The Routledge International Handbook of Autoethnography in Educational Research

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Illuminating the epiphany

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SECTION 1

Enhancing teaching and teacher education with autoethnography

Introduction

Deborah L. Mulligan

Teachers and those who work in the area of teacher education are uniquely placed as social, personal and political agents of change. The influence that we have over those with whom we work is infinite. As such, it behooves educators to employ best practice with the interests of our students uppermost in our minds. We should examine our praxis and remind ourselves of the primary intention that guided us when we started out: to make a difference. Autoethnographic exploration of self is an effective tool that educators can employ to remind themselves of their original intent and build upon it. This methodology can also be harnessed for older students to allow them to examine their own burgeoning career positionings. Avenues into this personal and professional development are expertly highlighted within the five chapters in this first section of the handbook.

In Chapter 2, Karen Barley reflects on her “lightbulb moments” and three of the epiphanic episodes that have led to a shift in her educational approach. Her essay on educational inclusion invites the reader to reflect on the notion of success as an individual experience. She implores us to consider breaking down the barriers that are erected when working with some students. The author believes that a provocation of change can exist only when teachers challenge their praxis through a change in their belief systems about what it is to be an inclusive teacher.

In Chapter 3, Brian Andrew Benoit examines the notion of power and how it operates in our classrooms. He emphasises the responsibility that he has to his students as a teacher. The author utilises fieldnotes in the form of course evaluations of his teaching written by his university students. These memory triggers enable him to revisit teaching episodes that help him to reflect on the educational and personal positioning of his present self. This then serves as an avenue for future understanding of students’ needs and for professional development.

In Chapter 4, Anne Bradley challenges the reader to think about being proactive in our stance against systemic racism in our educational systems and practices. She chronicles the “metaphorical treasure hunt” that has been guided by her quest for self-examination and active reflection. This is situated in the cultural context of postcolonial Aotearoa New Zealand. The author utilises autoethnography as a method of reflection upon the endemic racism that occurs within educational institutions. This decolonisation of her research and teaching creates an awareness of transformative practices of which we should all be fully cognisant.
In Chapter 5, Shelley Hannigan, Jo Raphael and Peta White utilised collaborative arts-based autoethnography (CABAE) as a vehicle for their practice improvement as teacher educators. Their collaborative approach highlights the value of working with others to share perspectives, knowledge and experience. They further believe that this form of collegial collaboration should be the cornerstone of professional praxis in a neoliberal university setting. The authors argue that an arts-based approach fosters the development of innovative ideas and commonalities inherent in their work. This shared productivity allows professional and personal reflexivity, and provides a source of collaborative encouragement. This, of course, benefits both practitioners and students.

Finally in this section, in Chapter 6, Nadia Mead offers autoethnography as an alternative to the employment of an action research approach that is commonly utilised by teachers as a form of data gathering. She warns that the latter methodology can marginalise teachers and inhibit the strength of their influence. Autoethnography, on the other hand, can be utilised in a number of aspects such as the reclamation of teachers’ voice and agency; a means of validation of teachers’ knowledge and skills; exemplifying transformational practices that are applicable to multiple learning environments; and authenticating the lived experience of teachers.
Introduction

When I start writing, I find myself wrestling with my thoughts which inevitably leads to a divergence to the original plan for a project. I would say this is a part of my process; a method if you will, in that I deliberately allow the writing to flow, so the epiphanies follow. The role of the epiphany is a vehicle of discovery, the pivotal moment when transformation can occur from a previously held position or idea (Barley, 2020a, 2020b). Within an autoethnography, the epiphany is where a truth is revealed or a light is shone upon a previous unknown (Bochner & Ellis, 2016; Douglas & Carless, 2013).

When writing, “the epiphany is an inherent byproduct of autoethnographic writing” (Barley, 2020a, p. 492), and the way I come “to understand the world and to know myself within that world” (p. 494). These epiphanic moments reveal themselves and establish a new truth (Barley, 2020a) and when heeded cannot be unknown. Trusting this process has led me to take my greatest leaps in my teaching career where I am guided towards transformational and innovative practice.

It has been over a year since I proposed this study and the writing. I’ve spent a considerable amount of time contemplating. Living in Melbourne and experiencing multiple lockdowns, we witnessed the scramble by all educational institutions to deliver curriculum online. As teachers, we’ve all had to diversify and adapt to connecting to our students through a screen. All students had to contend with online classrooms and constant change where parents found themselves in the dual role of carer and teacher. The collective struggle was palpable and the concern for our children was tangible, but what was even more confronting was the numerous challenges faced by students who have additional learning needs. During the last two years in my role as an Autism Support Specialist, I have sat outside bedroom doors trying to coax my students out; then when out of lockdown, I spent hours reassuring kids that the classroom was safe; I also walked with some of my students as they felt fearful they would be arrested because they didn’t know how to explain why they were outside in the first place. My students struggled to understand what was happening in the world and why everything in their lives had turned
upside down. They had lost the comfort of their routines, their classroom and teachers, as well as the services and professionals they usually accessed out of school. These fundamental amenities create a safe and supportive environment where these students feel supported because without the structures that hold everything together, they can feel lost and out of control. Hence, the crux of this autoethnography and the discussion on inclusion remains as important as ever (Morina & Carnerero, 2020; Sharma et al., 2021).

My original plan was to write primarily about my students, but it became clear to me that the spotlight should be on my practise, not on what they did. This shift came when I pondered telling the stories of my students without objectifying them, or ‘othering’ their stories (Lalvani, 2015; Richards, 2008). Writing about students with disabilities could be considered an ethical dilemma. How do we amplify the life of the other, without co-opting their stories? This question has been pounding away in my thoughts since I started writing this autoethnography. Richards (2008) suggests that those “living with disabilities or illnesses are seen as objects of study and not as agents of study” (p. 1719). Conversely, Lalvani (2015) argues that the teacher’s perspective on disability can be a valuable one. She also elucidated that when an educator can see the student and not the disability, the more committed they are to inclusive educational practices. As much as I subscribe to this position, it is important that my motivation is pure. I’m known for storytelling utilising anecdotes or teachable moments and it is inevitable that my students are encapsulated inside the story. Despite my concerns, I felt the stories were worth telling. Compassionate storytelling can illuminate the epiphanies that disrupt our beliefs (Barley & Southcott, 2019), so I had to remind myself to be cognisant of trustworthiness when writing about my student relationships. If I was to write about them, it was important that I write the narrative through my viewpoint and not theirs. Ahh, that first epiphany.

As the epiphany lands, I resolve to narrate through the lens of an educator; and in telling my students’ stories, ensure that I am representing my transformation, not theirs. This is a pivotal place to stand because the ethical dilemma remains, one that Spry articulates as when the other is “brought into the light as a mere foil to the autoethnographer’s representation of self” (2016, p. 53). We need the other to promote the essence of the narrative, so in “consideration of the Other, otherness, and difference, autoethnographic work often conceptualises the Other for the purposes of understanding self” (Spry, 2016, p. 36). I hope to be a conduit from which their stories can be told, but ostensibly I must focus on myself as the subject of the investigation and the students are the accompanying characters. They are pivotal to resolving the complication that is at the centre of my story, but the story is about me and how numerous epiphanies transformed my role as an educator and as a human. These moments caused attitudinal and belief changes that became the concrete to which I have cemented my pedagogical and personal beliefs (Barley & Southcott, 2019; Yacek & Gary, 2020).

The value of autoethnography and the epiphany

My first autoethnography (Barley & Southcott, 2019) contained tales of “wisdom, courage and resilience” (p. 2622) about students who were my greatest teachers. The tangible epiphanic moments inspired by my students elicited change in my pedagogical and educational foundations. My encounters with them enabled me to reinvent myself “as an educator through their lives and individual journeys because, in a way, their stories were reflected in and complemented my own” (Barley & Southcott, 2019, p. 2622). Storytelling is negotiating with a set of facts where the writer is deliberately trying to make sense of the facts within a specific context. As Smith contends, “we understand the world through the stories that we tell ourselves about the world and about ourselves” (2013, p. 15).
Along with the many researchers who came before me (Douglas & Carless, 2013; Ellis et al., 2011; Bochner & Ellis, 2016; Poulos, 2014), I espouse that autoethnography is a potent methodological tool that moulds essential narratives and stories about issues of paramount importance in society. I can relate to others in the context of society, community or culture through positioning myself within the stories I tell. Bochner and Ellis assert that “we depend on stories almost as much as we depend on the air we breathe” (2016, p. 76) – in that vein, storytelling is the way I connect to the world and is my most comfortable form of communication (Barley, 2020a, 2020b).

Autoethnography in disability education

It is an important thing, I think, to trace how one arrives to the classroom.

(Warren, 2011, p. 140)

Having a career in education is more of a vocation; it’s a calling if you will. Most educators undergo moments of transformation and many seek to share their experiences in one way or another. A quick search on the internet and you will discover many teacher blogs, vlogs, YouTube Channels, websites, Instagram, Pinterest and Facebook groups etc. Teachers are natural sharers, it’s after all fundamental to what they do – share and teach information. My way of sharing is through the medium of writing; hence, to undertake educational research utilising the methodology of autoethnography is an organic segue (Barley, 2020b). Writing our encounters into narratives invites the reader to appreciate the perspectives and experience of others, where both the writer and reader garner crucial knowledge and understandings. These understandings should lead us to “establish a diverse, democratic learning environment” (Smith, 2013, p. 249).

The autoethnographical narrative is phenomenological educational research that explores and recalls “lived experience about a phenomenon, as described by participants” (Creswell & Creswell, 2018, p. 13). It is an inquiry which “explores multiple layers of consciousness, connecting the personal story to a wider lens of cultural understanding” (Barley & Southcott, 2019, p. 2609). The method is distinct from autobiography insofar as instead of focusing on the bigger picture, the autoethnography distills and focuses on a particular issue as a way of investigating and solving a problem (Choi, 2016). The writing process takes the author down the phenomenological path of writing to learn the unknown and as a method of knowing and collecting data (Chang, 2008; Choi, 2016; Richardson, 2000). Writing about oneself provides a unique perspective, but in the same investigation, one has the privilege of providing a first-hand account of any others who can be purveyed from that perspective (Chang, 2008). The autoethnography organically allows the author to denote some personal and emotional truth from their lived experience (Bochner & Ellis, 2016); and this truth emerges as the “epiphany or epiphanous moment” (Barley, 2020a, 2020b; Barley & Southcott, 2019, p. 2610). The epiphany is a vital ingredient to the autoethnography; the “aha!” moment of realisation. Smith elucidates that autoethnographic stories bring the personal and emotional into research and is where one derives “a deeper sense of what is important and how one feels, understands, and interprets life” (2013, p. 249).

Diamond explained that the heart of an educational autoethnographical work is to interpret the “teacher’s experience in order to formulate one of the organizing stories of that teaching life” (1992, p. 70). This was especially true for me when I considered the importance of equity and inclusion in my own educational practice. It is critical to note that this knowledge and belief in inclusion didn’t come naturally to me. The two vignettes explore the shift in my
belief emerging from my lived classroom experience (Bochner & Ellis, 2016). Warren refers to this as “reflexive, ethnographically centred research that takes our labor in the classroom as a vital site for investigation” (2011, p. 140). Philaretou and Allen (2005, p. 75) describe the “storying and personifications of academic themes characterizing autoethnographic research” as painted visual stories of the teacher’s experiences. Within this study, the stories I tell portray important crossroads in my educational life that evoked an epiphanic metamorphosis to my teaching practice (Yacek & Gary, 2020). The transformative changes were steeped in empathy and compassion that ultimately led to an interest in educational minorities. I found myself propelled on “a quest to find or invent innovative practices that addressed these problems” (Barley & Southcott, 2019, p. 2609).

Educational autoethnographies allow teachers the opportunity to record their own “sense-making” as a means to critically assess what’s shaped and moulded the type of educator they become (Warren, 2011, p. 143). The realisations emerge by revisiting one’s past as a way “to understand what you believe and how those beliefs were formed” (p. 140). Subconsciously, I found myself seeking the epiphanies which led to continued transformation. The stories elucidated and expanded this ‘knowing’; as I made more meaningful connections with my students, the more compelled I was to seek better educational outcomes for them. Dyson instills the notion that autoethnography as a methodology unleashes “power in education”. He goes on to describe “a profession of stories and a profession who profess to be the transformers of society” (2007, p. 46). Those momentous ‘ahas’ I experienced became a formidable impetus for my evolution as an educator.

Silence is golden

During my experience as a pre-service teacher in the 1980s in Victoria, Australia there was no mention of inclusive practices. I didn’t undertake any topic that dealt with diverse or disabled students. Our only tutelage on disability (unless you chose ‘Special Education’ as an elective) was to visit a ‘Special School’ and observe the students for an hour. There was no interaction with students or teachers and from the outside looking in, what I viewed looked bleak. I recall a busy room with children in wheelchairs being fed by teacher aides while others sat in chairs rocking and humming. Many students seemed to be wandering around the room aimlessly and, from my perspective, what I witnessed didn’t look like education. To be fair, this was during the 1980s and special education is not what it is today. Most of our early special settings were severely lacking educationally and were generally institutions that housed students with disabilities (Hurley, 1995; Steer, 1985; White, 1985). The Victorian State Government between 1984 and 1994 made significant inroads to ensuring that educational institutions provided educational and social programs for students with disabilities (Hurley, 1995; VAGO, 1992; White, 1985). Suffice to say, when I began my teaching career, I had no knowledge about how I would teach diverse children. Most of my early classes consisted of neurotypical children, with a select few who may have had minor learning challenges.

In the early 2000s, mid-career, I was teaching in a mainstream suburban school. There were a number of years where the ratio of girls to boys was quite low and all of the Junior School classrooms comprised one-third girls and two-thirds boys. My grade one class had 20 boys and 8 girls. To add to the complexity, there were several students who had additional learning needs. This was the first time I had been asked to teach children of diversity and my confidence petered. I had no idea what to do with children with disabilities. I felt that I was dealt an unfair hand and started the year with an extremely negative attitude. It was taxing to say the least, as many of the students were quite rambunctious. Their previous teacher had
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identified some as having ADHD and tried to convince their parents to medicate them. I wasn’t sure this was the solution. One of the biggest challenges with this cohort of students was when they returned to the classroom from the recess and lunch breaks. They would bounce into the classroom, overexcited and noisy. It was almost impossible to calm them down, let alone have them concentrate on any lesson content. I struggled through the first month and wondered how I would survive the year.

During the first term break I went to a yoga retreat and in the evening, we were shown a black-and-white video about a mime artist working with four-year-olds in a pre-school class. The children in the video were typical of any pre-schoolers: some were running around, while others were shy; some played in groups, and a number were playing alone. The intent of the mime artist was to engage and communicate with the children using movement, silence and connection. By the end of his act, the children were captivated and without any instruction they began emulating his performance. Part of his act was to hand the children a flower to greet them. Later, various children were shown to hand their mother a flower, smile and bow. I was fascinated by this video and wondered how I could integrate something like this into my classroom. I didn't have to think too hard, because by the next day, the epiphany unfolded. I dug through my children’s playbox and found a teddy bear puppet. He was perfect. I named the bear Sebastian and knew exactly how I would use him.

The following Monday after morning recess, I was ready. I perched myself at the front of the classroom and had Sebastian on my lap. As each child entered the room, using the bear I gestured for them to be quiet and pointed to the floor in front of me. The students were perplexed and whispered to one another “What is she doing?” I did not speak one word and used body language via the bear instead. I placed Sebastian’s paw to his lips to indicate quiet and pointed to the mat for them to sit down. I then crossed his paws to demonstrate crossed legs and hands in laps. Within a few minutes they were all seated, quite excited to find out who our new classmate was. I explained that the bear’s name was Sebastian and that he was going to be a helper. This epiphany and the use of the bear transformed the classroom exponentially. Sebastian grew to be an extremely good helper; whenever I needed quiet or to capture the student’s attention, all I had to do was sit at the front of the room with Sebastian. I was able to use the bear, silence and mime to create calm in the classroom. Sebastian became so popular that in the third term, he would take trips home with many of the children and they wrote a diary about his adventures. This eventually became a class book. Sebastian took a few trips to Sydney and Queensland; he even went to Bali.

This teaching moment was profound and, in essence, set the tone for the many epiphanous junctures I would have throughout my career (Barley & Southcott, 2019). Faced with a challenging group of students and believing I was not equipped to teach them had me feeling paralysed. However, watching the mime video sparked an inkling of an idea which “led to a dawning realization that I had to step outside of a box of my own making, then out of the next box, then out of another box ad infinitum and essentially get out of my own way” (Barley & Southcott, 2019, p. 2609). The use of Sebastian the Bear and of deliberate silence set the tone for the rest of the year. As the students became more responsive, their behaviour improved and so did their academic outcomes. This led to further realisations, where I changed my attitude to unique, diverse or disabled students. First, the belief that any child could be reached was cemented and second, I believed that I could teach any student. The bigger awareness stemming from this epiphanous event was that my pedagogical position had transformed. I was compelled to be an advocate and supporter of all children “passionately espousing the need for fairness, equality and inclusion into the mainstream” (Barley & Southcott, 2019, p. 2621).
Making the connection

NB: All names in this vignette are pseudonyms.

Many years later, I was employed to work in a Special Education setting. The school was very small and pitifully resourced. What this school lacked in resources was made up exponentially with dedication, care and support from the staff. I found myself comfortable in what was considered one of the academic, ‘low needs’ classes. The students I taught had a range of disabilities such as autism, Down Syndrome, ADHD, Williams Syndrome and so on. All the students also had an intellectual disability which posed significant learning challenges. I felt confident that I could teach these students and felt satisfied with my role. During Term Two, one of the teachers became very ill and was forced to go on leave. Her grade was classified as ‘high needs’, where all students had medical and learning challenges. There were four students in this class: Mark, a 15-year-old who was in a wheelchair for 90% of the time (being malnourished as an infant he could only walk short distances), non-verbal and, due to extreme neglect as a baby, had compulsions with food. Another student, Zac, was a 15-year-old autistic boy who only spoke in echolalic speech. He was very disconnected from everyone and spent most of his time standing in the corner of the room. The third student, Ellie, was a 17-year-old female who had an intellectual disability. She had a beautiful nature and loved listening to music, but she was detached from the world and also from those around her. Finally, Steven was a young man who had just turned 18 and was in his last year of school. His communication skills were better than the others and he was able to answer direct questions. He liked to feel important, so he was allocated odd jobs to do around the classroom.

When the original teacher fell ill, the problem for the school leadership was that they could not hire a Casual Relief Teacher (CRT) for the role, so the Principal asked me how I would feel about taking on this class. My first reaction was that I didn’t have the qualifications to work with these students. In the previous vignette, I claimed I could teach any student, so this assertion was put to the ultimate test. The Principal told me I would have ongoing support and allocated an experienced Education Support Staff (ESS) to work with me. The first day, I felt extremely anxious and when I walked into the classroom the four students were in different corners of the room. The ESS told me this is how it was; they tried to do activities, but there wasn’t a lot of expectation for them to do anything.

For the first two weeks, I followed the curriculum set by the previous teacher which included a very basic morning circle, a literacy activity, a numeracy activity, art and craft and extracurricular activities such as horse riding, swimming and shopping. I tried to bring the students together but while they could be coaxed into sitting on chairs for about five minutes, inevitably one of them would end up wandering. I attempted to individually speak to the students but became acutely aware I was not capturing their attention. I was left wanting more. A colleague at the school gave me a CD that contained videos of a practise called Intensive Interaction. Founded by Dr Dave Hewett OBE (Intensive Interaction Institute, 2021), he describes Intensive Interaction as a process that “teaches and develops interaction and communication by doing and taking part in interaction and communication” (Intensive Interaction Institute, 2021, para. 6). It teaches and motivates fundamentals of communication with the aim of being to learn “how to enjoy being with other people – to relate, interact, know, understand and practice communication routines” (Intensive Interaction Institute, 2021, para. 2). Designed to stimulate social engagement for individuals with a severe-profound intellectual disability, it was deemed to have a positive benefit to their wellbeing (Hankin, 2017; Weedle, 2016). I watched and rewatched the video examples and I also attended a course in my local area. I did not want to accept that my students were unreachable because they had a profound
disability, hence I trialled this approach with the goal to increase connection with my students (Barber, 2008; Weedle, 2016). At this stage, all four students were still in residence in their various corners of the room.

I began with Mark. This student mostly sat in his wheelchair, with one leg upon his knee. He was non-verbal but would make groans or loud noises and occasionally would smile or laugh. I placed my chair next to his and sat for a while without doing anything. Mark started tapping his fingers on the side of his chair, so I tapped on my chair. Every time he would tap, I would too. If he made two taps, I also did two taps. Next, I instigated the taps by just tapping once on the side of his chair. At first, he gave no response but after a number of demonstrations, Mark repeated my taps exactly. He also began smiling and laughing. After 15 minutes, I stopped tapping and waited. I didn't have to wait long because Mark reached over and grabbed my hand to tap again. This was the first time Mark had initiated any connection with me (apart from when he had wanted food). When he reached over for my hand, he smiled and laughed quietly, seemingly enjoying the game. During this very first session, I was able to maintain Mark's attention for over 30 minutes.

Ellie loved music and would stand for most of the day. She rarely sat of her own accord. Her favourite music was by André Rieu or ABBA. When we played André Rieu for her, she would gesticulate towards the speaker, use speech-like patterns and cry. When we played ABBA, she would make sounds along with the music. I played ABBA’s *Thank You for the Music*, stood in front of Ellie and sang along with the song. Ellie reacted to my singing by pointing to the speaker and me. She eventually stepped so close to me that her body was touching mine. I was able to reach out and hold her hands to sway with the music. This was a moment! After many weeks of unresponsive behaviour from Ellie, here she was swaying with me to the music, singing (in her way) and pointing to the speaker.

It took longer to reach Zac. If I tried to sit too close to him, he would push me away, or walk off making echolalic sounds. I tried lots of ways to communicate with him by sitting in front of him, sitting to his side, standing with him, but nothing worked. Finally, I tried one more time by sitting further away from him. He began using his echolalic language and I emulated his language. Without warning, he stood and came closer to me, gesturing for me to stand. When I did, he stood close speaking to me in echolalic speech. I continued to repeat after him and when I did, the more excited he became. The combination of speech and physical closeness inspired a connection between us.

I didn’t try this process with Steven. He used simple language, but I was able to connect with him immediately. The one aspect that changed for him was as the deeper connections were made with the other three students, Steven also drew physically closer to his class members. He spent less time in his corner and would sit with myself and the ESS with regularity.

What happened throughout the rest of the year was astounding. The ESS and I continued to develop our relationships with the students. We witnessed more initiated contact and connection with us. Ellie would put her face close to ours and ‘talk’ to us. Zac would take our hand and guide us towards something he wanted. Mark would rise from his chair and drag one of us back to his chair, motioning for us to sit with him. Remarkably, all four left their corners and merged into the middle of the classroom. The epiphany and lesson for me was that human connection is everything. It’s the one thing you don’t need resources for. You can have great resourced schools, excellent curriculum, and well-thought-out lesson plans, but if you don’t have a connection with your students, everything else will collapse. Connection is the foundation for everything else and *Intensive Interaction* facilitated a space for that to occur (Hankin, 2017). I think I always knew this, but the experiences in this classroom crystallised this concept into an essential ingredient of my pedagogical belief (Yacek & Gary, 2020).
Discussion

As a result of these epiphanies, I hold the belief that my role as the teacher is to explore new frontiers and commit to never giving up. If I am not having any success with a student, it is up to me, as the professional, to keep trying until the goal is met. I achieved the desired teaching outcome of forming human connections with my students, but it was paramount to follow their lead and allow mutual connection and communication between us. Success was assessed and evaluated “in terms of quality of involvement rather than outcome” (Barber, 2008, p. 401). The narrative in an autoethnography elicits “both phenomenon and method” (Diamond, 1992, p. 69). Being the subject of my own inquiry and examining my personal response to the data, I came to the realisation that the experience was transformative.

There is not enough room here to broadly explore the topic of inclusion; however the approach deserves some space in this discussion. Inclusive education is the tenet that ALL children have a right to equal education (Sharma & Pace, 2019; Sharma et al., 2021). We still have a long way to go to achieve an equitable and inclusive environment that embraces diversity and the richness that it brings (Sharma & Pace, 2019; Sharma et al., 2021). Concurrently, we are still trying to build inclusive practices upon a system that needs a lot of work and growth (Sharma et al., 2021; Smith, 2013). A continued barrier to successful inclusion is teacher beliefs and attitudes. I did not fully believe in or support full inclusive education until my beliefs transformed; and my beliefs could not change without the teaching experiences that triggered the epiphanic change (Barley & Southcott, 2019; Yacek & Gary, 2020). To provoke change, it’s up to teachers to embrace an inclusive classroom and they “may need to challenge what they think they already know or what they were taught, confronting theoretical knowledge and ways of being” (Moriña & Carnerero, 2020, p. 3). The experience-led epiphanies catapulted any previous ideas I had entertained about my own ability to teach all students out the window. I was capable, if I was willing. I also couldn’t lay any deficits in my student’s learning in their laps. This was MY problem to solve. I must, as the educator, find a way to connect and then cater to all my students (Sharma & Pace, 2019; Moriña & Carnerero, 2020).

What I learned in the early days was to form deeper connections by challenging what I had done before. Thinking outside of the box allowed me to form the idea of using Sebastian the Bear to create a place of quiet and calm in a chaotic classroom. The added bonus was, that in the quiet space, I also developed deeper bonds with my students because I was able to ‘see’ them without feeling frustrated by their behaviour. The second story is less about the success of using the Intensive Interaction strategy and again, more about opening a path to connection. On that first morning when I walked into the classroom and saw the students all in their respective corners, it seemed an impossible task to overcome. By being deliberate with my intention, I took myself to their space and the results brought us all closer in that small classroom.

Conclusion

The strategies outlined in these autoethnographic stories can be delineated to the following:

- All students are reachable. Even the most challenging deserve us (the teacher) to keep trying.
- As professionals, it is our responsibility to never give up on any of our students. It is an educator’s problem to solve.
- Connection is everything. Finding and forming this connection with students is a path to successful educational outcomes.
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- Allowing experience-led epiphanies can instill a new belief or attitude that transforms pedagogical change which then informs practice.
- Epiphanic changes can be precedents to transformation leading to future pedagogical change.

I no longer question if I can teach any student; the question I now pose is “How will I teach?” Epiphanies have guided me throughout my 30-year teaching career and grounded a rich and inclusive teaching platform. This led to many deep and fulfilling connections and the belief in my ability to teach any and all.

References


