

6-2011

GIVING MY HEART A VOICE: REFLECTION ON SELF AND OTHERS THROUGH THE LOOKING GLASS OF PEDAGOGY: AN AUTOETHNOGRAPHY

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GIVING MY HEART A VOICE: REFLECTION ON SELF AND OTHERS
THROUGH THE LOOKING GLASS OF PEDAGOGY: AN AUTOETHNOGRAPHY

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Education Leadership Doctoral Program

Submitted in partial fulfillment
of the requirements of
Doctor of Education
in the Foster G. McGaw Graduate School

National College of Education

National-Louis University,

June, 2011

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IN THE LOOKING GLASS OF PEDAGOGY: AN AUTOETHNOGRAPHY

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ABSTRACT

To improve students academic outcomes this auto-ethnographic dissertation examines my teaching practice in the Ukraine and in the United States, and the similarities and differences between the two educational systems. This study, designed in the form of auto-ethnographic vignettes, explores the effect of my personal and professional metamorphosis on the academic advancement of my students, and investigates the conditions that molded me into a teacher I am today. Through the reflections on the process of self-development as an individual and a teacher, I discovered that building the relationship of trust between school and family is an underlying condition for improving students academic performance, discipline, and overall wellbeing. This dissertation enabled me to analyze the boundaries between the personal and the professional, and to identify human ethics as the major component for efficient teaching and productive student learning. The study highlights teacher ethical leadership as a key factor that permeates the entire pedagogical process to make it complete and successful.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

I feel privileged to express my eternal gratitude to the people who were directly involved in my doctoral journey. They played not only an outstanding role in writing this dissertation, but they also made this process enjoyable. First of all, I would like to thank my wonderful advisor Dr. Norman Weston, an exemplary Chair, for his continuous support, knowledge, insight, friendliness and high expectations of me as a doctoral student. I am also extremely grateful to the members of my Dissertation Committee: to Dr. Vicki Gunther for her encouragement, genuine care and unwavering support; to Dr. Linnea Rademaker for her direction and understanding through all of my trials and triumphs, and for her love of qualitative research that she instills in her students; to Dr. Joe Fischer for sharing my enthusiasm and believing in me as a researcher as well as for his great advice that led me through the process of writing this dissertation. I extend my appreciation to Dr. Linda Tafel for her gentle mentoring, benevolence and wisdom. I want to express my sincere thanks to all the professors, who guided and assisted me on my doctoral journey to reach this milestone in my life, including Dr. Richard Best and Dr. Jan Perney. The last but not least, I am thankful to my family whose love sustained me at my most vulnerable times. On my life journey I was afraid to take the wrong steps and inadvertently show you the ropes. This dissertation is for you as much as for me.

To my parents who by the example of their lives introduced me to human values and to values of education.

Know thyself... For the source of what we do is not in books or students, but in ourselves. The paradox of teaching is that we honor students best when we honor who we are-our own individual and idiosyncratic selves.

Daniel Lindley, *This Rough Magic: The Life of Teaching*

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CHAPTER ONE: INTRODUCTION

There are times when I think I was born a teacher, and sometimes I ponder if “yes”, then “why”. I entered a classroom in that capacity at an early age of 18 in the Ukraine. Still a student myself in the Department of English Language and English Literature at the oldest university in the Ukraine, I was overwhelmed with doubts and insecurities towards the profession my parents dedicated all their lives to. If my then students had asked me whether I knew how to teach, most likely they would not have gotten a positive answer. From that time on, I have been constantly looking for the pedagogical methodologies and strategies to bring my teaching to a new and higher level. My quest directed me to three more colleges and to many sophisticated textbooks and manuals, but it is still an open-ended question. The purpose of this auto-ethnographic study is to investigate how my personal and professional life experience have made me the teacher I am today.

Twenty years ago I left behind my Ukrainian students and colleagues and came to the United States as a political refugee. I could not even dream of teaching. The communist government allowed its former citizens to enter the free world with no more than \$65 in their pockets. Thus, first I had to find a job to put bread on the table, and then wipe my bitter tears, appearing each time I passed by the neighborhood schools. The sight of schools and playing students cruelly reminded me about what I lost, loved and missed so much. The situation changed when the last dollar was spent at Aldi for a bag of potatoes. I went to the agency that recommended people for babysitting the young or taking care of the old. Here I am, standing in the long line, and suddenly hear my

neighbor's voice, "Vera, what are *you* doing here? At Kleins school they are looking for a person who speaks English and Russian. Go right now. The office is still open."

Remembering the encounter in the agency, I could not realize that at that moment a new, American chapter of my professional life has begun. How could I have known that my teaching experience gained in the Ukraine might turn out to be useful in a different part of the globe, in a completely different political and academic environment?

When I came into the office and introduced myself, I was given directions and instructions about the tests I had to take and the forms to complete. It was in December. In late February I received my first real AMERICAN Bilingual Teaching Certificate. I proudly went to Kleins school with all the papers they asked me to bring just to learn that somebody else had been hired in January. That roadblock had the power to upset me, but not to stop me. Next year I was hired at a different school as a bilingual teacher. Later on I started teaching ESL, and in a few years I was assigned as a regular classroom teacher.

To improve my students' learning I continue by all possible means to improve my teaching. After many years of teaching in the Ukraine and the United States, I still have to be receptive and open to new approaches in the educational field. As an elementary and then high school student I imagined that becoming a good teacher is not that difficult. However, when I did become a teacher, I realized that choosing the field of education as a profession neither promises nor equals to becoming a true professional. I came to understanding that good teaching is as subtle as an outfit, knit from the thinnest though not transparent fabric. This study was prompted by my internal desire to learn what the fabric of good teaching is made of. As any person's life, mine went through

many transformations. Some of them were so profound that they affected its very infrastructure, my perception of life, and my development as a human being. Therefore, this study is also about my self-development and how shaping my personal and professional identities has made me the teacher I am today. Thus, this study focuses on my perception of the essentials of teaching and explores the essence of my teaching. Sometimes I feel like I am on the quest for the “Holy Grail” of teaching: many heard about it, some people saw it, but where it is now and how to find it nobody is aware of. Why is it so important? Investigating educators’ own teaching practices has recently come into the limelight and is important for effective student learning when teachers can use the reflections on their teaching practices as a tool to improve students’ academics.

Context of the Study

Our government and society expect schools to accomplish their ultimate goal of educating new generations of American citizens. They have high expectations for our students, as above all, they are the future of the United States of America. The American society invests huge resources in education and expects high efficacy from teaching and administrative staff in return. However, student academic accomplishment is a big problem in Chicago, and particularly in the Chicago Public Schools (CPS). In 2008 alone, based on the Illinois Standard Achievement Test, ubiquitously known as ISAT, forty percent of CPS students scored below state standards. The statewide standardized examinations, Adequate Yearly Progress, abbreviated as AYP is also a strong indicator of the district’s success or failure. As a CPS teacher I am alarmed that in

2008 only sixty percent of 400,000 CPS students met AYP in Reading. According to progress reports from the Illinois State Board of Education each year from 2004 to 2008 CPS failed to make AYP both in Math and Reading.

My work as a teacher on two continents (I worked as an educator in the Ukraine as well) introduced me to different teacher styles and quality of performances. Positive or not, they all have one feature in common: they affect the consumers, i.e. students. Those students who benefit from the work of an excellent teacher have an edge over many school sufferers, who drop out of schools. The latter characterize schools as useless, time consuming institutions. They view themselves as losers, teachers as vindictive, and life as punitive. CPS teachers stand behind their students' success or failure, and as such their role in this process shouldn't be underestimated. It is no secret that not all teachers are successful in educating their students. Many students have no chance to succeed due to the fact that their teachers do not apply best teaching practice in their everyday professional lives. Berliner (1987) argues that not all teachers acquire professional expertise. Hargreaves and Fullan (1992) claim that some teachers do not improve from the professional standpoint. This phenomenon leaves behind hundreds of thousands of undereducated young Americans who at some point of their lives will join the work force of this nation. Will they be able to make our country blossom economically? Have they been taught to be proud of their work well done?

I clearly understand that teachers cannot cure all the problems of society. However, I assume that if teachers do their best to educate students, our society would face fewer social ills and more opportunities to prosper. I believe there is the best

professional way to teach (no matter how idiosyncratic teaching experiences may be) without causing in students a lifelong repulsion of schools, teaching and learning. Having said that, I recall what my friend's son once told me. He was so afraid of his first grade teacher's constant humiliation that even during summer break, he would choose another route if he had to pass by his school. Now in his thirties, he acknowledges that the damage he had incurred from his former teacher is permanent.

Purpose of the Study

For me as a teacher it is painful to watch so early in life disappointed, young people, who did not get any help on time. I believe that teachers are endowed with a unique human power and a professional responsibility to create special relationships with their students. This invisible, but nevertheless, strong bond may turn many bad situations around. I think students are entitled to get help from teachers (just for the mere fact of being our students) that cannot be obtained in the loving environment of their homes (maybe it is not loving after all). By the same token, I hope that teachers who struggle in the classrooms (and who do not) will find this study reminiscent of their own personal and professional routes.

I have been teaching all my adulthood and have learned from my own and my colleagues' experiences that everything that happens in a teacher's personal life affects his or her professional performance. I am no exception to this phenomenon: the transformations that took place on a professional level were triggered by internal changes in my personal life.

The purpose of this study is to explore how these changes in my personal life have affected my professional life, and consequently, my students. The guiding research questions for this study are:

What have I learned in my personal and professional life that has affected my teaching?

What is the reciprocal relationship between the personal and professional?

What are the boundaries?

How does establishing relationships with students affect their academic performance?

What has made me the teacher that I am today?

Why an Auto-ethnography?

This study is situated within Edmund Husserl's (1970) phenomenological concept of Lebenswelt (Life world). Reflecting upon my professional and personal Lebenswelt I explore two different political, cultural, and educational systems. In his philosophy Husserl (1931) concentrated on phenomena as we perceive them against the facts that exist independently of our perception. Husserl examined numerous possibilities and ways the process of thinking takes place in different people, and how people understand and interpret the world around them. The life world can be perceived as an ever changing horizon of our experience that plays the role of a dynamic background/ horizon where we live, love, hate, and work. Not only we dwell in our life world, but it lives within us as well. This study investigates my professional Lebenswelt that I encounter every day as a teacher. I have 38 students in my classroom, and I have to find a key to each of them.

If I fail as an individual to open their life worlds with that special key I will also fail as an educator. Their life worlds cannot be understood in a static manner as consciousness has already taken root and has grown into students' cultural, economic, social, racial, and historical Lebenswelt. That Lebenswelt has developed its own prejudgment and concepts of bad and good that determine human actions.

As the research method is driven by the purpose of the research as well as by the research questions, I discovered that auto-ethnographic method has in abundance all the necessary techniques and strategies to address both. Reed–Danahay (1997) defines auto-ethnography “as a form of self-narrative that places the self within a social context”, and is “the method and the text” (p. 9). Sociologist and author Denzin (1989) argues that auto-ethnographic research is embedded in the researcher's most important events of life, and brings to the surface hard to solve provocative problems that can be interpreted through thorough examination and analysis. Ellis and Bochner (2000), consider auto-ethnography to be an autobiographical writing that interprets multiple levels of personal consciousness connected to cultural consciousness. Denzin and Lincoln (2008) claim auto-ethnography to be an emotional and personal experience in the ethnographic research design. This auto-ethnographic research creates the background to study myself as a professional through the prism of my personal life both in the Ukraine and in the U.S.A. Auto-ethnography as a form of qualitative research makes it possible to contemplate my own life and professional experience as the major foci of the investigation. Auto-ethnographers can dissect and analyze their own lives more thoroughly than any other researchers as they possess the information on the events

of their lives that others have no access to. The reflections on the stories from my professional life are the means to explore, analyze and comprehend educational problems teachers encounter in their journey to a professional accomplishment.

The fieldwork of this study is my own life as a political refugee, a new American citizen, and always a teacher at heart and in skill. I also describe and analyze my professional experience in the two different academic systems. My personal life is inseparable from my professional life in regard to who I am as a person because it defines who I am as a teacher.

In the undergraduate college I was impatiently waiting for instructors to disclose the secrets of best teaching. While taking teaching methods class I was searching relentlessly through chapters on teaching, trying to locate the recipe for best teaching practice. I have to admit it was in vain. Nevertheless, I was persistent and continued my quest. "After all, there are good teachers everywhere," I thought. I was determined to find them no matter what. I had questions that waited for specific answers. How did best teachers achieve their mastery? How could I become a good teacher? Don't future teachers deserve to be exposed to best teaching practice without harming their own students first? I recalled the first postulate of "the Father" of Medical Science, Hippocrates. In relation to patients it states: "Do not harm." Hippocratic wisdom could be equally applied to educators as well, as many students are harmed by inadequate teaching and suffer undue academic collateral damage.

CHAPTER TWO: REVIEW OF LITERATURE

When I started the Educational Leadership Doctoral Program at National-Louis University I could anticipate neither its depth nor the intellectual journey I would have to embark on. It drew a line between “me then” before I started it and “me now”, and set the ground for conducting auto-ethnographic research. My auto-ethnographic investigation of the essence of teaching through studying my personal and professional life paths is two-pronged. It is an attempt to uncover the essence of what is good teaching amidst the backdrop of “best” practice. A growing body of research suggests that “teacher effectiveness is an extremely strong determinant of differences in student learning” (Sanders & Rivers, 1996). But what determines effectiveness? Is it merely good technique or something more? In this chapter I explore literature in three areas related to my study:

- Theory and practice on teaching effectiveness
- Teachers’ reflective practice and reflexivity
- Auto-ethnographic vignettes as a vehicle for reflexivity

Theory and Practice on Teaching Effectiveness

William Bennett (1986), the former Secretary of Education indicated that teacher effectiveness is not a dismal science, and that it is not mysterious either. His efforts directed researchers to identify forty research-based effective practices. The effective practices that dealt with improved classroom instruction included memorization, homework, direct instruction, experiments, classroom assessments, classroom time

management, and many other important strategies. Creemers (1994) confirmed this point and claimed that effective teaching strategies such as feedback, clarity of presentation, corrective instruction, ability grouping and tutoring as statistically significant and academically promising. In the same vein, the data from the international studies suggest that teachers' effectiveness has a profound effect on student achievement (Teddle, Cremeres, Kyriakides, Muijs & Yu, 2006).

The educational research on teaching effectiveness has focused on the educational strategies that improve student academic achievement (Marzano, Pickering & Pollock, 2001). Thousands of teachers studied nine categories of effective instructional strategies by identifying their similarities and differences, by setting objectives and providing feedback through nonlinguistic representations, and by regularly assigned homework (Marzano et al., 2001). However, Marzano (2003) contends that "while subject-matter knowledge in itself might not be consistently associated with student achievement, pedagogical knowledge is" (p.64).

Darling-Hammond (2000a) argues that effective teaching practices are especially important in the schools that serve underprivileged students. Darling-Hammond claims that "the likelihood of passing student achievement tests in Reading and Math depends on the teachers' qualifications and on whether effective teaching practices were applied" (p.150). She underscores that there is a continuous relationship between the reading achievement of elementary school students and their teacher's professional ability to use effective teaching strategies. Darling-Hammond claims that effective teaching starts with adequate teacher preparation and on-site staff development to introduce effective teaching practices.

While unprepared teachers are unable to plan curricula that meet student needs, well-prepared teachers using the most effective learning and teaching strategies, sharing and acquiring the professional experience with and from their colleagues better respond to their student needs, and achieve the highest results possible (p.152).

In the same vein, Weglinsky (2009) reasons that teaching effectiveness results in improved students' performance. Feiman-Nemser (2001) contends that teaching effectiveness is embedded and intrinsically connected to lifelong learning. Feiman-Nemser introduced a professional learning continuum from college to years of teaching. She maintains that providing teachers with the curriculum framework of continuous professional growth will enable them utilize effective teaching practices while they are still in college.

Copland (2003) highlights the importance of a proper collecting and analyzing data on teaching effectiveness. However, not all school districts have a district/school-wide system to analyze data. In these regards Patton (2002) argues that often teachers reject data on their accountability as they are apprehensive of being scorned for low effectiveness that will affect their professional evaluation. "What was the impact of the qualitative data collected from teachers? They (school board members) could not easily dismiss the anguish, fear, and depth of concern revealed in the teachers' own reflections." (p.20). Patton claims that if school districts/schools engaged in multiple-level inquiry they were able to detect the conditions for effective teaching to thrive because "the emotional stability is necessary for effective teaching to take place" (p.19). Thus, only

the appropriate and adequate collection and analysis of data can be used to enhance the conditions and principles of effective teaching that could be later extrapolated as a generalized knowledge.

Various researchers brought their extensive experience and their insight to define what teaching effectiveness is, and how it can become a wide-spread phenomenon throughout learning communities. The literature on teaching effectiveness recently shifted in order to identify conditions that make teaching effectiveness a norm of academic life. DuFour (1991) indicates that positive school climate promotes student advancement through raising teaching effectiveness. He argues that teaching effectiveness improves if teachers are treated as professionals, and the school climate is conducive to teacher collaboration. Wagner & Kegan (2006) believe that if the school climate is negative and teachers feel victimized, they are incapable to overcome their reluctance to teach effectively and as a result leave behind scores of undereducated students. Instead of improving their teaching effectiveness, they start blaming their colleagues for ill-preparing students in earlier grades.

Some researchers assert that a successful professional staff development improves teacher classroom effectiveness. Specifically, it relates to new teachers in the system. Lieberman and Miller (2008) argue that novice teachers have the right to become experts in their profession by using the experience of their professional predecessors. Nonetheless, DuFour and Eaker (1998) indicate that many teachers do not discuss effective strategies as it is not a tradition in American educational culture to share secrets of teachers' mastery. However, the persistence to avoid collegiality and collaboration

among teachers prevents them from breaking their professional isolation and contributing to their improved knowledge, skills and judgment, and raising teaching effectiveness to a new level. Little (1990), Stiegler and Hiebert (1999) claim that if seasoned and new teachers convene on a regular basis to discuss effective teaching strategies in small study groups, they may collaboratively create a model of teaching effectively.

For many years educational writers analyzed the essentials of academics in terms of effective strategies for teaching and learning. There is a general agreement on the importance of teaching effectiveness and how it can be learned. Although teaching effectiveness represents a complex and often idiosyncratic process, Lieberman and Miller (2008) maintain that it is an acquired skill. Based on their research and extensive experience they came to conclusion that teachers learn the most when they are introduced to new skills in a familiar environment of their own schools. They developed five themes of effective practice, such as context, capacity, content, commitment, and challenge. The researchers argue that learning communities need to use all of those themes in order to grow professionally (Lieberman & Miller, 2008). A study of Chicago's latest reforms indicated that failure to improve teacher performance through introducing the strategies of effective teaching practices is an unrecognized academic problem (Darling-Hammond, 2006). She argues that school reform could be successful if teachers would go through rigorous on-site training and coaching with follow up discussions with their colleagues, teacher leaders and coaches as collaboration and productive cooperation improves teaching effectiveness and enhances student learning.

Teachers' Reflective Practice and Reflexivity

Teachers' reflective practice and reflexivity are rooted in modern qualitative inquiry that introduced research, theories and practice in the new light through the lens of Human Science. Unlike Natural Science that explores natural objects and natural events, Human Science consisting of sociology, ethnography, ethno-methodology, critical theory, gender study, semiotics, etc., is engaged in learning an individual's mind, values, thoughts, feelings, and emotions together with that individual's actions and motives (Dilthey, 1987).

Affected by the devastating phenomenon of the World War II, the postwar authors gave Human Science more consideration via postmodernism and reevaluating the value system of the West. The ideas of Derrida, Foucault, Kuhn, Lyotard, Gadamer and Baudrillard penetrated all of the above mentioned fields of Human Science including the approaches to the methods of research and "phenomenological sociology" (Van Manen, 1990).

Edmund Husserl's phenomenological philosophy and his concept of life-world as the world of human lived experience were highly appreciated by Dilthey (1976). Dilthey argues that while nature needs explanation, a human life needs to be understood and interpreted based on the phenomena that took place in the individual's life.

According to Max Van Manen (1990) Human Science aims "at explicating the meaning of human phenomena (such as literary or historical studies of texts) and understanding the lived structures of meanings (such as in phenomenological studies of the life-world" (p. 4). Furthermore, Van Manen claims that educational research needs

to be based on “textual reflection on the lived experience and practical actions of everyday life with the intent to increase one’s thoughtfulness and practical resourcefulness or tact.” (p.4). Max Van Manen points to the importance of phenomenology, hermeneutics and semiotics in pedagogical research. While phenomenology “describes how one orients to lived experience”, hermeneutics describes how one interprets “the texts of life“, and “semiotics” (the science of signs and symbols) is used here to develop a practical writing or linguistic approach to the method of phenomenology and hermeneutics.” (p.4).

To comply with the needs of the modern society in regards of teaching and to improve the nexus between research and practitioners, Flyvbjerg (2001) created a taxonomy based on Aristotle’s perception of knowledge. It consists of three parts: theoretical knowledge–*episteme*; action derived from theory–*techne*; experience gained from action/practice to satisfy the needs of community at-large–*phronesis*. Interestingly enough, Frank (2004) perceives Aristotle’s *phronesis* as “practical wisdom, which is the opposite of acting on the basis of scripts and protocols; those are for beginners, and continuing reliance on them can doom actors to remain beginners” (p.221). In the same vein, Frank introduces mindfulness as a significant part of knowledge. According to Bolton (2010) “being mindfully aware develops accurate observation, communication, ability to use implicit knowledge in association with explicit knowledge, and insight into others’ perceptions.” (p.15).

In the academic world theory and practice do not always converge. Bourdieu (1994) claims that there is a consistent divergence “between theory and practice” while

Greenwood and Levin (2008) explain that divergence takes place due to “lack of reflection on the social research and the knowledge needs of society at-large. In this regard, teachers’ reflective practice and reflexivity get a new momentum.

Max Van Manen, (1987) devoted many of his writings to teaching or pedagogy and to “self-reflection of life” through a pedagogue’s reflexivity. In Latin the word pedagogue means to lead a child to knowledge. Van Manen, argues that a teacher’s reflexivity is an instrument to help educators not to get lost on the way to that noble destination. From that perspective Van Manen claims that “pedagogy’s task is to practice an active self-reflection (a thoughtfulness) on the reality in which adults live with children to offer parents, teachers, and other educators insights or understandings” (p.6). Van Manen, (1991) warns educators that “in our pedagogical living nothing is ever completely foreseeable, predictable, manageable. It is usually not until afterwards that we have the opportunity to think reflectively through the significance of the situation” p.113).

The connotation of the word “reflection” implies complicated mental activities in the process of learning with the purpose to solve obvious problems that do not have obvious solutions (Dewey, 1933). For Dewey reflection is one of many kinds of thinking, among which the most important is “reflective thinking”. Dewey argues that reflective thinking is a process governed by skills and attitude when the human mind is in the state of doubt on the reflective activity to be taken. In this regard “reflection” is more associated with the notion of “critical thinking” (Barnett, 1994).

Some researchers created their own bastions of the term “reflection”, such as “reflection in-and on-action” (Schon, 1983; Van Manen’s (1990) “many levels of reflection”.

Habermas (1971) and Van Manen (1977) argue that knowledge in uncertain situations can be gained through interpretation of less complex events. They suggest that an individual arrives to a new level of comprehension through self-development when critical thinking and self-reflection are used as its major tools. Armed with auto-ethnography I explore the change of my personality and its affect on my identity as a teacher. Lipka and Brinthaupt (2007) attribute major transition points in becoming a teacher to the issues of self and personal identity. In the research on the problems of learning and knowing, Belenky, Clinchy, Goldberger and Tarule (1986) contend that the highest stage of self-development is characterized by the individual’s awareness in solving problems based on provisional or uncertain knowledge. King and Kitchener (1994) claim “a difference between reflective and critical thinking, with the latter accompanied by developing problem-solving skills” (p.6). Yet, the theory of reflective thinking for teachers was addressed by Dewey as early as in 1933 in his famous book *How We Think*.

Bolton (2010) regards “reflexivity as finding strategies to question our own attitudes, thought process, values, assumptions, prejudices and habitual actions, to strive to understand our complex roles in relation to others” (p.14). According to Cunliffe (2009b) to be reflexive is to examine how we-seemingly unwittingly-are involved in creating social or professional structures counter to our own values.

In asserting the researcher’s reflexivity through writing on vulnerable issues of

the society, auto-ethnography takes a special place among many forms of qualitative research. Reed-Danahay (1997) dissects the word auto-ethnography linguistically and semantically to illustrate the scope of auto-ethnographic research. Reed-Danahay claims that auto-ethnographer investigates "self" while reflecting on the process through writing "graph" to describe "ethnos"- culture.

Alike Reed-Danahay's conception on the goals of auto-ethnography, this auto-ethnographic research explores "me" as a subject within the culture of the public school. This study is based on the premise that auto-ethnography involves writing about a specific culture the researcher has experiences with, while studying the awareness of self within that culture.

Auto-ethnographic Vignettes as a Vehicle for Reflexivity

Denzin (2000) claims that auto-ethnographic vignettes enhance reflexivity in qualitative research and help readers and writers to relive the past experience "through the writer's or performer's eyes". I identify strongly with Denzin by thinking that our life after all is a snapshot of different events stored in our memory. However, it is self-reflexivity that makes a researcher omnipotent in deciphering the events and phenomena that caused the snapshot.

Humphreys (2005) was the first to use the concept of auto-ethnographic vignettes among many other instruments of auto-ethnography, comprising stories, poetry, novels, fiction, journals, photographic essays, and social science prose (Ellis & Bochner, 2000).

Humphreys (1999) claims that in his vignettes he tried to produce “a solo narrative, revealing a discovery” and retelling what Saldana (2003) called “epiphany in a character’s life”. Humphreys (1999) views auto-ethnographic vignettes as a form of “analytical and representational strategies ”to increase ethnographer’s self-reflexivity.” He concurs with Erickson (1986), who envisioned “auto-ethnographies as vivid portrayal of the conduct of an event of everyday life.” According to Erickson auto-ethnographic vignettes should be based on the “field notes” from the time the events took place.

I can relate to this perception as I had a habit to reflect on the events of the day in a diary, or in a poem. That habit turned out to be handy while working on this study. It made it easier to recall places, times and faces, as well as the feelings and emotions that accompanied them. Ellis and Bochner (2000) contemplate auto-ethnographic vignettes as “bringing life to research, and research to life” and claim that connection of “personal to the cultural” together with “ the researcher’s own experience” present important topics of investigation” (p.733). Ellis and Bochner (2000) view this kind of investigation as a “systematic sociological introspection and emotional recall to try to understand an experience a researcher has lived through” (p.737). Ellis and Bochner argue that the reward for that kind of reflexive investigation is understanding yourself in deeper ways resulting with better understanding of others.

When I looked at the nooks and crannies of my personal and professional life, I found aspects which I did not necessarily like, for instance, my divorce on a personal level, and dealing with bullies in the classroom on a professional one. Nonetheless, not to repeat the errors of the past I had to analyze all the dubious issues and take a new

approach to build a new and positive experience. The importance of creating positive experience is brought by Crites (1971) in his concept of “continuity of experience over time” and which is supported by Bochner (2000) in “Why Personal Narrative Matters”. Our personal identities seem largely contingent on how well we bridge the remembered past with the anticipated future.

This qualitative research is represented by auto-ethnographic vignettes that are the tools to raise the curtain above the stage of my professional and personal life. On one hand, being close to that stage makes it easier to observe the numerous details of different past and current events. On the other hand, watching the stage from afar makes it possible to see various developments that could be overlooked if I stayed in the close proximity to the stage with an abundance of details blocking the whole view. Therefore, in order to forego unnecessary details and to better understand and interpret the most important ones holistically, I would periodically come closer to the stage, or move away from it to the hermeneutical dress-circle. From there, it would be possible to embrace the actions as well as the motives of the major characters, i.e. myself, students, parents, and educators, performing in the cultural background of public schools setting. Though the decorations alternate depending on the country of the educational production (the U.S.A. versus the Ukraine), the assumed roles of the major characters stay intact.

The nascence of educational auto-ethnographic vignettes is a response to the need of the community at-large to see the classroom, students and teachers within the pristine process of education otherwise concealed from the public eye. Even such insiders, as school administration may not have the clear picture of that process: formal observation,

fragmental in its very nature, does not always reveal what goes on daily behind the closed classroom door.

The last century and the beginning of a new millennium witnessed a continuous debate over public education. The society attributes public schools failure due to a lack of teacher professionalism and their reluctance to apply effective teaching strategies to raise student performance. Therefore, this literature review explores different studies that could shed light on the ways to rectify the daunting situation.

CHAPTER THREE: METHODOLOGY

Introduction

The purpose of this study stems from the problems and phenomena stated in Chapter One of this inquiry. It is rooted in my internal desire to learn the effects of my personal transformation on my professional efficacy as a teacher of a diverse student population. I am eager to learn how my human values, beliefs, and personal self-development affect my professional morality and ethics, and whether a professional and a personal self-expression have a reciprocal impact on each other.

This chapter explains why auto-ethnographic method became my research strategy to introduce to the reader my vision of effective teaching and in order to answer my primary research questions:

What have I learned in my personal and professional life that has affected my teaching?

What is the reciprocal relationship between the personal and professional?

What are the boundaries?

How does establishing a relationship with a student affect their academic performance?

What has made me the teacher that I am today?

Auto-ethnography

Auto-ethnography appeals to me because “personal engagement in auto-ethnographic stories stirs the self-reflection of listeners” (Chang, 2008). I discovered auto-ethnography when I was searching for a qualitative method to examine my Lebenswelt, or my life world constructed of my personal and professional life events.

Chang (2008) claims that auto-ethnography promotes better understanding of ourselves within multicultural world, and measures teaching practice in the context of teachers' personal and professional experience. Auto-ethnography sets the stage to reveal my assumptions as an individual and as a teacher. Eisner (1991) views researchers as connoisseurs of their lives as nobody knows about researchers' personal and professional lives more than researchers themselves. Eisner (1991) claims that auto-ethnography shapes the vision of researchers as instruments with which they analyze and interpret events of their lives. In the course of this study I research my personal life and its implications on my teacher's potential in terms of the ways I make meaning of the world I live and work. To investigate who I am as a person and as a teacher, and in order to answer my research questions I chose auto-ethnography as the only and the best equipped for my goals research method.

Chang (2008) argues that auto-ethnographic method permits researchers understand their own behavior by getting connected with others through cultural windows. The very configuration of this method creates conditions for setting the focus on researchers themselves by penetrating into their lives on all levels in the background of social events and life upheavals. Despite of all these features this method is criticized for its limitations, such as lack of objectivity in one's memories, and for its introspectiveness (Holt, 2003). John Van Maanen (1988) thwarted my doubts about the validity of auto-ethnography. He claims:

The relation between the knower and the known to be a most problematic one, and anything but independent in cultural studies. There is no way of seeing,

hearing, or representing the world of others that is absolutely, universally valid or correct. Ethnographies of any sort are always subject to multiple interpretations.

They are never beyond controversy or debate (p.35).

In this study I will rely on Van Maanen's kind of research, and will conduct intrinsic case study from Van Maanen's perspective.

Auto-ethnography has its roots in ethnography, a science that explores a specific group of people. Ethnography, that derives from anthropology, became popular in the 1900s through the anthropologists' research that explored the life of exotic cultures (Malinowski, 1995). The 21st century postmodernist world tried to accommodate multiple new realities, and accept as trustworthy viewpoints of people living in their own life-worlds. As ethnographers started to assume narrative approaches they were acknowledged as important contributors to the essence of the research (Tirney & Lincoln, 1997). Auto-ethnography came to the surface of a qualitative research through the experience of self-discovery of a human being, when researchers explored their own memories as fieldworks and instruments. This method makes it possible to interpret researchers' lives from the mountain top of their own idiosyncratic experience and knowledge unavailable to others (Peshkin, 1985). Auto-ethnography is a unique method in terms of investigators' dual performance in the capacities of both informants/insiders and analysts/outsideers. Van Maanen (1988) claims "ethnographies of any sort are always subject to multiple interpretations." (p.35). From his point of view, it is the major reason why ethnographic researchers become interested in phenomenology and hermeneutics (Van Maanen, 1988).

Relationship to Phenomenology

Phenomenological inquiry, or qualitative research, employs naturalistic approach to explain and better understand phenomena in their specific contexts. Lincoln and Guba (1985) claim that people better understand the phenomena if they are described in a familiar way, in the form they are used to. Phenomenology, the study of development of human consciousness and self-awareness, is allied with existentialism, hermeneutics, and epistemology. Existentialism, the analysis of the individual's existence or acts, regardless of the individual's ignorance of right/wrong concepts, is related to hermeneutics, a philosophical perspective on interpreting texts. Hermeneutics phenomenology suggests that the meanings of individuals' experience are to be studied and interpreted on the basis of socially constructed realities (Max Van Manen, 1990). He contends that whereas "phenomenology describes how one orients to lived experience, hermeneutics describes how one interprets the texts of life." (p.29 in Hatch, 2002). Epistemology, a theory of knowing/knowledge and its limits, explores the concepts of how we know what we know. Auto-ethnography is a critical tool for learning about learning, as it "reveals concretely realized patterns in one's own actions rather than the actions of others" (Roth, 2005, p.4). Boyle and Parry (2007) note that despite its self-reflective style, auto-ethnographic method concentrates on the relationship between people and the culture of the environment in which they live as individuals and perform as professionals. Through auto-ethnographic description researchers analyze their own behaviors to develop an objective comprehension of the events and actions under consideration. This multifaceted method is related to psychoanalysis as well (Parker, 1997). It allows

“postmodernist memoirists to better examine the plurality of codes that create our multiple selves.” (Slater, 2005). Ellis and Bochner (2000) argue that narrative psychologists are challenged by qualitative research outside psychology, when they assume the role of auto-ethnographers.

The above-mentioned characteristics strengthened me in my determination to use auto-ethnographic method as a research design for my qualitative study. Auto-ethnography supplied me with a key to open the closed doors of my classroom and my soul to observe in retrospection my professional experience along with personal human development. I investigate how the process of my personal transformation affects my professional growth as a teacher. Both sets of experiences are dissected into smaller, but nonetheless, important components. A thorough self-examination permits me to follow my human and professional journey through continents, countries, and different political and academic systems. This method let me foreshadow my memories, actions, thoughts, and feelings. The fieldwork of this study is my life and teaching experiences within the sociological and academic setting of two different cultures. This rare combination provides the basis for analysis of interpersonal relationships within a learning community on all of its levels: teachers to teachers, students to administration; students to students, teachers to administration; and parents to all of the parties mentioned previously. The analysis of the interpersonal relationships within the learning community is important in order to perceive the undercurrents of academics and their implications.

What Is Data?

The ultimate goal of data collection is to gain enough pertinent information to answer the research questions of the study. Thus, my data collection strategies stem from the need to address the research goals on one hand, and from the specifics of auto-ethnographic design, on the other. Reed-Danahay (1997) acknowledges auto-ethnography as a valid research method that is marked by its dichotomy. It is a genre of writing with the three characteristics of “native anthropology”, “ethnic autobiography”, and “autobiographical ethnography” (p.2). As auto-ethnography concentrates predominantly on the researcher’s self and understanding that self within a certain culture, it is the researcher’s personal memory that becomes the primary source of data. However, memory alone cannot be a single sufficient tool for collecting data as researchers’ objectivity can be challenged (Holt, 2003). Therefore, I support the data from my memory (an unfathomed well of my personal and professional information in itself) with the data from interviews, case studies, documents, and artifacts.

Bhaskar (1978, 1979), Manicas and Second (1983), Huberman and Miles (1994) argue that social phenomena exist not only in people’s subjective memory, but they also exist in the objective world. Although “personal memory is a building block of auto-ethnography” (Chang, 2008, p.71), and remembering events is a powerful tool indeed, it adds to the validity of the study if there is physical evidence from the researcher’s life. Broad-based data, such as artifacts, documents, and interviews add to the objectivity of auto-ethnographic research (Chang, 2008). Over the years of my teaching career in the Ukraine and in the USA, I (still cannot explain why) kept my personal and

professional diaries and journals; collected artifacts, such as portfolios on teaching methods, student papers, case studies, student photographs, letters, drawings, parents' notes, records of teacher/student/ parent interviews, records of student awards, mementos, meetings notes, articles from newspapers and magazines, by all means related to education.

“To manage better the research project” (Chang, 2008) I chronicled the events of the past and created their time-line. Besides that each occurrence is accounted for by its own time and date, I found it important not to misconstrue their significance as their essence might be affected by social, personal and professional changes in the researcher's life.

Tompkins (1996) and Nash (2002) argue that time-line is a research instrument that can provide the basis for the educational auto-ethnographies. To dig deeper into my data collection and organization process, I took a step towards continuous self-observation by recording my current thoughts, feelings, and new attitudes I did not have before. This strategy made it possible to objectively and holistically observe and analyze various professional and personal undercurrents from the vantage point of my new juxtaposition and gained knowledge. The string of events from my past suddenly assumed a new connotation. Stepping back and beckoning them, revealed their meanings hidden from me in the past. At that time, absorbed by the hectic race of each day, I did not pay attention to all of the facts, red flags and details. As a result I became blindfolded by my inadequate analysis of the situations. Currently, armed with my new perception, I can completely detach myself from the past, and raise the veil over the unknown me. This perspective sets the stage for an upgraded level of comprehension of past and current events

in my life-world, as well as their objective analysis and interpretation unattainable earlier.

During data collecting stage I encountered an interesting phenomenon I could not account for: I immediately tried to analyze and interpret its meaning. Later on, I found the description of this mental process. (Chang, 2008) claims it to be an “inventorying activity that brings together data collection, analysis, and interpretation” (p. 76). Chang argues that auto-ethnographic researchers should not be limited by any rules, and should take any creative steps in order to meet their own needs. In the same vein, Taylor & Bogdan (1984) argue that qualitative research does not carry any guidelines for the amount of data to be collected, and it is the researcher who decides either to continue the quest for new data, or to stop it indefinitely. Taylor & Bogdan also claim that data collection, its analysis, and interpretation may take place simultaneously. Data analysis, or refinement activity, starts when researchers sift through data to jettison the redundant items and unimportant information. In auto-ethnography data analysis is based on dissecting the collected data into smaller and therefore, more manageable for analysis pieces. However, data interpretation requires a magnifying glass to observe data from a close distance in order not to omit any valuable detail. Data interpretation, unlike data analysis, requires researchers to delve into their cultural background (Creswell,1989), and into the relationships between the self and others to interpret the meaning of behaviors that took place in researchers’ lives (Anderson, 2000). Personal behaviors are best interpreted in the context of socioeconomic, cultural, and geopolitical environments where those behaviors originated and took place.

Presentation of Data

This study is presented in the form of auto-ethnographic vignettes. The theory of auto-ethnographic vignettes was developed by Humphreys (2005) to increase his own self-reflexivity as an ethnographer. Each vignette of my study offers for observation a vivisected particular event from my professional or personal life. It is hard to separate both as their roots and branches have intertwined into one substance. My decision to use auto-ethnographic vignettes is two-pronged: to share my life events with my readers, and help them reconstruct the missing parts of their own lives. This approach is in line with Rambo's (2007) claim that through the techniques of auto-ethnographic vignettes researchers can share their emotions and personal information with readers, who get a chance to construct the meaning of what was not said by a researcher, but only implied.

This study presents vignettes allegedly separated in place and time. At first, I imagined this inquiry as a pizza pie, then as a jigsaw puzzle, though the jigsaw puzzle analogy is mostly related to coding and analyzing stages (Sidel et al. 1988). However, neither of the concepts completely addressed the essence of education auto-ethnographic vignettes. Afterwards, I came across the concept of a bricoleur, or a quilt maker (Harper, 1987; Kincheloe, J., 2001). Albeit it was closer to what I was looking for, I still could not settle for second best as the concept of bricoleur perceives the quilt as made of ends and pieces. From my standpoint, educational auto-ethnographic vignettes are different from all other types of vignettes because students and their lives are not lifeless odds and pieces, but authentic and cognitive entities. In a quilt, without ruining its whole image of a quilt, a bricoleur can substitute one colorful piece by another. Unlike a quilt, education

endures no replacements, but authenticity only. In my further quest I encountered the concept of montage in filmmaking (Denzin & Lincoln, 2008). It addressed my need as a researcher for assembling separate auto-ethnographic vignettes into one inquiry by “creating something new from what had been obscured by a previous image“ (p.6).

Denzin and Lincoln provide the examples from the Eisenstein’s masterpiece *The Battleship Potemkin*” and in particular, from the scene on the massacre on Odessa’s steps.

While varying by their themes, the vignettes in my study are intrinsically united by the leitmotif of my own personal perception of what makes an “effective teacher”. Like the filmmaker’s perception of the events, the researcher’s interpretation illuminates all the ambiguities, subtleties, understatements and dark corners of the problems, implied by the inquiry. This approach makes the whole meaning of the inquiry transparent and comprehensible to its readers. Thus, readers get a chance to make their own inferences and conclusions based on the presented vignettes. Involving readers to think and infer, adds value to auto-ethnography as a method. Not surprisingly, Berry (2006) claims that auto-ethnography has the power to transform both researchers and readers alike.

As life itself auto-ethnographic vignettes are not one-dimensional either. Some described events are close and understandable, some are distant and not coherent to others. It may take years before an auto-ethnographer fully understands and interprets them through detailed and thorough analysis. The researcher may discover that an underestimated powerful event from long ago has conjured and triggered unexpected new developments in the present. Auto-ethnography as a method is different from other kinds

of research due to a dual role of the researcher as an investigator and as the one being investigated. Loughran et al. (2007) claim the importance of analysis and interpretation in order to understand better the phenomena taking place in a researcher's life. Those phenomena could be comprehended through a conceptual and theoretical framework of theories of self-study in regards of teacher education, performance and best teaching practice.

Though auto-ethnography magnifies the researcher's "self" it is equally essential to protect the "others" from the point of view of ethics because "self is an extension of a cultural community" (Chang, 2008). As a matter of fact, researchers do not act in isolation, and do not live in a vacuum. By describing the events researchers witnessed or participated in themselves, does not make them the owners of the story just because they told it to the world (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000). Researchers' stories are equally related to other people's lives and stories as well. In my case, those people are my colleagues, students, parents and administrators. Writing auto-ethnography does not waive my obligation to protect my subjects' confidentiality. The participants in my auto-ethnographic vignettes will be described under assumed names, or pseudonyms. Ditto to the names of schools, and other educational institutions.

Researchers have the inalienable responsibility to be genuinely empathic towards their subjects in their attempt to understand the "others". Ellis (2009) reminds auto-ethnographers how significant it is to acknowledge connection to other people through supporting relationship ethics. I always keep in mind that it is impossible to trespass on ethical boundaries without ruining the fabric of both the research and the bond it created

with the others. In the following auto-ethnographic vignettes I reflect on the “pleasure and pain of my teaching career in response to the plea for a return of the author to the research text” (Humphreys, 2005). Below I share an account of nine auto-ethnographic vignettes and their reflections.

CHAPTER FOUR: GIVING MY HEART A VOICE

Vignette One: Hitting the Teaching Bottom

Regardless of the geographical position of the classroom on the map of the world, it is very easy for a teacher to get burned out. Maybe there are lucky ones who immediately know how to meet challenges disguised as unruly twelve-year old students. I, alas, do not belong to their ranks. I will always remember my first year of teaching in the Ukraine. Even if I wanted to forget it, I would not be able to because of the scars left on my teacher's soul, if one exists separately from the main one.

Public schools in the Ukraine differ significantly from the Western design. Unlike the United States, they are not divided into elementary, middle or high schools. All students begin their education in the same school comprising all of the three above, and from which they would graduate ten years later. Beginning with the fourth grade, education is departmentalized. From that time on students have a different teacher for each subject and the same homeroom teacher until their graduation. Thus, during the same academic year a teacher might teach students from different grade levels, but have a specific classroom as a homeroom teacher. Usually, I taught English to eighth, ninth, and tenth grade students corresponding to the American sophomores, juniors, and seniors respectively.

During my first year I was assigned as an English teacher for three fifth grade classrooms, but not as a homeroom teacher whose responsibilities included a huge amount of paper work, parents' conferences, visiting students in their homes, fieldtrips, weekly political information, topic of the week discussion, monthly assemblies, publishing

classroom and school-wide newspapers, as well as solving unpredictable academic and disciplinary problems. Some teachers tried to avoid homeroom assignment by all means, as they saw it as a burden not worth their efforts, though they were paid for it. However, many teachers enjoyed it and welcomed as an opportunity to know their students better.

Recalling the times when I stood on the road-crossing pondering what professional road to take, being a teacher attracted me the least. To begin with I did not want to be a teacher since the time I watched under the ceiling of my ninth grade classroom a floating herring, launched by my male classmates. Our regular Geography teacher was on a sick leave, and we had a substitute teacher. That day our classroom was one happy place: laughing faces, noise, pranks, a herring, hitting one student's face after another. To my complete amazement the teacher did not even try to stop her public and professional humiliation. Instead, she turned to me, the only student who was not participating in the revelry (possibly due to my affiliation to my parents as teachers), and continued lecturing as if she did not see the turmoil developing in front of her eyes.

Remembering this and some other incidents of a complete teachers' failure, I avoided employment in public schools by all means. Instead, after my graduation from the university with a master's degree in Philology and Teaching English and English Literature, I chose a job as a live interpreter at the Technological Institute that sold advanced technologies all over the world. In the Soviet Union it was a prestigious job as it gave me freedom of visiting different cities, cultural sites, meeting celebrities, interesting people, including foreigners. It turned out that job provided me with a

priceless experience of learning how to speak fluent English. (It sounds bizarre, but graduates of Foreign Language Colleges could not speak the languages they had studied. Authorities were afraid that young people would learn truth about the West and discouraged any form of communication with foreigners. Definitely, communist admonitions had no borders).

The Institute of Advanced Technologies was located far from my house, and the job description did not include time limits, requiring me to work even on weekends and holidays. Nonetheless, I liked my job, and did not think of quitting. The situation changed when my daughter went to kindergarten, and I had to take her to and from school. “You have to find another job. Why don’t you start teaching?” my mother suggested.

So, here I am, a new English teacher in front of my new students. Everything went well in the two of the classrooms, but I could claim a pedagogic disaster in the third one. Each time I opened the classroom’s door the students would go berserk and had a field day. They were disobedient, did not do their homework and unlike me obviously had a lot of fun. I could not understand what I did wrong: same lesson plans, same curriculum. Why in the two other classrooms were there no discipline and academic problems? Why in the two classrooms did students listen to me and come prepared for the class with completed homework? I could not figure out what I did wrong. Albeit I did not want to look professionally inadequate, I decided to talk to my father, a very wise and experienced educator. At that time nothing could disappoint me more than his response. “Think,” he said. “I am thinking about this all the time,” I replied indignantly. “It means

that you don't see the whole picture. Continue thinking, and you will find the answer," he added.

I was devastated: I was looking for a helpful professional advice and was left out in the cold. "So, you mean I have to come to that classroom and be humiliated again?" I asked impatiently. "No, I mean that you have more information on the situation than anybody else and will definitely come with a proper solution if you continue thinking."

I started visiting my experienced colleagues and watched them teach. Unfathomable to me, my troubled students in their classrooms turned into tender lambs, while in mine I was always their prey. Each time I approached that classroom I felt as an academic Prometheus whose liver was going to be gnawed at by a merciless eagle. At night my courage grew back as did Prometheus's liver, and I would open that classroom door more eager than ever to bring academic fire to my torturers no matter what.

The summer break began, and as usual I went to the Black Sea. That year I bought a beautiful skirt for the Day of Knowledge, which was a national holiday. Getting ready for the first day of school I remember ironing that skirt. But I was not thinking about the skirt. Actually, I was thinking about my troublemakers. Many times over the summer I mentally returned to the unhealthy academic situation I encountered during my first year of teaching. My thoughts were really gloomy. "My students grew up and got stronger now. Could I handle older kids who did not listen to me when they were one year younger?" I knew this dilemma would not disappear by itself. I had to do something about it, but what? Suddenly, it was like a bolt of lightning.

“Never again will that situation repeat itself,” I said to myself, and felt adamant in my determination.

When I opened the door to the now sixth grade classroom my former “eagles” immediately sensed a change. Both my students and I knew that good, old days were gone for good, and from then on they had to follow my rules. Till now it is an enigma to me. Was it a result of my professional self-development as a teacher? Did I become a more confident adult, or was it a mix of everything in between? Did I intuitively hit the gold lode of keeping discipline? Regardless of the reason, I knew that the roadblock of bad discipline was removed, and I was free to teach without losing valuable instruction time calling my students to order.

That September another amazing thing happened. One day my Principal asked me to come to her office after school. She invited me to take a seat, looked at attentively and offered me... to be assigned as a classroom teacher. I started to refuse, but she said.: “Vera, just for one year. Give it a try. If you don’t like it, come to my office, and you will never have it again.”

The rest was history. I liked it despite all the challenges it brought into my professional and personal life. In a year my Principal smiled at me and said “I was positive you would love it.” Oh, yes. She was absolutely right.

Reflection on Vignette One

Vignette One illustrates the problems I encountered during my first year of teaching. Though I was not a complete novice to teaching (in the Ukraine I was teaching English at one of the city colleges during my senior year at the university), educating young children in a public school setting was completely different from my previous experience. First of all and foremost, at a city college I did not have to deal with the discipline issues as my students were mostly young adults. Therefore, I could completely zero in on teaching English as a subject matter. I am not saying that it was easy, as it was a very demanding endeavor that required a lot of knowledge, hard work, organization, and personal and professional responsibility. However, that experience was of little help in the fifth grade classroom. (That experience was not completely lost, and I could utilize it when I started teaching ESL in one of Chicago's City Colleges). I have to admit that when I decided to start my work as a schoolteacher I did not expect any discipline roadblocks on my teaching path. Now I see that situation in the new light, having in my hand a lantern of auto-ethnography (Diogenes to look for a "real man" was holding a lantern in his hand day and night).

Searching for myself I learned a valuable lesson that teaching is not merely what a new teacher expects it to be. Though I felt it should be obvious how to rectify the situation, I could not find the solution to the problem at the time I faced it. Though as a teacher I wanted to focus on the exciting aspects of teaching, my fifth-graders immediately brought me back down to Earth in a sort of "business as usual" mode. From that time on I learned not to take well-meaning criticism too personally, even if it came

from my father. At that time, however, his wise advice “to think”, that is to reflect, I took as an insult. Interestingly enough, my father’s advice mirrors John Dewey’s philosophy in terms of what Dewey (1910) means by “thinking”. In “*How We Think*” Dewey wrote:

The data at hand cannot supply the solution: they can only suggest it. What, then are the sources of the suggestion? Clearly they are past experience and prior knowledge. But unless there has been experience in some degree analogous, which may now be represented in imagination, confusion remains mere confusion. There is nothing upon which to draw in order to clarify it. (p. 7)

Based on Dewey’s observation, I have come to the conclusion that during my first year of teaching I was unable to find a solution for the fifth grade discipline problem as I had neither “past experience nor prior knowledge.” “To reflect,” Dewey continues “is to hunt for additional evidence, for new data that will develop the suggestion, and will bear it out” (p. 7). That was exactly what my father advised by suggesting to get more details and “to continue thinking.” Nonetheless, at that time I could not appreciate his advice. It is Dewey’s theoretical underpinning that illuminated the past situation and explained why many new teachers are unable to solve professional problems during the onset of their teaching careers.

I believe my summer rest played a certain role too, as being positioned between Scylla and Charybdis was not the right place to look for a proper solution. In many ways it was my own tension blocking my insight. My vacation literally cleared my head as I had time to detach myself from the troubling situation and look at it from a different angle. It definitely helped. At least it seems that way in hindsight.

Vignette Two: Remember Your ABCs.

I am used to trusting my environment at work. However, I am aware that not every teacher feels as comfortable as I am in terms of leaving her purse in the classroom. I have to admit that on both continents I heard about the students caught red handed. Even one of my best friends, who was a piano teacher at the Conservatory in the Ukraine, did not escape that. When for a short minute she left the room, her student stole a big sum of money straight from her purse that sat on the grand piano (that day my friend was collecting money for a baby shower for her colleague). She immediately reported the loss, and the security recovered the money from the student's briefcase. The student was expelled.

For some reason I had unclear feelings about those situations as I felt sorry for both the teacher and for the student. Of course, the obvious victim was the teacher. Nevertheless, there was even a bigger, hidden victim, whose face was not saved...

I personally trusted all of my students, and the idea to pick up my purse whenever I left my room had never crossed my mind. However, a few years ago I encountered the big problem myself.

That year I had a very nice group of students, and we had a lot of fun together. One day I shared with them a funny ABC, a humorous anagram with the concise concepts on human values, e.g. for letter N it said "Never lie, cheat, or steal, always strike a fair deal." The students loved it, and asked me to make copies for everyone, which I did.

One day after work I had to go to the grocery store. Already at the cashier, to my

complete embarrassment I could not locate the forty dollars I put into my wallet at home that same morning. At first, I thought I lost it. I recalled that at school I did not open my wallet, and decided to look for the money at home, in case I forgot it there. My search turned out to be to no avail. The next day I repeated my trip to the store and tried to forget the conundrum.

However, I was reminded about it in the most unexpected manner. When I was lining my students up for the lunch break, I saw that one of my boys, Robert, showed another one a twenty-dollar bill. When I came closer, besides the twenty dollars I saw also the ten-dollar bill and the two five-dollar bills, exactly in the denominations I put into my wallet before the money so mysteriously disappeared. When I asked Robert why he needed so much money for lunch, he blushed and said that it was not for lunch (he had a free lunch), and that it was the money his mother gave him yesterday. Not seeing the boy taking the money out of my purse I could not accuse him of theft, and most importantly I had no intention to. After all, it was just forty dollars, and I did not want Robert feel as I was picking on him. Nonetheless, I did not trust him completely either. As a matter of fact, I saw Robert repeatedly alone, without any adult supervision, at the mall closely located to the school. Every time I saw him there, Robert felt uneasy. It looked as he was hiding something behind the counters. The last time I saw Robert at the mall, he said that he came with his mom, but he could not explain where she was. In any case, I decided to talk with his mother about the latest incident. I met her earlier as I was concerned about Robert's slow academic progress, and his reluctance to read. Robert's mother seemed a very nice lady to me, and I felt sorry for her when she told me how hard

it was to raise her younger son, especially after the boy's father passed away a few years ago. She acknowledged the academic problems her son had, and promised that her older son would control all the assigned homework. She assured me that from that time on she would be more involved with Robert's upbringing. For a certain period of time there was some improvement, but after awhile it withered as a flower in the late fall.

So, when I called Robert's mother, I asked if she gave the boy some money. She said that lately she did not give him any money at all. I informed her about the forty dollars that was missing from my wallet, and the forty dollars I saw in the boy's hand the day after. I asked the mother to talk to Robert in order to find out where he got the money from. I neither accused the boy in taking the money, nor told anybody at school about the incident.

In a few days Robert's mother called me and asked for an appointment. She came not alone, but with her older son as well. I was as sincere as possible, and asked her about the boy's frequent trips to the mall. It turned out she had no clue about them, and suspected that their neighbor, a high school student, gave Robert a ride to the mall, but for what reason? Why did not the fourth grader report home right after school? Why did nobody take him home? All these questions were unanswered as the mother and her older son listened to me with gloomy expressions on their faces. The son asked me about the forty dollars, and I reluctantly repeated what I already told his mother a few days ago. He attentively looked at her as if trying to tell her something with his glance. She also looked at him, and I saw tears in her eyes.

Well, after that conference something changed dramatically. Since then, the boy

would never come to my classroom without his homework. I saw his mother picking him up after school every single day. He improved his grades, and his ISAT scores went up. The biggest surprise awaited me on the last day of school. As many students walked in with the bouquets of flowers, Robert proudly entered the classroom with a paper bag with some gift and proudly gave it to me. When at home I opened the present I saw a beautiful purse. Inside of it I found a receipt for forty dollars and a letter that said:

Dear Ms. Neyman,

Thank you for a great year. I promise that I will continue to read, and will read all the books you recommended for the summer. I also promise that next year I will be on the B-Honor Roll. Have a great summer. Robert.

P. S. I will always remember my ABCs.

What else can I say? I have the copy of my ABCs on my nightstand. When I take it into my hands I always recall my former student, who made it to the B-Honor Roll, and about the lesson I learned. About my purse: I still leave it in the classroom without second thoughts.

Reflection on Vignette Two

Vignette Two is important to me as it illustrates that in the classroom teachers face not only missing homework or behavior issues. There is no such course in a teacher's college that introduces the prospective teachers to the issues of theft, family problems, and many more. When Robert allegedly took the money from my purse, I was already a seasoned teacher, and had empathy for the little people sitting at the desks in front of me every single day. When I enter the classroom on the first day of school, I

openly tell my students, that I am not to punish, but to teach them. Why do I tell them that? For one thing, over the academic year my students will encounter a rigorous curriculum as I do not distinguish between the offered, taught, and hidden kinds of curriculum, and will teach them everything I am supposed to. This will require my students to work very hard and develop skills most of them do not have. Why they do not have them is another story. However, it will require them to change their whole attitude towards school, education, homework, relationships with parents, peers, siblings, etc.

Let me think what would happen if I told anybody at school that a certain sum of money missing from my purse was found in the hands of my student. Well, I could expect a school investigation, parents' conferences, tears, confessions, revelations, maybe even police, but for what reason if my goal was to teach, not to punish? I think that Robert's family clearly understood where that money came from (maybe Robert confessed after all), and decided to stop the behavior that could ruin his whole life.

The process leading to Robert's transformation took place and had a potential to succeed because the most important people in his Life world i.e. his mother, brother and his teacher united their efforts in what Freire (1974) called a "true generosity". In *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* Freire opposes true generosity to false generosity in that "true generosity consists precisely in fighting to destroy the causes which nourish false charity" (p.29). In regard to Robert, "false charity" would be cover up of the incident by his family and denying Robert's problems; on my part it would be accusing Robert of theft without giving him a chance to rebuild his reputation. True generosity required Robert to find courage to say "no" to hanging out with his high school neighbor in the

mall. It was genuine generosity that required bravery from Robert's family not to give up on the youngest child who lost his way. Both his family and I tried to do everything possible to destroy the causes of that behavior.

Thus, what were the causes of Robert's problems? First of all, his family did not set a sensible time frame when Robert was expected to arrive home. Besides, as I learned later, Robert had a way to convince his mother that he could come home at any time. As nobody picked up the boy after school and because family supervision did not exist at all, Robert felt he was free to engage into any kind of activities. Therefore, his poor academic achievement that I observed, turned to be a collateral damage caused by his family's absenteeism in the boy's life.

This vignette demonstrates that often teachers are able to see only one side of the educational coin, which is students' academics, while the other, the ethical side, stays terra incognita. Having high expectations in regard to students' academics is not enough to raise socially responsible individuals. If a teacher's high expectations are not linked to high expectations for moral and ethical behavior, the teacher's work would not be complete. After all, who would care that a criminal had an excellent Math score? Freire (1985) argues that educators have to be aware of what goes on in the life of a student in order to help him/her. Otherwise, a teacher will miss on the whole picture of the student's Life World. If teachers and parents intervene on time, a great number of future altercations with the law could be completely avoided. Recently I was reading "*Schools of Tomorrow*" by John and Evelyn Dewey (1915) and was amazed by their citation from Pestalozzi:

In the world of nature, imperfection in the bud means imperfect maturity. What is crippled in the germ is crippled in its growth. We must therefore, take care, in order to avoid confusion and superficiality in education, to make first impressions of objects as correct and as complete as possible. (pp.66-67).

I cannot but agree with this conclusion as I witnessed different outcomes of events if parents and school could not develop a common language, a kind of pedagogical Esperanto to understand each other, in order to raise children as valuable members of the American society.

Vignette Three: “The Mathew Effect”

Last year my fourth graders’ performance jolted me into the time machine to explore the role of schools, teachers and parents in regards to students’ academic advancement. This vignette is written in the form of social/academic discourse to explore the concept of the relationship between school and family. I believe that this issue deserves additional attention and needs to be addressed to the general public .by all possible means.

In about fifteen years from now, today’s ten-year-olds will become the working force of this nation. How this working force will perform in the future depends on the quality of skills they acquire at school.

For me the last academic year marked a new and increased in numbers generation of students, who stay comfortable with the level of ignorance remarkable for their age, and unthinkable just a few years ago, on the concepts they were supposed to know long before they entered the fourth grade classroom. I was appalled to learn that my new students were not used to reading, writing, or doing homework which they deemed a teacher’s whim. I discovered that about fifty percent of them did not know names of the months, the number of hours in a day, let alone days in a year; they could not tell time, subtract two from ten, and the times table looked for them as rocket science, while reading was their most hated drudgery.

Make no mistake: I fight tooth and nail for my students’ academic and human survival, and I always will. That academic year enabled me for a creativity I did not know I had ever possessed: I wrote poems on parts of speech; invented new techniques

for my students to understand and memorize the times tables; planned Science lessons together with the Shed Aquarium Educators, and choreographed dance performances for school assemblies. The Tchaikovsky's Nutcracker became their favorite. How do I know? In their essays my students shared the feelings of "serenity" and "pristine beauty" that the Tchaikovsky's music caused in their souls.

As far as reading is concerned I always believed and still believe that introducing students to the masterpieces of the World Children Literature is the best way to evoke their interest for books. So, we read and discussed Aesop's fables and the beautiful tales written by Hans Christian Andersen. Together we marveled at the wisdom of the stories from all over the world. I hoped that monthly Book Reports on all genres of literature would improve students' reading skills to make them life-long readers.

Despite all those efforts, my students' Winter Benchmark scores in Reading and Math hit an all time low. They scored only 74 percent (lower than usual) in Math, with school, district and state much lower. The 62 percent Reading score struck me as a bolt of lightning, even though lower Reading scores were reported for the school, district and state. As I taught all the concepts of the fourth grade curriculum, I was positive that my students would perform well on the Math and Reading Benchmark Tests. However, the test results displayed two things: my pedagogic naivety, and the dangerous location of my students' Reading comprehension scores to mark nine on the academic Richter scale.

The fact that the school, district and state had lower test scores did not make me feel any better. Nonetheless, it illuminated in a new light the whole situation as beyond control of the above mentioned revered academic institutions. If test results were limited only to

my classroom it would be pretty alarming. On the scale of the city and the state such a profound failure looks disastrous.

Reflection on Vignette Three

Last year for the first time in its history, the school where I work did not meet the requirements of Adequate Yearly Progress (AYP) in Reading and Math. Analyzing my students' Reading scores I realized that reading comprehension does not start at school at all. How did I come to this conclusion? It was my guess that children who were not read to at an early age, would have problems with reading comprehension at school. That guess prompted me to take one step further. I asked my students if their parents read them books when they were very young. Only one third of the class raised their hands. It was a moment of truth for me. From talking to my students I discovered that for reading comprehension it does not matter if parents read books in English, or in any other language. Some of my students were read to at an early age in a language other than English. However, despite the fact that their first language was not English, they did well on the comprehension part of the Reading test. "Aha," I told myself, "it is at home, where reading comprehension starts, regardless of the first language, and as such, it is not only a school academic endeavor."

Since early childhood many students miss out on something BIG that creates an academic chasm a teacher cannot bridge, regardless of the rigorous structure of the classroom academic time. That chasm is gradually constructed during the first years of a child's life, when neither school nor teachers are in the picture at all. With the TV set on,

the best babysitter of all time, many parents neglect their roles as their children’s first teachers, given to them not by credentials earned in college, but by the right of their bringing those children into the world.

An article in the July 2009 issue of *Pediatrics*, a scientific journal of the American Academy of Pediatrics (AAP) introduced the results of a cross-sectional study of 275 families of children aged 6 to 48 months. The study showed that children with high language scores were engaged in multiple conversations with adults who were often reading them their first books. However, each hour of daily television viewing was associated with a 26.8% decrease in the language score. Therefore, AAP recommends no television for babies under 2 years of age. The American Academy of Pediatrics recommends parents to start reading books to their babies at the age of six months in order to build a child’s vocabulary, stimulate imagination and improve communication skills.

Likewise, research conducted by U.S. Department of Education shows that at a young age many children in poverty stricken communities are not read to at all. The data introduced in the table below are provided by U.S. National Center for Education Statistics (2009).

Percentage of Children Read to by a Family Member in a Typical Week

Race/Ethnicity	9-month-olds	2-year-olds	4-year-olds
White	40.7%	59.3%	50.5%
Black	22.6%	24.7%	20.5%
Hispanic	21.4%	27.2%	23.3%
Asian	26.4%	42.2%	38.1%

These data is a dire reminder that many American children are not read to from

the very onset of their lives. Starting from kindergarten, the reading scores of those students who were not read to at home will significantly differ from the reading scores of their more read to peers. Working on this reflection I came across the concept of “the Mathew effect” in Reading (Stanovich, 1986). The term “the Mathew effect” is used to demonstrate a gap in reading skills. It denotes that students with well-established vocabulary will read more and will progress faster academically than their peers whose vocabulary is poor. Each year the gap becomes wider as better readers significantly expand their vocabulary and reading skills. However, slow readers will read less. That alone will result in their slower vocabulary acquisition and inadequate reading development.

Reading to children is not only a quality family time, but also an opportunity to provide children with a strong academic boost that lasts for a lifetime. Otherwise, deep educational undercurrents could cause an academic tsunami, unless the efforts of students, teachers and parents are united by one common goal of the ultimate success of our children. I see the relationship between school and family as undeveloped, undelivered and often misunderstood by both parties.

As a teacher I feel responsible for rectifying the academic damage some of my students unduly incurred in the previous years of their lives. I cannot allow my students to fail the Illinois Standards Achievement Test (ISAT) and try to improve their reading comprehension by all means.

“So, what stands in the way of reading comprehension?” I asked myself.

“Lack of reading fluency caused by a limited vocabulary. If let us say, I were a student in

a Chinese classroom, I would be considered the dumbest kid, just for the reason of not knowing the vocabulary. Thus, knowing vocabulary and fluency is crucial,” I concluded.

The National Institute of Child Health and Human Development (2000) determined that fluency is a critical component of learning to read. Reading fluency is an automatic decoding of words in the text that enables the reader to concentrate on the comprehension of what has been read. Fourth graders’ reading fluency should be from 118 to 140 correct words per minute (WCPM) depending on the semester. As word knowledge enhances fluency, it is futile to teach students fluency as the final reading destination. Reading comprehension depends on the readers’ knowing about 90% to 95% of the vocabulary in the text they read. Thus, the established and often practiced vocabulary will affect positively not only students’ reading fluency, but their reading comprehension as well (Hirsch, 2003).

If students do not know the vocabulary they will trip over the unknown words and will not make sense of the text they read (Dudley & Mather, 2005). Both slow and fast reading-can result in poor comprehension.

To monitor my students’ reading fluency I assign fluency practice abstracts either from the base reader, Social Studies, or Science Book (introducing vocabulary first), and assess fluency rate the next day. Simultaneously, my students’ daily workload on a new vocabulary increases as well.

Here comes the importance of homework, and the reasons why it cannot be missed. Modern physiologists and psychologists discern between short-term and long-

term kinds of memory (Baddeley, 2000). Short-term memory is a system for storing information for a limited amount of time. However, if the information from short-term memory is rehearsed, repeated, or reviewed it is transferred to long-term memory, where it will be stored for a long period of time or even permanently (Mayer, 2003). The academic concepts introduced in the classroom, but not reviewed during homework, are stored in short-term memory and will be eventually lost for good. In this regard, I would like to share my own experience.

Before I came to the United States I learned Italian in three months. Why did I do it? The American Embassy that worked with political refugees was located in Rome, Italy. I clearly understood that without knowing a language it is hard to survive in any country, let alone to find a job there. How did I learn Italian? In the best and largest library of the city where I lived, I was able to find only one textbook of Italian. As it was the only textbook for the whole city, every Monday (it was my additional day off from my work at school) I went downtown to the Reading Room of that library, and from 10:00 A.M. till 6:00 P.M. I copied page after page. I had a week to learn the lessons that I copied. The following Monday I would come again to copy new lessons. Eventually, in the Embassy I chose to use Italian as my primary language of communication until the American Ambassador somehow figured out that I understand English. The Ambassador asked me if I did not mind speaking English. "Si," I answered, and we continued the rest of the interview in English.

Now, twenty years later, I do not remember a word in Italian though I spoke it pretty fluently. Fluent enough at the time to be offered in Italy a job of an English teacher in one of the schools.

Why did I lose the language I learned? First of all, I learned Italian in a very short period of time on the one hand, and did not review it, on the other. Thus, Italian dwelled in my short-term memory. As I did not take any efforts to review or practice Italian, it disappeared forever. I tell this story to demonstrate from my own experience how easily learned knowledge might be lost if not reviewed on a regular basis.

To remember academic concepts for a long time, a review of the studied concepts is a must. This is why homework is an indispensable tool. However, the typically suggested amount of time for homework is insufficient to improve students' academic performance. Thus, in the end, it actually does more harm than good, by proving that homework is not important.

I have to acknowledge that different cultures have different views on assigning homework. In the Ukraine, homework is assigned to review a certain curriculum concept. However, the amount of time for homework is not specified, as students' learning styles are idiosyncratic in their nature, and differ from one student to another. One and the same homework might require one student to spend an hour to complete it, while another student can complete it in just fifteen minutes.

I need to confess that many students who enter my classroom are not used doing their homework at all, let alone studying independently. I do not mean they do not need help with homework occasionally. They definitely need academic assistance.

If, at times, my students cannot get help with homework at home, they come to my room the next morning: no penalties, or bad grades as long as I have a chance to explain what they could not understand on their own. I have also noticed that some students try to do homework as fast as possible. The quality of homework, or its appearance is not even considered an issue at all, which means that students were never introduced to the ethics of work.

A few years ago I investigated what stands behind the concept of ten minutes homework rule. It mainly means that a first grader's homework should be calculated by the formula: 1st grade 1×10 minutes = 10; 2nd grade $2 \times 10 = 20$; 3d grade $3 \times 10 = 30$; 4th grade $4 \times 10 = 40$, and so on.

One parent called me to say that a big amount of homework took his daughter more than forty minutes to complete. However, the guidelines for homework in the fourth grade require forty minutes. I explained to him that his daughter did not meet grade level reading requirements, and if he wanted to see his child meet academic standards, it would take more than forty minutes of homework. I asked the parent if he had a recipe to cook a chicken, and the recipe claimed that the chicken would be ready in twenty minutes, and it was not, would he eat it raw, or allow it to be cooked for another twenty minutes to bring it to the proper condition? He laughed and said that the most important thing for him was the bright future of his daughter. If it required an hour more of homework, let it be so.

My intention is not to blame parents, but to help them and their children. To do so, I reflect on my experience, regardless, it is positive or negative.

I painfully watch that some parents are adamant (I do not know where their standpoint comes from) that homework should be limited to a “one size fits all” academic Procrustean bed, the perimeter of which is determined by multiplication of the student’s grade level by ten. Individual students’ characteristics are not even discussed. As parents are busy calculating the number of minutes spent on a homework assignment, they lose track of the fact that their children are being shortchanged on no less than their future. I cannot accuse parents for thinking that an extra hour of homework could be detrimental for their children. “To do or not to do homework?” is addressed more often than Shakespearian Hamlet’s question “To be or not to be?” Parents are lost in an ocean of conflicting information on homework. Is it a destructive force on a happy family time, or is it necessary to their children’s academic progress? (Cooper, 2007; Kohn, 2006).

I apprehend that some parents do not take seriously their children’s academic failure. Having engaged in previous years in numerous parent/teacher conferences without the student present, they develop into a “he said, she said” scenario. Now, when I schedule a conference with a parent, I invite the student as well. Children are intrinsically honest, they do not hold back truth in the presence of their teacher. The moment of revelation for some parents comes when their child confesses that she /he does not do homework. These parents are confident without any reason, as they do not check if it is true, (why bother if homework is no longer important?) that their son or daughter always comes to school with completed homework. They often ask the child, “Is it really true that you did not do your homework?” Then it looks like they do not believe their own ears. “Oh, the situation will change from now on,” they often affirm. It changes

sometimes, but only for a short period of time because homework is both a family commitment and a student's responsibility. They must work together. The way a child is taught to brush her/his teeth every morning is the same way to teach a child to do homework.

From my perspective, homework is the cause of more friction between school and family than any other aspect of education, and becomes the prime battlefield where schools and families view one another as adversaries. Thus, if a parent's commitment fails, so does the student's. Some parents choose not to be bothered with such trifles as their children's future, which is so far away, and their favorite TV show is so close. Lack of parents' supervision on home-work leaves the educational cycle incomplete and wasteful.

Last academic year underscored once again that it takes a whole village to raise a child. Until recently I refused to see things as they were, and placated myself with hopes, beliefs, and unflinching faith and determination to heal the soul of any academically hurt child. I still hope that not everything is so alarming, and assume there is a way to bring teachers and parents together to assure their children's academic future.

The school is like a large food store. What do we do in Jewel or Dominick's? We buy food there. Do we expect those stores to cook food for us? No, we go home to cook the food supplied by those stores. Like those stores, schools are knowledge depositories, where teachers deliver in doles the curriculum to be digested by each student individually. As with any kind of digestion, learning is a very private matter. Thus, if parents detach themselves from their children's academic daily routine, and

refuse to participate in “cooking academic food” for their children’s success, most likely, teachers will not be able to deliver what is expected from them either. I am not talking about the student/teacher relationship that lies on the surface and is obvious to everybody. Here, I mean a true collaboration of school and family in order for students to learn in earnest.

As far as the Illinois Standards Achievement Test is concerned, through my students’ hard work in the classroom and at home, and through my close cooperation with their parents, 94% of my students passed the ISAT with flying colors, meeting and exceeding grade requirements not only in Reading and Math, but in Science as well. I was especially impressed with the accomplishment of one ESL student, who entered the classroom hardly reading and writing in English, and exited the classroom with the highest overall ISAT scores ever.

So, does “the Mathew effect” always work? For me, it is an open-ended question. By the way, the aphorism on karma is engraved on the necklace that the girl, whose father was concerned about the time spent on homework, gave me on the last day of school. The message on the necklace is that educators’ actions vibrate in eternity.

My last year experience underscored once more how important it is for teachers to believe in students’ abilities to overcome academic difficulties. However, students need to be taught to believe in themselves. My attitude not to give up in my personal life made me strong enough not to give up professionally, when I encountered “the Mathew effect” in my classroom last September. Looking back I can acknowledge how much emotional capital I invested in the academic success of my students. I did everything

possible to hold their performance to a high standard and tried to convince them that it was impossible to back down. My personal attitude helped me professionally to teach my students to be a lot more determined to achieve whatever they have dreamed of during last academic year.

Thinking about my role in the classroom I cannot avoid reflecting on teachers' leadership. Teachers hold the rudder of the classroom educational ship to avoid rocks that can wreck the boat. In the past few years Lieberman and Miller (2004) have identified three transformative shifts for teaching: when a teacher moves from individualism and connects to a professional community; when a teacher moves from teacher-centered to learning-centered teaching; and when a teacher moves from managed work to inquiry and learning. In the same vein, Howey (1988) claims the importance of teacher entitlement for a classroom leadership. Darling-Hammond (2000), and Katzenmeyer & Moller (2011) argue that the quality of teaching defines the quality of student learning. Addressing the nation in the State of The Union Address President Obama said:

Let us also remember that after parents, the biggest impact on a child's success comes from the man or a woman at the front of the classroom. When a child walks into a classroom it should be a place of high expectations and high performance.

Both my students and I were amazed with their high ISAT scores never attainable before. The students' parents, who watched such a radical transformation of their children supported me in any academic endeavor I would like to start. The moment my students recognized their academic work at school and at home not as a burden, but as a stepping

stone for their life success, they started learning in earnest. Taking the ownership for their education stood behind the students' decisions to arrive to school half an hour earlier than they had to even during harsh Chicago winters. Farr (2010) claims:

Teachers, who are successful in closing the achievement gap, do exactly what all great leaders do: they set big goals, invest their organization (students) in working hard to achieve those goals, plan purposefully, execute effectively, continuously increase their effectiveness, and work relentlessly toward their objective (p. xiii).

Vignette Four: The Missing Watch

The importance of parents' active daily involvement in their children's lives was once again illuminated when I was teaching sixth grade in the United States.

One morning my student Jason told me sadly that his watch, a recent present from his grandparents, disappeared after Matthew, another student from my class, came to his house for a play-day. "Matt stole my watch," Jason said convincingly. "How do you know?" I said. "There are thousands of watches of the same brand," I insisted. "I understand that," he replied. "You see, when I come home from school, I always put my watch on my desk, but after Matt's visit it disappeared from its usual place." I did not want to give up on my trust in humankind, so I said, "Maybe you misplaced it, and it sits somewhere quietly in your house." "No," he replied firmly. "My family searched all over the house to no avail. Yesterday Matt came to school with my watch on his wrist. When I approached him, he scoffed at me, and said it was his." I saw tears in Jason's eyes, and felt sorry for him.

I got very upset with the whole matter, and decided to do something about it. When I came home that evening I called Matt's mother, and told her exactly what Jason shared with me. I asked her to talk to Matt to find out if he had the watch Jason claimed as his. Unexpectedly, I encountered a barrage of angry words against Matt's classmates. Matt's mother said that since first grade other students were always picking on Matt. She was convinced they lied that Matt would take their stuff. She also said that it was not in her intentions to spy on her own son and to check if he had Jason's watch or not. However, she refused neither to confirm nor to deny the possession of Jason's watch

at her home. *“I trust my son unconditionally. If somebody from Matt’s class lost his watch, it is not my business,” she added arrogantly.*

Several years passed. Both Jason and Matthew (no longer friends), graduated from their elementary school, and became freshmen at different high schools. One busy school morning (as a matter of fact they are always busy), my colleague Anna entered my room with one of the city’s major newspapers in her hand, and a question on her face. “Did you read an article about your former student?” she asked. “No,” I answered. “There is a picture of him too.” Anna mentioned that she did not need the newspaper any more, and left it on my desk.

When I looked at the picture I immediately recognized Matthew. Why he was in the spotlight I learned after I read the whole article. It turned out that Matthew befriended another student of mine, Ryan. Ryan’s father owned a small business, a watch repair shop. You might think it is again about watches. Not really. The article said that one evening Ryan invited Matt to his father’s shop. Unfortunately, Ryan decided to impress Matt, and bragged about the gun his father used to keep in a special safe. More than that, Ryan opened that safe, took the gun out and let Matt hold it. Then, Matt intentionally distracted Ryan. When the boys were leaving the shop, the gun was safely hidden among Matt’s books in his backpack.

The next day as usual, Matt went to his high school. Sitting comfortably in the back of his class, Matt pointed in the direction of his backpack and whispered to his friend, “There is a gun.” “You are kidding,” his classmate sneered at Matt.

“You don’t believe me? Look!” Matt nonchalantly reached for his backpack and showed

As the described events happened right after the Colorado massacre, Matt's classmate did not lose time. He wrote a note to the girl in front of him about what he saw in Matt's backpack. The girl raised her hand and asked for permission to go to the washroom. Instead of the washroom, she dashed to the office and showed the note to her Principal.

When the police entered the classroom, they knew who, where and what to look for. The police ordered everybody to stay at their seats and proceeded straight to the end of the classroom. First, they cautiously picked up Matt's backpack with what was later identified as a loaded gun. Second, they immediately arrested Matt, who tried to make jokes about the whole incident, but no students smiled. It was not a laughing matter at all, as they watched Matt leaving his classroom in handcuffs.

A couple of years later I accidentally came across Matt's mother in the grocery store. She rushed to me, started crying and said through bitter tears, "Can you believe, Matt is still in the juvenile jail? It was just a teenager's prank, but the judge did not believe it. He said that bringing to school a loaded gun is called not a prank, but a crime. We had appealed, and now we are waiting for another trial. I hope it would take place before Matt turns eighteen. Otherwise, he will be judged not as a juvenile, but as an adult. In any case, he will spend in jail another three to six years at least." Having said that, the poor woman cried again. Both of us knew that Matt crossed his Rubicon, which became his point of no return.

Reflections on Vignette Four

I wrote this vignette to attract the attention of parents and educators to a phenomenon that from time to time takes place among schoolchildren. This phenomenon is theft, committed by students of different ages, genders, races, and from different socio-economic backgrounds. What alarms me is that in some cases neither young thieves, nor their parents (the latter often in a state of denial) have any empathy towards victims. The most striking is that young thieves consider theft as a sign of their supremacy over their peers, a kind of valor to be proud of. The students, who were not caught red-handed, develop a misconception that their lucky streaks will continue forever. Therefore, when such students are busted, and their underhanded activities become transparent to others, they experience the shock of their lives. Their self-esteem plummets, and in a way, they become persona non grata, regardless of their young age. The perpetrators themselves, they become victims of rage and disdain of their former friends. With lost respect, reassurance and even love of their own parents, they feel betrayed by the society they once belonged to, the ethic boundaries of which they audaciously trespassed.

In a school environment it is often a teacher, who is notified by a student/victim first about the theft, and it is on a teacher to inform parents or not. If that happens with my students, I feel how my professional and personal responsibilities clash. A rule of a thumb for educators is that if an incident does not take place on school grounds, the school staff does not have to intervene. Though the incident with Jason's watch took place in Jason's residence, and professionally I did not have to intervene, personally I felt responsible for the physical and emotional well-being of all of my students regardless

where the crime took place. As a matter of fact, I always feel like Shakespearian Hamlet facing a question: “To intervene or not to intervene”? I personally deem it necessary to inform parents about the accidents immediately. However, it is not a teacher, but a parent, who has the unobstructed power to help a child start over with a clean slate. After all, to err is human.

Luckily, many parents take such information very seriously, and accept the responsibility for a big problem in order to eradicate it completely. If they do, the reward is priceless. Their children, who acknowledged stealing from others as wrongdoing, who returned a stolen item to its owner, and who apologized in front of their peers, though embarrassed, will be forgiven. Most likely they will not repeat their error again in order to avoid future emotional agony and social ostracism. After all, they went through a very hard life lesson.

I tried to analyze why some parents do not stop their children in their tracks. I think that like Matt’s mother, they try to protect their children from being exposed to the world as thieves, and themselves, as the thieves’ parents. What they achieve, in reality, is a temporary cover up till a new theft takes place. Acting in such a manner, those parents unknowingly become the perpetrators’ accomplices.

When I was writing this vignette I recalled a pretty five-year-old Jennifer, my ESL student, who used to go to the washroom next to her kindergarten lockers, and ransack her peers’ backpacks. She was especially “successful” on tell-and-show days, when her classmates brought favorite toys to school.

The kindergartners noticed that Jennifer was hiding their toys in her backpack and told

their teacher about that. The teacher asked me to notify Jennifer's mother about numerous incidents when Jennifer was caught having toys of other children in her possession.

However, Jennifer's mother claimed that Jennifer never had any toys other than those she bought for her daughter herself. By mere coincidence, the very same day, Jennifer's stepfather, picking Jennifer after school, shared with me that under Jennifer's bed there was a Toys "R" Us franchise, filled with toys he had never seen before.

In a few months Jennifer transferred to another public school. I did not hear about her until recently, when in the mall I was approached by a gentleman whose face looked familiar. "I am Jennifer's stepfather. She was once your ESL student," the gentleman said. "Oh, yes, of course, I remember her. How is she?" I wondered.

"I do not even know what to say," he muttered. "It is such a shame. You might remember she started to steal in kindergarten. Well, she has never stopped. She was kicked of every school we transferred her to. The matter grew completely out of hand when Jennifer became older, and her hormones kicked in. She started using drugs, got involved with boyfriends much older than her, with rich criminal records. Many times she ran from our house, which I bought in Vernon Hills. Regretfully, I left Jennifer's mother because I could not handle the stress caused by Jennifer's constant disappearance and the following national search. Last time we found her in Texas. I wish her mother intervened when you told her about the incidents. Now, it is too late," he said with bitterness and deeply sighed.

When he left, I thought that Jennifer's mother should have intervened not when I called, but the moment she noticed somebody else's toys under Jennifer's bed. She had to

investigate how they got into her house and landed under Jennifer's bed. I believe that a five-year-old Jennifer would have confessed and returned the loot to their owners.

Then, why did Jennifer's mother lie to me? Of course, she was ashamed to recognize that her own child was stealing from other students. Far worse, though, was to allow Jennifer to stay unpunished and to develop into a full fledged thief in her later years. A student who steals from his/her classmates, cannot start from a clean slate, unless the dirty scripture on their conscience is completely erased.

Like Jennifer's mother, Matt's mother did not recognize the dangers of parental blind love. With a lack of foresight of the future, both women were unable to prevent an imminent legal closure to their children's illegal actions. I was terribly sorry for what happened to Matt, but how could I comfort his mother? I knew whatever I said, would not heal her ailing soul. No words had the power to change Matt's plight, or prevent the dire circumstances of his life in prison.

Recalling the incident with Jason's watch, I understood that the time when his mother ought have talked to Matt was lost for good. My concerned call, which was beyond my teacher's responsibilities (again crossing boundaries?) could become a wake up call that could give Matt a lesson on honesty. Instead, Matt's mother took the stance "Caesar's wife is above suspicion." If Matt's mother respected other children's claims that Matt was dishonest from grade one, and that he stole his classmates' school supplies, she would not find herself in the situation, where her only son was awaiting a new trial for theft of the gun and bringing it loaded to his high school. If Matt's mother, the closest person to her son, had intervened in a timely manner and insisted on returning the stolen

watch to Jason, the course of events could have been changed. However, as a parent, she chose otherwise.

Talking about Mathew's academic performance, I have to mention that he failed all subjects, including Gym and Library. Whenever teachers tried to reach his mother, she was always unavailable. She was either at work, or skiing in Colorado with her new boyfriend, who she later married. Matt was left all alone with his grandmother, who did not speak a word of English, and who had no influence on Matt whatsoever.

I have observed that the students who steal from their classmates are often the students with the lowest academic scores. "Maybe that is their way to validate themselves as individuals, or is it a signal of emotional distress ?" I asked myself.

Going back to the wrong moral choices Matt made in his life, I doubt that his emotionally and physically distant mother has ever introduced her son to the norms of human ethics. The following constant fights with his new stepfather exacerbated his loneliness and anger that erupted in stealing from his classmates. His complete indifference to the feelings of others was nurtured at home by the indifference of his mother to his needs, when he was left abandoned. Lack of habitual honesty led Mathew to immoral actions, which eventually destroyed the normal course of his young life.

As a teacher I always choose to cross boundaries when I perceive a reckless students' behavior. Nonetheless, I often feel helpless in my endeavors to reach families if they are not receptive. Then, it is extremely painful for me to watch how life, the toughest teacher unfolds its own "curriculum" to teach my former students "right" from "wrong".

Vignette Five: Finding My Teacher's Consciousness

In the Ukraine a full time teacher is expected to teach eighteen hours a week. To earn more, teachers have to increase their teaching loads by another six hours. For me, teaching for about five hours a day provided a decent salary and a comfortable living. Those teachers who teach thirty hours a week raise their income significantly. Another alternative to make more money is substituting. Nonetheless, Ukrainian teachers seldom resort to it. Below I will explain why.

In the Ukraine, the concept of substitute teachers, as it is known in the United States, does not exist. There is no army of substitutes, traveling from school to school, from classroom to classroom, and from one grade level to another. The role of the substitute teachers is assumed by regular teachers who substitute for their colleagues on their days off.

Like their American counterparts, the Ukrainian teachers work five days a week. Sometimes, on one of their days off, which is not necessarily Sunday or Saturday, they have to attend professional development seminars, or they are asked to substitute. Substituting is a voluntary matter, and if regular teachers are busy, or do not want to substitute, they can simply refuse. Nonetheless, from time to time, all regular teachers substitute as it is a common and necessary practice.

However, teachers do not want to substitute at all, regardless of the extra money they can earn. In particular, teachers try to avoid substituting in the eighth grade.

In the Ukraine if students did not get passing grades in elementary schools, they were not accepted into any high schools. Instead, those students were referred to

vocational schools, where along with diplomas similar to the American GED Certificates, they received professional licenses in the trade they pursued as their careers. Their professions could range from jeweler to truck driver, or from dental technician to brick layer. Upon graduating from such a vocational school, the former graduates were immediately hired by different companies. Often, from the very start, they were paid more than the teachers who taught them. Despite that, the eighth graders heading for vocational schools were considered inadequate by both their peers and their teachers. Lack of interest in education, and the academic gap between them and the students who were accepted by high schools, triggered extremely rude and disruptive behavior. To compensate for the stigma of academic incompetence, the student population heading for vocational schools did not spare a moment to generate laughter from their classmates. Therefore, teaching eighth grade was a challenge both for regular and substitute teachers (the latter hardly knew the students' names). Besides, the number of eighth graders often exceeded forty students per teacher, which did not help teaching either.

The events to follow took place during my second year of teaching. It was a cold winter and a zenith of the flu season. So, when asked to substitute I agreed because many of my colleagues were on sick leave, either sick themselves, or nursing their own kids. I was supposed to substitute for the Social Studies teacher in the tenth grade classroom, where I was a regular English teacher. I did not anticipate any problems, as ninth and tenth graders (juniors and seniors in the U.S.A. respectively) were selected groups of hard working students, looking forward to colleges of their dreams. However,

when I arrived at school, I learned that over the weekend the regular eighth grade Math teacher, Ms .Tomsky, unexpectedly decided to quit. Therefore, I was asked to substitute for her students. The Social Studies class was cancelled, and the tenth graders, praising their luck, were sent home.

When I was approaching the eighth grade classroom, I heard an uproar that made the blood freeze in my veins. It reminded me of unpredictable acts of nature, such as a tsunami, a hurricane and a tornado happening simultaneously, interrupted only by the vicious gusts of wind. Through the closed classroom door I could discern some high pitched voices coming from the same sources. Uncontrolled bursts of laughter followed them.

When I opened the door, I was overwhelmed by a rumbling noise far beyond the allowed noise pollution norms. For a moment I could separate neither sounds nor students' faces distorted with wild laughter. The whole class looked to me as a nomadic tribe gone berserk.

A complete stranger, who looked a little older than the students themselves, I proceeded unnoticed to the teacher's desk. Though young and inexperienced, I knew that I was a teacher, who against all odds had to teach an unruly group of kids. The students did not notice me as they were preoccupied with having a good time. I was a new teacher, who could not identify a single student, or be identified herself. It looked as though the students were hiding their identities behind my inability to recognize who they were.

In the Ukraine there is an unwritten rule religiously observed by all the generations of students from kindergarten to college. The rule underscores the concept of respect to a teacher from a student. Whenever a teacher (any teacher) enters the room, the students rise from their seats to welcome him/her.

To regain my teacher's consciousness, I resorted to the tactic I normally do not apply at all, as I do not believe in it. Nevertheless, looking back at that event, I recognize it was the only right thing to do. I had to distract the students' attention from each other, and to focus it on me. "Everybody rise!" I yelled so loud that the toughest drill sergeant might become jealous.

If at that moment a lightning bolt struck the classroom, less surprise would be displayed on the students' happy just a few seconds ago faces than when they at last noticed me. I bet they had never heard my voice at all, and the might detected in it, shocked and numbed them to their inner core.

The noise ceased abruptly. I felt like an ocean floor explorer in a bathyscaphe, being lowered into the abyss, where the Earth sounds were lost in the eternal silence.

The silence that fell on me was simply deafening. I watched as the students quietly rose from their seats and stood patiently by their desks waiting for my directions. I did not, however, hasten to relieve them from standing. Instead, I allowed some more time for them to calm down and come to their senses. "You may sit down," I finally enunciated, looking straight into the eyes of each and every student.

On the teacher's desk I noticed the attendance book and a substitute teacher's plan. While taking attendance, I was told that one student did not return from recess,

and that most likely he was still outside (in the Ukraine students are allowed to go outside for recess at any season without supervision, but are required to report to the next class on time). Then I asked students to take out their Math books. I thought, “Finally, I can teach them some Math!” Well, I was so-o wrong indeed!

Just when the students were obediently reaching for their Math books, the classroom door suddenly opened wide, and a strange looking, tall and thin teenager entered the room. At first, I could not account for what was actually strange about him, but when I looked at him again I noticed that he was completely barefoot. In one hand the student was holding his sneakers, covered with melting snow dripping on the classroom floor. The socks, which the student was holding in his other hand, produced the similar physical effect.

When I met the eyes of the students sitting in front of me, I noticed the glee, extinguished by my extraordinary powerful yell. Now, the students welcomed the long due revenge, since I made them forego fun for Math. However, events developed not exactly as the students wanted them to.

Frozen in complete admiration, classmates watched the strange student walk past me, straight to the window sill, on which with an accuracy of a space engineer, he unfolded his wet socks and placed his shoes, soaked in the deep snow. After completing that maneuver, the student directed his barefoot steps towards his seat.

At that point I regained my teacher’s consciousness for the second time in ten short minutes. This time I quietly asked the strange looking student to come to my desk. Your name, please,” I firmly asked. Though polite, it was a demand. “Sergey Smirnoff,”

the student replied. I recognized that was the name of the student, who was outside.

“The reason of being late, ”I continued. “I did not hear the bell,” he blatantly lied (the bells were installed both inside and outside the school building). The student paused for a moment, and then continued moving in the direction of his desk. “One more thing,” I went on, and he stopped moving. “You were late, disturbed the class during Math, and, therefore, I will not allow you into this classroom before I talk to your parents. For this, you will go to Assistant Principal, Mrs. Gaze, and tell her that I asked to call your mother. I want her to be notified about your outrageous behavior. ”But how will I go there barefoot?” the student whined. “The same way you got here,” I responded. At that point I turned to the students, who by that time realized that the show might not go on.

As there was nothing else to do (Sergey’s classmates ignored him by averting their eyes), he quietly left. In about ten minutes I heard a weak knock on the door. When I opened it, I saw our AP, concealing her smile, and Sergey, who was not smiling at all. When they both entered the classroom, the AP apologized for the interruption. Then, the audience (AP and the students) holding their breaths, watched a barefoot Sergey swiftly proceed to the window sill and grab his still wet, but no longer producing the dripping effect socks and sneakers. Without a single sound, Sergey then left the classroom that he so audaciously had entered.

When the bell rang I went to the office to talk to Mrs. Gaze. She said she was happy with the turn of events. Unknown to me, Sergey was a troublemaker, a king who ruled the class, and made teaching in his eighth grade classroom next to impossible. It is because of him that Ms. Tomsy had quit. Therefore, the Assistant Principal welcomed

the opportunity to punish Sergey to show his classmates the King's true clothes.

Later that day I met Sergey's mother. She told me that she was a single mother, and that it was hard to raise Sergey. Sergey did not respect anyone, including herself and Sergey's teachers. She felt sorry that Ms. Tomsy had quit because of Sergey. She wished his father, who left the family when Sergey was one year old, was involved in Sergey's upbringing. However, there was no contact between father and son. Sergey's mother started sobbing, and confessed that she had great expectations towards the vocational school that Sergey had chosen. She hoped that the trade Sergey chose would help him understand life better and teach him respect for other people.

Reflection on Vignette Five

I wrote this vignette because Sergey's story is not unique. He belongs to the army of troublemakers, who rock the boat of public education by neglecting the ground rules of teaching and learning. Such students show complete disregard towards classmates, teachers and administration. Their disruptive activities are not so innocent, as it might seem from the first glance as they are the major cause of loss of academic time for their peers, and of the emotional and physical distress for their teachers.

It is sad that a considerate group of teachers who spent four or more years in teachers' colleges to earn degrees in education, quit their jobs after just a few years of teaching because they get burned out over the battles with unruly students. This phenomenon does not recognize borders and relates both to new and seasoned teachers. I became a regular classroom teacher in the U. S.A. when one of my former colleagues

quit in the middle of the academic year. At that time I was teaching ESL. One December morning, my then principal came to my classroom and said, “Vera, there is an emergency situation. Ms. Jones quit. I need you as a regular classroom teacher in the sixth grade starting next week.”

Just like Ms. Tomsy so many years ago in the Ukraine, her American peer Ms. Jones, an experienced and an efficient teacher quit to avoid daily stress, incurred by one of her students who since kindergarten literally terrorized the whole school. Teachers, like Ms. Jones, who decide to quit, do so because they feel they have had enough of students, who were never hold responsible for breaking school rules. Those teachers find themselves caught in a situation when they are unable to teach due to discipline problems in their classrooms. At best they start teaching somewhere else. At worst they quit the field of education for good.

People who plan to become teachers, often do not realize that for teaching to happen, the educational construction site needs to be cleared of anything that interferes with the teaching process, including discipline problems. Novice teachers do not anticipate that at some point they might need to assume the responsibilities both of a police officer and of an educator. To avoid this predicament and to save their sanity, many teachers quit.

I recall a brilliant novice teacher of Russian Literature in the Ukraine, whose professional life became unbearable because of a few eighth graders, who brought to a halt all her positive efforts to lead them to light. She felt betrayed for not being supported by colleagues and administrators. Sailing in a Teaching Sea, infested with many problems

is especially frightful for new teachers. After eight months on the job, she quit. She was the only teacher who knew Russian poetry by heart. It was a great loss (not recognized though) for the school and for the students.

Teachers' large turnover has a detrimental effect on students' academic performance. Sometimes it is the most knowledgeable and talented teachers who leave the education field to avoid challenges of the classrooms. They are positive they will find application of their talents in a different areas.

Research shows that new teachers, feeling left alone and helpless, often resign within their first years on the job (Inman & Marlow, 2004; Patterson, Roehrig & Luft, 2003). In some school districts, including the Chicago Public School System, the turnover of novice teachers reaches forty to fifty percent during the first five years (Brickhouse & Bodner, 1992). Teachers, who quit their teaching positions, say that teaching left them frustrated, depressed, and isolated from their colleagues. They comment that they might have remained if more experienced teachers, together with school administration, provided timely assistance in discipline control and effective classroom management skills

The high turnover of novice teachers makes it difficult for school districts to find qualified teachers, and forces them to lower the standards in hiring qualified teaching staff. That alone adversely affects student academic performance. Researchers claim that the areas of Special Education, Math and Science suffer the most. (Boe, Bobbitt, & Cook, 1997; Grissmer & Kirby, 1992).

Reflecting on this vignette I relived the moments when my human and

professional dignities could have been humiliated by a student (Sergey Smirnoff).

The described events enriched my professional experience, and made me a stronger person on a professional level. No experience comes without price. When I came home that evening, I was so physically and emotionally exhausted that I felt not fit to teach the next morning. Though the word “quit” never crossed my mind, I suffered a lot of stress, and had to stay home to recharge my teacher’s batteries as my energy was completely sapped and depleted.

Analyzing this vignette I clearly understood that if teachers give in to audacious students, they become martyrs. Martyrs, however, cannot enjoy teaching. A joy of teaching is the highest teacher’s reward which helps overcome adverse circumstances on the road of bringing children to light. If the joy of teaching is a missing variable, there is no point to suffer. Then quitting comes as a natural solution. I believe that this vignette is important to the teaching profession because many districts have a high level of departure of new teachers very early in their careers, due to lack of classroom management skills. I believe that with adequate help from experienced teachers, district and school administrations, novice teachers could find more reasons to stay than to quit.

Vignette Six: Shattered

The described below events took place in the Ukraine. One day, a colleague of mine, a second grade teacher, charged into the teachers’ lounge with something in her hand. “Look,” she addressed nervously to everybody, what I found on my desk.” She displayed a rock that was bigger than her palm. “But that is not all,” she continued.

“The window next to my desk is broken, and the floor is covered with shattered glass.” All the teachers, who at that time were in the teachers’ lounge, rushed to the first floor, where the primary grades’ classrooms were located.

What appeared in front of our eyes was in complete contrast to what a peaceful atmosphere of a second grade classroom is all about. In the middle of one of the windows gushed a huge opening with jagged edges. The very sight of it reminded me of the photos of devastation caused by an artillery shell during World War II. The snapshot of the broken window is hard to forget because of its senseless brutality.

Now I have to focus on the architecture of that school. It was a modern three-story building made of shining glass and metal. Each classroom had three huge windows rising from the floor up to the ceiling. Therefore, regardless of the season, the classrooms were always lit with bright daylight. Needless to say, that those windows were extremely expensive and custom made. They had to be ordered at a specific plant, and be delivered by a special truck.

As the incident took place in early fall, it was still warm when in a few weeks the construction workers came to our school to replace the broken window with a shiny new one. Everybody was excited, but not for a long time. It turned out it was too early to celebrate. The same week when the broken window was replaced, a Biology teacher, whose classroom was on the second floor, just across from the teachers’ lounge, reported the same problem. Again, a new window was ordered to replace the broken one, but the incidents continued. Pretty soon there were no classrooms left without windows that were not broken by some merciless hand.

Of course, all the school staff was shocked. Teachers held numerous meetings trying to figure out if the students they failed lately could be behind that scheme as the possibility of somebody's revenge could not be ruled out. Alas, our findings were not consistent. Then, like during war times, the male teachers' squad was formed. A plan was developed for the squad to hide late at night in the orchard around the school and watch for the assailants.

For the whole week nobody showed up. The frozen (it was already late November) and tired teachers, unable to teach during the day, were sent home early to get some rest and coffee to be awake and alert at night. That week every morning started with the same question about whether the attackers were found. Frustrated staff was told "not yet."

Nonetheless, the following Monday, around 12: 30 A.M. the assailants were not only caught, but identified. They turned out to be the sixth grade students, who immediately confessed to breaking all of the school windows with the assistance of a slingshot, deliberately designed for such a "feat". The five boys were taken to the Militia Department, and the misdemeanor charges were reported to the judicial organs. Their miraculously complacent (till that incident) parents were called to the Militia to be informed about the judiciary actions, and the hefty fine they had to pay. They also had to replace the rest of the broken windows and reimburse the money for the windows that had been already replaced. As a matter of fact, the parents paid twice the price of the broken windows. I mentioned above that the windows were to be delivered by a special truck. That kind of truck had a device to hold those enormous windows in place during their transportation. I do not know the reason, but the parents rented a regular truck:

either they could not find the right one, or the price of the rent was too high. The parents decided to stand by the windows at the time of delivery. Well, during transportation those huge windows broke into small pieces, and almost cut one parent in half. He was taken to the hospital and was treated for numerous lacerations. Despite that mishap, the parents still had to reorder the new windows and pay for the new delivery once more. Though that time they rented the special truck they failed to rent for the first delivery.

One more thing I want to share. The boys who broke the windows were the same students whose misbehavior caused so many problems during my first year of teaching. I think if their parents took the comments I made during parents/teacher conferences seriously, the incident with the broken windows would not have taken place at all. Both parents and students could have avoided a lot of future hardship that eventually came their way.

Reflection on Vignette Six

How did this event make me feel? First of all, I felt frustrated. I felt frustrated because I did not prevent it. I felt bewildered because as any act of vandalism it was senseless, which always leaves me with the question "why?"

I was perplexed by the parents' indifference. It made me think about parents' role in the society, and how their ability to control children affects the society itself. I understood that parents' could not control children at all times. However, children can be taught to control themselves, whether they are at home, or away from it, in the company of their friends.

Sometimes, media downgrades the importance of parents' involvement to the level of mere caregivers. This misconception negatively affects both families and schools. Absence of school's leadership limits parents' understanding of responsibility to raise their children as members of the society, who honor its rules and laws.

Some parents assume the roles of fun sponsors (which is easy), instead of becoming children's lifelong guides, best friends, and confidants (which is hard). By senseless monetary injection in any of its forms, consumed by their own busy lives, some parents subconsciously buy out freedom from penetrating deeply into their kids' thoughts, and aspirations. Children, who became victims of parents' moral absenteeism, grow out of trust to their parents. As the time, when the emotional ties are built, is gone forever, children refuse to let parents enter their inner worlds and/or understanding of life. At that moment parents lose power to affect the paths their children chose, regardless of how wrong they might be. The closest people in the world, they become as distant as planets in space, whose orbits never intersect. The young generation becomes reluctant to share secrets with parents who do nothing worthwhile to earn respect (a mall spree does not count). Unaware of the temperature on the children's moral thermometer, parents get alarmed only when the fever rises above the healthy social norms, and/or when it is no longer possible to cling to the old status quo.

Getting back to those times, I recall that none of the parents could answer the question why their children were outside at 12: 30 A.M. Of course, parents have to trust their children, but it is equally important to know what children are engaged in during the time they are supposed to be sound asleep in their beds, in order to be ready for school

the next day. The fact that children were not home after midnight, and their parents were not alarmed, demonstrates that something was terribly wrong in the children's upbringing, or the culture of their homes. The parents got mad at their children only when they had to pick them up late at night from the Militia Department, and when they learned they were to pay fines and replace the broken windows. However the question remains. Why would they not exercise parental responsibilities before the incident? It could be completely preventable if the parents would set the household rules, and teach their children the rules of social behavior. They failed to teach their young ones that breaking something that does not belong to them is considered a crime. Instead of the timely parental guidance, those students had to face the punitive measures of the society.

Now, did the parents and the children get the message? Well, it is quite possible. I believe that the parents made a decision to watch their kids more closely. Concerning the students themselves, they had a humiliating experience, lost their allure, and became the target of everybody's jokes. Their reputations were shattered, like the glass from the windows they had broken.

This vignette reflects my concerns about students who regardless of the country they were born in, develop habits and character traits that could bring them to criminal activities later in their lives. Their misdemeanor can start at school, but usually does not stop there.

This academic year two of my students' mothers have already asked me for help. One of the students uses profanities, hits his mother, leaves the house whenever he wishes, and comes back after midnight. When asked where he was, he would not even

consider answering. Amazingly, the boy's father does not want to intervene at all.

Another student throws tantrums and destroys everything at home after he visits his father, who left the boy's mother for a new girlfriend. He is extremely rude to other students and exhibits all forms of antisocial and aggressive behavior. This boy is just nine years old. However, his mother, who is an adult, does not spare details about the private life between the boy's father and his new girlfriend, who he used to bring to their home on a regular basis. I had to invite the school social worker, the counselor and both parents to convince the latter to stop bickering in front of their child, let alone disclose their private moments.

Research indicates that "early conduct problems", such as aggression, stealing, and lying are general predictors of delinquency in future years (Huizinga, David et al., 1994). However, parents' poor supervision and marital discord are the strongest predictors of the adolescents' altercations with the law (Loeber & Stouthamer-Loeber, 1987). Future delinquents "can be recognized in their elementary school years on the basis of their conduct problems going hand in hand with poor academic performance" (Farrington & Hawkins, 1991). Until parents take seriously their responsibilities of parenthood, juvenile delinquency will plague the society.

I wrote this vignette because it reflects my "passive teaching experience" different from the one I am actively involved in the classroom. From that experience I learned a valuable lesson that teaching in any of its forms "active" or "passive" should never stop. That passive experience made me investigate the reasons of students' misconduct at school, and how this misconduct grows into students' vandalism, and gradually, into full

fledged delinquency. I also learned that there are no boundaries between students' after school and classroom forms of behavior: they are like fluids that take the shapes of the vessels they are in. Therefore, only parents' and teachers' combined efforts have the potential to change students' misconduct for the better. In this regard, quarterly parents universities could be of an extreme help. The strengthened ties between schools and families would have a positive effect on students' discipline and academic performance.

Vignette Seven: The Sad Trophy

It was the beginning of June and the end of the school year. To sustain students' motivation to learn alive and well, I offered my fourth graders to create a Science project of their choices.

Over the years of teaching I came to conclusion that students love hands-on activities, though overlooked as a powerful teaching tool. I love them too, but for many more reasons. First of all, hands on activities raise students' creativity. The second of all, such activities develop mental skills while expanding intelligence. The third of all, students improve speaking and listening skills, as they present their projects to the public (the rest of the students), and answer the questions the public might ask. The last, but not least, hands-on project is a great opportunity for family bonding, the quality time both kids and parents would cherish in their memories for years to come.

On the day of the presentation my students marched proudly past the curious students from other classrooms, holding tightly to their projects, ranging from pulleys, earthquake models, to a battery activated moving Solar System. By coincidence, that day also was The Breakfast with the Principal Day, when A-Honor Roll students received trophies for their outstanding academic achievements.

Among all the wonderful projects presented on that summer day, The Third Newton's Law stood out of the crowd, as it was not the part of the fourth grade Science curriculum. I was proud of Alex, (the student who chose that project), confidently presenting The Law to his classmates. He focused on its postulate that for every action there was an equal and opposite reaction. Little did my class and I know that we would

observe the social ramifications of that postulate the very same day.

After the last presentation was over, four students left for the Breakfast with the Principal. When they returned with glistening with gold trophies, their faces were beaming with joy. They put their trophies into their lockers and went for lunch.

After lunch I noticed that Gaby, one of the girls, who received the trophy, was crying. "My trophy is no longer there," was the only thing she could utter through desperate tears, pointing to her locker. "Don't cry. Let us look together. We will find it," I promised, trying to comfort a child, who was the best student and my right hand (classroom monitor). Not to miss a thing, we took everything out from her locker, but the trophy was not there. We returned to the classroom empty-handed. It looked like it disappeared into thin air.

I felt awful. I have never encountered the situation when I had to explain a ten-year old why life is sometimes unfair to those who least deserve it. I had no intention to cover up a theft from a child, no matter who committed it. Whoever took the trophy would pay a full price of despise and social ostracism. It was my human and professional responsibility to identify him/her as such, and return the trophy to its lawful owner. However, there was a dilemma. Though somebody stole the trophy straight from the lockers, it was against the law to search them without a warrant. I also did not know who was behind the shameful plot: was it my student, or somebody from another room. For so many questions there was no single cue for an answer. At that moment I felt as Sherlock Holmes on his prowl to solve the crime, and as Mother Theresa trying to protect the abused.

I realized that my students could identify the perpetrator, in case they witnessed any unusual activities around the lockers. They already knew that Gaby's trophy had disappeared and were not surprised when I asked to write a note on any information on the missing trophy. The next class was Music, so the students took recorders from their backpacks and headed to the Auditorium. In the meanwhile I read the students' notes. Nobody supplied any information except Lana, a cute, quiet girl. Lana wrote that she saw Carl, a sixth grade student taking the trophy. Two years ago Carl, was in my classroom. Not the best student in the world, he was a kind and an honest kid. I was one hundred percent positive that he would never do such a thing. Nonetheless, I decided to talk to him. When I told Carl about the accusations, he laughed and said that he did not see any trophy, and that he just arrived to school after a doctor's appointment. It was definitely an official alibi, but then I had to find out why Lana lied. I took her note to the Assistant Principal (AP) Ms. Robinson and shared my apprehensions that Lana might have the trophy in her possession. Though we could not search Lana's locker, we could watch her putting the recorder back into her backpack.

After Music all the students swiftly put their recorders into backpacks. Lana, definitely was taking her time, especially when she noticed the AP standing next to her. When at last, she opened her backpack, the sought trophy literally fell on her feet with the effect of the bomb explosion. "Gaby it is your trophy!" one girl screamed. "Lana, why did you take it?" questioned another. Some boys were openly laughing and pointing at Lana and the trophy. The exalted students' were hard to quiet, as the crowd grew bigger and bigger with other students and teachers returning from their Specials and

stopping to find out what was the reason of the whole turmoil. It was the scene to remember: Lana, surrounded by students and teachers with Gaby's trophy still by her feet.

"Look, it is your trophy," she said to Gaby, like nothing has happened. Gaby, pale and still in shock, did not say a word. "Why did you take it?" Gaby finally asked. Not able to regain her composure, blushing and sobbing Lana ran to the washroom. She returned to the classroom accompanied by the Assistant Principal who told her to go to the Principal's office. Then Ms. Robinson addressed to my students. She told them the right things about ethics, and about the compliance with the school's rules. By undivided attention students' demonstrated that they were overwhelmed by the events of the day.

Lana was suspended till the end of the school year. She confessed of taking the trophy from Gaby's locker and of being the mastermind behind the scene. It turned out that during lunch-break Lana returned back to lockers, telling the security that she forgot her lunch. With the rest of the students in the lunchroom, she was sure nobody would see her taking Gaby's trophy.

Stealing Gaby's trophy and bringing it safely home (the way she plotted it), would make Lana feel good, accomplished and respected by her family. Lana, however, did not realize that truth always comes onto the surface in its ugliest form. As a child, she could not grasp that life, complicated and unpredictable in its very essence, makes people pay their moral debts this way or another.

Later that day before the dismissal I turned to the Board and noticed still displayed The Third Newton's Law Project. I asked my students, now more experienced in life than before, if there was an allegory between the laws of motion and the laws of

society. All the class raised their hands.

Newton was definitely a genius when he stated that for every action there was an equal and opposite reaction. However, even great Sir Isaac Newton could not predict that his third law will materialize in front of schoolchildren four centuries later.

I sometimes watch Lana, now the fifth grader, in the hallway. She seems even more lonely than before. She never has a smile, a symbol of sincere soul and a carefree childhood, on the face that she could not save.

Reflection on Vignette Seven

In addition to the fact that Johnny still can't read, we are now faced with the more serious problem that he can't tell right from wrong.
William Kilpatrick

I wrote this vignette because from my perspective teaching moral values is a foundation for academic success of my students and for their fulfillment as human beings. Therefore, before introducing the fourth grade curriculum, I try to construct that foundation, so the students could recognize its ground rules.

Research indicates that development of moral values among children differs from that of the adults and requires a different approach (Huxley, 2006). Kolberg (1984) claims that children between ages five to ten years old do not see reasons why they have to respect other people's rights, and try to attend to their own "self-serving" interests. Ryan and Bohlin (1999) claim that "if we want students understand virtue we must teach it" (p.96).

Each year, when I welcome a new generation of fourth graders, I am not amazed by their conspicuously different looks, clothes, and academic standing. What stuns me is that regardless of young age, all of them possess a broad set of values, deeply rooted in their inner worlds. That set is exposed externally in their interactions with peers and school staff. People of all ages disclose their inner selves through actions. To hide true intentions and motivations they might apply coveted actions. The case of a stolen trophy is a vivid example of what happens if human ethics does not command human desires. Often unaware of their children's progress at school, some parents naively believe everything their youngsters choose to tell them. As it turned out later, Lana told her family ahead of time that she was going to receive a trophy for being a straight "A" student. Nothing was further from truth. As a matter of fact, Lana hardly made fourth grade. However, she was longing to get a trophy, as it would add to her prestige. During recess, nobody played with Lana. She told me that nobody liked her. I recalled that no students wanted to sit next to her either, because often their lost pens, pencils and erasers were found in Lana's pencil-box, though she vehemently claimed those items as hers. If she succeeded with her plot, and did bring the trophy home, her parents would be proud of Lana, praise her as a domestic hero, and shower her with undeserved gifts.

Every year I witness how a growing number of Chicago Public School students experience difficulties not only with reading comprehension (this year I have fifteen students at risk out of thirty-eight), but also with finding the healthy solutions to their ethical problems (cheating, fighting, using profanities and threats against each other and against their own parents, lack of respect and loyalty to friends and families, etc.).

Feeling personally and professionally responsible for my students, I address those issues through literature on universal human values. Over the years of teaching I discovered that one of the best ways to improve students' reading skills while raising the bar on their ethics, is reading and discussing Aesop's fables. Didactic in their very nature, they are short enough for students not to get lost in the labyrinth of the plot of a longer story. That alone makes Aesop's morals easily comprehensible. One of the monthly Book Reports is deliberately dedicated to Aesop's fables. "The Boy Who Cried Wolf" taught my students to be honest at all times. Lana, for some reason, might have misconstrued the author's message.

This vignette varies from my other vignettes written on theft committed by students. This theft, ruthless by its nature, premeditated and committed by Lana, took place in her own academic setting. This time Lana stole not a pen, but the academic embodiment of her classmate's accomplishment as a successful student. Lana's complete indifference to Gaby's tears and emotional breakdown, demonstrated her lack of empathy for other people and illuminated her selfishness. Despite Lana's own confession in stealing Gaby's trophy, her mother accused every student as a potential thief, who did not deserve her daughter's friendship, and denied any wrongdoing on Lana's part. I was shocked because her rejection of the bitter truth, was a road to dismantling Lana's future. Instead of discussing the incident in the way it would not repeat itself under the new circumstances, Lana received a parental green light to elect any method (even a dishonest one) to get whatever she wanted from life. Lana's parents' shortsightedness could afflict harsh consequences. It was not the case to overprotect the child, but a reason for a serious talk.

Before the incident with the trophy I saw Lana's mother every morning, when she used to take her two cute daughters to school. She loved to stop by the office and chat with the people there. However, after the incident, she was never seen around.

Two years passed quickly. Since then many things happened in my personal life. Not only life has changed on the outside, I myself have changed from the inside out as well. The changes in my personal life triggered a new professional outlook on the events of the past, and in particular on the case of a stolen trophy. The reciprocal relationship between personal and professional affected my perception of a due professional action I could recruit then, but chose not to.

Reflecting on this vignette raised the veil over my professional positions "then" and "now". The changes in my inner self created the grounds for professional changes on a wider spectrum. Going back in my memory to the described events, I cannot omit my feelings of empathy towards the victim. Witnessing Gaby's ordeal, watching her sufferings because of the injustice inflicted by her classmate, caused my moral disgust towards Lana, which was reinforced by her mother's stance.

Through working on this reflection I understood that "then" professionally I was not right. Yes, on a personal level I could feel disgusted by Lana's actions, but on a professional level I did not have the right to. I definitely did the wrong thing. So, where was my mistake?

Afterwards, I recalled the students' complaints about Lana's stealing their pens and pencils. However, I did not investigate those accusations (did not cross the boundaries).

Maybe, if I did, there would not be the case of a stolen trophy at all. “Then,” at the moment of theft, I chose the values of human ethics over my student, a child. I have never offered Lana to sit and discuss in private what really happened and why. I never gave Lana a chance to analyze the embarrassing situation in order to teach her to discern her future motivations and future actions. My father once said that a teacher has to rise to the level of a student. Well, “then” in the case of a stolen trophy, I did not. But “now”, I will.

Vignette Eight: Talking to Parents. Parents Again!

It was my second year of teaching sixth grade in the United States. In front of me was a diverse population of twenty-eight students coming from families of different walks of life and of various ethnic and racial backgrounds.

When administering the sixth grade entrance test, I learned that just a few students could read and write at a sixth grade level. On top of that, there was one student who could not read at all, let alone write. It was Kevin Rider, a quiet African-American boy. I was bewildered. "How could he get to the sixth grade and not get help from teachers prior he came to my room, "I questioned my teacher's core. I really did not know what to do as the academic gap between Kevin and other students was too wide for me alone to fill in. I had to enlist someone else's help, but whose? I asked myself " Who in the world was the most interested in Kevin's success?" The answer easily came to my mind. "Eureka! Parents! I have to talk to his parents," I told myself. That night I went to bed determined to find a sensible solution. Thereafter, I was impatiently waiting for the Parents' Night to meet Kevin's family and discuss his academic predicament..

To my big disappointment, his parents did not show up. I tried to reach them by phone, but for some reason his phone number was miraculously missing from all of his papers. When I went to the office to locate it from the students' alpha list, the secretary revealed that I did not have to look any further than the school lunchroom, as Kevin's mother worked there.

That very day I went to the lunchroom to introduce myself to Mrs. Rider as Kevin's

new teacher. I shared my concerns about Kevin's academic level, if such existed, but to my complete surprise, Mrs. Rider did not even want to talk about it. "Kevin has a father. Talk to him. I am too busy to deal with this," she flipped, and gave me her husband's phone number. I respected her right for privacy and apologized. In a few minutes I made a phone call to her husband and set a date for a conference.

Mr. Rider arrived to the conference together with Kevin. To avoid any future misunderstandings, I always invite to a parent/teacher conference both parents and students. At first, Mr. Rider was very reserved: he obviously braced himself to listen to another pedagogical sermon he already knew by heart. Nonetheless, as soon as he felt the sincerity in my intentions to help his son, Mr. Rider's attitude immediately changed, and he became all attention. Since then he turned into my staunch ally.

Together we developed a plan aimed to assist Kevin with any academic difficulties he might encounter. However, it was Kevin who would be held responsible for completing both classroom and homework assignments. Mr. Rider and I agreed to meet twice a month to reflect on Kevin's progress or problems. I was asked to call him day or night to report any concerns I might have during that process. By the same token, Mr. Rider could come any time he deemed necessary to talk to me to check on Kevin's advancement. (I have an open door policy to accommodate parents' needs to see me without scheduling appointments).

Though it was not an easy year for Kevin, it set his future in a new direction. Instead of a freelance approach towards school, which Kevin acknowledged only as a socializing tryst for hanging out with friends, Kevin was required to study in earnest the

subjects he somehow “missed” during his previous years of schooling. Kevin was slowly, but steadily learning how to come to school with finished homework. That alone translated into an increased attention span, a better understanding of the taught curriculum, along with a new appreciation for school and its goals.

By the middle of the year, Kevin was able to express his thoughts in writing in his short essays and reflect on his research findings in the Science Journal. He mastered the times table he had no clue about before, and understood fractions, percent, decimals, and many more concepts. Amazingly to himself, Kevin discovered a joy of reading interesting books. By learning to solve conflicts in a more civilized manner, Kevin avoided numerous nasty fights. With improved social skills he made new friends and was accepted as an equal by kids who previously ignored him. His self-confidence soared to the point that he volunteered to assist students, who needed some academic help.

That academic year came to an end very fast. In one of his essays Kevin wrote that he would come to my classroom every single day to say “Hi” and to ask how I was doing. Believe it or not, he was doing that until his last day in elementary school.

Kevin successfully graduated from the elementary school and became a freshman at a well respected high school. Annually, on the day of his finals, Kevin would come to my classroom to say “Hi”, to give me a hug, and to report about his new achievements, In four years Kevin successfully graduated from high school and started college immediately after.

In the beginning of that ordeal Mrs. Rider, being apprehensive that I would complain about her son and share the information on Kevin’s performance with her

coworkers, tried to avoid me by all means. As weeks passed by, she was the first to greet me in the lunchroom with a broad smile on her face: Mrs. Rider was really happy with Kevin's accomplishments and was very proud of him. Interestingly enough, the rest of the lunchroom staff also smiled at me. Their smiles silently told me, they were keeping some special secret.

In June Kevin's father came to thank me for being instrumental for his son's success, though I attribute it mostly to Kevin's family and to Kevin's own efforts. I was just doing my job. On the last day of school Kevin gave me two pictures: one of his mother, and another of himself.

In a few years Mrs. Rider was promoted to a position of a manager at a different school. When she comes to our school to visit her former coworkers, she never misses the opportunity to stop by my classroom and say "Hi" from Kevin.

Reflection on Vignette Eight

How did this experience change me as a teacher? Well, it changed me in regard to my ability to ponder on professional situation from the point of view of other participants. I have never considered my students' parents as adversaries, even if their actions could sometimes be hardly characterized as friendly. I think parents are lost in deciphering their own kids' behavior as they do not want to inflict more tension in their families. They step in to defend their children regardless whether their children are right or wrong. Unknowingly to many parents, some children need to be defended not from teachers and school administration, but from themselves, as they may ruin their health,

future, and even their own lives. I believe family and school can arrive to a consensus mutually beneficial to all of the parties. The strained relationship between parents and school takes place not because the differences are irreconcilable, but because both parties are reluctant to compromise. I believe that schools could do much more than they are doing now, and meet parents' needs half way. If we, teachers always remember to wear our teachers' hats, most conflicts could be successfully resolved. Parents get frustrated because they do not believe that educators act in the best interests of their children. Every parent will follow a teacher if a teacher is sincere and means educational business. All the involved parties would benefit if they remember that family/school miscommunication is detrimental to the students' progress.

Over the years of teaching I learned that before bringing a child to knowledge as the word pedagogue implies, I would have to explore his/her closest environment, that is the child's family. It is crucial to encourage the people who mean the most to children (as they love them the most) to cooperate with school on all of its levels. For parents to be on the same page with teachers translates into drastic improvements in their children's performance and behavior. Nonetheless, if parents choose an adversary stance towards school, the big loser is a child., and the biggest loser is the society.

This experience helped me to observe my own actions from the parents' point of view. I understood that parents build their attitude towards school based on the words of their children, who might see the situation from a different perspective than their teachers. Teachers are adults, and the responsibility is on us to present any troubling situation in a proper light. As a teacher, I needed Kevin's family to see the situation

through my eyes and through my insight in order to assist him. I am positive that I wouldn't be able to help Kevin on my own. I attribute Kevin's success to his family, and specifically to his father's involvement. Could his family do without me? Possible, but somebody had to show them the ropes. The family was not prosperous enough to share their paychecks with a tutor. Public school offers free and licensed teachers to educate students. However, I often observe that schools and parents perform as one dysfunctional family: teachers do not help students, who need the most of assistance, and do not reach students' families to develop a plan for academic success. Parents watching such teachers' attitude try to avoid school by all means. That is why some parents do not show up even twice a year for parents/ students conferences. Why to come? To hear that their children flank major subjects? If parents knew that school is a safe haven for knowledge, they would be more supportive of teachers for the sake of their children. Research shows that meaningful family involvement is a predictor of high student achievement (Blazer, 2005). Caplan (2000) argues that parents-school partnership is beneficial to all the community at large as it focuses on the "real issue of high student achievement."

The earlier school and family find the common ground to assist students, the better the outcomes would be. Henderson (1987) argues that if parents' involvement starts on elementary school level, students' improved academic performance continues through the middle and high school levels. Studies have shown that parents' involvement is the major factor in students' academic achievement going far beyond students' ethnic, racial, and socio-economic background.

Researchers came to conclusion that parents' involvement has the biggest impact on students at risk of failure who gain the most from their parents' participation (Henderson, 1987); (Funkhouse & Gonzalez, 1997).

From day one after the conference Kevin did not miss a single homework assignment. Why? I was not there. It was the parents' involvement that made the impossible possible. Not only Kevin's academics improved. His human development proceeded in the right direction. What a contrast to his own words that he prays to "return in a single piece after his "winter break visitors."

When Kevin came to see me on the day of his finals, for me as a teacher, it was like an icing on the cake. Retrospectively, I was thinking about what made Kevin come to my classroom and report on his successes. I came to conclusion that he trusted me completely, and considered me as one of few people, who were genuinely interested in his academic progress and his life achievements.

In my eyes Kevin became a true gentleman who discovered what human dignity was about, and who made a cognitive choice to live up to it.

Vignette Nine: What Is Visible; What Is Not?

Just imagine a fourth grader with a happy smile on his face. He is twice the size of his classmates, who are afraid of him. Why? Because Brandon (this is the boy's name) is unpredictable and may develop tantrums. Then... who knows what then.

Brandon Jackson, a nine-year old African-American boy, came to our school when he was a second grader. He was expelled from his South Side elementary school when he got mad at his classmate and slammed him head first against the wall. Brandon's classmate bled from lacerations and was sent to the Emergency Room to be treated with multiple stitches. Brandon was sent home with instructions never to return to that school.

Brandon Jackson needed to pluck all his courage to move from his home on the South Side, where he lived with his Mom, to the North Side apartment to live with his maternal grandmother, his uncle, and two of his cousins. His older cousin, for some strange coincidence, was also expelled from a different South Side elementary school for throwing a chair at the teacher, who did not immediately supply him with crayons.

Brandon's grandmother moved recently to the North Side after her home was burglarized. Thieves took most of her belongings together with her new wide screen TV. She loved the North Side for the security it provided, and welcomed her grandsons to her new place.

From day one in my classroom Brandon refused to do any class work, let alone homework. As it was the beginning of the academic year I was not in a hurry to notify his family. Unexpectedly, on the third day of the new academic year I had to schedule a

conference with Brandon's grandmother, because Brandon tried to choke one of his classmates.

The following morning I met Ms. Jackson, who seemed to be a very nice lady, genuinely concerned with Brandon's problems. She assured me that she would monitor both Brandon's behavior and his academics. Ms. Jackson provided me with her cell phone number and asked to call her any time Brandon was in trouble.

I have to acknowledge that for a few weeks Brandon behaved better, and did all the assignments. Nonetheless, the moment he left my room for Specials or Lunch signaled big trouble for Brandon. In a few weeks the Security Officer came to my room to announce that Brandon was suspended for two days for threatening to stab and kill a new janitor.

When Brandon returned after his suspension, I decided to watch him more closely. I hoped to break the ice between Brandon and me, so he could see a human being behind my teacher's personality. I wanted to understand why his behavior changed so drastically the moment he left my room, and why each time he put himself in deeper trouble.

For that purpose I shadowed him during his Specials. I watched Brandon disrupting his Music class by loud whistling, making squeaky sounds, and completely ignoring his teacher. In the Gym he intercepted the ball from other students, though it was not his turn. Similar to his behavior in the Music class, Brandon treated the Gym teacher with no respect, and did not listen when the latter gave Brandon directions. In the Computer Lab Brandon did not work on the assignment that the Computer teacher

gave to the class. Instead, Brandon tried to ruin other students' papers, and therefore no students wanted to sit next to him. In the Library Brandon grabbed books from the shelves and threw them intentionally on the floor. When the librarian asked him to pick up the books, Brandon refused with a complete disregard towards the teacher. With a grin he watched how other students were collecting the books he scattered. In short, Brandon exhibited an anti-social behavior towards both his teachers and classmates.

One morning when I was taking student attendance, I was told not to mark Brandon absent as he was in the Principal's Office. In an about an hour Brandon came to the classroom with the Security Officer. This time without a smile on his face Brandon took home his textbooks and homework as he was suspended again, now for three consecutive days.

The Principal later explained that on their way to school Brandon and his cousin noticed a huge pumpkin by one of the houses near the school. The boys decided to take it to school, but for some reason they changed their minds. Maybe the pumpkin was too heavy. So, instead, they smashed it by throwing it against the sidewalk. The sound of the cracked pumpkin was so loud that the owners, who bought it for the School Pumpkin Fair, heard it inside their house. They noticed the two boys running away and called the school to describe them. To identify both students was just a matter of time.

I decided to talk to Brandon privately to find out what was going wrong in his life, as the boy's behavior was out of the ordinary on the one hand, and because he could not control it by any means, on the other. When Brandon returned after three days of suspension, he told me the following.

Brandon was born when his mother just turned fifteen years old. For as long as he remembered, Brandon was longing for a father figure in his life, but he did not know even what his real father looked like. Once, amongst the crowd on the Mall, his mother pointed to an unknown man. "That is your father, Brandon. Go and talk to him." However, as soon as a five-year-old Brandon introduced himself, he was given a dollar and was sent back to his mother. No further communication between father and son ensued.

Another man in Brandon's life was his uncle, a gang member. His uncle's constant altercations with police became a norm of everyday life for a little boy. The illegal activities his uncle was involved with, "broadened" Brandon's horizon on crime and punishment.

Despite all the negativities that surrounded Brandon at school, I knew that Brandon was a sensitive and caring child. If I needed "students' technical support", Brandon was always there for me, and was always the first to offer assistance.

He is a caring son, grandson and a loving brother. Knowing that his family struggles to make both ends meet after his mother lost her job, Brandon once said, "I need nothing. I have everything." To calm down his baby-sister Brandon would wake up early on a Sunday morning to entertain her and make her laugh.

Brandon loves his family. He is proud of his grandparents. "She was a Chicago Police," he told me about his grandmother. "Her father served in the Army," Brandon said with pride in his voice.

Every weekend Brandon goes to the South Side to visit his mother, who now lives

with her new boyfriend and their daughter. Brandon calls his stepfather “Dad” and respects him for being a nice person and for working hard to support the family. His step-dad carves the portraits of famous people out of wood. He even presented me with a beautiful portrait of President Obama. Brandon’s education is important to his parents, and whenever I gave a weekend assignment, it was always completed. It was Brandon’s step-dad, who would bring him back to the North Side on Mondays, though they had to get up at 3:30 A.M to get to school on time.

Brandon told me that in my classroom he had only one friend, Steve. However, Steve’s mother objected to their friendship. When I asked “why” Brandon said, “Cause some white people hate black people. I do not know why,” he said pensively.

Worrying about Brandon’s future I asked him how he envisioned it. “A wife, two kids and a big home,” was the answer. It was a beautiful American dream. Right? ? Not necessarily. I do not know what prompted me to ask Brandon what he was usually thinking about before falling asleep. I expected a childish answer, but received the response of an adult, worn by life. “To join, or not to join the gang,” a nine-year-old child mentioned matter-of-factly.

Brandon’s story though no matter how troubling and alarming, is not unique. Last year one of my students, Rayna, a bright African-American girl, was not submitting her homework for a whole quarter. Whatever I did to convince Raina do her homework brought no results. Though Rayna, did all her class work, and passed her tests, I was still concerned about her academic progress, as I consider homework an important factor in student academic advancement. Then something had changed, and Rayna became a

poster child for a student, who always completed her homework.

One day, while my students were working on their writing assignments, and peace and calm engulfed my classroom, I looked at Rayna. She might have felt my glance, and our eyes met. I still did not have an answer for my burning question. I pulled another chair to my desk, and with a gesture invited Rayna to join me.

I felt some tension coming from Rayna, but dismissed it. "Rayna," I said. "Can you honestly tell me why you started doing your homework?" Our eyes met again. "Ms. Neyman, you tell me. Could a girl do homework if she had to sleep on a loaded gun under her pillow?" I looked at Rayna in disbelief. "That was my life before," Rayna continued. "My mother's boyfriend had some problems with police, and was afraid that if policemen searched our house, he would get arrested. So, one day he came up with a brilliant idea to hide his guns under my brother's pillow and mine. I did not know how long it would go on, but one day..." Rayna could not continue because she started choking with tears. "But one day" she bravely went on, "my mother and my brother went to the Mall to buy him shoes. I stayed home with my mom's boyfriend, and he raped me."

I could not conceal my emotions any longer and cried. "Did you tell your mom?" I asked through tears. "No, I was too afraid of him. Later, I told everything to my grandma. She went to police, and got him arrested. He received thirty-seven years behind bars." We looked again at each other, and cried in unison.

At that moment I noticed that my class was watching us, but nobody even moved. It was such an awkward moment for me to know that my students watched their teacher, crying together with her student. However, my understanding fourth graders diverted

their eyes from both of us, not to embarrass us more than we both were.

I looked again at Rayna, and thought that this little girl knew much more about life than I, a grown up woman did. Even for me, an adult, it was hard to cope with miseries of life, let alone for a child. I knew with my heart that for Rayna it was incredibly hard to live through that horrifying experience, and it would require enormous strength to get back to normal life.

“Now you listen to my story,” I said. Not getting into details, I can tell you that I had to flee from my husband for my dear life. I fled from the house, where I spent most of my life in the United States. I bought it with my so hard earned schoolteacher’s money. That house was the expression of my love of life and nature. However, when I fled, I left everything behind, including the house itself. I took my books and my dog, and rented an apartment. I started my life from scratch, literally. No matter how hard your life is now, I hope it is much safer for you now. Right?” Rayna nodded. “Study! Do your homework! Your education will open new doors, and I would love to help you and be part of your life journey.”

The school bell rang. With our eyes still teary, Rayna and I rose simultaneously and hugged tightly. It was time for lunch.

Reflection on Vignette Nine: Crossing the Boundary

In 2009 Chicago Public Schools suspended one in four black males. The CPS black dropout rate is 55%. In real terms it means that 63,250 semi-literate, mostly poor, and angry black teen-aged boys drop out of Chicago schools every year.

Examiner.com (September 2010)

The 2010 Schott 50 State Report “Yes We Can” on Black Males in Public Education concluded that public school districts including CPS are failing to educate Black males causing many of them to drop out when they reach high school.

USA Today (September 2010)

I elected to write this vignette because of the indelible marks my former students Brandon and Rayna left on my personal and professional lives. Through educating them I met with my biggest pedagogical challenge, awaiting me in the United States: accommodation of the academic needs of students from different racial, socio-economic, and ethnic backgrounds. I view and treasure this experience as my professional right of passage as a teacher. On a personal level, stories shared by Brandon and Rayna, encourage me to be stronger not only for myself, but mainly for the sake of those students, who need teachers’ unconditional protection, understanding and support.

While I was writing this vignette, the word “empathy” came to my mind. However, I realized that there are two different kinds of teachers’ empathy. The first one is a passive empathy. I witnessed that a passive empathy causes students’ self pity that led to nowhere. Rayna and Brandon needed an active empathy, the one that transforms itself into a lifetime banner not to give in to any adverse circumstances. The children, lost in their relationships with the perplexing world of adults, are in dire need of that particular kind of empathy. Though Brandon and Rayna were unable to change their

past, the active empathy helped them launch a new and a brighter future.

Brandon, a nine-year-old African-American student, holds a special place in my heart. His story caused tears in my eyes, and left a wound in my soul. He was bold enough to open his heart to me, his new teacher, despite our differences in age, race, ethnicity, culture, and social standing.

When after three days of suspension Brandon returned to school, I decided to interview him. At first, he did not feel comfortable to talk to a stranger, who I was for him, though I was his teacher. As a matter of fact, I concluded that teachers are not viewed by students as “friends.” Subconsciously students do not believe teachers, who wield the power to give a bad grade, or call their parents. A teacher should deserve the trust of a child. Therefore, building a relationship of trust may become a decisive factor in improving the student academic performance and discipline.

I was longing to talk to Brandon in order to understand why a hardworking and a well-behaved Brandon while in my classroom, turned into an unmanageable and inconsiderate student the moment he left it. This situation reminded me of the about face problem I encountered during my first year of teaching in the Ukraine. Then students, behaving in other classrooms, misbehaved in mine. Though on the surface both incidents looked similar, deep down they were different. Brandon’s situation was more complex, and was influenced by more powerful undercurrents than those that affected his Ukrainian counterparts.

In order to help Brandon, who from second grade exposed himself to the world as a bully, I needed to learn as much as possible about his life, which was a real puzzle to

me. Little by little, as Brandon felt more liberated from the burden of thinking that I might hurt him somehow, the separate pieces of the puzzle of his life came into place to form a whole picture. That picture was missing a powerful variable, known as a sincere teacher's involvement to project a better image on the world around him. However, the people who were supposed to support Brandon and lend him a helping hand, had no intentions to offer it. Once, when I came to pick up my students from the Specials, the teacher welcomed me with the following comment. "I am so sorry for you, Ms. Neyman, that you have to deal daily with such students as Brandon." "You don't have to be sorry for me," I retorted. "In my classroom he behaves."

Already in my classroom, and still upset by that comment, I asked Brandon indignantly why he could not behave in other teachers' classrooms. "Cause it is in my DNA, and many teachers don't like me. That's why," he answered.

The painful truth I heard in his words, evoked my earlier concealed emotions and cleared my blocked understanding. Analyzing Brandon's response, I realized that he was right. While shadowing Brandon in different classrooms, I encountered the same model of teacher behavior, signaling a lack of empathy to a student, expressed in a pedagogical indifference. It was a model of teacher behavior that Brandon classified as "teachers do not like me." When it concerned Brandon, it looked like some teachers became oblivious of their professional duties to accommodate the needs of each and every student, including bullies. No effort was ever made to apply a different approach, beneficial to both Brandon and to the rest of the students, who were constantly disturbed by Brandon's antics. None of the teachers attempted to understand what was

going on in his life. It was a cookie-cutter pedagogical approach: you came to my classroom, then learn. But what, if something was going on in the students' lives that prevented them temporarily from learning and behaving? Why to not timely intervene instead of waiting for the forty minutes of academic time to elapse on their own? What teachers' efficiency could we talk about in this regard? Interestingly enough, as the number of the teachers' complaints grew, so did the number of the incidents of Brandon's misbehavior.

Despite the disheartening teacher's comment, I became more determined than ever not to give up and continued to convince Brandon to stop his self-destructive behavior. From talking to Brandon I learned that he loved his family and did not want to disappoint any of his loved ones. Therefore, I counted on Brandon's family for support and positive influence. Since the time Brandon came to my room, I tried to build close ties not only with his grandmother, his primary caregiver, but with his mother and stepfather as well. Together, we continuously underscored the importance of discipline in the life of a young man. On the one hand, Brandon already had a bad example in his family: his uncle, a gang member was in jail. On the other hand, one of his cousins chose a different path in life and became a marine. Proudly showing me a photo of the brave marine, Brandon said, "I want to be like him." Of course, the decision on what direction in life to take was completely on Brandon. However, I deemed the adult intervention crucial and enlisted his family as the major power behind the scenes to help Brandon to make the right decision.

Gradually, Brandon believed us and accepted our vision of self-discipline as a

primary condition for his American dream to come true. From that time on, every teacher noticed a positive change in Brandon's attitude towards school. Brandon's classmates were no longer apprehensive of him as his behavior changed, and no more aggressiveness was observed. He turned to the world with his soft side, and the world welcomed his wide smile. Brandon was accepted to the cheerleaders' squad as his test scores improved. It is always a great pleasure to watch him on stage. Brandon's positive transformation affected his family's involvement in his school life. His grandmother became an active member of Parent / Teacher Association. Whenever she sees me in the school hallway, she gives me a warm hug.

This academic year the youngest of Brandon's cousins became one of my fourth grade students. Interestingly enough, when I need to address any issues on his cousin's behavior, I rely on Brandon's support, in the same way as a couple of years ago I was looking for the support of his family. It is also amazing to watch Brandon come to my classroom to check on his cousin, who is not a bully at all, just a boy, and as an old adage has it, boys will always be boys.

Why was it important to intervene with Bradon's bullying in a timely manner? The research on bullying in elementary and middle schools defines bullying as any form of victimization of a young person by another young person (Gill, 2007). Coloroso (2002) defines bullying as a "conscious, willful, and deliberate hostile activity intended to harm, induce fear through threat of further aggression, and create terror" (p.13). Often bullies blame their victims for their own violence, which they consider as a self-defense (Beale, 2001 in Smokowski & Kopasz, 2005). Bullies are not socially welcomed, and neither

bullies' peers, nor teachers like to deal with them (McNamara & McNamara, 1997 in Smokowski & Kopasz, 2005).

Unsympathetic to other peoples' sufferings, a bully intentionally causes either emotional or physical harm, expecting the victims' pain, and enjoying the sight of it (Coloroso, 2002). It is not healthy to watch bullying. Those students, who watch bullying, but who do not stop it, will not live up to their human and citizen's responsibility to protect other people. Their unethical decision not to intervene may, after all, cause loss of life and/or dignity.

Research indicates that bullies most likely come from troubled families, with minimal children's supervision, and where either one or both parents are uninterested in their children. Those children often endure physical punishments from their parents, or older siblings, and see domestic violence as a means to achieve goals in life (Roberts, 1988; Olweus, 1994 in Smokowski & Kopasz, 2005). One third of the children in the United States become either a bully, a bully's victim, or both a bully and a victim, a so called bully-victim. Holt, Finkelhor, and Kantor (2007) claim that bullies themselves are victims/ witnesses of a crime, or of sexual abuse.

Some researchers claim that often educators do not recognize a student's behavior as bullying. Astor (1995); Cullingford and Morrison (1995) argue that "underestimating the harm caused by some forms of bullying, in particular nonviolent aggression, may lead to inappropriate response." It could be quite a reason why my colleagues did not respond to Brandon's bullying accordingly. (Holt et al., 2007) argue that the students, who expose themselves as bullies will commit crimes as adults. Therefore, it was so important

for me to stop Brandon's bullying as soon as possible, especially after I learned that he was considering joining a gang. Without bullying prevention, closing the achievement gap between the races will remain wishful thinking. To increase the achievement levels of the minority students grown in poverty, students need to be challenged by their teachers. The bullies, disrupting class discipline, are often below their grade levels, and teachers do not envision ways to improve the situation (Haycock, 2001).

In regard to Rayna, the situation with constantly missing homework (over the whole Third Quarter) did not look right to me. However, I could not even imagine the sinister nightmare a very shy Rayna had to cope with. Though I was aware of some kind of a tension between Rayna's mother and grandmother, I did not feel confident to ask Rayna directly about the family feud (the question that always daunts me whether I should or should not cross my professional boundaries, and where those boundaries start and end, if at all). That academic year Rayna resided with her grandmother. The rape took place over the Christmas break, when Rayna and her brother moved in for two weeks with their mother and her mother's boyfriend. The fact that Rayna chose to tell about the rape to her grandmother, suggests that Rayna had a more trusting relationship with her grandmother than with her mom. It is worth noting that only seventeen percent of rape victims report rape to law enforcement agencies. (National Crime Victimization Survey, 2006)

I combined Brandon's and Rayna's stories into one vignette because sexual assault is another kind of bullying, and is a common form of victimization. Fifteen percent of all rape victims in the United States are girls under age of eleven, and eighty

percent of them are raped by their acquaintances or relatives [National Crime Victimization Survey (NCVS), 1998; Koss, 1992]. The psychological impact of rape on a victim is immediate and can last a life time (Koss & Kilpatrick, 2001). Koss (1993) argues that rape victims experience stress during the first week, which escalates during the next weeks and can last for three to four months (in Rayna's case it was exactly the time frame of the Third Quarter). Some researchers claim that victims of rape will self-blame for the rape, will develop low self esteem, and will suffer from different forms of depression (Thompson et al., 2003). Casarez-Levison (1992) views victimization as a process where a victim moves from "a pre-crime state to a crime-event, to transition (initial coping and adjustment" and finally, to a "resolution", considering the past as one of life's experiences. How could I know that my very young student was battling depression, the side effect of the horrible process of "victimization"?

A sudden change in Rayna's behavior, expressed in a daily completion of her homework, ignored before, caused me ponder on the reason of that sudden change. By revealing the terrible truth, Rayna overcame her fright of meeting the truth face to face, no matter how ugly that truth was. It put the dark past behind her and cleared the space for a new future. Nothing prompted me to the thought that an inexplicable change in Raina's behavior was caused by a psychological imbalance, triggered by an abnormal home situation. It is a pity and a shame that teachers know so little about their students and are unable to provide help when students need it the most.

Since our conversation I observed a subtle change in Rayna's behavior. I saw more of smiling and happier Rayna than before. Slowly, but steadily, Rayna was

restoring her inner peace and a vulnerable self. Eventually, she let herself forget the dreadful past in order to live in the present and build her future.

The summer was over, and students came back to school. Almost every day I watch Rayna, now a fifth grader, during recess. She runs and plays games with her friends. Nothing in her appearance manifests that once she suffered a great deal of pain in her life. Rayna often stops by my classroom. We no longer need words to understand each other. A tight hug and a smile on our faces tell more than any words in the world.

As a magnifying lens, this vignette made it possible for me to observe the reciprocal relationship between the personal and the professional. I found myself to become somewhat detached on a personal level and more connected to the outer-world. Professionally, I feel more committed than ever to take a great amount of initiative to further assist my students. It is due to the stories, shared by Brandon and Rayna, that I developed a better understanding of the hardships some students might have. It is because of Brandon and Rayna that I am more tolerant and more compassionate in my personal life, and feel more responsible for my students as a professional.

Although at present it takes much more from teachers than ever before to find out what tortures students, the results are worth the efforts. By opening their own hearts, teachers help students get on the right track. This vignette reflects the importance of establishing a teacher/student friendly relationship as a primary condition to positively affect the students' academics and overall behavior. With combined efforts, despite all the odds, students and teachers can produce miracles and move away mountains of years of academic failure and disruptive discipline. I hope this vignette will evoke memories of

rank and file of the CPS teachers, who may connect with me on a professional and personal levels not to leave any child behind, even if the child is a bully or does not complete homework.

What I learned about Brandon and Rayna has forever changed the angle from which I address the needs of underprivileged students. Some of them, no matter how young, can tell a life story to make any adult's hair stand on end. The ingenuous and bitter confessions of the two fourth graders altered my already established perception of the severity of problems my students might have. Their powerful stories taught me a priceless lesson that sweet dreams of my students might be threatened by loaded guns, hidden under their pillows. From that time on, I greet my students not only with a cheerful "Good Morning", but with a deliberate "Did you have a good night sleep, honey?"

If we teach today's students as we taught yesterday's,
we rob our students of tomorrow. John Dewey.

CHAPTER FIVE: CONCLUSION

Introduction

In the next sections I discuss my findings. The auto-ethnographic method applied in this study was an instrument to answer the research questions and to reflect on the themes that emerged during the research process. In this study the major research questions were:

What have I learned in my personal and professional life that has affected my teaching?

What is the reciprocal relationship between the personal and professional?

What are the boundaries?

How does establishing relationships with students affect their academic performance?

What has made me the teacher that I am today?

The Effect of Personal and Professional on My Teaching

Reflecting on my personal and professional life, I learned that my teaching was affected by the relationship between the personal and the professional and the boundaries between the two. However, even upon reflecting on my vignettes, I could not grasp the whole picture. In order to come to the conclusions, I had to go through the third phase of this research, which I view as a post reflection. The post reflection revealed that in my particular case, the boundaries between the personal and the professional merged.

Nonetheless, I continued asking myself, “How and when did it happen?”

Looking for what had an impact on my teaching, I explored the essence of my personal life. I have learned that my professional life was influenced by my personal moral values, acquired through my personal life experience. Thus, an additional question emerged: “Where were my moral values coming from, if nobody had intentionally introduced them to me?”

The a-ha moment came when the auto-ethnographic lens magnified my personal life and highlighted early childhood as the time-frame when moral values came to the surface. It was then, when I elected to adhere to the right choice, no matter how attractive the wrong one was (humans always know if their choice is moral or not). Thus, the source of my personal moral values was subconsciously constructed by the home atmosphere of my childhood. Those values were born there, but their importance was supported at first, by my personal life experience, and as time went on, by my professional experience as a teacher. Therefore, my professional values were formed under the influence of my personal values, which were the source of my decisions in my professional life. Now, if nobody taught me how to act in a dubious situation, where as a child I looked for the response. I think that observing my parents under different circumstances prompted me with a correct answer. Below is one of the examples of my implicit “moral education.”

During my childhood in the Ukraine, I was a latchkey kid, and when I returned from school, there was nobody home. Only the dog I found in the street, happily welcomed me. One day, my father came home earlier than usual.

“What happened?” I asked. “Oh, I went to the restaurant with one captain,” he said matter-of-factly. My father went to the restaurant during the week? It sounded strange. As a rule, we dined out on Sundays. Besides, military men were not among my parents’ circle. “Who is he, and how do you know him?” I demanded. The story I heard left an indelible imprint on my whole life, both personal and professional alike.

In the beginning of World War II my father’s division was located in one of the Ukrainian villages. Once, while returning from an important meeting in the Command Headquarters, he noticed a young boy, standing in the solitude of the winter night on the bridge above the frozen river. My father stopped and said, “ It is very late and cold, sonny. Go home to your mom.” “My mom was killed during the latest air strike. There is no home for me any more. It is destroyed. There is no place in the world where I can go to,” the child sobbed. “What about your dad?” my father kept asking. “He was killed during the first days of war,” and the child cried inconsolably.

Then, a twenty-four year-old senior lieutenant, my future father, brought the boy to his temporary lodging, which he shared with other lieutenants. He made sure that his very young acquaintance got food and a warm bed. Miraculously, he also found winter clothes for the child, who just turned ten. The next day my father went to the Headquarters, where he received temporary documents for the boy. For the time being he could legally stay with my father. However, when the Russians started the assault, my father had to leave with the rest of the Russian Army. Before leaving, he brought the boy to the Headquarters, and left him there under the care of other officers.

The war ended. Many peaceful years passed by. That day, on my father's way home, a handsome young captain approached him and asked the following. "Sir, during the war didn't you stay in such and such village?" "Yes," my father answered. "Did you meet, by chance, a young boy on the bridge?" "Yes," my father said. "You know what, I am that boy." With tears in their eyes, the two men froze in a tight hug. "Let's go to the restaurant. We have to celebrate this remarkable meeting. Be my guest of honor," the young captain pleaded.

In the restaurant the captain told that after my father left with his army, he was accepted to a military school for orphans, whose parents were killed during the war. Upon graduating, he decided to become a professional military man. The captain shared that his career was very successful, and in the near future he expected to be promoted to the rank of Colonel. He lived in the Far East with his wife and their two children. He told his family the story of his survival, and that he had a dream to meet my father one day. However, the last place he expected to meet him was in our city, where a captain came on a one day business trip to the Military Academy located there.

Why did I tell this story? I tell it to show how children from early age see their parents as their first role models. Watching the integrity of my parents' characters, and the dignity they approached difficult situations (in the Ukraine they were in abundance), forged my own perception of right and wrong. I think, in my professional decisions I just followed in their footsteps. I learned early that there was no right way to do the wrong thing. Over the years I grew more observant and learned to notice how life harshly punished people both professionally and personally, who have blatantly wronged others

(banker Maddof's life is one of the latest examples). Is it an eternal law of "do unto others" in action? Who knows? Not me. What I do know is that I have to act ethically at all times, be honest to myself and others, and lie to neither.

The unsettling events in my personal life, culminating in a divorce the summer of 2009. Some people in my situation would have asked for help. As an introvert, I suffered in silence. However, there were people, who observed unobtrusively the events of my personal life and tried to assist me. I will never forget the kindness and understanding of Dr. Rademaker, Dr. Gunther, and Dr. Weston. Their involvement is appreciated beyond any spoken words, as they were the people who literally stood behind my survival on all of its levels.

Thus, what was the long-term effect of the personal on the professional, in regard to my teaching?

I now understand that I have applied the same moral values system in my professional life that I have used in my personal one. Through this auto-ethnographic research I learned that I meet professional challenges the same way I met the challenges in my private life. I learned that as a teacher I chose the path of fairness, honesty, and forgiveness. I acknowledge that my professional life has been deeply affected by moral values honed by confronting personal and professional challenges in an ethical manner. I believe that this explains why I never take shortcuts in teaching. For instance, I do not allow myself to shortchange my students on the curriculum they were supposed to be introduced to. In a similar way, I think that it is my professional responsibility to be personally involved in helping students who are unable to do their homework on their own.

Nobody requires my students to come to school early. But they do. I think it is because they consciously respond to my concern about their academic standing. Every morning students flock to my classroom, at least half an hour before the official bell rings to study what they missed the day before.

I have learned that my professional ethics is underpinned by my personal moral values. When these roots got intertwined, I became a stronger person, on the one hand. On the other hand, I was also transformed into a teacher who never stays indifferent to her students' problems. Standing tall for the sake of my students' interests raised their confidence and faith in the success of their academic efforts.

On a personal level, I had to find inner courage to pass and transcend the situation I found myself locked in during my divorce. I had to break the emotional and financial locks and rebuild my life from the remnants of my past life. I was on a mission to rebuild my human integrity in order to build a new future. Despite all the hardships, (belt tightening was the easiest), sometimes weakened, I carried on. Through my personal life journey, I learned there was some bigger purpose for my physical and emotional survival. I tried not to look back. "Forward!" became my personal and professional motto. It was the ultimate internal command to myself. Before falling asleep I was often thinking, "My disadvantaged students need me. I have to bring more light into their lives through teaching. Enlightened themselves, they would share their newly found Light with their own children and people they would meet on their own life journey. If not me, then who?"

The Reciprocal Relationship Between the Personal and The Professional

Facing personal problems in an ethical manner honed my professional resilience, patience, and careful thinking. It taught me to take responsibility for the life changing choices I had to adhere to both professionally and personally. This auto-ethnographic research has helped me see in retrospect the gradual process of my self-development as both a person and as a professional. I studied myself as somebody who I never met before, and whose actions I could analyze, but not necessarily agree with. In retrospect I saw myself abandon for good (both personally and professionally) the habit of putting on rosy glasses whenever I encountered insatiable avarice, immorality of any kind, and/or self-serving interests. That alone explained what prompted me to look for the student's trophy so relentlessly (Vignette Seven). I realize now that the merged boundaries between personal and professional made me worry about lack of students' interest in learning (Vignette Three, Vignette Eight, Vignette Nine).

From my personal problems I learned that to survive as a human being I must be strong, never give up, and be responsible for my own decisions and actions. Becoming stronger personally made me stronger professionally. By acquiring professional strength it was easier for me to protect my students' interests and their human dignity (Vignette Five, Vignette Nine). Applying my personal value system in my professional life, prompted my readiness to help students if they lacked behind in academics, or resorted to the wrong life choices (Vignette Two, Vignette Three, Vignette Four, Vignette Eight).

A relationship between the personal and the professional is reciprocal: the personal affects the professional, and vice versa. For me, one of its manifestations is the ability to

look at myself through the eyes of my students. Seeing myself as a strong teacher and my students' role model (some students want to become teachers) will not allow me to lower standards in my personal life, reminding me that at all times, I have to wear a teacher's hat for the sake of my personal and professional integrity.

Crossing Boundaries

In this study my values came under scrutiny. Breaking the boundaries between the personal and the professional was never an easy solution for me, as I always wondered if that was the proper or inappropriate thing to do. During the course of this research I did a lot more self-analysis than most people realize, probably because I rarely discuss what is really going on in my life. Behind my life bravado and professionalism I am very shy. Like anybody else, I fight insecurities too, but I am highly unlikely to admit this. What people often don't see is my vulnerability and sensitivity as I do everything to present a strong exterior. However, there are times when I feel that the bravest thing is to be me with all my vulnerabilities. Now is one of those times.

This study enabled me to become more human, which also makes it possible to receive more positive response from my students. As a result I feel that I have dropped some of the barriers I have put up, that have driven a wedge between me personally, and me professionally. In so doing I discovered that the boundaries between the personal and the professional exist in the virtual world of a human mind. However, their combined strengths are amazing. To help a student in earnest, both teachers and parents must risk to crossing the boundaries. For me, as a teacher it means taking on a part of parental

responsibility for the well-being of a child. For a parent, likewise, it means to assume, in part, my role of a teacher. A student's academic success is attainable only if the boundaries merge when school and family become a unified meaningful whole, where the interests of each coincide (Vignette Two, Vignette Eight, Vignette Nine).

Nonetheless, boundaries that did not merge, or were not crossed for the sake of the student, have limits and expiration time. If neither party (teachers and parents) allows trespassing the boundaries, the consequences might be disastrous for a family, a student, and at times for the society. For instance, I was unable to save Matthew from jail, and Jane from using drugs or running away, etc. (Vignette Four), and prevent vandalism (Vignette Six). Though I tried. Did I have to cross those boundaries professionally? Not really, though I felt a strong personal responsibility to help a student who lost his/her way in life. However, in the end I learned the harsh reality that teachers are not omnipotent and cannot substitute parents when not words, but actions are needed. In this regard, President Obama's words during his State of the Union Address are so meaningful to me:

Over the next ten years, nearly half of all new jobs will require education that goes beyond high school education. And yet, as many as a quarter of our students are not even finishing high school. So the question is whether all of us-as citizens, and as parents-are willing to do what is necessary to give every child a chance to succeed. That responsibility begins not in our classrooms, but in our homes. It is family that first instills the love of learning in a child. Only parents can make sure that the TV is turned off and homework gets done.

Again and again I returned in my thoughts to my parents as the primary teachers of their child. Numerous times I watched them assisting their former students: helping find jobs, apartments, introducing them to future spouses. Providing support in any of its forms was far beyond my parents' professional responsibilities. It was an example of how the professional and the personal dissolved to become a lifetime bond, thriving on mutual respect between the Teacher and the Student.

My Relationship with Students and Their Academic Performance

I don't know how it happened: maybe it was an act of intuition. Whatever the reason, I realized that before I could start teaching in earnest, so my students could start learning in earnest, I needed to build a relationship of mutual trust and respect. To evoke an understanding of the importance of being honest and trustworthy for their future, I spared no moment building a flowerbed for planting seeds of high moral values. For example, Aesop became a household name for my students, while they reflected on their own stories from their short but rich life experiences. Introducing moral values through the students' own critical thinking, had ameliorated their souls, and made introducing "subject matter" ready for academic consumption.

No one in the world, young or old, wants to be betrayed, or lied to. Those despicable qualities immediately become a no-show in our classroom. Being polite and caring are my students' choices. However, accidents do happen. Vignette Seven and Vignette Four are vivid examples of what happens to young people if low moral values take the upper hand.

In many ways teaching is a reciprocal activity: if teachers believe in their students, students will believe and trust their teachers. The environment of mutual trust makes it possible to teach students not to give up in the face of academic challenges, and to fight back against negativity they might face during their first conscious steps in life.

If teachers respect students, students will return the favor by respecting their teachers. Every student, no matter how young, needs and deserves recognition as a person. Attending to that, I always keep in mind that teaching is a profession of “give-and-take” of a much larger order. The degree of mutual respect, trust, and warmth that is created between each student and myself, I believe, positively affects their academic performance. At the same time, my relationship with my students has made my personal and professional life more rewarding and more fulfilling.

The academic success of my students is not caused by “pie-in-the-sky” thinking. Problems I encounter cause me to experience both professional challenges and personal pressure. Often I ask myself why I have incurred so much pain that other teachers seem to have avoided. Yet, instead of grinding me down, solving those problems has helped me grow buoyancy and optimism, which I share with my students. I continue to read more than one hundred students’ papers a day, and discuss them individually with each student afterwards. I believe that formative assessment is more effective than any other form of assessment as it induces more student learning. My students’ confidence came from their trust in me as their teacher and leader. The students’ trust and the ensuing hard work resulted in their improved understanding of curriculum. I sensed that with just a little more effort I could get my students onto the path I wanted them to take

each new school year. Pretty soon (within two and a half or three months) many challenges my students faced were behind them.

What Has Made Me The Teacher That I Am Today?

When I was thinking how to approach this question, my first reaction was to answer it in a multiple choice manner: all the above. However, it would have been a simplified approach. When I imagine teaching, I think nothing but of mountains, often covered with snow. Like mountains that withstand many unfavorable weather conditions, teachers have to meet challenges they have never thought they would ever deal with. As mountains teachers must stay strong despite all odds.

In my case, from day one of teaching, I was challenged by students' misconduct and their lack of understanding of what it means to be a responsible student. In *Hitting the Teaching Bottom* (Vignette One), I relived my first negative experience of losing the classroom ground, on which I was supposed to teach. No college textbook could ever introduce me to the stress a young teacher might experience, when being placed in the classroom abyss of misbehaving students. In *Finding My Teacher's Consciousness* (Vignette Five) I reflected on how this "sink or swim" approach have drowned a large number of excellent teachers. I had a home-based support in the face of my father, an experienced educator, who helped me avoid the "teaching panic attack" that some young teachers went through.

I learned that if I planned to overcome challenges I had to get to the root cause of them. In particular, I faced student poor discipline if student engagement was not to par with the student level of knowledge. The understanding has come that all of the

challenges could be resolved through patience and love. During those times my professional strength, momentum, resilience, and professional ethics were forged. I understood how important it is to publicly validate my students' success and show my sincere admiration of student accomplishments. At all times I have to remember how hard it was on my students to break their own boundaries and barriers that kept them put, and what it took them to go from the alarming status "at risk" students to the status of "honor roll" students. I have to commend them because for a large number of public school students school is still a place they have to attend, but do not see any personal benefits of doing so. Some of them abhor schools, teachers and everything that is associated with them. Thus, even tiny steps on the road to student academic achievements symbolize that in the foreseeable future, big and sure strides will follow. I am proud for my students' accomplishments and for having an honor to be a part of the process of academic metamorphosis.

My decision not to give up in my personal life, called for the similar decisions in my professional life, and forged my professional high expectations for my students. That alone helped them see me as a person, who wanted and could turn their lives around. A crisis, caused by lack of morality of another person, and hence, the violation of trust, has shaken my personal world. It was through the challenge of meeting the crisis head on, that I understood that it was my trustworthiness that counted on a personal level. On a professional level alike, trust, which students placed on me as a teacher, was my life-jacket in the open sea of professional relationships as well.

Traveling the educational path of a doctoral student, has allowed me to

contemplate the paradigm shifts of life itself. Over human history, I am not the only one who has been betrayed. World literature is filled with examples of undermined lives of real people, and characters, as alive on the pages of books, as once their prototypes were in real life. Countless times during treacherous moments of my life, I opened Shakespeare and Moliere to help me unravel the secrets of a human soul, leaving none of its stains undetected.

It is my teacher's heart and passion for teaching that drives things on the professional front. Thinking positively makes my teacher's dreams surprisingly doable, long lasting, and practical. As a teacher I try to do everything I can to keep my students excited and motivated about academics, encouraging them not to give up in front of any challenges. Given support, in time will put those challenges behind them. They are on a quest, a goal to keep them motivated that will transform into their academic tenacity.

I promote parent/teacher networking to build strong communication with my students and parents. That opens up communication lines with students' families, making all the variables (students, teachers, parents) work together to achieve common goals. This home/school networking relieves all participants from the burden of unnecessary worries about homework balance issues. For example, with this approach in place, I do not lose professional momentum. If anything, it solidifies what I feel about my role in the academic process. One of the things I definitely try to avoid is looking for easy solutions, like the man in the old adage below:

One night a man together with his friend was walking the street that had only one lantern. Along the way in the darkest part of the street, the man lost his watch. He tried to look for it, but without any success. Suddenly, that man walked away from the dark spot, where he lost his watch, and charged to a brighter side of the street. “Why are you going there? You lost your watch here,” his friend said. “Ah, it does not matter any longer.” the man replied. “There is more light under that lantern.”

From professional experience I know that teaching is not as easy as a lay person might think it is. As a teacher I know that setting high academic goals for my students, and high professional targets for myself, will make all the challenges of the academic process disappear into thin air and fulfill my students’ and my own dreams.

Working on this auto-ethnographic study let me ponder on the recent and past events of my professional and personal life. The newly found ability allowed me to see the images of the past, not distorted by the fake refraction. This empowered me with lifting myself above the epicenter of my personal earthquake in order to survive the crisis, and keep my human and professional dignity intact.

Though by education, I am a teacher, I still consider myself a student in the Life Department. It was for my students that I found the strength to carry on as a person. My students’ wisdom came as a response to their own lives’ crises. It was a true consolation to reread the journals, letters, and notes, they were so kind to share with me. In particular, Kevin in his letter gave the reasons why I ought to go on teaching indefinitely (Vignette Eight). It elevated Kevin as both my lifeguard and my guru.

It really helped reverse the emotional context of a situation I never expected to find myself in. Even now I ponder how a sixth grader could grasp what was beyond the ken of my own teacher's comprehension. In conclusion, a poem I once wrote may shed more light on who I am as a teacher.

Learning

I am teaching my students to read and to write.
Respect older folks and wish them "Good Night".
I am teaching my students to live and survive.
Be grateful and prudent. Give life their "High Five."
I am teaching my students to be honest and strong.
Love Arts and Fine Music. Have a favorite song.
I am teaching my students to work pretty hard.
Not let common sense leave them off guard.
I am teaching my students to be kind and be nice.
Eat plenty of apples to be healthy and wise.
I am teaching my students. They teach me as well
That laughter and fun are at times so swell!
I am teaching my students. That's the best of rewards,
It's my favorite pastime and the highest awards.
I am teaching my students. Don't blame me for this.
This noble profession is my infinite bliss.

Closing the Loop

This auto-ethnographic study is significant in that based on the reflections of my personal and professional life, it explores the process of gaining my teacher's experience, confidence and efficiency, on one hand, and the effect of that process on the academic achievements of my students, on the other. This study contributes to the plethora of auto-ethnographic research on pedagogy and introduces educational theories and experts' opinions to support the findings of this dissertation. Ellis (2004) claims the following:

Auto-ethnography is research, writing, story, and method that connect the autobiographical and personal to the cultural and social. Auto-ethnographic forms feature concrete action, emotion, embodiment, self-consciousness, and introspection. Showing what happens in the classroom provokes readers to experience the power of auto-ethnography, to feel its truth, as well as come to know it intellectually. (p. xix).

This research is important because it responds to the call of American Educational Research Association for more research on educators' own teaching practices and on the factors that make their teaching effective (Cochran-Smith & Zeichner, 2006). This study highlights teachers' reflectivity and reflexivity as the tools to make teaching more efficient. Coia and Taylor (2006) recognize as a benefit that auto-ethnographic research stirs the self-reflection of listeners and readers. Brill (2008) argues that "by analyzing shared narratives" educators can "better integrate their new experiences, reflect deeply on their decisions, and identify outcomes connected to their actions." (p.18).

From this self-study emerged the themes of students' low academic progress and poor discipline, students' vandalism and theft, lack of parents' supervision, the importance of cooperation between school and family, and the effect of the relationship of trust between my students and myself on their academic progress. These themes exposed themselves in the background of my personal and professional relationships, which were ruled by moral ethics. It came to me in an epiphany that teachers' ethics (it is particularly true in my case) is the primary factor that affects teachers' efficacy and students' academic performance.

The American Heritage College Dictionary defines ethics as "a system or a theory of moral values; a set of principles of right conduct; the rules or standards governing the conduct of a person or the members of a profession" (p. 471). The philosophy of ethics is rooted in Aristotle's perception of virtues and the development of good habits.

At the time I started this research I did not expect ethics to be a decisive factor in my teaching and students' learning. However, in the process of the study, I discovered that it is the presence or lack of moral values and ethical relationships, that makes a difference in students' academics. In this regard, to validate my discoveries on the impact of ethics on education I addressed my quest to the studies conducted by other researchers. Alston (1989) argues that "teaching is a practice with specific moral dimensions" and "should be based on ethical relationships between teachers and students in their pursuit of knowledge." Lee (1993) claims that "practice of ethics of caring by teachers and principals has a significant positive correlation with the learning outcomes."

In the same vein, the findings of the research on a balancing accountability and ethics (Hall, 2009) reveal that “positive, caring and supportive relationships, honest communication, and a culture of mutual respect are the essential components to balance the pressures of accountability and support teaching and learning.” Karbula (2009) in the case study on the role of superintendent of schools indicated that “at the heart of all behaviors and decisions made by superintendent regarding instructional leadership and student academic achievement were his core beliefs on honesty, integrity, and his personal ethic of caring deeply for students and staff.”

Thus, the research demonstrates the importance of ethics, but is it supported by theory? I found the answer in the Personal Construct Theory (PCT) also known as Personal Construct Psychology (PCP) by George Kelly (1955). This theory explains the relationship between moral values (ethics) and personal constructs. Kelly referred moral values as the core set of human constructs dealing with the self. Kelly claims that “core constructs are able to subsume peripheral constructs, which can be altered without serious modifications.” According to Kelly “core constructs are those which govern a person’s maintenance processes—that is, those by which he maintains his identity and existence” and therefore, inseparable from that person, or from who that person is. (This explains my tenacity to stay in marriage as divorce was against my moral values. To disvalue my own moral principles was equal for me to reject myself as an individual).

Kelly’s theory was further developed by Harding (1977), who conducted a research that supported her hypothesis that “situations are discriminated on the basis of a dimension which is representative of a person’s core role structure.”

Within the framework of Kelly's Personal Construct Theory Harding (1977) constructed a model of cognitive structures that considered the "distinction between rules and values"; the "association of values and self-respect," and the "relationship of guilt, shame, and moral values."

I believe that it is extremely important to instill high moral values in each district, school and classroom. I concur with Doyle (1997) who said that a value free school does not exist, and "that the issue is not whether or not a school will have values, but what those values will be. Like it or not, schools shape character."

John Dewey (1964), who was one of the most outstanding education scholars and practitioners, warned against excessive dependence on subject matter knowledge, considering such dependence fatal to schools and to public education. Dewey claimed that the desire to know can be instilled through cultivating teachers' self-reflective mindset to inspire students' own reflectivity, inquiry, and moral judiciousness. Likewise, Habermas (1990) argued that teachers' moral values (consciousness) have a tremendous impact on the outcome of student learning.

Newmann (1996), and Darling-Hammond (2000) claim that effective teaching depends only partly on teachers' technical knowledge, but heavily on teachers' ability to model positive images and construct positive relationships. Brady (2005) argues that the student/ teacher relationship is as important as a teacher's subject matter proficiency. It is the student's trust and respect of the teacher that allows the teacher to lead her students to the highest academic potential. The relationship between teachers' values and students' academics is not a new concept. Rogers (1969) claims that in their classrooms,

teachers with high moral values tend to create the atmosphere of trust, empathy, and genuine care, leading to academic success. In a study on the effect of teachers on student achievement, Wright, Horn, & Sanders (1997) argue that “the most important factor affecting student learning is the teacher” (p. 63). Rowe (2004), and Louden et al. (2005) underscore the significance of the stimulating pedagogy that thrives in the climate of mutual trust and respect between the teacher and student. In the same vein, Bryk & Schneider (2002) concluded the following:

Maintenance (and growth) of relational trust in any given role set requires synchrony in these mutual expectations and obligations. For example, parents expect that teachers will take the necessary actions to help their child learn to read. Teachers feel obligated to work in a professionally appropriate manner and are willing to commit extra effort, if necessary, in seeking to respond to the parents’ expectations. Parents, in turn are obligated to make sure that students attend school regularly and, more generally, to support the teachers’ efforts at home. In many schools, however, the behaviors of “others” do not conform to expectations. Individuals typically withdraw their trust when expectations are not met, leading to a weakening of relationships and, in more extreme instances, a possible severing of ties. (pp. 20, 21).

Thus, how did knowing myself as an individual within my personal world and knowing myself as a professional within the culture of my teaching affect my professional practice?

For Habermas (1990) knowing takes place through critical “authentic” learning of knower, as learning “the others” is impossible without learning “the selves.” Through reflecting on my own teaching experience I gained what Habermas calls “communicative knowledge” or “historical hermeneutics,” i.e. learning oneself through communication with others. According to Habermas, this new knowledge influences “praxis,” or a practical action. Reflecting on my teaching practice, I have learned some new things. First of all, I need to build the relationship of trust with *all* of my students’ parents. Secondly, I realize I can learn even more through my students’ reflections on *their own learning experience*.

Thinking about the relationship of trust in other professional fields, I recently recalled that medical doctors ask their patient, if the prescribed medicine helped. Invigorated by that idea, straight after winter break, I offered my students the opportunity to write essays where they would reflect on their own learning experience, and on the steps they could take to facilitate their learning. My students enthusiastically responded to that assignment. Upon reading their essays, I was amazed by the students’ depth of thought, and by the profound analysis of their own learning practices. Their responses included “becoming better listeners,” “being more attentive in class,” “avoiding procrastination with homework,” “choosing priorities,” and “wanting my teacher to be proud of me.” Analyzing students’ reflections has opened a new page in my teaching practice. From now on, I am going to use my students’ learning revelations to their academic advantage and for my continuous professional growth.

Working on this research highlighted the values of writing and reading auto-ethnography. I learned to value this method for its special flair for better cultural, personal, and professional awareness, and for setting the stage for a detailed interpretation of the self and of the others. Writing auto-ethnographic vignettes enriched me with the experience that changed the perspectives from which I view and evaluate my professional and personal worlds. I hope this robust method has the potential to transform educators' perceptions on their daily practices.

From the themes that brought themselves to the forefront of this research, I would like end with a return to the metaphor of mountains as teaching. Yes, there are times when mountains are covered with snow of challenges. Notwithstanding, the bright sun of teachers' experience and high ethics melts it in no time. On a positive note, mountains are often covered with forests, where travelers (students) can find shade in summer, protection from wind in winter, and always fresh water from the pristine spring of knowledge.

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