in order to feel at home in it. I also try to incorporate the sense of touch in the classes that I teach. For instance, when I taught history in high school, I would often bring in props such as old photographs, posters, replica navigation tools, and historical artifacts provided by museums, which I allowed the students to manipulate. In a science class I was assigned to teach when the teacher unexpectedly retired, the first thing I did was introduce actual labs for the students to do.

Because of the many different schools I attended, I became very hesitant to make friends with my colleagues. My constant question was why do I need friends that I will just lose at the end of the year? As a teacher, I feel that my job is to get to know my students as best I can and in as little time as possible. Taking time to fraternize with colleagues did not make sense unless their friendship could help my teaching or my students through collaborative teaching. Looking at the origins of this behavior helped me see where some of my hesitation came from.

Over the last few years, as a result of this study, I have made an effort to get to know my colleagues. This has allowed me to learn about different teaching methods and improve my own.

I have a better understanding of my dislike of lists. I feel that they belittle students by not giving them the opportunity to learn for themselves. Students need to be given the tools required to better themselves in language they can understand. Providing them with paperwork and lists that are not explained to them well enough is not the practice of the type of teacher I aim to be.

What is normal? Moving from school to school and discovering that what was considered normal varied from one to another ingrained in me the notion that what we consider to be the norm is relative. As part of my teacher identity, I try to acknowledge what each student feels her or his strengths to be so that each one can be proud of who she or he is. Looking back at the origin of some of these feelings has made me put more effort into promoting who I am as a teacher with my students and with fellow staff members.

As a teacher, I am terribly sensitive to the need to never make students feel as if their actions will affect the rest of their classmates. When I changed schools, I was labeled a “new kid” by the class teacher, supervisors, and other teachers. This label was one that I could do nothing about. A teacher having to rearrange chairs to incorporate me into the class or some students having to add me to their project group when their project was almost complete was not my fault, yet I was made to feel that it was. As a teacher, I attempt to use labels wisely, especially in the presence of students, since I do not want them to experience what I had to live through.

### *Memories of wishing I could do better*

Part of my teacher identity stems from seeing my students as part of my extended family. Looking at my childhood memories prompted by the photograph of the front of my first home allows me to understand the roots of this view. It was not the act of playing in the front yard or looking for a place to hide, but the memory of it that allows me to inquire into my teacher identity in relation to the manner in which I view my students. Should all teachers view their students in the same way? Would I have viewed them in that manner had I been raised in a building that did not benefit from a yard or a lane?

My memories surrounding the colour coding of the level-based reading programs I encountered in the earlier grades allowed me to explore my understanding of student self-efficacy and the importance of using multiple approaches when teaching students. The colours of the books left an impression on my mind of my inability to easily keep up with the other students in the class. As a result, I had to find my own ways to cope. I cannot leave a classroom knowing that I have not tried at least two different approaches with the student(s) I am working with.

Having had the opportunity to live in various neighborhoods caused me to see a lot of differences in the manner in which people were treated. Seeing the doors in the gates locked between the town of Mount Royal and my new neighborhood (in order to discourage children to move freely between them) had a big impact on my teacher identity. What did the area I lived in have to do with who I was? Why was I suddenly a security issue? As a result, I make every effort to learn as much about a student as possible because I want to ensure that they are all treated equitably. Where you come from should not provide others with the right to define you.

The memories associated with my attempt at passing as normal are not unlike what many students experience. The difference is that I had to continually change my persona to conform to the new expectations of the new school that I was attending. As a teacher, I am sensitive to the need of institutions such as schools to categorize students for purposes of simplicity. Nevertheless, as a teacher, I have had to remind myself and my colleagues that their students are still in the processing of developing identities and that putting them into categories sometimes affects how we deal with them. It is important to acknowledge the diversity of student backgrounds that students have but creating overarching stereotypical categories does nothing to serve the students or their learning. In my case, up until the point when my grade 3 teacher labeled me a French boy, I was not aware of the assumptions that came with it.

### *Memories of teachers and supervisors*

Kindergarten is often the time when students' concepts of right and wrong are formed as they begin to be socialized into the school system.

Returning through my memories to the time spent learning about rules and how and when they were applied has affected the manner in which I deal with my students. I do not think that simplistic discipline programs work in most contexts unless they take into consideration the concerns of all students. A teacher needs to get to the root of a problem and address it, and, in order to do that, it is necessary for them to know the students involved.

Seeing the school supervisors during recess treating students differently only served to make me withdraw from the schoolyard play. The buildings, however, remained constant and supported me when I needed to lean on something. As a teacher, I feel that students need to be given some space to call their own even if it changes every now and then. It has also solidified the idea that the principal should be present in a schoolyard as much as possible in order to ensure consistency in the application of the school rules. Working as a team with a leader is the best way to make students feel secure in their surroundings.

Remembering my experiences with school uniforms brought me back to the idea that decisions are sometimes taken by well-intentioned school stakeholders but have very little impact on student success. Uniforms or other decisions that apply an extra layer of bureaucracy onto students in order to solve a problem does not address the underpinning idea behind the problem in the first place. If some students are coming to school with dirty clothes, making them buy a uniform will not help the situation.

My incessant need to blend into the norm was built upon what I perceived to be a teacher's need to label students for convenience. Although teachers did not always verbalize these ideas openly, it later became clear to me that some students were given extra help that other students in the class might have benefitted more from. Once I am aware of a student's home situation, it

becomes easier to make decisions related to student performance and development. My teacher identity was shaped by observing students with very little home support being treated as if it was their fault. How can the teacher hold so much power over students and not use it more wisely? Had I not attended to so many students, would I have noticed the same patterns? As I mentioned, the categories that teachers place students in often transcend teaching styles and are applied unofficially within each school community.

I have developed the idea that knowledge that is learned by students outside the classroom can be just as valuable as what is learned in it. When I look at the picture of my home on Gaspé Street, I see more than the building. I see my neighbors playing in the lanes. I see myself playing pick-up hockey with them. When I returned to the classroom after learning something from a friend, I was often discouraged from speaking about it in class. There was a textbook and the teachers would mention that we did not have time to diverge from the set lesson. Now, as a teacher, I make sure that students are given a chance to share their concerns and inquiries if there is time. Once students know that I am interested, they are usually willing to wait for the right moment to share what they have to say.

As a result of having to adapt to so many new schools, I have developed the understanding that being placed with the same students year after year is not as important as providing them with what they will need in every lesson. As a teacher, I need to be present for my students every time I am working with them. Since students may change schools at any given moment during the year, they have to be prepared to identify their own strengths and weaknesses the following year.

### FURTHER REFLECTIONS

In addition to the effects of these three groups of memories, there are other ways in which my practice has been affected. I now plan my lessons to include activities in which students get to discuss what their interpretation is of what we have studied, what I plan on presenting to them, and where they think I am going with the lesson. Knowing where they are going allows students to focus on a goal that they can understand, and this includes them in the learning process.

Although there is an increasing number of school board and government rubrics / assessment tables for the evaluation of student work, I still make sure that students are included in the process. Students have to be aware of what is expected of them, what they are learning, and why. Although it might seem clichéd to say this, students are more than the results of what they get on the test. Getting a good grade is not the only indicator of progress. If students realize that they are doing what is right for themselves, they are more willing to make mistakes.

I see the need for strong school leaders who are more concerned with the well-being of their students than with getting a promotion. My teaching experiences have led me to work with a vast array of administrators who, for the most part, care a great deal about the students. Administrators need to get to know the students and staff in order to put into place the necessary structures to avoid larger problematic issues from developing. As a student, I remember that the principals who were the most respected by the teachers and student were those who were able to tell you when you were not behaving according to your own standards, as well as those who showed that they viewed you as a fellow human being.

As a result of this memory work, collaborating with other teachers has become easier. I understand how categorizing students into groups is not done out of overt negativity but is, rather, often a way to make an ever increasing job more manageable. When I am working with others, I suggest ways that will help the teachers realize how their language might be affecting some of their students adversely. For the most part, teachers are pleased to be helped in this manner since they have never quite realized the effects of their previous practice on students.

As a result of this revisiting project, I now view knowledge production as a complex process that involves learning about the world and our place in it. The relationship between student and teacher is as important as what is supposed to be learned. There is no ultimate truth and any person or any program that claims to have it should be viewed with suspicion.

Photographing and remembering these different schools has also caused me to remember all those first day experiences. The photographs used in this article act as artifacts that helped me to re-discover forgotten moments. It is by extracting these moments, as Springgay, Irwin, and Kind (2008) pointed out, that insight is born and from such insights a more concentrated interpretive and research strategy can be constructed. The schools that I attended played a part in the establishment of my identity.

Qualitative research that draws on different modes of research enhances our ability to understand classroom life and support students in becoming more aware of their position vis-à-vis the world (Mackenzie, 2009). This type of research was a personal exploration into how some of my core educational views were established, altered, and reformulated in schools. Before this academic exercise, I had remembered the general events of my different school years such as field trips and school ceremonies, but had not taken the opportunity to go deeper into understanding just how much of my personal and professional identity was being affected then.

## SUMMARY

In this article, I used photographic images as memory triggers to enable a deeper understanding of my teacher identity as being both important and necessary to ensuring my personal and professional development. Since our understanding of cultural phenomena is controlled by our ability to respond and understand (Collier & Collier, 1986), the use of photographs as part of a reflexive exercise in identity building renders the research personal. Using it as a means of generating data enabled me, as the teacher-researcher, to better understand and reinterpret my own teaching practice. Looking at the importance of personal narratives, place, sensory memory, and self-study in the development of teacher identity has enabled me to better understand myself and my own teaching practices.

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