

## **Layering Sel(f)ves: Finding Acceptance, Community and Praxis through Collage**

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*There are multiple aspects that shape one's experience as a student teacher; however often as teacher educators, we focus on the intellectual rather than the emotional nature of the experience. Within this a/r/tographical inquiry, we render a story of what can happen when teacher educators intentionally engage the multidimensional nature of the student teaching experience through the integration of arts-informed epistemologies within the context of the student teaching seminar. Student teachers entered into a dialogic space of reflexivity and praxis where they discovered that their experiences mattered and did not occur in isolation. This project has implications for considering ways to help student teachers and teacher educators bridge the gaps between the personal, social, artistic, and academic that is teaching. Key Words: Student Teaching, A/r/tography, Collage, Arts-Integration, Qualitative Research.*

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The student teaching experience, for many, can prove to be both a time of great learning, as well as isolation and disconnection. As teacher educators, we often spend a lot of time focusing on the intellectual side of the student teaching experience, while rarely even acknowledging the emotional aspects of this experience. For example, we ask what went well in the lesson and why, what did not go well and why, but rarely do we ask “how do you feel about your experience teaching the lesson;”; rarely do we ask students how they feel about the student teaching process as a whole. The student teachers we have worked with, over the years, often voice concerns about feeling isolated and disconnected as they leave the comfort of the college classroom for the uncertainty of the public school classroom. However all too often these expressions are drowned out by the academic side of things, requirements that need to be met, outcomes that need to be demonstrated. As teacher educators, we have come to believe that it is important, in fact necessary to embrace the whole experience with regard to our student teaching seminars and the kind of mentorship we offer. Learning to teach is not simply about method, rather it is about self and other, engaged in a complex pedagogical relationship where theory and practice intertwine with the emotional. It is important to recognize that the emotional and intellectual are not binaries; rather, they are complementary realities that shape one's ways of seeing self and other.

So, “How can educational institutions sustain and deepen the selfhood from which good teaching comes” (Palmer, 1998, p. 4)? More specifically, how can we, as teacher educators introduce student teachers to this “selfhood”? This became our research question. We further contemplated, how can we do so while acknowledging our own

experiences as artists/teachers/researchers and those of our student teachers? This would require an arts-based methodology that would allow both ourselves and our student teachers the opportunity to visually and verbally explore self in relation to teaching student teachers/being student teachers, and in relation to each other as individuals within the context of community. As artists and arts-informed researchers, we have both worked with collage before in our own inquiry, artwork, and pedagogy. Knowing the process would lend itself to deconstruction and analysis as well as re-construction and synthesis we sought to use collage (both visual and poetic) to further explore what might happen when teacher educators explicitly acknowledge the concepts of isolation and connection that so often remain unspoken within the context of the student teaching experience. We wanted to know what pedagogical practices might engage students in the work of vulnerable reflection, those which might better create space for dialogue and reflexivity amongst ourselves and the student teachers we worked with. Finally we wanted to better understand the possibilities of arts-informed epistemology as a *pedagogy of discomfort* (Boler, 1999, 2004), a liberatory pedagogy that might create more opportunities for students to collectively, within the space of the unfamiliar, reflect upon multiple aspects of their student teaching experience, moving through active engagement with art as text—beyond the often silenced emotional experience.

Drawing on a/r/tography (Irwin & de Cosson, 2004; Springgay, Irwin, Leggo, & Gouzouasis, 2008) as method, we began our inquiry within the context of our student teaching seminars seeking create a space where both ourselves and our students might enter into the work of “knowing (*theoria*), doing (*praxis*), and making (*poesis*)” (Irwin, 2004, p. 27) through the process of art-making in a communal context where as Irwin and Springgay (2008) remark, “encounters between subjects, thoughts, and actions propose new assemblages and situations” (p. xxxi). As they engaged in this process, we wondered if students would move from an outward, individualistic, classroom performance toward relational reflexivity and theorizing (Britzman, 2003), carefully planning their representations, reflecting upon and discussing with their peers, the meaning behind the images and words they chose to deconstruct and reconstruct through the process of collage. Would the collages encourage ongoing discussion, moving toward a form of living inquiry (Bickel, 2006; Springgay, Irwin, & Wilson Kind, 2005) that invited students to examine the fluid nature of self within the student teaching experience? It was our hope that through artful living inquiry, using collage, discussion and written reflection both our students and ourselves might discover new meanings and possibilities within the images and words they chose, creating further opportunity to reengage with one’s understandings of work as well as the factors that shaped the experience and process of becoming a teacher.

As instructors within the courses where this inquiry takes place as well as teachers ourselves, our research journey does not end in the classroom with our students, rather our inquiry is positioned in a relational space that is fluid and temporal, shaped by the moment we are teaching, as well as those past experiences that have shaped our own perceptions of self within practice and pedagogy. . Our inquiry began with our own collage work, followed by our students’ engagement with collage in our student teaching seminars, and has evolved to become an ongoing work of inquiry that never truly stops as our understandings, perceptions, and beliefs shift across space and time. Within this article we share our own work and the work of our students, rewriting the experience

through poetic inquiry (Prendergast, Leggo & Sameshima, 2009), we review and rearrange the representations and words, sharing our momentary observations, in a quest to arrive at new insights that might create space for further questions as we move develop insight into our practice as teacher educators as well as our understandings of the needs of our students. Thus, we seek to create a living space of collage and poetic inquiry upon the page where our existing understanding of the experience becomes something that may be further rearranged to lead to deeper, more transformational understanding; an understanding that is fluid, informative while always open to disruption.

The purpose of this paper is not to generalize truths or provide an image of the ideal student teaching seminar experience or even to answer Palmer's (1998) question, "How can educational institutions sustain and deepen the selfhood from which good teaching comes" (p. 4)? Instead, we seek, to render our own experience as teacher educators engaged in inquiry, striving to weave together those intellectual and emotional aspects of teaching that shape one's sense of self and practice. Within this rendering, we explore an arts-informed epistemological strategy we integrated into our student teaching seminars as a means to respond to our previous observations of the experiences of student teachers, developing a research question that asked us to consider, how might we as teacher educators introduce future teachers to a "selfhood from which good teaching comes." But we also consider the nature of inquiry as one that is fluid, personal, and public, always shifting and becoming, informing our understandings of the practice of teacher education as well as ourselves within the context of that practice. Much is said about the need for reflexivity and praxis (Freire, 2002; Pinar, 2004; Shannon, 2001) both that of the individual, but most often across communal spaces; yet we are often most comfortable existing in what might be considered a narcissistic individuality. Grumet (1988) has remarked that "Trapped in the dualisms of individuals and idealism, we become convinced that whatever we see in our 'mind's eye' is a private vision, split off from what others know and feel, split off from synesthesia that interrogates all our perceptions, split off from the body, the other the world"(p. 129). Reflecting on students' consistent articulation of the experience of isolation and disconnection during the student teaching experience, we recognized that it was important to further investigate the nature of the experience. Drawing on the work of Sameshima (2007) who remarks through poetry, "Intellectual conversation/community and communication are not enough/We must know our location in relation to each other/We must touch" (p. 108), we sought to create a space of living relationality through artful inquiry of their experiences as student teachers—where the emotional and intellectual spoke together, as we invited students to consider the significance of the concepts of touching and isolation in education both as a student (past), as a student teacher (present), and a teacher (future). Would such an artful and communal space of inquiry, where students and instructors together constructed, reflected, and re-arranged, through dialogue, those images and words that had been chosen to represent the nature of the student teaching experience serve as a vehicle to introduce ourselves and future teachers to a "selfhood from which good teaching comes?"

### **Touch as Communal**

The touch, so often is viewed as something violent, perverted, an invasion that must be avoided and so many of us remain in isolation, fearful of the unknown interaction. We fear the inscriptions (Davies, 2000) that so readily etch themselves upon our bodies when we open ourselves up. In isolation we are safe, as teachers – untouchable heroes (Ayers, 2001), but to open oneself up, becoming vulnerable, we risk becoming s/he – the image – we have spent so much time trying to escape. This isolation, while perhaps a mechanism of (imagined) self-preservation can be destructive without the reflective dialogue that allows one to recognize self and other. Barthes (1977) remarks:

Imagine that I am a teacher: I speak, endlessly, in front of and for someone who remains silent. I am the person who says I ...I am the person under cover of setting out a body of knowledge, puts out a discourse, never knowing how that discourse is being received and thus forever forbidden the reassurance of a definitive image – even if offensive – that would constitute me. (p.194)

However, one might ask who is it who has forbidden – is this a result of a protective separation? There is a disconnect between the teacher Barthes describes and the student, yet we propose that this disconnect is not limited to this relationship, but rather exists between the facets of ourselves as well as those others who may be dealing with the disequilibrium of being an unrecognizable self, alone. Perhaps if only one, in this case the student teacher, were to stop, to look at oneself – to share her reflection with another, the vividness of experience and subjectivity might unfold – engaging a sense of autonomy through the connection, through the intentional act of touching. But still so often we choose to remain a/part.

Palmer (1998) notes that “Good teachers possess a capacity for connectedness. They are able to weave a complex web of connections among themselves, their subjects, and their students ...” (p. 11). Yet so often we find ourselves carefully guarding those aspects of self we hold dear, fearful of the soul catcher, who may pounce upon our subjectivity in a dance of violent judgment. What we do not recognize, however, is that this self without connection, remains vague, translucent, a fragment of our imaginations. Ayers (2001), talks about teachers “finding their own way” (p. 128), yet this is not something we must do alone. In fact, the journey becomes far more powerful when we are able to recognize ourselves within what Pinar (2004) and Pinar and Grumet (1976) remark to be a “biographic experience” (p. 51), an experience that must be read by another in order to be rewritten into a space of possibility. Still so often as Sameshima (2007) notes, we remain “trapped in stories already written” (p. 88). We in a sense bask in the pain and beauty of our own isolation. But there is little transformational value if we remain silent, static, and alone.

As teacher educators, artists, and researchers, we often find ourselves engaged in the act of “gazing” inwardly as a tool for personal and intellectual growth and we often ask the pre-service teachers we work with to engage in similar forms of reflection. However, coming from a poststructuralist perspective, we recognize that this gaze and the

sights we see are the result of being positioned within a particular context, in relationship with others. Our knowing is fluid and easily influenced—yet it is important that we deconstruct this knowing as a means to (re)construct experience—moving beyond the past into a present space of possibility. And we have asked ourselves, how can it be possible to be present, without fully engaging with the world around us? Through our researching, we have begun to recognize the value of being willing to let go of claiming, instead offering our momentary knowing to be disrupted, cut and collaged into that which we might not have been able to predict. The unpredictable is the living and as such, within our project with student teachers, it was important as Leggo (2008) highlights “to make a story in collaborative dialogue with others, always aware that [our] story is one of many stories, one of many versions of the story” (p. 90).

Sameshima (2007) tells us that “The teacher’s job is to make opportunities and possibilities accessible. Sharing autobiographical texts explicitly connected to learning provides an environment of living research in the classroom” (p. 148). But text does not simply exist as words upon the page; instead, we view text as anything that may invade the senses, organs that Dewey (1980) believes to be those with which “the live creature directly participates with the ongoings of the world about him” (p. 22). This direct participation calls for response. As teacher educators we recognize the importance of creating opportunities for our pre-service teachers to enter into an autobiographic and textual dialogue of participatory praxis. As such, our project focused on the integration of poetry and visual images within the context of our student teaching seminars as a way to engage in a communal inquiry of self within the student teaching experience. For it is these artful forms of inquiry that so often lead to discomfort (Eisner, 2008) while also demanding a certain amount of presence, establishing an openness that creates space for others to enter into the dialogue of meaning making through a collective entering into experience.

### **Seeing Community in Context**

Our research project took place in the context of two student teaching seminars, one art education, and the other elementary education. Given that our inquiry was of a pedagogical nature, requiring students to do nothing outside the context of the seminar and that the insights we arrived at, while valuable, would be oriented toward the goals of our courses, our research project was deemed exempt by the Institutional Review Board liaisons at our respective universities. While different in terms of discipline the goals of each seminar were consistent, in that they sought to provide student teachers with the opportunity to reflect on their teaching and learning within the classroom and plan for future instruction that would benefit the needs of all students in the classroom. As such, the seminars were structured in such a fashion that students had the opportunity to share what they were learning and experiencing in the classroom while processing and discussing these in a manner that would prove most meaningful to them. While the goals were consistent, there were differences between the students in each group. The first group, 10 elementary education student teachers, was enrolled in a highly selective liberal arts university in central Pennsylvania. The students were all female and were from middle, to upper-middle socioeconomic positions. Their families were generally intact, and parents held high expectations for academic success, and these expectations were no

different when it came to the level of success expected in student teaching. The second group consisted of art education student teachers immersed in the student teaching experience. The students attended a public liberal arts college in northwestern New York. The students' families were working and middle class and very proud of their children for going to college and for becoming teachers. This was the first semester of the student's senior year and they were eager to begin their student teaching experience, which for most of them, would be their first experience teaching in the classroom.

Throughout the course of the semester, students were invited to share their experiences as student teachers, in a holistic sense that moved beyond simple discussions of theory and practice. Building upon these discussions, we made the decision to integrate a variety of textual forms to provide opportunities for meaning-making and reflection. This article explores one such project that invited students to create collages that represented their own feelings regarding the experience of isolation and connection (touching) with/in student teaching. By exploring the images created by our students, the written reflections that accompanied them, and our own poetic reinterpretations of these reflections, we were able to explore the nature of the student teaching experience and those factors that played a significant role in shaping both our own and our students' perceptions of experience.

### **(Re)searching through Process**

Using poetic inquiry (Prendergast et al., 2009) and visual, a/r/tographical methodologies (Irwin & de Cosson, 2004) we seek to engage in an interactive, performative dialogue as a means to open space for embodied reflection. Examining the positions of teacher educator and pre-service teacher, we engage, through image and text, the voices of art and elementary education student teachers, intertwining them with the poetic echoes of our own interpretations, as they begin to consider the meanings of isolation and connection (touching), based on their own beliefs and experiences related to education. We use these "stories" or collective creations of experience, to create the space for a living pedagogy of praxis, inviting the reader-participant to engage with the meaning of isolation and touching (connection) in relationship to his/her own understandings of the experiences of pre-service teachers and teacher educators. As these fragments of being and experience join together, we hope to create spaces where one might begin to see the colorful possibilities that exist in education when we are willing to step into the dangerous and exciting spaces of listening and creating as a living whole.

Referring to teaching as a crazy quilt, Ayers (2001) remarks, "to make a life in teaching is largely to find your own way" (p. 1). He acknowledges that teaching is "confusing and uncertain, and yet it is as often creative and dazzling" (p. 1). We used this concept of quilting or collage as a starting point for student teachers *not* just find their own way, but also to collectively make sense of aspects of their emotional experiences in student teaching. Instead of asking the student teachers the typical what should you be teaching, how should you be teaching or even the deeper why we teach, we asked our students to consider themselves in relation to teaching. Instead of relying on first impressions stated verbally, we asked them to contemplate their past, present, and future and create a visually poetic response that illustrated their perspectives, sharing them visually and verbally with their peers, through a communal process that acknowledged

those aspects of the emotional side of teaching, as a means to make sense of self with/in experience. Hammerness, Darling-Hammond, and Bransford (2005) state that new teachers must first think about and challenge their own understandings and experiences with education. This research attempts to challenge student teachers to consider their practice as holistic, involving the emotional aspects of the self with/in the student teaching experience, rather than simply the cognitive aspects that are generally addressed in student teaching seminars.

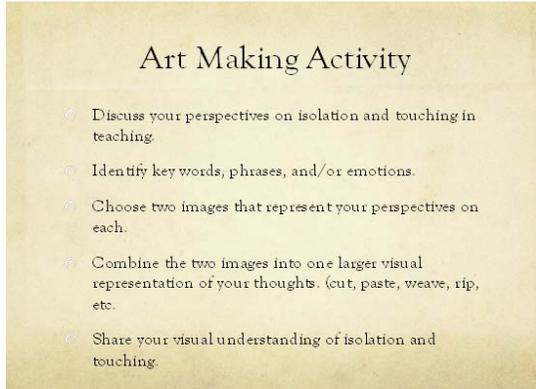
### **An Artful Inquiry**

The artful inquiry project we designed arose out of our discussions regarding a perceived need and reluctance on the part of our students to explore the more personal aspects of the student teaching experience. We recognized that it was important to provide our students with the opportunity to move outside the comfortable space of intellectualizing experience, toward the (dis)comfort of experience. It is this discomfort that Eisner (2008) intimates “that can be temporarily relieved through inquiry” (p. 17). We believed it was important to provide our students with an opportunity for inquiry that was embodied, connected to the self so that they might actively engage with the (dis)comfort and those other emotions that arose with the intellectual, all woven together, yet rarely articulated. Dewey (1980) notes

The artist has his problems and thinks as he works. But his thought is more immediately embodied in the object ... The artist does his thinking in the very qualitative media he works in, and the terms lie so close to the object that he is producing that they merge directly into it. (p. 16)

We believed that significant possibilities for praxis and communal reflexivity existed if we were to choose a more arts-informed approach to inquiry, inviting our students, along with ourselves, to be engaged in the act of communal art-making and inquiry, becoming present to the moment, in relationship with the story of image they/we were creating, but also to those past stories that shaped the present experience. As such, we began by designing an arts-informed, inquiry project that began in the classroom, attending to those issues we saw arising, calling on students to engage aesthetically with meaning, self, and other—moving toward possibility.

Figure 1. Powerpoint Slide Introducing Student Inquiry



In our previous observations of students, it was clear that many of them were focused on the outcomes of their work—how their performance might be perceived, what grade they might earn. Therefore we felt it was important, as we worked on the development of our shared inquiry activity, to move students outside a position of comfort where they might know/predict what was expected of them. We also believed it was important to start with a collective reflection of the teaching experience in relationship to the concepts of isolation and touching (connection), creating an opportunity for supported dialogue and practice which might also be considered oral rehearsal (Myhill & Jones, 2009) before we moved into the independent process of creating the collages. This dialogue not only provided students with the opportunity to rehearse, but also created a space of compassion as students slowly began to share their experiences of isolation and connection, and in their vulnerability recognized that they were not alone. It is this compassion that Boler (2004) comments, "... is one bridge between those suffering a pedagogy of discomfort and those who have invited new ways of being fully alive within a world replete with imperfections" (p. 131). We also recognized that it was likely that some students may already have arrived at a position that accepted ambiguity, perhaps even found comfort in this and that they might help their peers become more comfortable, willing to take risks in relationship to the depth of the experiences they might share.

Denzin and Lincoln (2000) have described qualitative researchers as quilt makers who piece together complex aspects of an inquiry in order to better understand those complexities. In doing so the qualitative researchers uses the aesthetic as a process that goes beyond its practical and pragmatic nature. More recently, Butler-Kisber and Poldma (2009) argue for the use of collage as another form of qualitative inquiry. They describe collage as an interpretive tool and draw on Creswell (2003) when explaining the constructivist aspect of collage process that reveals "multiple realities and ways of doing and understanding" (p. 37). As researchers we have engaged with artistic forms of inquiry and found that the collage allowed us to deconstruct and reconstruct our understanding of various inquiries. We sought to help the student teachers inquire into their own experiences to deconstruct and reconstruct their sense of isolation and touching (connection) that exist in teaching. Collage as inquiry allows one to reflect, elicit, and conceptualize ideas (Butler-Kisber & Poldma, 2009), naturally weaving together the practices of *theoria*, *praxis*, and *poesis*.

As we planned the collage portion of the inquiry, we sought to prompt reflection as a way to elicit personal understanding of their experiences by asking students to contemplate the terms isolation and touching (connectedness) in relation to their teaching. We encouraged them to choose two images that might represent their understandings of the two terms and to think through the media (Dewey, 1980) of collage to deconstruct and reconstruct them as a way to come to understand the isolation and touching (connectedness) as significant in education.

By engaging in this process, it was our hope that students would explore ideas imaginatively (Greene, 1995), finding both a sense of praxis (action) as well as poiesis (making) within the theoretical context of the inquiry project. For as Greene (1995) so eloquently intimates:

To tap into imagination is to become able to break with what is supposedly fixed and finished, objectively and independently real. It is to see beyond what the imaginer has called normal or 'common-sensible' to carve out new orders in experience. (p.19)

It was our hope that through the making of the collage, students would begin to move outside order and expectation toward reflection within imperfection. However, we also recognized that not all students, especially the elementary education student teachers, would feel comfortable with an intense multi-step art-making process therefore we decided to ask students to choose only two images to work with. Restricting the choice to two images allowed students to spend more time reflecting on experience and meaning within process, rather than focusing only on the outcome of the final product. Throughout the art-making process we encouraged our students to work in a space of dialogue where they might discuss their choices, make connections, share poignant experiences, and offer interpretation and feedback. Finally, we chose to have students "conclude" their portion of the inquiry by returning to a reflective space where they might quietly write about the experience and that which informed their choices. As students wrote, they were able to further interrogate both the representations and well as the ideas and experiences that shaped them. Building upon these written reflections and our interpretations of the images, we began to poetically engage with meaning, re-arranging words to represent the communal nature of the experience as well as our presence within the inquiry.

### **Methodological Positions**

We approached our research using a three part progression, first acknowledging our unique epistemological processes as a means to identify the shape of our own gaze as artists, researchers and teachers, but also as a way to step into those processes in which our students might engage. As we prepared to integrate the arts-informed inquiry activity within our student teaching seminars, we felt that there was value in first entering into the experience ourselves. This allowed us the opportunity to better empathize with and anticipate those experiences of our students, as we prepared a meaning-making activity that might create a strong sense of vulnerability, and perhaps resistance. We share the outcomes of our personal work exploring the metaphors of isolation and touching within our own teaching experience, as a means to further lay the groundwork for the second

part of the inquiry when we begin to explore how student teachers might more holistically represent and reflect upon their experiences through artful inquiry, offering us further insight with regard to both pedagogy and the needs of student teachers. In addition, like our own experience with interpreting the work of students, it is our hope that the images and words we created might offer further insight into our own positioning which no doubt might shape our later interpretations. As with the work of our students, we encourage you—the reader participant—to disrupt, re-arrange, and build as you integrate your own experiences into your interpretations of these particular renderings.

### **Art education supervisor (Mary)**

*Figure 2. Mary Collage*



Mixed media work  
 represents  
     my understanding  
 Isolation  
 touching  
 and education  
 on the left  
 three different images  
 trees pieced together  
 in sequence  
 I honor  
 students, individuals  
 vital

part of the class  
they come together in collaboration  
On the right  
green  
to represent how  
    I hope  
to provide  
individually and communally, students and teachers grow  
    personally, socially, and artistically.

**Elementary education supervisor (Sarah)**

*Figure 3. Sarah Collage*



Answers disrupted  
in the messiness of being  
(im)perfect  
human  
    teacher  
We yearn for straight answers  
drawing lines  
that become jagged  
in our grasping

Experience overlaps  
 and we become  
 something more  
 an/other in perspective  
 color  
 shifting the image of messy nothingness  
 into something  
     (un)nameable  
     Creation  
         with/in perception  
 Freedom with/in the circle  
 Be(long)ing  
 with/in chaotic community  
 We learn  
 acceptance  
 we learn to love  
 ourselves  
     and one  
         an/other  
 Praxis (re)created

After creating our own artistic representations we shared them with each other. This allowed us to share our experiences and perspectives, while engaging with the advantages of incorporating multiple sign systems into the context of the inquiry. Drawing on semiotics Berghoff, Egawa, Harste, and Hoonan (2000) state that signs mediate something between “two human meaning makers. . .forms we use to express or construct meaning” (p. x). Furthermore, they consider the use of various sign systems as “multiple ways of knowing” (p. xii). These sign systems include but are not limited to language and art. By engaging a semiotic approach to meaning-making, we were able to enter into a multi-faceted discussion about our own experiences with/in teaching and with/in the inquiry process itself. Beyond informing our inquiry, the process further established a sense of community as we became vulnerable both in relationship to the process as well as the sharing of experience. It was this same sense of communal reflexivity through praxis that we hoped for our students, and thus we were ready to begin the next part of the inquiry.

### Finding Wholeness in Pieces

As stated previously, the purpose of this project was to explore what can happen when we provide student teachers with the opportunity to engage with the emotional aspects of the student teaching experience. Using arts-informed epistemologies to facilitate a communal dialogue, we invited our students to explore the intersections of their experience through the metaphors of isolation and connection (touching).

#### Art Education Student Teachers

The art education students were initially shocked to have the opportunity to discuss the emotional side of student teaching and were excited to have the opportunity to do so visually. Seldom do student teachers in art have time to make their own visual work. As the student teachers worked, they discussed the metaphor of cutting something apart (isolation) and gluing them back together in connection (touching). One art education student teacher stated, “Students and teachers can feel disconnected when there are no caring relationships built.” This comment prompted student teachers to open up and share specific examples of trying to create relationships some successfully and others not.

Figure 4. Art Education Student Teacher Collage One



Images, buildings  
 a new city  
 isolation in culture  
 I feel very small  
 Touching  
 Images  
 Ceramic bowls, plates, pitchers

personal and intimate  
in the home  
the rims of these  
the area that comes in contact  
with the person  
A far away motif  
blurred  
proceed with caution  
balance  
isolation  
touching  
approaches  
becoming acquainted  
willing  
to share a part  
letting others in

*Figure 5. Art Education Student Collage Two*



Isolation and touching  
similar in terms of subject  
matter  
Different  
perspective and meaning

Distant landscape

space

Makes the viewer feel

emptiness

they can't relate

Up-close perspective

you can see the details, cracks, and flaws

this represents relationship

closeness

There is ambivalence present within the students' renderings as they try to make sense of themselves as individuals feeling disconnected, while operating within a social space; there is a certain amount of pain present in their renderings, but also hope. This hope was nurtured as students were able to bond with one another during this time, offering comfort, praise, and advice. At the end of the seminar students were asked what they thought of the activity and they articulated that they appreciated being able to make art—having the opportunity to make their responses visual, the opportunity to share their needs and concerns related to the emotional and relational aspects of student teaching not simply focus on the standards, lessons, and artistic outcomes. The student teachers felt the activity allowed them to personally reflect upon their student teaching experiences while connecting to their peers by hearing other experiences and perspectives. They shared that they would like to do something similar with their future students on the first day of teaching to help set the groundwork for building positive teacher/student and student/student relationships that they identified as vital not only for their own learning but for their students' learning as well. They realized the importance of their personal perspectives, their communal discussions, and the artistic nature of learning. In other words, they identified the important balance between personal, social, and artistic development in art education.

### **Elementary Education Student Teachers**

While the elementary student teachers were initially reluctant to engage in art-making, in most cases because of a fear of failure, they slowly warmed to the idea as they began to search for images that might represent their own experiences in relationship to isolation and touching. Some found themselves caught up in the product, while others became deeply engaged in the aesthetic process. As the activity progressed, it was clear that all the student teachers in the elementary group were beginning to take ownership of their creations, eager to tell/share their stories, stories that so often remain silenced within the context of the traditional student teaching seminar.

Figure 6. Elementary Education Student Collage One



Touching  
 taught  
     practice into theory  
 through the lives of students  
     people don't  
 understand  
     normalcy  
 sleep in isolation  
 mentored by my teacher  
     family  
 boyfriend  
     alone

precious time  
     in isolation  
 waiting for a call  
     from my love  
 away  
     I am  
 randomly eating  
     time  
 with students  
     teachers  
 touching  
     I find myself  
 accepted

Figure 7. Elementary Education Student Collage Two



Figure 8. Elementary Education Student Collage Three



always in transition  
 a substitute  
     sharing my role  
 an extra hard creation  
         seeking safe space  
 alone  
     living with five other girls  
 close in proximity  
     yet always on  
                 the outside  
  
 I question  
     myself, my work, my  
 understanding  
 yet know  
         learning how everything

While these stories expressed frustration with cooperating teachers, students, and friends, they also at times expressed a level of loneliness that was unexpected. However, along with this sense of aloneness, also evident was the importance of relationship, whether that is with boyfriends, family, or simply friends. As students talked through the process they began to share new aspects of themselves, getting to know one another beyond the academic space, becoming a community of student teachers who were not only teachers, but human.

### Following the Experience

From our perspectives as teacher educators/researchers, the visual and verbal data from the activity proved to be a powerful opportunity for student to create deeper relationships with both themselves as well as their peers. We learned that they began to spend more time with one another outside the context of the seminar, meeting for coffee or stopping by to visit another student teachers classroom, just to chat or see what was going on for the other person. In addition to the development of these relationships outside the classroom, we also heard the student teachers begin to open up more regarding their loneliness and frustration, successes and failures as teachers as well as what was happening for them outside the classroom. As they talked about their experiences, it was evident that students were not simply telling about what was happening, but they were actively reflecting on these experiences thinking about how they might further inform them about themselves and their needs as well as those of

others. We noted throughout the rest of the semester, that the opportunity to reflect in an aesthetic fashion that embraced the whole of the experience established a foundation for the development of an inclusive community of learners and people—who were both intellectually and emotionally engaged in the student teaching experience.

As we engage with our own renderings as well as the poetic interpretations of our students', we ask ourselves how much of our own experience overshadows that of our students. Evident within every poetic piece is a certain amount of sorrow and search for relationship, that leads us to wonder does this reflect our own experiences as classroom teachers, that which we yearned for and perhaps that which we may have lost, or perhaps only always yearned for? The nature of our inquiry is such that while we have gained insight into the facets of the student teaching experience, we have also begun to better understand our own positions within this space. The words we have chose, disconnection and isolation, the nature of our interpretations, and the qualities of our visual representations indicate our own feelings of ambivalence, but also caution us to remain present to the ways in which we might influence the student teachers we are working with. Teaching and inquiry are human experiences, we are subjects—fluid and feeling and it is important that we regularly reflect into the untold stories that may echo within our renderings of experience and our pedagogical choices.

### **Praxis within Communal Contemplation**

As educators at all levels of experience, we often find ourselves alone, searching through the mazes of confused perspectives of relationships. We write, speak, perform, listen and reflect, yet as Boler (1999) notes self reflection many not be enough to lead to self-transformation; or even further, a living pedagogy of praxis cannot exist without vulnerability, thoughtfulness and sensuality between selves as they become fully present to place and other. It is important that teacher educators empathetically address the emotional aspects of student teaching, the tumultuous ups and downs that occur both within and outside the classroom. So often, teaching is seen as a one dimensional position where one drops certain aspects of self, like a winter coat, as s/he steps through the door of the classroom. By acknowledging these unspoken facets of self, we create the opportunity for the development of an accepting classroom landscape where experience is something holistic and relational, rather than exclusive and individualistic. As teachers at all levels of experience begin to accept themselves as (im)perfect, embracing those un/spoken aspects that often define their experience as teachers, they begin to see the beauty that exists with/in imperfection, they begin to embrace the (im)perfect others around them. If the multi-dimensional nature of self with/in experience remains neglected, teacher educators, student teachers and the students they are teaching miss out on opportunities to contemplate the reciprocal nature of the emotional and intellectual, personal and social, aspects of education. This project provided us, as teacher educators and researchers, and the student teachers we worked with, an opportunity to visually and verbally reflect upon teaching in relation to self and others through poetic and visual inquiry. Communally we discovered that we are never alone, and always learning, in education if we choose to enter into the relational and fluid spaces of community, creation, and inquiry.

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