Discovering Self Together: An Art Teacher Exploring Her Role in Helping Adolescent Students on Their Journey to Self-Awareness

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Discovering Self Together: An Art Teacher Exploring Her Role in Helping Adolescent Students on Their Journey to Self-Awareness

Rachel Jayne Romney

A thesis submitted to the faculty of Brigham Young University in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Master of Arts

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ABSTRACT

Discovering Self Together: An Art Teacher Exploring Her Role in Helping Adolescent Students on Their Journey to Self-Awareness

Rachel Jayne Romney
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Master of Arts

A case study of a junior high and high school art classroom that examines students’ development of identity and self-awareness through reflective practice in a caring community. This project considers what the role of teaching is and how working through vulnerability to create caring relationships can inspire teachers and aid adolescent students, within an art curriculum, to discover their true selves.

Keywords: self-awareness, journaling, caring, community, gratitude, bullying, vulnerability
ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

I, alone, have spent well over 100 hours of work in just the writing, editing, and compiling of this thesis. I have undoubtedly spent many more hours on research in my classroom, reading student journals, and the overall process of coming to this end goal. Despite how much time I have spent on this project, however, so much of the groundwork, refining, and most importantly support, came from others. For each of them, I am grateful.

I would like to thank my Committee Chair, Dr. Mark A. Graham, for encouraging me throughout my program and for his steady assistance and support in writing this thesis. He has spent much of his time, and undoubtedly his patience, in responding to my incessant questions, one email after another. Without his expertise, I would have been lost.

I thank my dad, Brad Romney, for likewise being a mentor in the process of revising and editing. He too was hounded with endless questions and ultimately helped me to get the job done. I also thank him for supporting me through my program and helping me get through the challenges that arose. He is an endless example to me of hard work and endurance.

My mom, Sara Jayne Romney, was not only the soft comfort during my program and the voice of encouragement during this process, frequently asking, “How many pages have you written?”, but she is also the reason that self-awareness has always been of value to me. From a young age, she taught me the importance of reflecting upon myself to glean understanding and to know how I played a part in the world around me. I thank her for the wisdom she imparted that I now feel inclined to share with my students and others in my life.

Last, I want to thank my students for letting me into their lives and hearts and for creating, with me, a community of caring within our classroom. I am grateful for the time that I spent with them and for my personal growth in the process.
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Chapter 1 - Introduction

As I entered the field of teaching for my first time, I was excited by the opportunity to get back into the world of art. This would be my first job utilizing my degree since graduating in art five years earlier. I was ready to be back. However, soon after stepping into my first class, I realized that my adolescent students were lacking the proper tools to discover who they were and to decide who they wanted to become. Bullying and student apathy were heavily prevalent and it made me realize that, as part of my job as a teacher, I needed to nurture and mentor my students and to help them grow as individuals. Paintbrushes and pencils would only go so far in fixing the problem: These students were in need of a safe and caring environment where they could build confidence, gain self-awareness, and come to know their true selves.

This thesis both describes my research on these topics and illustrates my own personal journey in my efforts to cultivate caring relationships with my students and create a caring environment in my classroom. The existing climate of unkindness at my school led me to believe these students were in need of a change in their learning experience. This encouraged me to develop a curriculum founded on cultivating caring relationships, growing through vulnerability, and learning through reflective journaling in order to develop self-awareness.

Background

Pulling up to Mount Olympus Academy for my first time, I sat in my car debating if I really wanted to go in. I found the job listing online and was hopeful about getting the job and returning to my love of art. After my first glance at the building, however, I lost my enthusiasm. The building had obviously served as a church at some point, but it was apparent that much time and wear had taken a toll since then. The building looked run-down and
uninviting and I would soon find out that the conditions inside were even worse, particularly in what would one day become my art room.

Talking myself into some courage, I walked inside and looked for the school principal, who would be interviewing me. I had no teaching certificate, let alone any work experience in teaching. I entered the school with only some of my personal artwork to prove that I had some art-making ability. Nevertheless, I was offered the job on the spot, and I took it.

When the school year began, I had been thinking about how to introduce an art curriculum, but it took very little time for me to realize that teaching art would take second place to something else, and I needed to find out what that was. I was there to teach art to students at both junior high and high school levels, but I was struck by the realization that there was something different about these teenagers compared to those that I had worked closely with before; there was something missing.

Less than a year prior to this teaching job, I had been a youth leader in a humanitarian group. Juniors in high school from all over the Salt Lake Valley applied for the program and, as one of the adult leaders, I was involved in the interviewing process. During the interviews, I found myself amazed again and again at the lives and behaviors of the applicants. They were doing so many meaningful things in their lives with all of their extracurricular activity and service experiences.

When we narrowed down the participants to our final group, we began a year-long preparation for a humanitarian expedition the following year. These participants were still teenagers that were youthful in their behaviors, but they were also kind and happy individuals who were confidently ready and excited to make a difference in the world. As they opened up, and I could see them for who they truly were, I was continually impressed with how they
behaved and chose to live their lives. For this program, they had chosen to volunteer much of their time, over the next year, to better themselves through reaching out and caring for others.

This experience expanded my vision of the potential of adolescents to do good and to care for others. When I started my new teaching job, this humanitarian experience was part of my frame of reference. I had seen what it was like to be a happy, confident, and caring adolescent. When I observed my new students, however, that sense of purpose and happiness were missing. Instead, I observed taunting and teasing, belittling before benevolence, a cutting threat of violence and even confessions of suicidal thoughts.

These behaviors scared me, but because of my experience with the humanitarian project, I believed that these students could choose to be more than the sum of their current negative behaviors. My excitement of getting back into the art world would have to come second to cultivating a caring community with my students. I realized that they needed more than a color wheel or shading techniques in their lives; these students needed a teacher who cared about them and who had a desire to help them become more confident, self-aware, and compassionate as they moved forward in this stage of life.

Because I was new to teaching, I had the advantage of seeing these teens first as people and second as students. I knew that adolescence is a time of change and discovery in life. Students make a giant leap from their more directed years of elementary school to the new freedoms, decisions, and autonomy that come with the nature of secondary schooling. On top of that, they go through physical and emotional changes that affect their choices and behavior. They are introduced to new faces, personalities, and ideas. Making decisions becomes a greater and more real part of their lives as they create their own school schedules and decide how to
respond to new people in new environments. Most important, but perhaps most difficult, it is a
time of discovering who they are and deciding who they will become.

Adolescence is the transitional period between adult-directed childhood and self-directed
adulthood. It is a time of exploration and self-discovery. These students came with their own
packaged backgrounds of life-lessons and experiences; they were by no means clean slates.
During this time, they would need to learn to become independent individuals while moving
toward adulthood, and I wanted to help them in this process. My efforts turned toward
mentoring and guiding them in accepting and caring for others, becoming more confident in their
own identities, and helping them realize who they could become. I didn’t want my students to
resort to choosing the path of least resistance and opt out of becoming the individuals I believed
they were capable of being.

I began to observe my students more closely, and my classroom became a research site of
sorts. Because my job gave me the opportunity to spend several hours with my students each
week, I had the opportunity to better understand their behaviors and to tailor my teaching to their
needs. I believe that teachers can have a great and lasting influence on their students and that the
student/teacher relationship is an important part of the teaching and learning process. Being part
of a community of caring can have enormous impact on both their learning and on their feeling
of confidence and self-worth. Community does so much more than give a person an
environment in which to live, but provides a place where they can thrive.

My teaching methods and curriculum adapted and developed as I responded to the
changing dynamics of my classroom. In making efforts to facilitate opportunities for community
and caring, my hope was that we could design a space where they could make more positive
choices, free from the shadows of bullying and insecurity.
Research in the Classroom

My research year was a year of experimentation as I learned more about my students and how they responded to me. My research dealt with a very small population in a very small school. Nevertheless, this exploration of adolescence and human behavior touches on important questions about how adolescents can develop confidence, self-awareness, and character.

Research literature on the topics of bullying, vulnerability, caring relationships, reflective journaling, gratitude, and self-awareness were important in helping me understand students behaviors and in creating a community of caring in my classroom. These ideas will be described in Chapter 2. A case study methodology was utilized for this research and will be described in Chapter 3.
Chapter 2 - Literature Review

Research on the following topics has given me insights into the reasons why my students were behaving the way they were, and helped me understand what I might do to aid them in achieving greater self-awareness, so they could better see how they fit into and affected the world around them. For this thesis, I have researched how working through vulnerability, cultivating caring, utilizing the benefits of reflective journaling, and living with gratitude can guide adolescents on their road to discovering themselves. I also explored how these ideas fit into an educational context. Bullying was a big issue that I witnessed in my school and was an important research topic for this thesis.

Bullying Among Adolescents

Having noticed that bullying was commonplace in my school, I wanted to understand why it was happening and how it was affecting my students. It seemed that bullying was preventing students from feeling happy and safe in their environment. I believed that it was challenging their ability to value their self worth and eroded their confidence, as well as preventing the opportunity to create a sense of community in the school.

Bullying can happen at any stage of life, but it seems that it is particularly prominent in youth. It can take on many forms and appearances, but one thing that researchers agree on, is that bullying is intentional. It is not inadvertent, but is a deliberate act of harm from one person to another. In early childhood years, it may manifest itself in a more physical manner, but often becomes less physical as children get older. In the adolescent years, it will often take the form of “teasing, name-calling, spreading rumors, or ridicule[ing] someone in front of other people” (Weir, 2010, p. 6). Bullying can be physical, emotional, social, psychological, or verbal, and is described with words like, “hurt,” “victimized,” “aggression,” and “attack” (Lines, 2008, pp. 18-
In short, it is an act of cruelty from one human being to another and is commonly a repetitive activity.

Within the topic of bullying, I was most curious about: (1) the reasons why adolescents bully, and (2) the effects it has on both the bully and the bullied. The research shows that the motivating factors for a bully are social in nature and deal primarily with power, popularity, and social status. Bullies are known to have “good social skills” and they use those skills to achieve their status and power driven goals (Berger, Caravita, 2016, p. 45). Houghton, Nathan, and Taylor (2012) talk about a bully’s ability to “perceive vulnerabilities to target in potential victims” (p. 501).

One study suggests that there is a 3-part process that explains motivation for bullying. In the beginning, an individual will bully another individual in order to gain recognition and respect among their peers. Next, in order for this newly-minted bully to promote his or her new reputation, he or she will make sure to bully others in front of their peers to solidify the reputation. From there, he or she exhibits these behaviors outside of school, so as not to lose the status earned (Houghton, Nathan, & Taylor, 2012). This theory explains why bullying is usually a repetitive behavior.

Schools seem to be an ideal location for bullying. One theory suggests that the hierarchal systems that exist in schools among the staff is recognized and emulated by students (Lines, 2008). As bullies climb up the social chain, others are left below in the lower rankings. Another theory explains this urgency for hierarchy in terms of survival (Weir, 2010). The theory is that all life forms fight for survival in some way or another. Although students in school do not have the need to physically fight one another to obtain food and shelter in order to stay alive, there is still a fight for dominance and status.
Although bullying can be the means of gaining high social placement in a hierarchal system, the bully, who might be on top of the chain, isn’t as self-secure as one might assume. In one study, it was found that children who bullied others scored lower on their own self-esteem scale. While bullies may feel socially superior, they also tend to view themselves negatively within their families, academic environments, personal behavior, and even emotionally (O’Moore & Kirkham, 2001). A bully dealing with these insecurities will likely choose to redirect attention toward their own vulnerabilities by pointing out those in others. Despite the system of social power that is created through bullying, it is ironic that both the bullied and the bully end up with lower self-esteem than those who are not involved in bullying on either end.

One point that was particularly relevant to my own research was an explanation about the change that occurs in adolescent development that motivates bullying. During adolescent development, loyalties are transferred from adults in one’s lives, including teachers and parents, to their peer group and therefore, a need to fit in and belong to a group becomes vital (Lines, 2008). The status achieved through bullying can seem to become very important to an adolescent who is trying to find their place among their peers.

Valuing Vulnerability

I believe that teachers can have enormous impact on their students. If a teacher can inspire students to get a glimpse of their own potential and achieve a brighter hope for their future, students might begin to see themselves in a different light. In my classroom, I had observed my students putting up walls to protect their vulnerabilities. In my own life, however, I had come to see how vulnerability is valuable in relationships and I believed that it could prove beneficial to my students too, if they could view vulnerability in brighter light.
Brene Brown is a researcher who is widely known for her studies about vulnerability. In her research, she discusses the meaning of vulnerability and how it plays a role in our lives. In her book, *Daring Greatly* (2012), she describes the confusion people have in connecting vulnerability to positive things. She explains that it is much more common for us to associate vulnerability with the darker emotions of grief, fear, shame, etc. She further points out a substantial misunderstanding about vulnerability. She says that one of the biggest myths about vulnerability is that it is considered a weakness. (Brown, 2013)

The Merriam-Webster Dictionary (Vulnerable, 2016) defines vulnerable as, “open to attack, harm, or damage” and defines “weak” (Weak, 2016) as, “not able to resist external force or withstand attack.” In these definitions, there is a distinct difference of the two words in that vulnerability is being susceptible to being attacked whereas weakness implies that one lacks the ability to resist the attack. One refers to position or circumstance while the other refers to one’s ability (or rather inability) within that position.

If vulnerability is not actually a weakness, then can it serve as a strength? In much of my research, I found that the word “vulnerability” is often linked to the word courage. Merriam-Webster Dictionary defines “courage” as “mental or moral strength to venture, persevere, and withstand danger, fear, or difficulty” (Courage, 2016). So, not only do we find the word “strength” in the definition, but it refers specifically to the strength to “withstand danger” that could come with being “open to attack.”

Brown (2012) claims that, “Vulnerability is the birthplace of love, belonging, joy, courage, empathy, and creativity” (p. 34). If love, courage/confidence, and joy are elements that can be acquired through vulnerability, then achieving vulnerability would be valuable to my
students. Having to protect themselves from bullying attacks would deny them the valuable rewards that are the outcome of being vulnerable.

Brown (2012) talks about how one of the problems we face today is that people shut themselves off from vulnerabilities in their lives because of the potential harm they are exposed to as vulnerable beings. In her audio speech, “The Power of Vulnerability” (2013), she explains that shutting off emotions isn’t a selective ability. Once someone shuts themselves off to negative emotions, they are shutting themselves off from emotions generally. In this theory, if adolescents are protecting themselves by shutting themselves off from hurt and discomfort, they are also numbing their ability to feeling the happiness and joy that lead to human connection.

Psychologist and therapist Judith V. Jordan (2010) said that when we push past certainty into less security, “we enter the world of learning, curiosity, and, dare I say, love” (p. 212). Even in her role as a therapist, Jordan believes that she should allow herself to be vulnerable in order for growth to occur in her sessions with clients. She experiences the same challenge of letting her true self come forward that Brown discussed in her theories of daring greatly. Not only is Jordan more adequately prepared help her clients to grow, but she allows herself to become susceptible to the same vulnerability that allows for these qualities of learning, curiosity, and love. Thus, she can connect with and grow along with her client.

In my job as an educator, it is important that I, too, learn to access my own vulnerabilities. If I intended to make real human connections with my students, I needed to come out from any walls I may be tempted to hide behind and let myself be seen, giving them a safe place to do the same. As social psychologist, Amy Cuddy, explains, “Revealing your true self frees others to reveal theirs” (p.76). By letting my students really know me, they could then trust me to know them in open, caring relationships.
In *Daring Greatly*, Brown explains that this disengagement, spoken of earlier, doesn’t only occur as an individual shuts themselves off from their own experience with loss and heartache, but that some will disengage because of the way *others* behave. The idea is that a person who is working under another - in my case it could be my students working under me as their teacher - they will disengage when they see that their leader isn’t living up to their end of what they should be doing, according to their social standards. As an educator, I believe that I have the duty to be open with my students and do my part in the classroom to avoid such disengagement.

The idea of embracing vulnerability induces fear and uncertainty for many people. However, I have found in my readings, and in my own life, that the reward is greater than the potential risk and would further my development as an educator, researcher, and as an individual. I believed it would do the same for my students. As Hawley and Huta (2010) explained, “strengths showed their greatest benefit among those who were high on vulnerability” (p.82).

**Caring in Education**

Educational practices are derived from various beliefs about curriculum and teaching. One of those is a belief that the relationship between teacher and students is an important part of the teaching and learning process. I have found this to be significant and true in my own teaching experience. When students come into my classroom where they are expected to learn about a specific topic, they are often unable to do so because they are preoccupied with the latest gossip, with how they are being viewed by their peers, or with the social needs to either shrink and hide, or to rise above others. In the context of these distractions, the importance of what is being taught in class withers away.
Students are social beings with emotional and developmental needs. As students spend significant amounts of time with teachers throughout a school year, it seems that having a healthy relationship with teachers would be important. Teachers can typically have much more influence on their students than simply transferring information on a topic, but only if they know each their students on some personal level, and are able to recognize their needs.

Kristen Fink (2007), a junior high teacher, talks about going home exhausted at the end of each day in her first year of teaching. Finally, at some point in that year, she had the realization that her role as a teacher was not only about her lessons, but it was also about the feeling and character of her classroom. She explained, “What mattered were the caring relationships and sense of community that my students and I were experiencing” (p. 11). She realized that teaching was so much more than instructing students, and that caring was needed in her classroom. For Kristen, teaching moved far beyond the role of dispensing knowledge.

Nel Noddings, a female philosopher, known for her ideas about caring and education, has researched and evaluated caring in educational and other settings. In her introduction to *The Challenge to Care in Schools: An Alternative Approach to Education* (1992), she explains that it is a fundamental need for humans to care for one another and to be cared for. She is concerned not only with the act of one person caring for another, but particularly with the relationship of caring. This relationship may exist between any varieties of individuals, but Noddings tends to focus on the parent/child relationship as well as the teacher/student relationship.

In focusing on the relationship between the “carer” and the “cared-for,” she emphasizes that the recipient should accept the care given, but that it is also vital that they show to the carer in some way that they are receiving and recognizing the care given. An essential element is that the carer needs recognition in order for the caring relationship to even exist. The recognition
need not always come in the form of an outward expression of gratitude; sometimes even a renewed energy in a project that the carer has helped with is recognition enough. However, if the care is not being recognized, the carer must try something else (Noddings, 2012a). Connection and relationships take trial and error.

In one study, letters had been received from approximately 2,700 middle school students who were all responding to the question, “What should middle school teachers know about middle school students?” (Doda & Knowles, 2008, p. 26). It was very clear in the responses that adolescents desire “healthy and rewarding relationships with their teachers and with their peers” (p. 27). Teachers would do well to learn more about nurturing those kinds of relationships with students while carrying out their duties as a teacher.

With caring being a vital component in human interactions, it is important to understand what it means to care. In the same study, mentioned above, students sought for relationships with teachers that were “helpful, kind, happy, encouraging, patient, respectful, and non-judgmental” (p. 28). Another study said that students believe their teacher cared when they told them directly, or if they, “laughed with them, trusted them, asked them or told them personal things, were honest, wrote them letters… or otherwise recognized them as individuals” (Popline & Weeres, 1992, p. 19).

Ferreira and Bosworth (2001) explain that caring extends into a desire to know others, as well as a concern for their well-being. They explain, “When we care about others, we do not simply act for people (or on their behalf) as “objects” of our care, but also with them as mutual "subjects" in the human experience” (p. 62). We become connected and equal.
Cooper and Miness (2014) offer three suggestions for teachers to achieve a caring relationship with their students. First, they emphasize the need for one-on-one interactions with students as well as group relations. Second, it is important that teachers try to understand the students on a personal level. Last, they suggest a teacher emulate the virtue of understanding. For both student and educators alike, caring relationships are important to our deepest human needs. Caring is worth the effort.

**Community in the Classroom**

Many researchers have come to the conclusion that one of the most important improvements that should be made in schools is that of creating a community of caring. According to Osterman (2000), classrooms should provide a place of support in which each member has a sense of belonging. One researcher suggests that the first step to creating community in a classroom is to help students drop their guard long enough to begin to get to know one another, and their teacher, as people (Allen, 2000). Dropping our walls is to allow ourselves to be vulnerable, therefore getting to the heart of “meaningful human experiences” (Brown, 2012, p. 12).

In a school setting, teachers are at the head of the classroom and this gives them the important responsibility of creating the type of space in which a community can grow and thrive. Jenifer Rumfelt, a first grade teacher in an elementary school, explains that similar to her personal enjoyment of her work environment and the feeling she has amongst her colleagues, she says her students also, “enjoy working and learning in an environment where they know, trust, and respect their classmates and teacher” (Allen, 2000, p. 24).
One thing that is very important to remember in creating community is that the teacher is not only important in facilitating this safe place for students, but, as John Dewey believes (as cited by Osterman, 2000), teachers should also be part of the community, in shared membership with their students. One way that teachers can let students know that they are all part of the same community is to make sure their students’ voices are heard. When students are allowed to have input on assignments and projects, they will feel engaged as a part of the community (Range, Carnes-Holt, Bruce, 2013).

Another aspect of community in the classroom is the feeling of support. One article states that students’ feeling support from their teachers, or others, is connected to intrinsic motivation and autonomy, as well as self esteem (Osterman, 2000). Intrinsic motivation and autonomy are important for adolescents as they move toward the independence of adulthood. Self-esteem in this stage of life is also extremely important as teens search for identity and self-discovery. Another way to build confidence is through using encouraging statements that recognize the efforts of the students rather than praising the students’ abilities (Range, Carnes-Holt, Bruce). Students come to class with varying strengths and abilities, so in taking notice of their efforts rather than their abilities, students are less likely to compare themselves to others.

Osterman, (2000) says that autonomy “is one of three basic psychological needs that are essential to human growth and development” (p. 325), along with competence and relatedness. Autonomy experienced, in relation with a teacher, strengthens the relationship and promotes respectable social behaviors in class. Osterman also says that autonomy is linked to higher feelings of self-worth.

Community does so much more than give a person a place to be; it gives them a place to be a better version of themselves. Osterman (2000) says that, “Being accepted, included, or
welcomed leads to positive emotions, such as happiness, elation, contentment, and calm” (p. 327). He also says that the positive attitudes that people feel toward themselves encourages them in their support, consideration, and acceptance of others, “including those not in the friendship group” (p. 334). In this way, it moves us in the opposite direction of bullying in helping us reach out to include all, as opposed to ostracizing the one. It is the way to belonging.

**A Gratitude Perspective**

In my classroom, I noticed that students who expressed gratitude seemed more generally positive and happy than others. So I figured that it would be an important quality for all of my students to acquire. In the research about gratitude, it is linked to positive well-being. Some research shows that being grateful not only benefits our emotional well-being in the present, but can “trigger upward spirals” (Lee, Tong, & Sim, 2015, p. 87) of positivity in our lives and leaves us with optimism, vitality, and greater life satisfaction. Defined simply, having gratitude means that an individual will, “notice and appreciate the good things that happen” to him or her (Froh, Bono, Emmons, 2010, p. 145).

Other attributes that are derived from gratitude are: emotional warmth, trust, altruism, tender-mindedness, gregariousness, and greater competence (Wood, Froh, Geraghty, 2010). It also manifests itself in grateful people being more prosocial, meaning more “helpful, supportive, and empathetic towards others,” (p. 146) thus enhancing caring relationships.

Gratitude is known to better a person’s social life and in return, a better social life further increases gratitude, and so on, giving us that upward spiral. Although gratitude is often inspired by one person helping another, the person receiving help is then motivated to not only return the kindness, but to do good to all (Lee, Tong, Sim, 2015).
In adolescents, gratitude has many benefits, including reducing behavior problems in school, as evident in a survey of students ages 10-14. It was discovered that students in the top 20% of gratitude ranking expressed that after 4 years, their lives changed in that they:

- “gained 15 percent more of a sense of meaning in their life;
- become 15 percent more satisfied with their life overall (at home, at school, with their neighborhood, with their friends and with themselves);
- become 17 percent more happy and more hopeful about their lives; and
- experienced a 13 percent drop in negative emotions and a 15 percent drop in depressive symptoms”

Even those students who hadn’t been ranked in the top 20% were known to improve their well-being as compared to those who were in the bottom gratitude rankings (Bono, Froh, & Emmons, 2012).

It was no surprise to me that gratitude was positively linked to all of these wonderful things and, while this isn’t much of a surprise to me either, it was interesting to find in research that gratitude is negatively connected with materialism. The theory is that materialism motivates people to strive to acquire what they don’t have, while gratitude is the recognition and appreciation for what a person does have (Lambert, Fincham, Stillman, Dean, 2009). The research demonstrated that, “inducing a sense of gratitude reduces materialism by increasing one’s satisfaction with life.”

Authenticity is also linked to gratitude. Authentic is defined by Merriam-Webster (Authentic, 2016) as, “true to one’s own personality, spirit, or character.” Wood, Froh, &
Geraghty (2010) explain that people living authentic lives are aware of their identity and are in touch with their true selves, acting in accordance to what they believe is right.

Another important aspect of gratitude for my research was that in early adolescence, gratitude was linked with hope. Hope inspires teens to plan for the future and work toward their goals (Froh, Bono, Emmons, 2010). In this way, gratitude motivates teenagers to think about what they can be, and positively influences how they will choose to live their lives. Living authentically is living in confidence; knowing who you are. Furthermore, having hope and working toward a future can help adolescents be more productive in making the decisions needed to become who they want to be.

**Gratitude Journaling**

A common method of gratitude intervention is creating lists of things for which an individual is grateful. Many times, it takes the form of keeping a gratitude journal. Some studies propose that gratitude journaling, or creating gratitude lists, may be “as effective as techniques commonly used in clinical therapy” (Wood, Froh, Geraghty, 2010, p. 8).

This method has also been explored in the school setting. In a study conducted by Froh, Sefick & Emmons (2008), eleven classrooms of children between 11-14 years of age were assigned, randomly, to either the gratitude, hassles, or control group for a 14-day intervention. The gratitude group was required to make lists of up to 5 things they were grateful for. The hassles group did the same, but listing up to 5 hassles, and the control group was neutral. In relation to the hassles and control groups, the gratitude group reported that they were more satisfied with their school experience. These results were found again in a follow up 3 weeks after the study. Gratitude, in this study, was connected to optimism, domain-specific life satisfaction (school in this case), and overall life-satisfaction. Apparently, expressing one’s
gratitude, even just in private written word, can have an effect on how an individual views and feels about the world around them.

**Benefits of Journaling**

Over the centuries, journals have been used to keep records of political and religious experiences, detailed accounts of travel and exploration, or just a record of everyday life (O’Connell, Dyment, 2006). For some, it may be a way to vent emotions that cannot be shared in conversations, for others, it is a way to remember events, and for still others, it may be for the purpose of recording their life story for their posterity. The possible reasons for journaling are broad and varied, and so are the rewards.

A journal is typically written all by the same hand and, in this way, has been thought of as an interactive tool for an individual to have a dialogue with him/herself (Hedlund, Furst, & Foley, 1990). Journals may be read by others or they may remain private, but either way, they are most commonly written directly from thought to paper. This intimacy with one’s thoughts and feelings creates personal benefits to the writer.

One benefit, that is widely recognized, is the advantage of cultivating reflection. When writing about an event in one’s journal, for example, a person is mentally working through the occurrences of that event, and maybe even the feelings they experienced as part of the event, and then forming it all into their own words. In this way, they are taking a raw experience and engaging with it in a learning process; also known as reflection (Boud, 2001).

Some benefits that may be a little less obvious are actual health benefits, both physical and psychological, that come through such reflections. There is evidence that many individuals who have taken time to write thoughtfully about a traumatic experience actually improved in their physical health (Hiemstra, 2001). Journal writing has likewise been thought to be
psychologically therapeutic and to reduce stress in working through personal issues (Hiemstra, 2001). Journaling is sometimes used as a supplement to therapy or counseling and has been a tool for mental health professionals in helping clients with positive behavior changes (O’Connell, Dyment, 2013).

Through writing, experiences can become more meaningful. Journaling causes us to slow down learning. In this day and age, technology has created an expectation of getting information quickly, particularly for technologically savvy youth, but journaling doesn’t work like the Internet. It is not fast, and the learning process takes more than the click of a button. It creates an opportunity for a student to sit and process their experiences more slowly in their mind (O’Connell, Dyment, 2013). Hamachek, (2000), tells us that for some, “taking inner feelings and externalizing them in written expression allows them to understand those meanings more clearly, ponder the meaning, and, where feasible, make remediating changes in thinking and behavior” (p. 230).

James E. Birren is a researcher that studied adult development for over 40 years. It is Birren’s belief that writing about life experiences, “is one of the best ways we have of giving meaning to our present lives and by understanding our past more fully” (Hamachek, 2000, p. 91). Journaling proves to be much more than a stress reliever. It is a way to know ourselves better. In referring to several studies, Amy Cuddy (2015) writes that each of the studies, “suggest that you can make your deepest self accessible just by spending a little time reflecting on – and perhaps writing about – who you think you are” (p. 51). Reflecting on and understanding the person we are now can help us to create who we want to become later.

In a study of first year college students, reflective journaling helped many of them to see their growth along their journey throughout the year and helped them to think about goals for
their future and in what areas they’d like to improve (Everett, 2013). In other words, journaling about our lives creates a personal “‘landscape,’ the ground against which we make our choices, live, and learn” (Hedlund, Furst, Foley, 1990, p. 5). For adolescents who are in the thick of discovering and deciding who they are, journaling can be a great support and structure for answering these questions.

One of the greatest advantages for teachers who have students keeping journals is the opportunity to strengthen relationships with their students. In a classroom full of students, teachers rarely get the chance to really talk to a student one-on-one in a meaningful way. When students keep a journal, there is a unique opportunity for a teacher to read into the mind of a student. O’Connell and Dyment (2013) speak on this point and explain further that this process also helps students to see teachers as people too, especially if the teacher provides feedback to students in some form or another.

This brings up a question about whether reading student journals will affect the authenticity of their writing. When journaling is a personal practice, the writings can and sometimes will be altered when the journal-writer is aware that their words will actually be read by another, especially a teacher. However, much of the research shows that this writer/reader relationship is actually a positive experience for the writer.

Fenwick (2001) noticed that when writers are new to journal writing, they wanted to sense that their writing would have a genuine listener on the other end. In a study of first-year college students, Everett (2013) discovered that for many of those students, “journal writing was not a private activity, but a form of social engagement - a way of communicating with the instructor” (p. 219).
Fenwick (2001) brings to light a couple of things to consider in this social engagement between teacher and student. She explains that by responding, it can help the writer to feel motivated to continue on in journaling. Second, a responder can be a resource for shedding light on what the writer may not see on his or her own. Finally, a responder can probe the writer to extend their ideas and insights, and to find connections. She goes on to say that one important element in responding is for the reader to share personally as well. Sharing, also recognized as an act of caring, might be a means to furthering the relationship with students in opening the road of vulnerability to create trust and connection.

The reflective process of journaling is also beneficial for teachers. Classrooms are complex environments and it is important for a teacher to engage in the same reflective practice as their students. In a study by Rahgozaran and Gholami, (2014), in which teachers in an Iranian Language Institution were required to keep a journal for 10 weeks about their teaching experiences and performance, approximately 90% of the teachers involved enjoyed their experience in journal-writing. Many expressed that it helped them to reflect on their teaching practice and that it helped point out the elements of their teaching that worked well and those that needed tweaking.

**Journaling and Art**

As discussed above, journaling has been around through the ages and has been used for many different reasons and purposes. This truth is no different in the art world. Art education journals have published several articles over the years about the benefits and uses of journaling in learning about and creating art.

In one such article, Murdick & Grinstead have described writing as “a powerful technology for learning, problem solving, and creative thinking” (p. 59). They explain that
journal writing is a prominent part of their research in art education and that they require students in their art education studio courses to keep dialogue journals because it can “force students to analyze the problems they’re having, to really see what they have done correctly or incorrectly on a technical level…” (p. 60). Problem solving can be an influential part of any type of learning experience and is no doubt helpful in art’s creative process.

Similar to the discussion earlier, derived from the writings of O’Connel & Dyment (2013) as well as Hamachek (2000), Candace Stout (1993) explains that the slower pace of writing, as compared to speaking, allows the writer to break down information and that it “encourages an on-going back and forth movement among past, present, and future” (p. 37). Both the breaking down and the cycle of viewing information from past all the way to future are believed to help in constructing meaning from the journal writing process. In finding greater meaning in thoughts and ideas, an artist might become more equipped to transform those thoughts and ideas into a creative, visual format.

In another article, Delacruz & Bales (2010) talk about the human need for telling our story. They explain that scrapbooks, diaries, and blogs “are a reflection of the very human need to tell our stories, to create a record of our lives” (p. 36), and reiterate the point that these things can help people to work through problems and come out with a deeper understanding. In speaking of young minds in particular, Judith Burton (2000) says that “young people are too often bored in schools because we do not offer them meaningful challenges, we do not invite them to bring their own experiences into the arena of learning” (p. 330). She further explains that in constructing visual narratives, children are able to find meaning in their sense of self and also to make connections “between their personal lives and the experiences they share with others” (p. 330). Both journaling and the art-making process bring meaning to our world and to
our personal narratives and can bring meaning to students that can stretch beyond the walls of their classroom.

Artists have used the combination of art and journaling for centuries. In flipping through the pages of The Diary of Frida Kahlo: An Intimate Self-Portrait (Kahlo, 1995), her writing is intermixed with painting and drawings, with some of her writing even written in paint. On one page, she has pasted in a clipping of another artist’s painting, perhaps as inspiration for her own. Her diary is evidence that both the mediums of art and the journaling process can play a part in both the personal life and in art-making processes of an artist.

Stout (1993) also mentions the journaling of Frida Kahlo, as well as the journaling of other famous artists. She explains in her article that, “artists have long recognized the need for a place, alternative to the canvas, for their rehearsal of ideas” (p. 39). She uses the examples of artists like Edward Weston, Charles Burchfield, Paul Klee, Frank Lloyd Wright, and even the sketches of Leonardo da Vinci intermingled with his writing. Each artist has their own method in using journaling as a creative support and outlet, which shows the versatility of a journal in the world of art. In relating these methods to today, she reasons: “given it’s established heuristic role in critical thinking and writing across the disciplines and the time-honored tradition of the journal in the artist’s studio, it seems most appropriate that this forum for individual, expressive thinking should be a natural fit for the contemporary art curriculum” (p. 40).

Both journaling and art are known to be outlets for self-expression. They both allow the freedom of self-discovery and communication in a very personal way and, together, can be successful in shaping a meaningful modern day art curriculum.
Achieving Self-Awareness

Humans are the only creatures known to have the ability to figuratively step outside their minds and bodies and reflect upon themselves in a state of self-awareness (Morin & Everett, 1990). Don E. Hamachek, (1985) illustrates this point by contrasting humans with animals. He writes, “Eagles may be the masters of the sky, but they put on no airs before their feathered inferiors, any more than wolves boast of their prowess or lambs blush at their timidity” (p. 137). While animals live instinctively and are unable to self-reflect, humans have the capability of being distinctly aware of themselves and discovering why they think and feel and behave as they do.

Self-awareness was a tricky research topic in that it lies in a web of interrelated terms and meanings. Some of the terms that surfaced when researching self-awareness include self-knowledge, self-understanding, self-consciousness, self-concept, and mindfulness. While all of these can be defined separately, for my purpose, I have included them under the umbrella of self-awareness.

For this paper, I will refer to self-awareness as the process of “examining who we are” (Coholic, 2011, p. 303) through reflection and observation, discovering how we respond to and affect the world around us, and then gaining insights from the process.

This can be a particularly vital process during the adolescent years. Adolescence is a trying time for most people. It is a time of growth, discovery, and change. It is during this time that a person will experience many changes emotionally, socially, and physically. It is also a transition from childhood to adulthood, in which individuals are usually introduced to a greater level of autonomy and independence. Because of these changes, coupled with new freedoms, it is a natural time for a young person to be curious about their personal identity.
Coming to know oneself is not necessarily an easy endeavor, especially in a time of so much change, and requires honest self-reflection. As Hamachek (2000, p. 230) says, “Knowing oneself, deeply and fully, involves facing oneself, squarely and honestly.” It requires “showing up and letting ourselves be seen” (Brown, 2012, p. 16) by our own reflective selves.

There are significant rewards and benefits to knowing oneself more fully and is vital during this time of life. Ryan & Kuczkowski (1994) explain, “Awareness of oneself as a social object is a prominent feature of adolescent life, with both important development consequences and effects on social behavior” (p. 233). Another researcher says that identity discovery is crucial for individuals before, “being able to establish meaningful, intimate relationships with others” (Baumgardner, 1990, p. 1062). When social status becomes a greater need or often a greater threat during the teenage years, it is beneficial for adolescents to harness their abilities to reflect on the way they behave in and respond to the social world around them.

Beyond social benefits, there are important qualities that mature within an individual when they are able to recognize who they are. Ryan & Kuczkowski (1994) explain that teens who are capable of distinguishing their personal entity from those around them were found to be more confident, hold greater self-esteem, and even reported greater lovability. This confidence plays an important role for an individual facing new challenges and decisions on their way to becoming an adult.

Research says that being mindful, or being present in the moment, helps adolescents achieve self-awareness and also helps them in their search for meaning and purpose in their lives (Birnbaum, 2005 - as quoted in Coholic, 2011), thus giving them goals and a reason to create a future self that can fulfill that purpose. Baumgardner (1990) further explains that having a “strong sense of identity… promotes a sense of control over future outcomes” (p. 1062).
In Brene Brown’s latest book, *Rising Strong* (Brown, 2015), she coins the term “reckoning” in reference to this process. She defines it as, “the process of calculating where you are” and explains that in order to figure that out, you have to know where you have come from and what has lead to the person you are currently. She further explains, “Without reckoning, you can’t chart a future course…until we recognize exactly where we are…and decide where we want to go” (p. 46).

Through this process, a person can both learn to know how to live a life directed by their true self, and decide where to go from there. Living this way will result in leading a more fulfilling life, as suggested by many theorists. (Schlegel, Hicks, Davis, Hirsch, & Smith, 2013).

**Applying the Research**

Bullying has negative effects on both the bully and the bullied, and can keep them from discovering who they really are. When interacting with adolescents in a school setting, being a teacher can mean much more than educating students about specific topics. The role of a teacher of adolescents can, and should, include creating a caring environment to aid students in this new and unfamiliar stage of life, and to help them flourish.

Vulnerability, being the “birthplace of love, belonging, joy, courage, empathy, and creativity” (Brown, 2012, p. 34) can help in the process. Many of these traits are key in cultivating caring relationships with others because being vulnerable allows us to see people for who they are, and to grow in love for one another; thus creating a community of caring.

Caring relationships are extremely important for connecting within the classroom community. Community was imperative for my students’ growth and helped them trust me and to trust in my efforts to care for them, so they wouldn’t shut me out along with their vulnerabilities. I wanted each of my students to feel a sense of belonging so that they would
treat others with kindness and create a space for a caring community. In this way, the classroom could become a place of refuge from a world around them that isn’t always so kind.

With a safe and caring community, my students would have a greater chance for discovering their identities and hopeful future identities. Journaling was a helpful tool for facilitating that growth. Journaling is an intimate process that comes from one’s self, reflects on that self, and can be a source for understanding self, giving my students an opportunity to decide what characteristics they should further develop and those that can be changed. Through reflection, students grow in self-awareness. They become autonomous in living authentically, and it leads them to a fuller and more meaningful life. That has been my hope for my students from the very beginning.
Chapter 3 - Methodology

Case Study Methodology

In taking my new job and seeing that one of the first things I noticed with my students was their unkind interactions with one another, I lost much of my interest in teaching art and my concern for the character of my students took over. I had so many questions. Why do they bully one another? Why is it accepted? What motivates these teenagers to do what they do? Where does this apathy come from? How could they become the best version of themselves? What is the role of education in all of this? My classroom turned into a case study in which I was the researcher and my students’ lives and behaviors were the subjects of my inquiry.

Case study is a form of research that is used to study a specific case or multiple cases (Cronin, 2014). It is not a methodology geared toward researching a larger, more generalized group as it is for typically smaller groups or even a single individual. The findings can, however, be used to further inquire about what information and results might be discovered when researching on a larger scale.

Considering that I was already working in a small classroom environment with about a dozen students in each of my two classes, the case study methodology was the perfect fit for this study. Barron (1998) explains that case study is a method that would be easy to apply within a school setting. In saying this, Barron was referring to the Montessori method, which relies heavily on teachers observing their students. A classroom setting is a prime location for case study research when a teacher takes on the roll of being a keen observer of her students.

Pearson, Albon, & Hubball (2015) reference two theories for categorizing different types of case studies and suggest that they are helpful when used together. The first theory comes from Robert E. Stake, former Professor of Education at University of Illinois. He suggested that
there are 3 types of case study methodologies: The intrinsic case study is when the case isn’t chosen, but given to the researcher, as is common in program evaluations. Next is the instrumental case that is chosen for its “ability to contribute to a general understanding of a phenomenon” (p. 3). Last is the collective case study. This, he says, is an “extension of the instrumental case study, where two or more representative cases are selected” (p. 3).

Robert K. Yin, an American social scientist, suggests another method for categorizing case studies. Yin distinguishes them based on their purpose. He argues that they are, “the exploratory case study, a form of pilot study to inform subsequent research; the descriptive case study, which provides a thorough, contextualized description of a phenomenon; and the explanatory case study, intended to shed light on causal factors leading to particular events” (p. 3). I used both Stake’s instrumental case to try to understand behaviors of teenagers, as well as Yin’s descriptive case, in describing why they react the way they do.

I had been an observer from the beginning of teaching. I didn’t have a desire or need to find sweeping generalizations about all students in this age group, but I was very interested in finding solutions and answers to questions I had, specific to my students. However, many of the behaviors I was witnessing among my own students are common among teenagers as a whole.

**Case Study Research and Generalizations**

One side of the argument is a belief that human behavior cannot be generalized from one group to another because of those elements and characteristics that are specific for the group being researched, as compared to another group or individual (Gillham, 2000). This argument states that the reason for specific behavior in one case does not imply that the same things are responsible for the same behavior in another case. On the other hand, Helen Simons, author of *Case Study Research in Practice*, sees case study as a “potential to recognize a universal truth”
(Rule & John, 2015, p. 3). She compares it to a piece of artwork in which, “a work of art may reveal essential truths about the human condition” (p. 3).

My findings may end up being very different than those of another classroom, but I believe some of the themes that come out of my research can resonate with adolescent classrooms across the country. However, my primary interest is within the walls of my classroom. This is what Stake calls an “intrinsic case;” one in which the primary interest is the case itself, as opposed to an “instrumental case” that is intended to go beyond the case (Rule & John, 2015)

**Data Collection**

There are various methods of data collection that can be used within a case study. Pearsons, Albion, & Hubball (2015) note this flexibility of data collecting as a benefit to case study research. According to Tollefson-Hall (2013), “Detailed field notes are essential, along with interviews from key participants” (p. 205). Field notes are a researcher’s notes of their observations and findings while in their specific field of research. A case study can be seen as a more intimate form of research wherein the researcher finds most of their data by spending a large portion of their time physically in the presence of the group or individual being researched, and often interacting with them. Since I was their teacher and was spending several hours with them each week, I was already in the position to do this.

Journals were an important source of data for this study. Throughout my own life, I have kept over 20 personal journals. I have found value in reflecting on my life and looking back on it later. It was a good way for me to express thoughts and feelings and recognize patterns in my life. Not only would journaling be a great and inconspicuous way for me to take down field notes, but it was also a great way for my students to express their own thoughts and feelings.
Journaling was another form of participant interviews. Because I had to run a class *while* being a researcher, I didn’t have the opportunity to interview each of my students in depth. In my case, I didn’t want the students to know that they were being researched. I was trying to make changes in the environment that they, themselves, had created, without stepping in as the game maker. Through journal prompts, I would be able to ask them questions about themselves, thus creating an interview of sorts in a less intrusive manner.

**The Researcher**

An important aspect within case study methodology is that the researcher needs to think about how his or her presence in the research site can affect the research. Researchers need to be sensitive to their presence in making sure it doesn’t alter the natural data of the research project. Because this is a concern, it was perfect for me that I was already a part of the classroom because it was my job to be there. I needed to be careful to not be on a laptop that might segregate me from my classroom and change the mood of the experience. Although a laptop would have been much more efficient for writing down my observations, I felt it was important for me to be more present with my students. Hand-written observations became my avenue for my field notes. I could discover the “why” of my students’ interactions and behaviors while sitting with them.

**The Student Participants**

I realize that my students are part of a very particular circumstance because of their environment at this school. They study at a private school that does not follow the norms of the public or even other private schools in the surrounding area. The students came from a variety of demographics. Many of the students had come from different parts of the world, including some who did not speak English almost at all. They also came from many different cultural
backgrounds. These were elements that factored into my students’ behaviors as individuals, and the dynamic as a group.

I knew I would have to experiment to find answers. I was new to teaching, but not new to human diversity. I knew that people respond in a variety of ways to different people, different personalities, and different circumstances. I also knew that my relationship with my students would be an important aspect of the research. If I wanted to be a source for growth within my students, I needed to be present, to be approachable, and to create a safe space for them to change and develop. I made an effort to be a caring teacher, giving them an example of what caring looked like.

I knew my students also needed to be very present. I decided that I wouldn’t allow cell phones or other technology in my classroom so that we could be present together and really interact with one another, uninterrupted by electronics. Human interaction was vital for my research as it was the reason many of my questions came about. I wasn’t interested in how they could interact with technology, but was concerned with how they treat one another and even how they treat themselves.

**Reflection**

Combining my observations and the responses I had to my students’ journal entries, I tried to uncover and make sense of the reasons behind their behaviors and motivations. As I read students journals and observed their behaviors during class, I would record my thoughts and insights in my own journal in efforts to glean new information and understanding. As we all wrote in our journals daily, reflecting on my students’ writing and on my own writing helped me to see patterns in student behaviors and to alter curriculum and my own behaviors again and again as the year progressed.
School Background

Mount Olympus Academy is a small private school in Salt Lake City, Utah. The student body consists of somewhere close to 60 students between junior high and high school. Approximately 50% of the students are foreign exchange students, primarily from Asia, and occasionally from Europe. Other students come from across the Salt Lake Valley.

The turn-over rate with students was fairly high, from year to year, with close to half of the students being new each year. The turn-over rate with teachers was very high, as well, and only a few could be expected to stay past one year, with one teacher making it only a few months before giving up on the school. The principal was lax with students and expectations; his interests aligned more with school sports than with student academics. The school lacked a sense of purpose or mission, and the facility was old and run-down, with little expectation to keep up what was left.

At the beginning of each year, new students, along with a handful of existing students, seemed to start the year having respect for others and for teachers. After a few weeks or so, this changes for most of them as students settle into the culture of the school. Many students are plagued with apathy and are lazy about their academics.

During my first year teaching, there was a serious problem of bullying. Toward the end of that year, there was a girl who even expelled for a violent threat to students who had constantly bullied her throughout the year. Bullying continued the next couple years I taught and, although I never heard of threats like that again, I did have a student admit thoughts of suicide because of bullying.

The school climate and culture were an important context for this study.
Building a Classroom Community

In efforts to build a classroom community, I tried several techniques to help the students grow closer together. My ultimate goal was for my students to become self-aware in a safe community, and part of that included helping them gain awareness of how their behaviors affected others and how they were responding to their environment.

Classroom Connection. I taught at the school for 1½ years before starting my thesis research and data collection. I had already intuitively tried several things to motivate better behavior, and by the time I started collecting data, I had figured out a few things that I thought might work. In the previous school years, I had a lot of issues with students’ disengagement because of the use of cell-phones and personal music devices in the classroom. So, during my research, I banned all personal electronics from the classroom. I wanted students to really engage with one another instead of with their electronics. In my own use of electronics, I made sure to not have my laptop become a barrier in my connection to my students.

Connection was an important aspect of my research, as I wanted students to care for one another and move away from the bullying behaviors I had observed. I even had a rule that prohibited them from being unkind to themselves, as well.

To develop a caring relationship with each of my students, I made efforts to show them support and kindness and to get to know them as individuals. I tried to give them autonomy to let them know I trusted them. To bring us together, I combined the once separated tables into one large table where we all sat together. Journaling also created an opportunity to build trust and connection as I invited them to be vulnerable in sharing their thoughts and feelings with their peers by encouraging them to share their journal entries with the group.
**Journals.** Journaling was implemented from the beginning of the year and continued all the way throughout the year. When students came into class, they would grab their journals and look on the board to find the journal prompt. During those first 15-20 minutes of class, they were expected to quietly write while we listened to calm, instrumental music. It helped create a calm mood before instruction and projects began.

Journaling was also found to be very helpful in classroom management and in improving classroom dynamics. It also helped me to know my students better as individuals. My classes always averaged about a dozen students, so I had greater opportunity, than some teachers, to know my students; but it was through journaling that the more vulnerable parts of their lives and personalities were revealed. It seemed to me that most of my students learned to trust me as I read and occasionally responded to their entries.

My other intention was for my students to get to know themselves better in their writing. The majority of the journal prompts throughout the year asked questions about their own personal lives, their thoughts and feelings, as well as how their lives affected the world around them. The expectation was that they would become more self-aware and discover what kind of person they already were in hopes of helping them realize how to construct the person they would like to become.

**Final Project.** At the end of the year we had a final project that I entitled the “Self Art” project. I presented the project with slides of work that could be categorized as abstract or conceptual self-portraits. I then gave them each a long list of self-searching questions to consider. My students were required to write up a project proposal with a drawing of what they intended to create. As I met with them, one on one, we decided on projects that would in some way express who they were, or who they desired to become, in a visual format. Each idea was
quite different from the next and they were free to choose any medium that they felt would best illustrate their concepts.

(Note: Images of student projects can be found in Appendix A and the list of questions, are in Appendix B)

**A Year of Reflection and Research**

(*Note: For this thesis, all student names have been changed to pseudonyms to protect students)

My experience with this research and my attempts to develop a more cohesive classroom community will be presented both chronologically and by theme. The various experiences of the students will by interpreted within the contexts of the topics in Chapter 2.

**My two classes.** The year of my research started with two classes. I had a class of Junior High School art students and a class of High School art students back to back, in that order. From the very beginning of September, my first period Junior High class was extremely quiet. I introduced the practice of journaling right away, and for at least the first month, they were mostly quiet...*very* quiet. In both classes, about half of the students were foreign exchange students, and in my first period, there were three girls who didn’t know much English. Because of these dynamics, I was initially afraid that the class might not “drop their guard long enough to begin to get to know one another” (Allen, 2000, pp. 24-25).

My 2nd Period class, composed of High School students, was an entirely different story. My notes from the first day of school record: “My 2nd Period class is loud & talkative. It will be a challenge to help them find freedom in becoming vulnerable. Many of them will make an effort to be “cool” and not do anything to show themselves.” I was worried about their willingness to become vulnerable, but in a very different way than the other class.
In this class, Max was an immediate challenge. Ironically, this is the same student who had left the school early during the previous year. He had been bullied and teased incessantly by the “cool” group, to which he hung on the outskirts. This year, he was back and making his mark. I had witnessed him being teased, called names, and treated poorly over and over the year before, and now he was ready to protect his vulnerabilities by doing the same to others.

In my 2nd Period class, journaling was helping with volume control and proved to be a great way to start off the class. It was still a struggle to get them to be quiet, but as journaling became a habit, there began to be an expectation for silence and calmness to begin the class, and they eventually caught on…for the most part.

In the years past, I had struggled significantly with classroom management and creating a space of respect and in having a relationship with my students in which they would respect and listen to me. It had been a classroom in which I was constantly asking them to be quiet, to stop gossiping and talking unkindly about others, and to take off their earphones. I had often felt strong emotions of frustration, defeat, and anger and I was determined to make this year different. Journaling and putting a ban on technology in the classroom was a great help.

**Teacher and Researcher**

As I tried to teach different principles and mediums of art, my mind was constantly focused on my students’ reactions and behaviors during class. While making these observations, it was also very important for me to be self-aware of what I was doing, and present, just like I expected my students to be. By the end of week 2, I noticed that as I was up and moving around the classroom while my 2nd Period class wrote in their journals, they were loud and disrespectful. When I recognized that, I started sitting down with them during journaling rather getting things done around the classroom. I too became a part of the class and my students’
behavior showed that they could sense that. I became more a part of the community (Osterman, 2000), and my class began to be more calm and cohesive.

**Reading Journals**

In reading my students’ journals, I wanted to have a positive relationship with my students, and I wanted them to trust me. There were some entries that felt like a student was writing cautiously, in anticipation of having the journal read by the teacher, but I was pleasantly surprised about how personal many of the entries were, and how seemingly unaffected students were by knowing that I would be reading their writing.

At the beginning of week 3, I had recorded in my own journal that I wanted to start writing some letters to my students as their concerns in life surfaced. I wanted to let them know I was a genuine listener (Fenwick, 2001), and that I cared. As the year progressed, I would write notes to students, here and there, and leave them in their journals. I found myself becoming more invested in my students’ lives as I came to know them better through their writing (Everett, 2013).

In reflecting and writing down my own observations and concerns, I cared even more about them. Late in October, I had written in my 2nd Period notes, “I definitely think that journal writing has helped the overall mood of the class and even their effectiveness in working. I really have enjoyed teaching here much more this time around….this time has already been more meaningful.” Caring more about my students, and reflecting on my own practice and relationships with my students, really made a difference.

**Response to Journaling**

It was very interesting to watch how journaling became a benefit to both of my classes, but in very different directions. As I asked people in my 1st Period to share their writing, my
student, Maizie, was always willing to share and would even volunteer before I asked her to. At one point, of her own volition, Maizie took over my place as the one inviting others to share. She was a force for change in that class. As she voluntarily spoke up and participated, her enthusiasm spread and the class became more vulnerable and connected as other students started to open up too.

Conversely, my 2nd Period students, who were accustomed to talking during journaling and who showed little respect for me and the way I ran the class, began to calm down and listen to me as we started the class with instrumental music and no talking. The chasm between the way things used to run in years past and the way they ran now grew wide. It was much easier to give instruction to a class who had spent the first 15+ minutes of class in silence and reflection.

Journaling wasn’t for everyone, but the way it affected my classes, as a whole, was a benefit to everyone. The 80-minute class periods that used to run me over became much more manageable, and at times, delightful.

**Gratitude Journal**

When November came, I had read many journal entries from Zia about nobody liking her, about her not having any friends, and how she was never happy. I had expressed love and concern for Zia all along, but she needed a change in perspective. I figured that the month of Thanksgiving would be a good time to have my students keep a gratitude journal. Throughout November, the journal prompt asked, “What is one thing you are grateful for? Why?”

The gratitude journals didn’t have as much impact as I had hoped, but I think they were effective for some. Although Zia still found opportunities to put herself down, it was nice to see that she also had many things to be grateful for. Many students expressed gratitude for their family and friends as well as circumstances they had been given in life. For some, gratitude had
always been strong in their writing and I found them writing that they were grateful for everything from the common entries about family to gratitude for having a roof over their heads and not having to live on the streets. I even had one student express that he was grateful for his favorite class, art class, not only because he loved art but because of journal-writing!

In contrast, I found out (again!) that Max was grateful for his electronics and other material items. Throughout the month, he wrote about “a lot of flat screen TVs, a ping pong table, a pool table, a trampoline, a small home gym, a wrestling mat, a pool, a basketball court, and a hot tub” (Max’s journal) and even Little Caesar’s Pizza, “because they make awesome really good pizza and the amazing pretzel pizza.” Max wasn’t about to be vulnerable in expressing gratitude. My later research about gratitude being linked to reduced materialism (Lambert, Fincham, Stillman, & Dean, 2009) was interesting to me in respect to Max’s November journal entries. I hoped for him to grow beyond that.

November proved to be a good month for change. The once quiet, reserved students in my 1st Period class started crawling out of their shells. Journaling used to be eerily quiet sometimes, but one day early in November, I wrote in my journal that Delilah and Caden were talking and joking together during journal writing. Delilah, who repeatedly wrote in her journal about how shy she is, and had lived up to the claim, and Caden who had seemed quite serious in the beginning and was only recently becoming almost giggly at times, were the most distracting students in the class that morning.

It was a rule that talking was not allowed during journaling, but this time, I made an exception for a few minutes because the interaction between the two was significant in moving toward connection. My classroom was becoming a community and my students were beginning to build caring relationships with one another. Also during that month, Delilah mentioned in her
journal that she had made two new friends, referring to two of the Asian girls in my class who struggled to speak English. These were both small but monumental breakthroughs.

My Response

My students weren’t the only ones feeling the positivity grow. On November 5th, I wrote about my 2nd Period in my journal. I had expressed to the class that day that I wanted to give them autonomy and give them a say in the projects. I also expressed my concern and desire for them to enjoy the class. After that class, I wrote, “More smiles today. At least it feels like it.”

Motivation

I started experimenting with giving my students autonomy. I really did want them to be the creators of their curriculum and projects the same way I wanted them to take charge in creating themselves as human beings. We experimented by having a thrift store field trip in both classes, in which each student could choose whatever items they wanted, at the thrift store, within a very small budget. The next class after the field trip, I came to my 1st Period about 10 minutes early and found Emma and Kitty already there, working on their new projects. I knew it would be a good day. My journal reports, “Kitty is way more smiley today. She doesn’t let that out very much or very often. It’s great to see.”

Kitty and Emma weren’t the only students excited about this project. Zia couldn’t wait to start and had brought in extra materials from home for her project. My 1st Period class was all busy at work. They were taking down their walls and seemed more confident than ever before.

2nd Period showed positive results as well. At the beginning of 2nd Period, Johnny asked if they were going to be able to work on their projects. Before this, I don’t recall students ever asking to be allowed to work! When Johnny had finished his journal writing, he just got up and got started working on his project.
Typically, I would explain class and give instructions after journal writing and students didn’t usually get up until I basically told them they had to. When I read their journals after that day, McKenzie had written, “I’m kind of excited to work on my doohickey (I don’t know what to call it).” I was excited by these reactions. In my own notes for 2nd Period I wrote, “This class was working more fully than probably ever before. It took some encouraging, but even Kenji was working. I even heard a couple ‘Thank Yous’ as they left.” We were growing a community.

**Community of Caring**

My 1st Period students were excited to work on their projects and on December 5th, my students cleaned up after themselves, voluntarily! That doesn’t sound like a miracle, but it was! My journal says, “Okay, so I don’t know what happened today, but this class cleaned up so well. I was shocked! I looked over and Maizie was cleaning up papers and scrubbing the table, Caden had taken all the rubber brayers and scrubbed them in the sink, & Kitty was cleaning off our main tables. Whatever it was that brought this on, I am grateful for it.” My care for my students was being reciprocated and began to look like the caring relationship described by Nel Noddings. (Noddings, 2012, December)

Although 1st Period had become a wonderful community, my 2nd Period was still a challenge for me. There were some students in that class that often made teaching a miserable experience. I had tried very hard to be a caring teacher, but I felt that the class, as a whole, was showing little to no recognition of my efforts. However, I did start to see some positive changes in Max that were meaningful to me. He was always with Johnny in that class and, from the beginning, Johnny had shown a great deal of gratitude and care, especially in his writing. Now,
Max was showing small but significant signs of receiving and responding to the caring relationship I had been trying to cultivate with him.

Early in December, I wrote in my journal, “Johnny & Max said ‘goodbye’ to me several times as they were leaving. I think they like me and can tell that I care about them.” In the beginning of the year, Max always tried to leave class early to catch up with the cool boys for lunch. It this point, however, he was one of the slowest to leave.

**January - A Time for Change**

January was a time of change. In my 1st Period, I had two students transfer to another school, and I acquired three new Asian boys. Throughout the year, I had been very careful to not let cell phones and other electronics become a distraction in the classroom and get in the way of meaningful relationships and human interactions. In January, I found out that electronics didn’t rival the negativity and segregation that began when these boys joined my class.

In the beginning, there weren’t any obvious problems with having them in my class, and one of them had been in my class before. However, they would soon become the hardest challenge I would face in either class. As these boys, who shared a common language and a limited understanding of English, began to be exclusive, the community that had been built in my classroom waned. On January 22nd, my journal reads, “I snapped at Jiang from across the room for teasing Zia again. I also threatened the new students (Wuzhou, Jimmy, & Sega) with kicking them out of my class if they can’t behave.” My journal goes on to say, “I feel apathy creeping into this class for both me & my students.”

In contrast, my 2nd Period had become a place of peace for me. I had let the two classrooms choose what area of art they wanted to study, and 2nd Period had turned into a calm drawing studio where I would draw with the students to the sound of calming music. I was able
to also quietly move around the classroom to observe, and teach as I went. The sense of community that I had lost in my 1st Period was thriving in my 2nd Period. I was very much an equal member of the community, only giving instruction and floating around the classroom to help the students one on one as needed. On January 16th, I wrote, “The class feels good today. I had some warm goodbyes as they left.”

February – Recognizing Care

In February, I asked my students for personal input. As a teacher, I wanted to know what qualities my students valued in a teacher, and those they dislike. In two consecutive classes, the journal prompts asked what they would change about the way their teachers teach, and then what they liked about the way they teach. Jiang’s journal response compared me to another teacher in the school, saying, “He’s not friendly like Ms. Romney. I like the way you teach because you help, support, and share something with students.” It was nice to hear that I was doing something right, and rewarding to know that he recognized the support that is characteristic of community (Osterman, 2000).

McKenzie, from my 2nd Period, was very honest. She both appreciated the autonomy that I had trusted them with, and also shed light on what she found valuable in a teacher/student relationship. She wrote, “You, Mrs. Romney, I like the way you teach. You give us guidelines, but you still let us do our own thing and be creative.” The next day, her response to the prompt about the things she appreciated in teachers was again speaking directly to me. She said, “I guess another thing that’s cool about the way you teach is that you use emotional appeal. You seem to connect w/ us more than other teachers, or at least it seems like it.”

This 2nd Period class, that I had been worried was going to be too “cool”, was showing results of vulnerability and caring. Just the next week in class, my student Bo randomly asked in
class if I was going to be teaching at the school the next year. I didn’t know where that came from and it took me off guard. I had already decided that I would probably not be there the next year, and I told him that. When I did, he told me, “you will be missed…. lots of people here will miss you.” I told him I wasn’t so sure of that. That’s when Ji and McKenzie chimed in that it was indeed true. McKenzie even added, “You’re like everyone’s favorite teacher!”

I still don’t know how many students felt that way, but it showed me that we had achieved caring relationships, and that my caring wasn’t escaping their attention.

**February/March – Growing in Awareness**

Even though my 1st Period class was driving me crazy, there were some students that acknowledged and appreciated my efforts. I had written personal cards for each of my students as we left for the Christmas break. In my journal, on February 17th, I wrote that Maizie had taken her card out of her backpack. It looked like she just took it out to read it again, and then put it back. I hope that Maizie could feel that the words in my note, as well as my general love for her, were sincere.

As much as I would have liked to have everyone feel the positivity that was going on with many of my students, the three boys were only getting more difficult to deal with. I had recorded many notes of them being lazy, disruptive, exclusive, disrespectful, and more. I had split them up for projects to work with others, but still, their attitudes were dripping with negativity. I couldn’t handle them anymore and, in the beginning of March, I called them into a separate room to talk.

I told them that their behavior created segregation and a negative feeling in the class and that they needed to choose to become a part of the group and change their behaviors or choose another class. I told them I’d rather have them stay and learn to enjoy my class, but that I can’t
have that behavior in class. When writing about the experience, I finished the entry saying, “I will have to see if that changes things for them, but I felt more loving toward them after (for the rest of class) and tried to help them enjoy class.” If they were going to change, it would be because they wanted to, not because I asked them to. I’d have to wait and see. I hoped that having direct communication would at least help them to understand why I tried to run the class the way I did and that they might become self-aware as to how they affect the space.

**Letting Go in April**

Throughout the rest of the year, I had several moments of working very hard to show these boys love, and felt pretty good about it. At one point, Sega even laughed at something I said, which I took to be a sign of letting down a wall. However, the overall direction was still not good. They began skipping my class here and there, and by the end of April, I basically didn’t see any of them again for the rest of the school year. At that point, I felt that it was off my shoulders. I had tried very hard, and had pushed past my own growing apathy, to try to help them enjoy my class. I had been vulnerable and had tried to show love and to *feel* love for them, but it was far beyond my control by then, and class was more pleasant without them.

**Spring - Time to Bloom: The Final Project**

March flew by, as did most of April. I felt that my students needed something meaningful to end the year. In the very beginning of the year, I had designed some art projects that connected students’ journaling to their creation process in efforts to enrich meaning in the curriculum. We created puzzles of our lives, a visual thumbprint reflecting our identities, and drew self-portraits, further exploring identity. With the exception of reflecting on the technical process of the self-portraits in our journals, the collaboration of journaling and art-making didn’t reach the depth of meaning that I had hoped it would, and I quickly dropped the process. This
time, at the end of the year, I wanted to find that connection and meaning that I hadn’t found in the beginning.

I pondered these thoughts over Spring Break, in April, and the idea of what I called “Self Art” came to me. The journaling we had been doing throughout the year had been impromptu, but the majority of questions had asked about their lives, identity, purpose, etc. I had been asking questions that would help them know themselves better and would allow me to know them also, but I hadn’t realized how much these questions seemed to follow such an obvious theme. My students had spent most of the year writing about who they were, why and how they became that person, how they affect the world around them, and who they planned to become. This new “Self Art” project would be putting those discoveries to use.

In the second to last week of April, I talked to my class about the final “Self Art” project we would be doing. I defined “Self Art” simply as anything that represents the self or their projected future self. I showed them a PowerPoint of artworks that others had done that might fit into that criteria, and gave them a full page of “Self Questions to Consider”, that were meant to provoke thought about what made them the people they were. As we went through the slides, I’d ask them for their interpretations.

It was clear that this would be a challenging project. I felt vulnerable moving into the project because of my own lack of experience with conceptual work, and I hadn’t yet introduced that kind of work to students. Nevertheless, I was excited about the prospect of helping them see and create themselves visually in this project.

The next few classes consisted of writing responses to the list of questions I gave them, writing project proposals, and having one-on-one meetings with each student to discuss and solidify their project ideas. Coming up with projects for each of them was a real challenge. I
even had one student who was so lost that I gave him a list of questions to ask his mom when he called her later that night to see if that would help. Some ideas were much stronger than others, but eventually, everyone had something to work on.

It was a much more challenging project for my 1st Period than my 2nd Period. I tried to help and encourage as much as I could, and in one of my journal entries I wrote about my 2nd period saying, “This class has been a lot of fun. I wish I had been able to create this kind of curriculum & atmosphere from the beginning. It’s fun to watch them all work on their own projects & I think they have been pretty engaged because they are working on their own ideas & I hope they are meaningful to them.”

Student Work

Finally, project presentations began. Some of the projects were very disappointing. Some students just didn’t finish their projects, some clearly made little effort on their projects, and some obviously didn’t care about it. There were others, however, that put a lot of thought into their work and created something worth discussing.

Lucia had been absent a few days and didn’t finish, but her project was a transparent packing tape sculpture of her own body in an unconfident posture. It represented the feeling of losing her place in her dad’s new marriage. She was going to write in sharpie on her sculpture’s face those emotions she portrayed daily, and on the part of the sculpture than would normally be clothed, she would write the emotions that she truly felt. It was emotional, vulnerable, and raw.

Bo explained in our one-on-one that he wanted to pursue magic in his life because it made others’ happy and that was important to him; so he wanted to base his project on that. He didn’t say it, but I think it was a theme for the bigger part of his life. He was a very charming
teenager who lightened and brought life to the mood wherever he was. He created an enormous playing card with a big red heart in the middle and angel wings wrapped around it.

Johnny wanted to show his different personalities and interests. For him, he started with a white, blank mask. He designed it so that different sections of the face represented different aspects of his life and interests. Chao-Xing did something similar in that she made three or four eye masks, from paper maché, and then designed them to show the different emotions that were prominent in her life.

McKenzie’s was probably the most reminiscent of modern conceptual artwork. Her project was very simple in construction, but deep in meaning. She had debated between different ways to display her work, and settled on a clear, plastic cup. One half of the cup was masked with black paper and the other half was left transparent. Inside the cup were a few phrases that she had been told in her life about herself. From one side, you could see the paper and from the other, you couldn’t. The phrases were each written on several small pieces of paper, repeated over and over. She placed the cup up high up in a precarious, inconspicuous spot, and part of the presentation consisted of having the cup fall to the ground to expose all the phrases. It was a “falling apart” in her life that released those specific words/expectations/judgments about her.

I also enjoyed Maizie’s project. She and her sister Delilah are Navajo. Throughout the year, I was impressed and intrigued by how deeply rooted they were in their culture. So when Maizie wanted to do a project that connected to her culture, I knew it was an important part of her life and was very appropriate for the project. Her family had many artifacts that were important and sacred in their culture, and she wanted to display them all in one space for her project. Because they were too special to bring to school, she arranged them on a wall at home and photographed them, and explained their meanings.
As a whole, I was very excited about the “Self Art” project, and I was pleased with many of the outcomes. It made me interested in developing the idea further sometime, when I might have the opportunity to teach it again.

(Individual Cases: The following section provides examples of experiences with one specific student and how my research and efforts applied to her)

**Individual Journal Entries**

The individual journal entries of my students illustrate the story of their experiences within the class. Here, I have included the entries of one student, Kenna. Other student entries are included in Appendix B. Journal entries have been recorded as is, without corrections to spelling and grammar. (*All journals were kept private as I was the only one, aside from the individual student in ownership of the journal, to ever read the journals.)

**Kenna**

Kenna was a girl who was in need of a caring relationship. In her journal, she wrote time and time again about how she was bullied daily and she clearly displayed lower self-esteem that is found in victims of bullying. (O’Moore & Kirkham, 2001)

Kenna’s Journal

September 8th, 2014: “I get bullied every day”

September 16th, 2014: “I have been bullied every school year - except pre-school. (Even this year. But I am used to it) ... Because of my years of constant bulling I have a huge fear of people... Did you know in an average classroom 3 or 4 students are suicidal or think of
suicide? and most teenagers commit suicide because of abuse or bulling… So this is a small definition of who I am”

September 18th, 2014: “I have no impact in this life. I am like a single grain of sand on a beach. If I suddenly left I don’t think anyone would care to be honest… Everyone who has ever bullied me tells me that the world would be better off if I were gone. and I believe them… I have no impact in this world. Never have …Never will.”

If anyone needed someone to care, it was Kenna. I immediately tried to reach out. In response to reading these journal entries, I wrote her a letter. It said:

“Kenna, Thank you for your honesty in writing. I think writing can be very therapeutic and healthy for our souls. Kenna, I want you to know that you are loved. So often, our thoughts and feelings aren’t truthful. They may tell us that we don’t matter or that we don’t make a difference, but those are lies. Every person has great worth. This may not mean much to you now, but your sister Zia thinks the world of you! In her writing, she expresses how important you are to her. I am sorry you have gone through very hurtful and difficult challenges. Life will do that, but don’t let yourself believe the lies that tell you that you aren’t important. They are NOT TRUE! Keep enduring and know that you are loved. ☝️ / Ms. Romney”

I then wrote about this experience in my journal.

September 30th, 2014: “I wrote Kenna a card and put it in her journal from the journal check this weekend. I hoped it wouldn’t make her close off because I responded to her writing. I think she just read it. She is looking over her past writings. I hope she will feel loved & feel open toward me instead of closing off.”
After class: “Kenna was much more engaged during class. She responded quickly when I asked the class questions & she offered up information when I wasn’t even asking.”

Kenna’s response to my letter was immediate. She became more confident, even if only in comparison to her former self. She was happier. I know that she needed more than only my caring in her life, but it was evident that she was in great need of care. She later showed that she realized that what she had been made to believe from her bullying experiences were not actually true. She saw past those and found confidence in who she was and even showed a desire to care for others; her future family in this case.

November 7th, 2014

Journal Prompt: Write your own eulogy.

Kenna: “Kenna was a wonderful, bright girl. and though she was very silent and liked to keep to herself: She always brought a smile to her friend’s faces. She always felt that no one loved her, that she had no impact in this world. But she did! She felt this way because she was always bullied. Because people put these thoughts in her head! and because they put these things in her head; she could not see the truth: She was loved. She loved to listen to music, draw, write novels and play the piano. She was very talented and taught herself almost all of her talents. Most knew her as the world famous author, but I knew her as my best friend. She was kind to everyone around her and a great mom! She loved all her kids and they adored her.”
Despite the challenges that Kenna faced, she was grateful. In our gratitude journaling for the month of November, she revealed many things she was grateful for and expressed that she believed gratitude was important. She was grateful, and even confident in her abilities and in her true self, as opposed to the “actual self” spoken of in “The Dynamic Interplay Between Perceived True Self-Knowledge and Decision Satisfaction.” (Schlegel et al., 2013)

Kenna was only in my class for the first half of the year, so she was unable to participate in the “Self Art” project at the end of the year. However, I was happy to discover, through her writing, that despite the bullets of bullying that had penetrated her spirit, she intended to create a brighter future for herself.

December 3rd, 2014

Journal Prompt: What are you going to do to make your future plan/life happen? Be realistic.

Kenna: “First I am going to graduate high school. Then I am going to go to Collage. (I am hoping for BYU or UofU) I will take writers courses so that I can publish my book(s). Then hopefully I will get married to a nice hot guy and we will start a family together. I will raise my kids with love and kindness. I will support all their strengths, talents, and dreams. (unlike my parent.) I will be patient and calm and will never hurt them! Physical, verbal or mentle. (Again: unlike my dad.) I will be a better parent then my dad and mom. I will not get devorced like my parents did.”

I wish Kenna had been with me the whole year, but I was grateful for the opportunity I had to show her love and support while I had the chance.
Chapter 5 - Conclusion

Discovering My Role

I had come to teaching with fresh eyes, and that, I believe, made the difference. I realized that teaching art would need to take second place to something else and that part of that was to create a community of caring.

Cultivating Change

This thesis is a case study of my two art classes in a private school in Utah. It explored my attempts to build community through caring relationships among students who had been held back by a lack of confidence in who they were, and some, because of bullying. Realizing that my students were in need of a different kind of learning experience lead me to the research of vulnerability, caring, community and journaling to help students develop self awareness, happiness, and confidence. It is also a story of my journey, as both a teacher and a researcher and it explores how that dynamic changed my curriculum and perspective as I came to understand and care more about my students.

My first year teaching felt wild and uncontrolled. I had been shocked by the way some students were treated and couldn’t remember that time of my life ever being quite so cruel. It was frustrating to witness the apathy in my students, and I had a very difficult time managing those who showed so little respect and care for me, and for others. I had to make it up as I went, and I wondered many times if I was making the difference I had hoped to make. The school principal would try to help me when I asked for something specific, but he seemed fairly uninterested in the students’ academic achievements or in bringing lasting change to the bullying
problem. It was a challenging job, and I seemed to be alone in my effort to facilitate a community of caring wherein each individual could grow in safety, and achieve their potential.

The second year felt a little better, but it was still a lot of experimenting to find what worked and what didn’t. But in my third year, when I finally became a researcher, my perspective changed. The research project didn’t necessarily make the job any easier, but it was more rewarding. When it became my job, as a researcher, to take notes in my journal every day and to reflect on my practice, I was able to see which things were effective and those that weren’t. There are certainly many things that weren’t as effective as I’d hoped, but there were some small and simple things that made all of it worthwhile. I saw positive changes in my students and the classroom culture, and I also benefitted from the process of observing and reflecting, as I grew closer to my students.

I used several strategies to change the climate in my classroom, including prohibiting electronics, trying to be more present and aware of my students needs, observing and taking notes, and rearranging the classroom. The greatest achievements, however, were made through the use of reflective journaling. Through my students’ writing, I discovered who they were. I learned the depth of gratitude some students had and many of the struggles that all of my students were going through. I learned where they came from, what they valued, what they knew about themselves, and gained insight into things they may not have known. Vulnerabilities were manifest as students revealed their true selves.

I, too, kept a journal and discovered how I felt about my students; how torn I was when they rejected my care, or were rejected by others. I became concerned for their well-being and their future. I became more aware of my role as a teacher, realizing that my job took me far beyond the subject matter as I chose to care for my students in hopes of meeting their needs and
propelling them forward in confidence. Many of my students and I grew closer in caring relationships.

Nel Noddings’ work was significant to me as a teacher. Although I held my own personal beliefs about the importance of loving others, it was insightful to read her work and see how it all fit into the world of teaching. Student recognition and responses of my efforts in caring for them were vast and varied. While the infamous trio of boys (Jimmy, Wuzhou, and Sega) seemed to be repelled by any and all of my interactions with them, there were students like Max, Johnny, McKenzie, and Kenna, who accepted, and in their own ways, reciprocated care. Even Kenji, in very small ways, would receive and respond to caring at times.

The concept of vulnerability was an important theoretical idea for my study. It was also a little harder to measure. What may cause one student to feel very naked to the world may be commonplace comfort for a student like Maizie or Zia. Before looking into the research of Brené Brown, I had personally experienced how liberating it felt to be mutually vulnerable with others in a relationship. Brown’s work, however, taught me some of the reasons why I had felt the way I did about vulnerability. “Vulnerability is the birthplace of love, belonging, joy, courage, empathy, and creativity. It is the source of hope, empathy, accountability, and authenticity.” (Brown, 2012, p. 34)

Even though it was hard to gauge vulnerability in my students, I can say that I saw students grow in joy, courage, love, and belonging. I witnessed as Maizie read her journal out loud every class and how she appeared to live more authentically than any of my other students, and encouraged them to do the same. Focusing on vulnerability had an important impact on my relationships with my students. In my meetings with Kenji or with Wuzhou, Sega, and Jimmy, I felt very open to attack. Occasionally sharing my own journal writing with the class made me
feel vulnerable. Even posing for the gesture drawings in my 2nd period made me feel vulnerable. Although I couldn’t always determine when my students were becoming more open, I could feel that I was becoming more open with them.

In talking with Kenji and with the three boys, I definitely felt my love grow for them. Before my meetings with them, I mostly felt a foreboding. There were many times that I just didn’t know what to do with them and my emotions were exhausted. I often wanted to give up on them, kick them out of my class for good, and to just be done with it already. My resolve to care, however, made me push forward. I struggled to remain calm, and I fought my urges to be an authoritarian by giving them a punishing sentence. Instead, I did my best to let them know that, despite their behavior, I did care.

In the end, their negativity and distaste for me and my class prevailed, and, quite literally, I lost them. Kenji transferred out of the class, and the other 3 just stopped showing up. For them, things didn’t work out as I had hoped. Despite their response to me, my own response to them, in making a personal effort to understand them, and my willingness to be vulnerable stretched me, helping me learn and grow. Regardless of how my students reacted to me, I think it was important to be an example of vulnerability and show them how it is not a weakness, but is rather the way to live wholeheartedly. (Brown, 2012)

Journaling proved to be the greatest of my discoveries. When I began with journaling, I was hopeful that it would be a successful way to calm my classes down each day as they came in carrying life on their backs. Once my students got used to journaling every class, they would come in and write fairly quietly most of the time. There were often small conversations here or there that I had to hush, but in comparison to my other years teaching, it was heavenly. It made an enormous difference in the way class started, which often made a big difference in how the
rest of the class period went. Going forward, journaling will likely become an important part of any class I teach.

The gratitude journal we kept for the month of November was insightful and useful. For those who were already grateful, their journal entries just expressed more gratitude, and seemed to reflect, in more detail and depth, the things they were grateful for. For others, they mentioned family and friends and other relationships along with some material things as well. I suspect that gratitude journaling could be more effective if given more time.

Journaling helped me get to know my students better. It helped me grow in empathy and care for them. Keeping up on reading a couple dozen journals, even just a couple times a month, was a real challenge, but it was worth the effort. Many of the times when I’d leave with a cardboard box full of journals, it was with a slight feeling of dread. I knew it would take a large chunk of time to get through them, especially because I would record on my laptop some of the more significant entries. However, reading and recording those journal entries made my students become more and more human in my sights. My role began to feel much more like a mentor than a teacher, in the traditional sense.

As I read into the concerns and struggles of my students, I learned to have empathy for them. I wanted them to be accepted, to be happy, to achieve their goals, and to strive for more. This aspect of journaling enriched my teaching experience. There were meaningful times that I was able to give a response of open and honest love that I would not have had the opportunity to do without these journals. The few times I got to watch my students get their journals back, and the person I had reached out to in their time of need gave a small indication in their face, and later in their behavior, that they really knew I cared; those were the times that being a teacher meant so much more than sharing knowledge. As both Brene Brown and Nel
Noddings spoke of, in their writings, humans crave connection. Teachers have so much more to offer, so much more to give.

When it comes to adolescents, they are on a difficult road. Some are blessed with a support systems, already in place, that help them know who they are. They come with the confidence to live authentically and to push through the struggles of change, already knowing who they want to become. On the other hand, there are so many in need of guidance. These students come with struggles from home and from previous schools. Some struggle with deciding who they are in an ocean of new faces. They are dealing with new emotional and physical changes, and some come with the experience of years as a victim of bullying piercing deep into their hearts.

The Self Art project was a starting point for something that could be great when extended further. With little background on conceptual work, it was a challenge for both myself and for my students to wrap art around the discoveries we had made about ourselves. However, it was a real opportunity for me to meet one-on-one with each of my students and explore, together, the questions of who they were and what that looked like. The process may have seemed confusing to some, but for others, like McKenzie, it was a way to express herself through another medium.

It was a challenge and a blessing for me to be a mentor for students during this trying time of life. Looking back on my original concerns of negative student behavior, I almost forgot about bullying by the end of my research year. I had seen segregation and I had experienced some students’ negative feelings toward me at times, but bullying was no longer occupying my mind. Students learned that I had no tolerance for that in my classroom, and as community and caring filled the space, bullying and even insecurities crawled away.
I am also grateful for my decision to use reflective journaling as part of my research. I can’t say which, if any, of my students will continue to write in a journal and discover more about their character and emotions, but it was valuable during that year. Our Self Art project proved successful for some and I hope that it will remain with them as they continue on to establish themselves as adults. I have handed out the tools, as well as I knew how, and I have done it with care. My research was very intimate, within a small radius of influence, but I believe that each of these concepts, particularly in connection with each other, can be beneficial to any classroom.

In the end, each individual is the captain of his or her own life. Changing one’s behavior comes from their personal choices. Being a teacher of teens, however, is an opportunity to create new perspectives and inspire students to be the best of who they are. It is also an opportunity to create caring relationships with students who are in need of support during their transition into adulthood. I believe that teachers can aid in directing and inspiring the choices students are making to bring greater purpose into their lives. Students may take it or leave it as they please, but it is important for a teacher to create a safe place and to facilitate these opportunities for growing in self-aware in a caring environment. In this study, I learned that my own efforts to create a sense of community and caring can have a significant impact on the learning environment and on the lives of my students, as well as enriching my experience as a teacher.
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Appendix A

Figure 1 - Chao-Xing “Self Art” Project

Figure 2 - Maizie “Self Art” Project
Figure 3 - Bo “Self Art” Project

Figure 4 - Jiang “Self Art” Project
Figure 5 - *Johnny “Self Art” Project*
Appendix B

Self Questions to consider

• Are you your genetic makeup?
• Are you a reflection of your interests?
• Are you your lifestyle?
• Are you a compilation of your family and relationships?
• Are you something you believe?
• Are you defined by your struggles?
• Are you your talents?
• Are you your parents/friends/etc?
• Are you what/who someone else wants you to be?
• Are you what/who you want to be?
• Are you a process?
• Are you YOU in relation to something else?
• Are you your environment?
• Are you how you feel?
• Are you what you think?
• Are you your abilities?
• Are you your experiences?
• Are you an emotion?
• Are you your dreams/hopes/aspirations?
• Are you your fears/insecurities/etc.?  
• Are you transparent?
• Are you your nationality/heritage?
• Are you your beliefs/religion/etc?
• Are you your surroundings?
• Are you your knowledge?
• Are you a specific color?
• Are you hiding/wearing a mask/being someone else?
• Are you what others say about you?
• What materials/mediums describe you?
• What makes you who you are?
• What parts of you are real?
• What makes you happy/sad/grateful/frustrated/etc?
• What/who has shaped you/your personality/your life/etc?
• How do you know who you are?
• How can you find your true self?
• How can you search/explore your personality/life/etc?
• Why are you the person you are today?
Appendix C

Maizie and Delilah

Maizie is an extremely friendly and outgoing personality. She came to my class with her sister Delilah. Maizie is an extreme extrovert and Delilah is quite the opposite. From the beginning, I really liked Maizie. She was such a comfortable person and, I believe, contributed to others feeling comfortable. She was inclusive and kind. She is probably the best example of all of my students of the one who probably needed my kindness and care the least and who, herself, contributed very much to the things I was trying to implement in my class. I always really liked Delilah too, and although she too was quite stable, she could use some help in opening up and showing herself.

From some of the very first journal entries, it was very clear that Maizie and Delilah were very grateful girls who came from loving homes. They both recognized and were very aware of the role that others’ played in their lives.

September 12th, 2014

Journal Prompt: Choose 1 or 2 puzzle pieces from Wednesday and use a FULL PAGE to describe how & why it/they is/are meaningful in your life.

Maizie: “My Mom and my Dad are meaning full to my life by care of me. That they made me to live with them. That they love me with all their heart. That they work for all there children for a roof over are head,” etc.

Delilah: “My Mom and Dad are important because they brought me into this world. They loved me and cared for me when I was growing up and they brought me a sister and brother to live with I love both with all my heart.”
They both had a strong sense of who they were and Maizie was confident in that and Delilah was also fairly secure.

September 16th, 2014

Journal Prompt: Who are you? What is your identity? What makes you who you are?

Maizie: “I am Maizie. I am a Native American (Navajo). I am a daughter of one mom and one dad. That I know I am a child of God.” She goes on to describe her interests and things that are important to her.

Delilah: “I am Delilah.”...“I came from a Native tribe called Navajo. I’m a kind person also a shy person.” She also goes on to list things that are important to her and again mentions her dad and how much she misses him.

They also both knew they were loved and important. They clearly fostered caring relationships with others.

September 18th, 2014

Journal Prompt: How does your identity/life affect the world around you? How do you affect other people’s lives? How do you affect the environment? What would be different if you were not here?

Maizie: “I effect my family because I make everyone laugh. I will make them all the time when I am hiper. If I was not here no one will be smiling and be mad all the time.”

Delilah: “My sister would not have a sister anymore and wold be lonely with no sister to show her love and tell her what not to do and what to do....”
In their journaling, they were both very willing to be open and vulnerable, and after journaling, Maizie was always the first to share, often asking to share before I invited them to. Others in the class recognized and benefited from the care and kindness of Maizie and Delilah, too.

November 21st, 2014

Journal Prompt: What are you thankful for? Why?

Emma: “I want to thank Maizie and Delilah, because they are very good to me, they also helped me to improve my English.”

April 20th, 2015

Journal Prompt: When do you feel transparent?

Lucia: “... no one really likes to hang out with me but Delilah, Maizie, and Kenna and Bud....”

These two were already creating their future selves and were very decided in what their futures would hold.

December 1st, 2014

Journal Prompt: What life do you want to have in the future?

Maizie: My future plans are I will graduate early at 16 years old. Then, I will go straight to collage to become a WWE a wrestler.”..... “After, I am done i will go to NXT to train then move to the real WWE. I want to work there for a long time because I want to be a millionair.”... “P.S. I will be working at the Apple store in collage.”
December 3rd, 2014

Journal Prompt: What are you going to do to make your future plan/life happen? Be realistic.

Delilah: “Get a pony and finish High School. Get another pony and go to Arizona State University. Study computers for 3 years and finish college. Get a cat and look for a house or apartment. Get a dog and look for a job. Get a cow and find a house out on the reservation to keep my animals. Train my cat and dog also train my horses and ride them. Study a little on the violin.”

Although their future selves may not follow exactly the paths they chose in these writings, I believe they were making plans based on their true selves. (Schlegel, Hicks, Davis, Hirsch, & Smith, 2013).

They were easy to like and easy to care for. On March 11th, 2015, I wrote them each a response to their journals entries:

Letter to Maizie: (In response to a journal entry about missing her dad) “Maizie, I’m so sorry you had to lose your dad. It sounds like you had a wonderful relationship with him and that you love him very much.”

Letter to Delilah: (In response to her journal entry about losing both her dad and her grandpa) “Delilah, I’m sorry for both of your losses. It is very obvious that your dad is very important in yours and Maizie’s lives. I wish I could have met him. He sounds wonderful.”
Both Maizie and Delilah displayed the qualities of confidence, caring, vulnerability and gratitude, and I wanted the rest of my students to learn. Delilah did come out of her shell over time and I felt her learn to trust me, and others, and feel comfortable around us as time wore on. She began to sing to the music with no inhibitions and I even had to shush her from being too chatty with Caden one day. It was great to see her grow and it was great to have these two as examples of the happy, confident teenagers I had seen before.

Johnny

Johnny is another example of a student who was already very grateful and knew how to care for others. Johnny had been my student in years past and had always been kind and respectful. This year, he seemed to have more confidence than past years. He seemed more aware of and confident in who he was.

Johnny had two brothers with autism, one was very low functioning, he had twin sisters who were placed in different grades, and a mother who appeared to have some health issues and who also spoke in somewhat broken English. It was very apparent through his writing and in conversation occasionally, that Johnny was a huge support and asset to his family, and he was grateful for them, his mother in particular.

Johnny’s journal:

September 24th, 2014: “The faces that are important in my life are my family…”

December 1st, 2014: “The life in the future…. I would also give the rest of my money to my parents so they can have a better future to.”

March 11th, 2015: “I wish I had more time with my mom. even though I do see her everyday but I want to spend more time with her…. best times I have with my mom are
weekends. we watch movies. every friday night as well as saturday and sunday. also
best times with her are valentines day, mothers day and her birthday. I want to at least try
to spend as much time with her as possible.”

April 30th, 2015: “with my mom I want to go out with her and buy her flowers and take her out
somewhere nice before I die. with my Dad I want to go out and watch a movie with him,
and play games with him. with my sisters I want to give them all my games, and spend
time with them. with my brothers I want to do the same.”

Johnny was an example to me of how to care for others. He was so kind to his
family. He was grateful for them and also recognized how important he was in their lives. He
seemed quite confident of who he was in his family.

September 18th, 2014: “if I wasn’t born, there wouldn’t be anyone to help out my mom... I play
an important role in the family…”

March 27th, 2015: “but one of the most meaningful compliments that my friends and family’s
have told me are ‘You are special’. They said that I have changed several people’s
life’s, it may not seem like I do to you or to other people, heck even I don’t notice I do
but it seems as though as if I had. my mom said that if I wasn’t here in this earth my
handicap brother would be lost, and that he wouldn’t be progressing in the house because
basically im the one who has helped around the house. even my moms friend and people
from the church have told me that I gave a little spark of hope into my familys lives and
that they are greatful for me to be on this planet.”

Johnny already knew how to create caring relationships. He recognized the needs of
others and stepped in to support and lift them. At the end of March, I left a post-it note in his
I wrote, “Johnny, I totally believe that you have had a wonderful effect on the lives around you. I recognized a LONG time ago that you are kind and caring and that you must be a huge blessing to your family. You are a good example. You recognize important things in life that many of your peers will not recognize until years later. Thank you for your example.”

I was so impressed by Johnny. His influence in his family’s lives was evident through writing and through the few times I saw him interact with family members. He also very much reciprocated the care that I extended to him. He would clean beyond his own space and kept going after the bell rang, when it was still messy, because he knew he was helping me out. He listened respectfully and took instruction without question and showed gratitude and appreciation in many little ways.

In my journal, on February 19th, I wrote about a time that he came in after class. I wrote, “Johnny just came in looking for something. I asked how his life is going & he said good & then he asked how my life is going. I know that is such a small thing, but I think a lot of kids his age don’t think to ask how others are doing very much and I also think that brief interaction was an exchange of caring.” He had seen past my title as his teacher and cared for me as a human being.

Johnny’s influence, I believe, also reached out to Max. Johnny and Max were attached at the hip in my class.

Max

As I mentioned before, I had already known Max before the year began and I had known him to be the target of teasing and taunting by the “cool crowd” of boys. Max had clung to the group despite the ridicule, but he was obviously the token punching dummy of the group. This year, he had targeted a younger boy and constantly teased him and called him unkind names. In
fact, he wrote about it in January when the journal prompt was, “In what ways are you
creative?” Max wrote, “I am creative in many ways first there is nicknames like for A.J. it was
dung beatle and naked mole rat cause he was ugly.”

I didn’t find him to be as malicious as much of the bullying I had seen before, although, I
wasn’t the one being bullied. However, his bullying seemed a little more desperate and less,
seemingly, confident than what I had seen before. I had to remind him many times during the
year about my rule, “no ugly talk.” I had to tell him that it didn’t matter if the person was in the
class or not, he needed to speak kindly about others.

Luckily, Max seemed to like me. I had kind of a light and jesting relationship with him
and he responded well to it. I believe it also was a benefit that Max clung to Johnny in my
class. Johnny was an example of a respectful and considerate students and I think it rubbed off
on Max. As I tried to encourage Max in his art and in his behavior, when it was good, Johnny
was showing him, without instruction, how to receive care.

In the beginning of the year, Max was usually the first person out of the door at the end of
class and then one day, I remember making him stay late because he had ditched out early during
the last class. As the year moved along, however, Max began to linger longer with Johnny.

On December 5th, 2014, I had noted that Max looked pleased at his success in print-
making. That same day, he and Johnny stayed after bell rang to clean, and not because I asked
them to. Johnny may have done the before, but not Max. When Max would linger, I sometimes
wondered what happened to his efforts to try to catch up with the cool group of boys for
lunch. It must have lost its allure. That day, I wrote, “Johnny & Max said ‘goodbye’ to me
several times as they were leaving. I think they like me and can tell that I care about them.”
On December 9th, I wrote, “Max & Johnny still seem like they like & appreciate me, so I
guess there’s something good going on.” I had just had a really hard time with that class, and,
ironically, it was Max, and Johnny, who made me feel better. He had no reason to shield his
vulnerabilities when he was in a safe community. The community of the entire classroom wasn’t
quite built yet at the point, but Johnny and Max and I were becoming our own community of
caring.

When things swapped in January, and my 2nd Period became the class of comfort and
warmth, the feeling of community grew. In late February, my notes reflect that Max must have
trusted his classmates and forgotten about protecting his vulnerability in the whole
class. February 19th, 2015, my journal reads, “I saw a lot of improvement in Max’s work and he
actually voluntarily commented when I asked a general question about their drawing
experience.” He was growing in confidence.

It happened again on April 22nd, 2015. It was the day that I presented the “Self Art”
project. I showed several slides of images that could all be considered alternatives to a typical
self-portrait. For each image, I asked the class what meaning they found in the story. It was new
territory for them to surface their personal perceptions to investigate others’ personal
work. After class, I wrote, “Bo made the most comments & Max actually volunteered a lot of
ideas which was nice to hear.”

Finally, I think journaling was a tool for Max to acquire just a little bit of self-
awareness. Max had spent the entire year writing about all of his favorite video games, material
possessions, money as his motivation in life, and occasionally friends or maybe something about
family a few times. So all in all, journaling was not a breakthrough, but at the very end of the
year, it was a resource for him to self-reflect and find something he could refine in himself.
On May 6th, 2015, the last day for journal-writing, the journal prompt asked, “What are some ways you can be a better friend? What kind of friend are you now?” Max’s journal responded with, “I can not make fun of them as much even though I’m joking with them and they know that I’m just messing around. and I guess I could be a bit nicer to certain friends.” Of course I can’t say whether this reflection actually changed Max’s relationships with his friends, and my guess is that it didn’t do much, but it was a way for him to admit his true self to himself. What people decide to do with their self-discovery is their own choice, but journaling does serve as an avenue for such realizations.