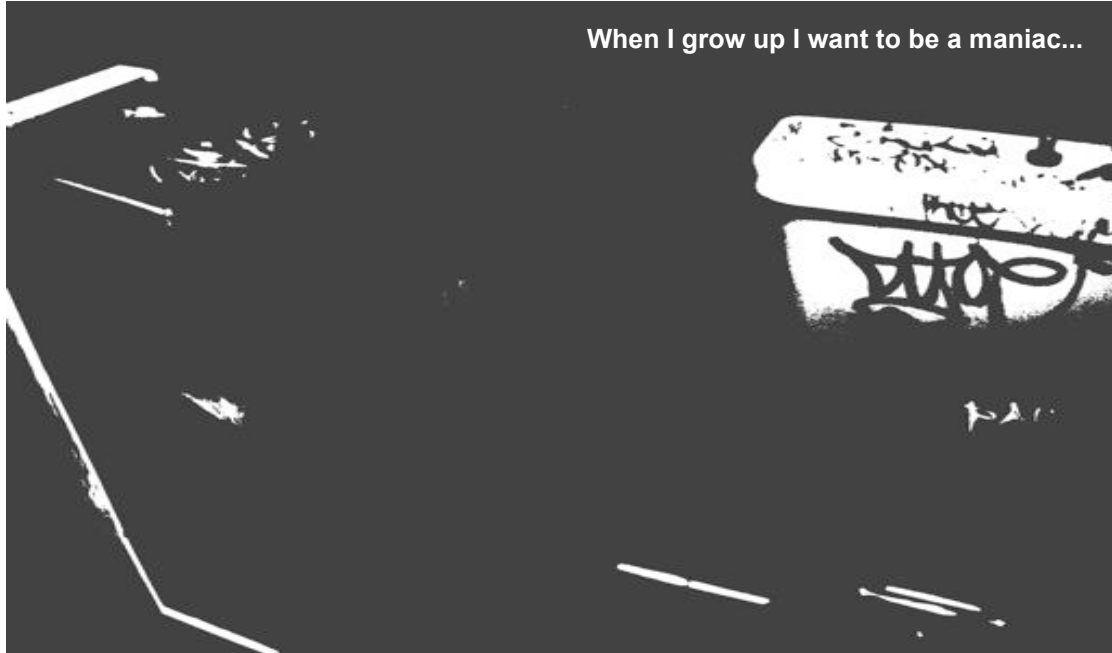


## **Raging Against the Mass Schooling Machine: *Performing Pedagogy Against the Grain***

**Andrew Miller**



### **Abstract**

Beginning teachers *who teach as they were taught* often perpetuate 'violence' in the classroom by upholding the status quo and perpetuating an exclusionary education system. In order to break this collusive cycle, beginning teachers like myself can deconstruct their developing teacher identities to unveil new ways of being and acting in the mass schooling machine. This way we break the cycle of social reproduction and domination and construct new ways of performing as teachers and students in the classroom. This involves teaching against the grain of habit and questioning the social and cultural discourses and practices that shape and define us.

In this article I use 'autoethnography' and 'arts-based inquiry' to deconstruct my school experiences and to imagine and perform a future teaching identity. Works of art and personal accounts are analyzed through the writing process. The article itself becomes a means by which to critically reflect upon the past to build and imagine a future. All teachers, whether new to the profession or not, can benefit from this kind of self-analysis and critical imagining. Students are relying on us to get it right. Their life-chances are at stake. The onus is on us to become the very best teachers we can be to help them become everything they might be.

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## Linocut Prints and Exile(s) *A Story of High School*

For migrancy and exile ... involves a 'discontinuous state of being', a form of picking a quarrel with where you come from. It has thereby been transformed 'into a potent, even enriching, motif of modern culture'. ... Borders and barriers which enclose us within safety of familiar territory can also become prisons, and are often defended beyond reason or necessity. Exiles cross borders, break barriers of thought and experience.

(Said qtd. in Chambers 2)

We as human beings tend ... to interpret our lives by weaving comprehensive frameworks in which the incidents, people, actions, emotions, ideas, and settings of our experience are brought together, inter-related, and situated. In this process, we sort through our experiences, dividing the pertinent from the extraneous and filling in the gaps as we construct sensible renderings or accounts of our personal histories.

(Doyle and Carter 130)

This is why I look back. This is why I sift through the rubble with the care of an archaeologist. I am looking for clues. I am attempting to understand the past to inform and make sense of the present (and future). I want to liberate the young boy from the discourses and practices that shaped and defined him. I want to inform my future teaching theories and practices from what he can tell me. I do not want to exclude others as I was excluded. I do not want to become a teacher as constructed by the stereotypes in my younger head. I want to remain conscious of the forces that play upon my making, the normalizing discourses and practices that so readily play out in repeat performances (Groundwater-Smith, et al. 127; Hatton; Marsh; Moore). Garth Boomer (*Metaphors* 31, 170) once said, 'We teach who we are.' *Who we are* is constructed from our histories: the social and cultural discourses and practices that shape and define us (Marsh). I want to teach who I am *today* – and who I can become *tomorrow* – by interrupting my conditioning, *reading myself against the grain* (Boomer, *Metaphors*), and being a *reflective practitioner* (Dart, et al. 294; Moore). I want to scrutinize the problems and dilemmas of teaching and not ignore them (Cochran-Smith 299). I want to be more than the rejection, resentment, and isolation I experienced while 'negotiating' my way through thirteen years of school (Boomer,

**It has been argued ... that teachers' pre-existing beliefs about teaching and learning are so influential that attempts to change teaching styles will be ineffective unless these beliefs are directly questioned.**

(Dart, et al. 293)

“Negotiating the Curriculum”; Connell, et al.; Smyth, et al. 127).

I can be so much more than this.

Duane Whitbeck and Elizabeth Hatton note that teacher education programs struggle to undo the deeply held preconceptions of pre-service teachers. Hatton writes: “However, it is possible to move beyond one’s biography. It need not be inevitable that teachers from dominant groups mindlessly reproduce through their practices the inequalities already present in society” (10). And Susan Groundwater-Smith et al. remind us that: “Your

own experience as a student, irrespective of how long ago this was, no doubt provides you with a set of ‘scripts’ for the roles that teachers and students play in

**Prospective teachers need to know from the start that they are part of a larger struggle and that they have a responsibility to reform, not just replicate, standard school practices.**

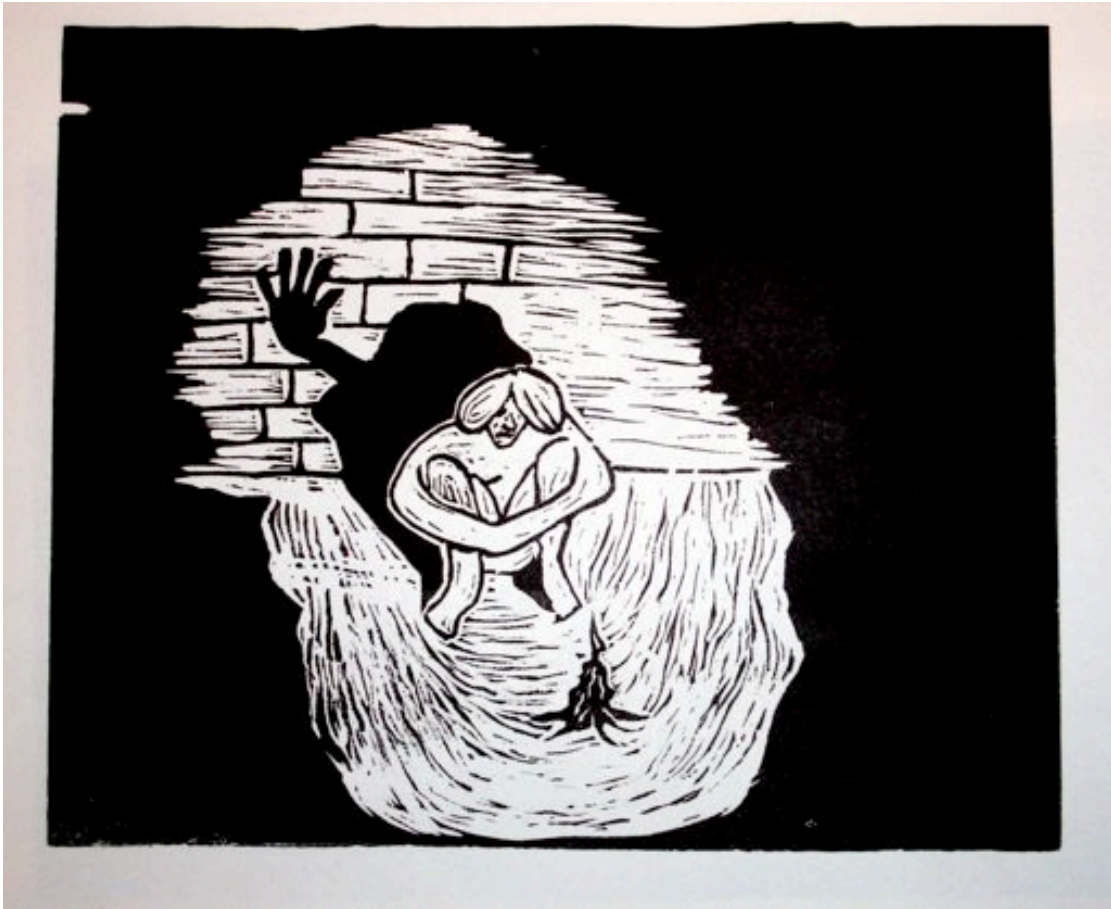
**(Cochran-Smith 280)**

these institutions” (127). In other words, I need to challenge my conditioning through critical inquiry and praxis. As Paulo Freire suggests: “For apart from inquiry, apart from the praxis, individuals cannot be truly human. Knowledge emerges only through invention and re-invention, through the restless, impatient, continuing, hopeful inquiry human beings pursue in the world, with the world, and with each other” (53).

One way of deconstructing (and reconstructing) my identity is through *narrative inquiry* (Chase; Doyle and Carter), *autoethnography* (Ellis; Ellis and Bochner; Jones; Neumann), and *writing* (Chambers; Richardson and St. Pierre). Walter Doyle and Kathy Carter argue that “[s]tory is a fundamental way of human knowing [and that] this assertion is especially true in pre-service teacher education” (130). Storytelling, as a method of narrative inquiry, allows me to examine, critique, and re-construe the various influences that have gone into constructing me as a teacher and learner (Cochran-Smith 279; Groundwater-Smith, et al. 47). Even still, I can never actually capture past experience: “narrative is always a story about the past” (Ellis and Bochner 750). Every story is partial and situated, and past events are always interpreted from my current position (Ellis and Bochner 752). “*Narrative truth,*” according to Arthur Bochner (qtd. in Ellis and Bochner 745), “*seeks to keep the past alive in the present. Stories show us that the meanings and significance of the past are incomplete, tentative, and revisable according to contingencies of our present life circumstances, the present from which we narrate. ... After all, stories rearrange, redescribe, invent, omit, and revise*” (italics in original). I mean to take advantage of this incompleteness and undo and re-construe my making. For I will not capitulate anymore.

So this is why I look back. Back to my making as a disaffected student.

## Image 1



This linocut print was rediscovered (wonderfully) in an old chest in December 2005. It was made in the early 1980s while I was a Year 8 or 9 student in high school in Adelaide, South Australia. The picture depicts a male figure hemmed in by thick, impenetrable darkness, squatting fetal and handless with his back to a wall, within a small, solitary flame of an almost burnt out candle. In this dying light – which I remember represented hope in the void – the boy's shadow can be seen to be reaching out from the body. Time appears to be running out. The crouched figure is me, a younger me, a powerless, handless, frowning, and grimacing me, staring vacantly at the light from beneath long hair. Perhaps the shadow represents the soul, and perhaps the hand, which is the most evocative gesture in the image, is the soul attempting to reach beyond the ego's (pre)occupation to places beyond the darkness. Perhaps, alternatively, the reaching hand is the ego itself, fingering the cosmos for external solutions to an otherwise inward and spiritual deficiency. Or perhaps the hand represents a more assertive me, the *me* I wanted to be, capable of ordering the world to stop. To stand back. Keep away. *Enough*.

For me, this is a very 'real' and passionate personal account that counts (Jones 764): a portrait of me as a teenager. It is a commentary on how the personal is also representative of the social and the political (Jones; Neumann); how this youth was disenfranchised and disempowered by the very systems that were meant to help and enable him: particularly school, but also the family unit. Each groove of the print has been carefully dug out from the linoleum block despite the apparent isolation, inertia, and incapacity experienced by the young artist. This image was meant to be seen and experienced, however shy and withdrawn the maker. Although sullen and brooding, this print is also, paradoxically, eternally optimistic and political. I suspect that the younger me knew full well that images were (are) powerful, and that, given his inability to express himself through prose and language, he could use visual texts to subvert the system from within the system. He was making a social commentary about *his* disempowerment and disempowerment *per se*. He knew that his art teacher would know what he meant and how he felt. He knew that she was his audience. *He knew that she knew his purpose*. It was a form of 'guerrilla warfare' (Denzin qtd. in Finley 689) against the system that silenced and controlled him (Connell, et al. 102; Smyth, et al. 290). It was, in effect, a 'mystory' performance (Finley; Ulmer).

Not surprisingly, I usually received As in Art in high school, and was always encouraged to pursue my artistic talents, at least by Art teachers. For me, art rooms were safe and special places. Places of sedition and expression. Places to translate agony into image and object. Places to go beyond the lies of everyday life, beyond the banal, to the brutal. Places, no less, to send telegrams to the future.

To me, the young artist is speaking out *in silence*. Like Edvard Munch's *The Scream*, the loudest scream ever screamed, this teenager screams in silence, in exile. In *Waiting for Godot* (Beckett), there is a scene where Gogo and Didi, the two tramps, are faced with a moral dilemma. Two travelers are approaching on a country road. They become entangled and fall. "They lie helpless among the scattered baggage" (77). They can't get up. They cry out for help. The two tramps observe all this and come to the conclusion that the fallen are *not* Godot. Nevertheless, the cries continue, to which Vladimir (Didi) says to Estragon (Gogo):

Let us not waste our time in idle discourse!  
(*Pause. Vehemently.*) Let us do something, while  
we have the chance! It is not every day that we are  
needed. Not indeed that we personally are  
needed. Others would meet the case equally well,  
if not better. To all mankind they were addressed,  
those cries for help still ringing in our ears! But at  
this place, at this moment of time, all mankind is

us, whether we like it or not. Let us make the most of it, before it is too late! Let us represent worthily for once the foul brood to which a cruel fate consigned us! ... What are we doing here, *that* is the question. And we are blessed in this, that we happen to know the answer. Yes, in this immense confusion one thing alone is clear. We are waiting for Godot to come—

(79-80)

I too am faced with such a dilemma, and I too recognize the choice to be made. The silent scream of yesteryear, so long having fallen on deaf ears, so long in its making and its journey from there to here, has met my heart. Do I turn away or do I turn to meet it? *Do I stop or gently pass* (William Wordsworth, "The Solitary Reaper," 1807)? *Those cries for help still ringing in my ears.* I hear that scream, I hear it loud and clear, and I am fortunate in this, that I happen to know the answer, I happen to know what I'm doing here: I'm here to listen, learn, and grow – so I turn to meet it. Together again, the boy and I will walk on and share what we've learned.

## Image 2



This linocut, also found in the chest, was made in Year 10, my last year of school before dropping out. The seated figure of Image 1 is no more, and in his place are

two writhing waifs. This time, the hand is cut off from the body (bodies), isolated in the darkness, less certain, and reaching and groping rather than insisting and demanding. One of the figures is missing an arm. There are no genitals, as with the first image, and no outlet for self-gratification. Yet they are male figures. We see ribcages, voiceless mouths, empty eye sockets, and contorted torsos and limbs. The figures grapple with each other and yet find no comfort. They seem to be imploring the viewer, you and me, to help release and save them. They don't see each other. They don't see at all. They are entirely alone, devoid of place and context, and simply suspended. There are no women here. This is an all male horror.

My emotional decline at this time was profound. I felt utterly hopeless and my confidence was failing. Months after this image was made, I began starving myself until I looked like these specters. I had dropped out of high school and was working in a factory, miserable and dejected. I became skeletal. I believed in Gandhi and *Satyagraha*, the philosophy and activity of non-violence and resistance as a political and social mechanism for change. I became this grim image. I lived it in body having lived it in mind and soul. It was a brutal and violent assault on *self*, but it was also a brutal and violent assault on my teachers and father for trying to dominate and oppress me. I became very sick, and seeing this image again after twenty years, I am reminded just how sick. In body, mind, and spirit, I wasted away. Starvation was a slow, symbolic, and agonizing experience, and I often fainted through weakness and exhaustion. But it was also a performance, an action, an attempt to reconcile my position as weak and vulnerable with my need to assert, make choices, act, and take control. I wanted personal autonomy. I was, as Stacy Holman Jones suggests, making the personal extremely political and the political extremely theatrical and bloody. I was posturing and performing for my life: literally baring my ribcage to the world.

**Barbara Tedlock writes: "Performance is every-where in life: from simple gestures to melodramas and macrodramas" (469). Performance, then, comes to refer to both human behavior(s) and human interaction(s) in local and global contexts.**

### **Image 3**

After a year out of school, I returned and completed Years 11 and 12 in relative silence and frustration. Once finished, I left home and moved into a small flat overlooking the Adelaide plains. From my window I would look out over the suburbs to the city. All I could see was a society of regimentation and control. Boxes and



boxes of failed dreams. Contained dreams. Mortgages and servitude. Life sentences and habit.



By Image 3 the people and skeletons have gone; in their place are rows of filing cabinets. After two years of taming in senior school, I no longer saw people in the world, just two-dimensional fabrications, like me. I would soon be going to art school. I was no longer starving myself, but I still felt empty and lost. I was also in love, something I had never experienced before. Both my girlfriend and brother lived with me in a small flat. I remember looking at the bloody cuts on my brother's wrists as he



lay passed out, drunk and broken, on the floor of the flat, and I remember thinking that life was a kind of insufferable hell. All the people were broken and filed away. Their secrets and passions lost in the filing cabinets of the suburbs. Their identities made to look very much like the identities of those beside them.

Later, I began writing these things down and sharing them in writers' groups. I merged the literary, the aesthetic, and the critical into oxymoronic<sup>1</sup> and multimodal<sup>2</sup> texts: prints, sketches, paintings, films, stories, novels, scripts, poems, sculptures, installations, photographs, and collages.<sup>3</sup> I was attempting to document and make sense of my world through multiple discourses and practices – the beginnings, perhaps, of my own explorations into *arts-based inquiry*, “mystory performances”<sup>4</sup> (Finley), *writing as a method of inquiry and migration* (Chambers; Chase; Richardson and St. Pierre), and *autoethnography* (Chase; Ellis; Ellis and Bochner; Jones; Neumann). I was teaching myself to communicate with the world and with (my) *self*.

The individual is lost in the regimentation of Image 3. There are no hopeful or desperate hands reaching into the abyss. There are no gestures of humanity at all. Emotions have been replaced by structures. I had been tamed and stuffed back into my box. This world is soulless and unfeeling. It has become the machine I experienced while working in a factory during my year out of school. An endless production line of objects and faceless individuals, all mechanical, apathetic, passive, and abstract, in the stale gray light and hissing noise of an industrial world, a world overseen by suits and ties and compulsory overtime, and yet hidden within unassuming and innocuous structures that looked like filing cabinets. (And for me filing cabinets represented power, control, and surveillance – containers of secrets

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<sup>1</sup> Oxymoronic genres include creative nonfiction, faction, ethnographic fiction, and true fiction (Richardson and St. Pierre 961).

<sup>2</sup> Multimodal texts “draw upon a variety of communication modes—spoken, written, visual, spatial etc—at the same time” (Kress and van Leeuwen qtd. in Callow 2). This text is an example of a multimodal text.

<sup>3</sup> According to Finley, “the text is defined [by many arts-based practitioners] in its broadest possible terms and invokes all of the actions in the world that can be ‘read’” (686).

<sup>4</sup> Finley writes: “Mystory performances are personal cultural texts (e.g. narratives, paintings, poetry, music) that contextualize important personal experiences and problems within the institutional settings and historical moments where their authors (e.g. painters, collagists, dramatists) find themselves. They attempt to make sense of seemingly senseless moments in life, to capture frustrations and turmoil and open them for critical critique. They open a liminal space, and create an open and dialogic text, where a diverse group of people can be brought to collective understanding of the sites of power, of conflicts between the empowered and the powerless, and from this point of understanding can begin to address the need for social change” (690).

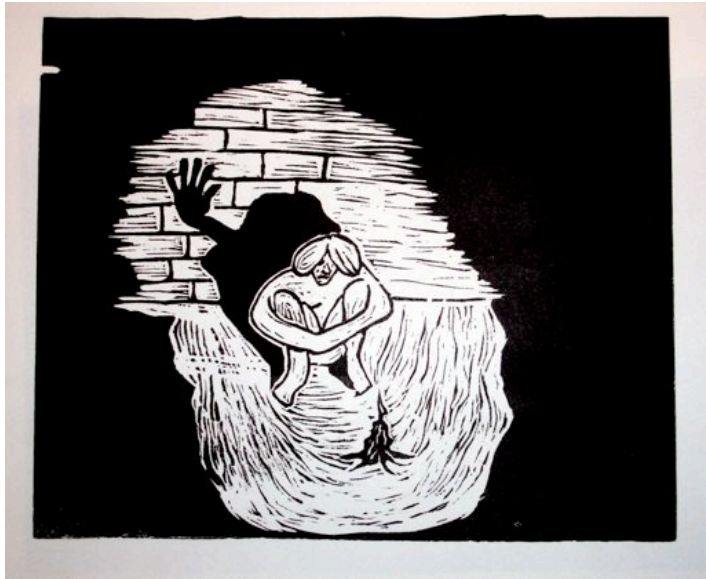
and personal details. The school, my dad, and the police all had files on me. Even I had files on me, but they were secret files.)

I wanted more than this. I wanted to free myself from the complicity I shared in my own subjugation—to *speak up* in defence of my own needs and *speak out* in the defence of others. In effect, this image illustrates what Freire calls “the ‘banking’ concept of education, in which the scope of action allowed to the students extends only as far as receiving, filing, and storing the deposits [made by the teacher]. They do, it is true, have the opportunity to become collectors or cataloguers of the things they store. But in the last analysis, it is the people themselves who are filed away through the lack of creativity, transformation, and knowledge in this (at best) misguided system” (53). When I read this passage and looked at my linocut, I was astonished at how well the younger me had illustrated Freire’s critique and representation of banking methods of education. He didn’t know this, of course, but from my vantage point in the present, I can now call back to him about the new ‘readings’ and ‘meanings’ I have made. He is impressed and slightly abashed, but smiles nonetheless. Yes, his ideas *do* matter. And today they *do* count.

## Images Together

These three images, when viewed in chronological ‘order’ and through different lenses, and contextualized with various voices and reflections, form a narrative (Chase). Individually, they make comments, but together they make a story of high school. Image 1 represents early high school and disempowerment (which I’ll call *The Taming*). Image 2 represents dropping out, departure, exile, and dislocation (I’ll call *The Shaming*). And Image 3 represents dropping back in, Years 11 and 12, conformity, and regimentation (I’ll call *The Framing and Containing*). A seven year period is represented. As Iain Chambers suggests:

Perhaps the sense of our journey does not lie only in one direction, perhaps there is no terminus at the end of the tracks to justify our insistent movement forward? Perhaps we are riding blinded by a future whose redemption ultimately lies at our backs, in the rubble, misery and confusion that we think we have already overcome? (30)



*The Taming*  
1983-84 (?)



*The Shaming*  
1985 (?)



*The Framing & Containing*  
1989 (?)

These images represent the expressions of a disillusioned boy and young man trying to make sense of his world and the systems of power that acted upon him. His outlook was grim. By reviewing these images and commenting upon them personally and politically, the older me, looking back and forward, both inward and out, is also grappling with these issues, although from a different century, a different perspective, through different lenses, and using different and newly acquired means (Chase). The same search for meaning and agency persists. Ultimately, it is about praxis and transformation (Freire). It is about naming my own learning experiences, questioning my making (Boomer, *Metaphors*; Chase; Cochran-Smith; Dart, et al.; Freire; Hatton; Marsh; Moore), and constructing new knowledge and new ways of engaging with, and perceiving, the world (Chambers; Chase; Freire). I am writing to understand my life, my world, my making, and “to live more fully in the world” (hooks 40). I want to “regard reform as an integral part of the social, intellectual, ethical, and political activity of teaching” (Cochran-Smith 279). Blind obedience is no longer an option. That would constitute violence against the self and degrade the resilience shown by a younger me. I will not hurt him like that again. Unlike Lady Macbeth, my hands will not be stained with blood.

By Image 3 the human figure has gone. In its place is a series of cabinets. The transition from boy, to skeleton, to machine, is complete. I need to free this young man from the cabinet and extricate his notes and experiences from the files. Now eighteen years old, he no longer sees himself as occupying the world. He sees himself as having faded completely away, his emotions stripped away with his flesh, until a controlled, trained, complicit, and numerical identity, mirroring all other identities, has slotted into its place—in a flat, a small box, a cell, in the suburbs, on the fringes of town, in a world with black skies and silence. *And yet he dared make the image*. The image is a gesture and performance that attempts to articulate thoughts and emotions (Finley; Jones; Tedlock). His audience was a small one—*himself*. Maybe he made this image for me to unearth in the rubble years later. Perhaps he knew I would need reminding of what it was like to be small and powerless and ‘me’ while growing up. Perhaps he secretly harbored ambitions of one day returning to these sites of agony and pain and becoming the type of teacher who empowers rather than enslaves. Perhaps he wanted to someday help make a better world, starting with a better *him*. Perhaps he knew I was on my way. Perhaps he knew the poem “At North Farm” by John Ashbery, which begins:

Somewhere someone is traveling furiously toward you,  
At incredible speed, traveling day and night,

Through blizzards and desert heat, across torrents, through  
narrow passes.  
But will he know where to find you,  
Recognize you when he sees you,  
Give you the thing he has for you?

[Yes, yes I will.]

Perhaps he knew the future *him* was coming. Perhaps he left clues in a chest so that I would recognize him and give him the thing I have for him. *Love. Stability. And Cohesion.* I now accept his invitation to re-view the past, and love him for surviving those years and making those images. I thank him for storing them so earnestly in a chest. I thank him for carting them around for twenty years. I thank him for waiting so patiently for me to arrive.

## The Pragmatic Radical

The boy's efforts (as my efforts) persist today. They persist in our renewed efforts to make sense of what has passed. We want to see what we've seen, *to know what we know* (Hospital). We are engaging in "retrospective meaning making" through theory, art, and narrative (Chase 656). I no longer wish to "pick a quarrel" with the younger me, but a quarrel with the politics and practices of schooling that left me bewildered and disenfranchised (Chambers 2). This quarrel need not be bitter and retaliatory, but a point of growth, transition, and improvement on what the term TEACHER actually means to me. Together, he and I, man and boy, can hopefully sift through these experiences and create a more productive future. A future where the term 'teacher' evokes positive rather than negative meanings; where the term teacher is about empowering students rather than treating them as clients, empty vessels, or people-in-waiting; a future where terms like facilitator (Rogers and Freiberg), co-learner (Freire; Kemmis, et al.), consultant (Claxton 287), learning coach (291), activist and reformer (Cochran-Smith; Groundwater-Smith, et al.), knowledge and power broker (Cervero and Wilson 271), fellow struggler (Boomer, *Metaphors* 40), co-creator or co-intentional re-creator (Freire 51), project organizer, resource person, and

**There will always be inequalities of power both in schools and in society, and the harmful effects of power will be offset only *if those in power make quite explicit* the values, assumptions and criteria on which they base their actions. In this way others will have a better chance to defend themselves, more opportunity to question and more chance of negotiation, at least where the power figure is not totally despotic [italics in original].**

**(Boomer, *Metaphors* 145)**

emancipatory coordinator (Kemmis, et al. 132), *all* come to build on the premise that teaching is a people-job with moral and ethical dimensions (Cochran-Smith) and caring rather than controlling relationships (Barry and King 568-571). This way, we do not ‘upholster’ the term teacher to depersonalize our work; we ‘reclaim’ the term teacher to mean *power with* rather than *power over* the people in our care (B. Kameniar, personal communication, September 19, 2006).

As Edward Said suggests: “Exiles cross borders, [and] break barriers of thought and experience” (qtd. in Chambers 2). For me, this involves viewing the role of teacher (and life itself) as nomadic, as a journey and a series of displacements through different classrooms, institutions, relationships, and interactions, of being in a state of ongoing transformation and flux, and never being sedentary and ‘comfortable’ with things as they are, or content to simply reproduce curricula year in year out as if only the faces change but the people do not.<sup>5</sup> In fact, *we can never live in the same world twice*. It’s impossible. Our worlds are changing, for better or for worse, every second. Our physical, emotional, and conceptual makeups are on the move. Nothing is permanent. Not even our most cherished institutional follies (Boomer, *Metaphors* 190-191). Change, although unsettling, is also exciting (Groundwater-Smith, et al. 11). It promises new experiences, new perspectives, and new potentialities (O’Farrell). It promises hope.

Autoethnography embraces this potential. Nothing is certain or fixed. Renderings and readings alter as frequently as new thoughts arise and new experiences unfold. As Jones points out, autoethnography can make ‘personal accounts count’ and ‘the personal political’. Personal accounts are acknowledged as valid and legitimate opportunities for inquiry and discovery (Chase; Ellis; Ellis and Bochner; Jones; Neumann; Richardson and St. Pierre). They link the personal to the cultural (Ellis and Bochner 740). By examining the emotional and subjective experiences of the individual – in

**As educators, we are involved in the struggle over meaning. Yet, in this society as in all others, only certain ways of understanding are considered ‘legitimate,’ only certain ways of understanding the world get to be called ‘official knowledge.’ This doesn’t just happen. Our society is structured in such a way that dominant meanings are more likely to circulate. These meanings, of course, *will* be contested ... and sometimes transformed; but, this does not lessen the fact that hegemonic cultures have greater power to make themselves known and acceptable.**

**(Apple, “Consuming the Other” 124)**

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<sup>5</sup> Freire writes: “In problem-posing education, people develop their power to perceive critically *the way they exist* in the world *with which* and *in which* they find themselves; they come to see the world not as a static reality, but as a reality in process, in transformation” (64, italics in original). I wish, in turn, to resist “unquestioning adherence to the textbook curriculum and [the] compulsion to maintain control” (Cochran-Smith 303).

this case 'me', as both a former student and a beginning teacher – insights can be gained and applied to the social and political situations in which these activities take place (Ellis and Bochner; Jones). *And all teachers can do this*. For me, it is about examining the disaffection experienced by a younger me towards school, his exclusion and departure, and how the school and its teachers failed to meet his needs or accommodate his differences. Experiences of intransigent conflict,<sup>6</sup> moral exclusion,<sup>7</sup> structural violence,<sup>8</sup> and dropping out are not uncommon (Croninger and Lee; Fallis and Opatow). These experiences have led me to envisage a teaching career and a pedagogical orientation that will accommodate *all* students, no matter how marginal or mainstream (Smyth, et al. 143), and to do so in a system that often 'teaches to the middle' (Groundwater-Smith, et al. 118; Tomlinson, *Differentiated Classroom*; Tomlinson, *Differentiated Classrooms*) and adopts a 'one-size-fits-all' mentality (Tomlinson, *Differentiated Classroom*; Tomlinson, *Differentiated Classrooms*). Such a system privileges certain social and cultural capitals while ignoring and excluding others (Apple, "Consuming"; Groundwater-Smith, et al.; Smyth, et al.; Thomson, "One, two, three"; Thomson, *Schooling the Rustbelt Kids*). Consequently, such a system fails many students (Groundwater-Smith, et al. 183; Smyth, et al. 148, 268). Silent and invisible students need to be seen and heard too (Apple, "Consuming"; hooks). And students like the younger me.

Such a teacher would need to be wary of the 'hidden curriculum' which tacitly reinforces social inequities and perpetuates prejudice and exclusion (Groundwater-Smith, et al. 71; Seaton 9); wary enough to negotiate the system without falling foul of its inbuilt 'teeth' which are designed to retain the status quo (Boomer, *Metaphors* 181). Such a teacher would need to endure a certain amount of political, institutional, collegial, and curricular 'toxicity' in order to quietly revolutionize the politics of the

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<sup>6</sup> Fallis and Opatow write: "Within institutions, admitting responsibility for harmful outcomes can be difficult because it threatens the core identity of school professionals who see their personal and institutional goals as promoting student well-being. ... Students, lacking voices and institutional influence, are the perfect repository for blame. ... Destructive conflicts are those that foster moral exclusion and rationalize harms others experience" (110).

<sup>7</sup> Fallis and Opatow write: "[M]oral exclusion is a theory that describes how negative social categorizations give rise to moral justifications and allow those outside the scope of justice to be harmed. In its severe form moral exclusion justifies human rights violations and mass murder. In its mild form moral exclusion justifies disparate access to opportunity and resources" (110).

<sup>8</sup> Fallis and Opatow write: "In contrast to direct violence which is committed by and on particular people, structural violence is gradual, chronic harm that occurs because of the way things are done, whose voice is heard or ignored, and who gets resources or goes without. Structural violence debases people by treating them as irrelevant, but it is difficult to isolate and examine. It remains invisible because responsibility for outcomes is diffused or denied by the way that institutions structure process and outcomes" (112).



classroom (Boomer, *Metaphors*; Boomer, “Negotiating the System”; Boomer, “Negotiating the Curriculum”; Thomson, “One, two, three” 250); in turn, such a teacher would inject what Pat Thomson calls ‘good stuff’ into the curriculum (250). Such a teacher would need to sneak under the radar of convention and interrupt the normalizing discourses and practices which stipulate “the way we do school here” (Tomlinson, *Differentiated Classroom* 115). Such a teacher would avoid decontextualized and static subject matter and negotiate meaningful and relevant learning experiences instead (Kemmis, et al.; Ramos-Ford and Gardner; Smyth, et al.). Such a teacher would engage students on a very real and personal level (S. Shambrook, personal communication, March 4, 2005). Such a teacher would involve and empower students in their own schooling lives rather than objectify, pacify, and have them carving grim images of despair and annihilation in art classes—or worse, lashing out at school property and/or other people.<sup>9</sup> Learners would take their rightful place at the centre of such classrooms, and prescribed outcomes and policy directives would be applied and utilized only

in so far as they are useful to the population of learners involved, not the other way around (Cochran-Smith 306; Ramos-Ford and Gardner; Tomlinson, *Differentiated Classroom*; Tomlinson, *Differentiated Classrooms*). This is a people-first philosophy, one that humanizes rather than tyrannizes its participants (Freire; hooks; Rogers and Freiberg).<sup>10</sup>

**What we all ideally share is the desire to learn—to receive actively knowledge that enhances our intellectual development and our capacity to live more fully in the world. It has been my experience that one way to build community in the classroom is to recognize the value of each individual voice.**

(hooks 40)

This is all easier said than done, yes. There are many barriers to educational reform, including people. Not only are many teachers suspicious of alternative approaches to pedagogy, curriculum, assessment, and behavior ‘development’<sup>11</sup>

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<sup>9</sup> Wachtel and McCold write: “[H]uman beings are happier, more productive and more likely to make positive changes in their behavior when those in positions of authority do things *with* them, rather than *to* them or *for* them. This hypothesis maintains that the punitive and authoritarian *to* mode and the permissive and paternalistic *for* mode are not as effective as the restorative, participatory, engaging *with* mode” (80-81, italics in original).

<sup>10</sup> Freire writes: “Education as the practice of freedom—as opposed to education as the practice of domination—denies that man is abstract, isolated, independent, and unattached to the world; it also denies that the world exists as a reality apart from people. Authentic reflection considers neither abstract man nor the world without people, but people in their relations with the world” (62).

<sup>11</sup> Unlike behavior ‘management’ strategies which administer external controls (e.g. rewards and sanctions) *to* or *for* students by figures in authority, a ‘development’ model encourages personal accountability by working *with* people and *through* relationships (D. Laycock, personal communication, August 23, 2005).

(Boomer, *Metaphors*; Cochran-Smith), but so too are many students, who have been conditioned to view such approaches as illegitimate (Boomer, *Metaphors*; Boomer, "Negotiating the Curriculum"; Haberman). As Groundwater-Smith et al. point out: "And yet, we reiterate, our schools, which are society's engine room for change, in many respects, seem to have barely altered at all" (17). It is hardly surprising then that students take the mass schooling formula to heart, and 'defend it beyond reason and necessity' (Said qtd. in Chambers 2) even when it is negating their freedom, inculcating them with social and cultural norms and prejudices, and molding them to suit certain labor markets through cognitive and behavioral conditioning. Students are, like many teachers, habit-bound and products of a system. Some equate this system to the *Fordist* factory model of mass production (Robertson qtd. in Groundwater-Smith, et al. 41) and others suggest that the education industry is built on the factory metaphor (Boomer, *Metaphors* 75). I am not the first teacher to observe that students are largely complicit in their own subjugation and oppression (Boomer, *Metaphors*; Boomer, "Negotiating the System"; Boomer, "Negotiating the Curriculum"; Freire; Groundwater-Smith, et al.; Haberman; Lewis 154; Porter 69), nor the first teacher to feel pressure to uphold the status quo and to follow the mass schooling script (Cochran-Smith; Groundwater-Smith, et al.; Moore; Tomlinson, *Differentiated Classroom*; Tomlinson, *Differentiated Classrooms*). The habit border is well fortified, and the pragmatic radical would need to chip away at this border with the patience of a prisoner digging to freedom with a teaspoon. Such, I think, is the dedication needed to break through the habit border and to open up new learning spaces for students and teachers alike.

Take the example of the Year 9 class I taught in 2006. It was my first day of an 8 week practicum at a public high school in Adelaide's southern suburbs. I had been given several Year 9 classes in both English and SOSE (Studies of Society and Environment). This class was a SOSE class. The classroom itself was located in the fringes of the school, well away from main buildings and public scrutiny. I quickly realized that whilst the school didn't officially sanction 'streaming' based on ability or behavior, unofficially it was no coincidence that these students were herded together. In other words, these kids were in a kind of intra-school exile—physically and mentally marginalized and quarantined from the mainstream school community. The students themselves may not have been able to 'name' their oppressors in the Freirean sense, but they certainly knew they had been 'othered' and 'outed'. Not surprisingly, this perception became a self-fulfilling prophecy. The students performed their 'deviance' with gusto. On my first day I asked one student to stop talking on his phone and was flatly told to 'fuck off.' I admit it. I was intimidated. University

discussions about behavior management hadn't prepared me for this level of hostility and defiance. For the next few minutes I stood face to face with this boy, asking him to turn off his phone and put it away. Eventually, he put it in his pocket but refused to turn it off. So far so good. I hadn't made one threat or resorted to yelling. It wasn't until after class that I got angry. Really angry. For the next hour I examined the school's behavior management policies and punishments. I was going to have my revenge. Groups of these students would be sent to Time Out for the term of their natural lives while spending their afternoons wallowing in Detention. I felt better just thinking about it.

Then it hit me. In a few short hours, I had become everything I had despised at school. I was performing the actions of my former teachers. I was losing me and becoming them. The authoritarian ghosts of yesteryear were channeling through me. I was horrified. So I started again. I threw the behavior management policies in the bin and decided not to punish any student from this class for the entire time I was there. I would rely instead on diplomacy and dialogue. I was challenging myself to find other ways through. I became a metacognitive teacher. I spoke explicitly about my expectations and openly about my frustrations at trying to 'teach against the grain' of a system determined to silence them. I reminded them that I hadn't hurt, verbally abused, or punished any of them. I offered them more and more responsibility for their own learning journeys. I took the tables out of rows and formed clusters. I played rap music during work time. I negotiated learning activities and self assessments. Students became active in the management of their own schooling lives. They were allowed to speak openly and honestly about their expectations of me and the school. Their amazement and suspicion gave way to action and trust. And guess what? No one failed. Everyone participated. And no one felt the need to tell me to 'fuck off' again. Little by little we changed the climate of that classroom – from one of anger and violence to one of enjoyment and substance. The emotional labor was exhausting. We had our good and bad days – and days when I nearly gave up my ambitions of being a pragmatic radical. But it worked. And I proved to myself that I *could* disrupt my conditioning and be the kind of teacher I could live with and love.

This is all easier said than done, yes. Teachers and students need to work together to overcome their respective positionings and conditionings. As Freire points out, both parties, as Subject and Object, can only exist in the context of the other. Both parties need to free themselves from their scripted 'roles' by transforming the banking concept of education (one narrative) to a liberatory concept of education (another narrative). The oppressors, too, need to be freed from their bondage, and the dichotomy between teacher and student needs to be unpacked and reconstituted

to enable reciprocal and emancipatory relations and activities. This is about working *with* people – not *against* them (Wachtel and McCold). According to Groundwater-Smith et al.: “Beginning teachers who do not come with the full paraphernalia of socialization into what is expected of teachers and schools may thus play an important role in this reinvention” (275). In other words, beginning teachers *like me* have the opportunity to not only redefine their own preexisting assumptions about teaching and learning, but those of the system that employs them. How is the system controlling the way I perform my role as teacher *and* inculcating me into the logic of its thinking?

Autoethnography permits such a praxis. Through the lenses and languages of art and science, I am able to unearth the messages (narratives), lessons (insights), and feelings (emotions and intuitions) of yesteryear in order to invigorate, inform, and revolutionize the teaching theories and practices I carry into coming years; I am also able to attend to the cries for help from a younger me and embrace his pain and honor his knowledge. As a method of inquiry, autoethnography is helping me recognize and deconstruct my conditioning and challenge the ‘roles’ prescribed to teachers. For Carolyn Ellis and Arthur Bochner, autoethnography opens up a space to write between traditional social science prose and literature, and stimulates discussion about working the spaces between subjectivity and objectivity, between passion and intellect, and between autobiography and culture (761).

I need to discover the secrets of survival in an institutional domain that is often suspicious of difference and resistant to change (Boomer, *Metaphors*; Boomer, “Negotiating the System”; Boomer, “Literacy”; Boomer, “Negotiating the Curriculum”; Cochran-Smith; Groundwater-Smith, et al.; Thomson, “One, two, Three”; Thomson, *Schooling*; Tomlinson, *Differentiated Classroom*). As Marilyn Cochran-Smith notes, “Teachers who work against the grain are in the minority” (284). I need to find a space for *me* in the social and the public. I need to meet my needs and those of the community. As Carl Rogers and H. Jerome Freiberg point out:

Too often I am tempted to *teach* in the way I have been taught. Breaking this mold requires reflection about what is best for the learner, not about what is familiar to me. (173)

I do not want to slot into a ‘default’ mode of teaching. I do not want to fall back on the Pedagogy of Poverty (Haberman) or the Competitive Academic Curriculum (Connell, et al. 82; Groundwater-Smith, et al. 23; Smyth, et al. 274) which suggest that *teachers teach, and students learn* (Groundwater-Smith, et al. 26). I do not want to

emulate many of the things I saw, felt, and heard while a student myself. I do not want to be stood over as a teacher and coerced into adopting the familiar formula of teaching and mass schooling as handed down through the generations. I do not want to perpetuate the tradition of transmission teaching and rote learning. As Carol Ann Tomlinson (*Differentiated Classrooms*) notes:

In a time when teachers feel almost unbearable pressure to standardize what we do, it is important to begin with the conviction that we are no longer teaching if *what* we teach is more important than *who* we teach or *how* we teach. (10, italics in original)

I wrote these two quotations on the inside cover of my diary while on my second teaching practicum some years ago. I did so because I was concerned I would forget my ideals (or have them forgotten for me) and become a mere ‘functionary’ of the system (Groundwater-Smith, et al. 47). I am glad I did. Every day I consulted these passages to remind myself of why I was becoming an “activist professional” (Groundwater-Smith, et al. 47) and a “facilitator of learning” (Rogers and Freiberg): because of a little boy who feared and loathed his schooling years and who, as an adolescent, resorted to class cutting, skipping school, and dropping out as a means of school survival. These passages gave me the strength to remain (mostly) true to my heartfelt convictions, despite the pressure I felt from those around me to hand back my idealism for the cold, hard reality of transmission teaching and sanctions-based control.<sup>12</sup> For the sake of this boy and other young people who have high stakes riding on their educations (Groundwater-Smith, et al. 211, 214; Smyth, et al. 129; Stiggins), I mean to write these passages on the inside cover of my being, so that they can never be erased or ridiculed as hopelessly idealistic and impossible to enact in the ‘real’ world. This is the palimpsest of self.

**It could be argued that the health of the education system ... is indicated by the capacity of its practitioners to be activist professionals, rather than mere functionaries.**

**(Groundwater-Smith, et al. 47)**

Thankfully, evidence abounds from teachers who have successfully implemented such theories and practices in their classrooms and who have enjoyed inspiring results in the ‘real’ world (Apple, “Consuming”; Apple, “Pedagogy”; Bigelow, “Discovering Columbus”; Bigelow, “Human Lives”; Bigelow, “Whose ‘terrorism’?”;

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<sup>12</sup> Seaton writes: “High schools clearly reflect an even stronger alignment with the traditional, disempowering and alienating curricular form characterized by control and a transmission model of learning” (10).

Cochran-Smith; Finley; Freire; Groundwater-Smith, et al.; hooks; Rogers and Freiberg; Thomson, “One, two, three”). These are the people I shall look to for guidance in my search for the secrets of teaching survival – and success – as a ‘pragmatic radical’ in a resistant and habituated education system (Boomer, *Metaphors*; Boomer, “Negotiating the System”; Boomer, “Literacy”; Boomer, “Negotiating the Curriculum”; Groundwater-Smith, et al.; Thomson, “One, two, three”; Tomlinson, *Differentiated Classroom*; Tomlinson, *Differentiated Classrooms*). I shall also seek guidance from one of the greatest teachers of all, the younger me, the *self*.

In 2005, while celebrating a fellow pre-service teacher’s 37<sup>th</sup> birthday at a dinner, a week after we had finished our second practicum placements, we spoke at length about these issues. We discovered that we had both experienced institutional resistance and personal dissuasion while trying to enact student-centered pedagogies in our classrooms—this, despite curriculum statements advocating constructivism<sup>13</sup> and student-centered approaches to learning and pedagogy in public schools.<sup>14</sup> We were both told that *The South Australian Curriculum, Standards and Accountability Framework* (DECS) was rarely consulted and largely discounted; in other words, that these teachers were dismissive of educational reforms and only too willing to rely uncritically on age-old teaching practices. “Besides,” I was told by one teacher who was incensed at my advocacy for the *SACSA Framework*, “this curriculum won’t survive. They’re even talking about doing away with grades in Year 11!” He said this as if SACSA was some kind of radical organization and I was a threat to school order. He went on to tell me that the students in my classes would need re-disciplining (re-conditioning) after I left.

**Relying uncritically upon old practices will not be sufficient for effective schooling in the twenty-first century.**

**(Groundwater-Smith, et al. viii)**

This teacher was quite open about the fact that he had been excluding students from class for many years and keeping files to further increase the case for their expulsion from school itself. He recommended that I do the same in my career. When I protested that I could never do such a thing, he fell silent, seemed annoyed, and from that day forward kept his more exclusionary teaching tips to himself.

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<sup>13</sup> DECS (Part 1, para. 23) writes: “The central thesis of constructivism is that the learner is active in the process of taking in information and building knowledge and understanding; in other words, of constructing their own learning.”

<sup>14</sup> DECS (Part 1, para. 1) writes: “Children and students and their learning are at the heart of our work as educators: the partnership we establish with learners, parents and caregivers, families and the community are crucial to the progress of learners and to the future of our society.”

Instead, he focused on undermining and criticizing my views on student-centered pedagogies (often in front of students) and repeatedly suggesting that my approaches were naive and untenable (which they may well be). Negotiating the curriculum, for instance, was viewed as amusing, and identifying preferred learning styles and multiple intelligences was considered a waste of time. The suggestion was that I wouldn't survive as a teacher if I remained so idealistic. I needed to harden up and let students know *who was boss*. This teacher did, however, give me a grade of 'outstanding' for my practicum placement – so I must have performed well enough in the end. This ongoing debate was, in fact, praxis at work – restless and searching dialogues about *what* teachers do and *how* we do it. I think we both benefited from these exchanges, and both grew and transformed as people and educators as a result. I remain extremely grateful for the pragmatics that this teacher pushed. After all, my idealism may well need to be tempered with 'real' school experiences, in different settings and contexts, with different populations of learners, over extended periods of time.

I ordered a coffee and received a fortune cookie on the side. I read my fortune:

*While we try to teach our children all about life,  
Our children teach us what life is all about.*

I was reminded of a younger me. He knew, in his way, that life was about love, freedom, and growth – not exclusion, domination, and control. A teacher with this fortune would be very lucky indeed: she or he would be free to unburden the 'self' of absolute power and absolute knowledge (of playing God), and instead be open to the reciprocity of other learners and wholeheartedly share in what life is all about. Such a teacher would actively 'cross borders of thought and experience' and willingly distance themselves – even quietly *exile* themselves – from the prevailing dogmas and habits shared by many of their colleagues. Such a teacher would be free to learn, having shed the pretence of *already knowing*.

On my final teaching placement I was extremely fortunate to work with two supervising teachers who allowed me to explore my teaching philosophies *in practice*. Both, amazingly, were nearing the ends of their careers and yet were only too willing to listen to my views on education (including my concerns over neo-liberal and neo-conservative agendas), and to allow me the professional space and discretion necessary to experiment with my pedagogical approaches and behavior 'development' strategies in a traditional, sanctions-based, school system. Importantly,



they were also willing to question the practices and theories that underpinned their work and that of the system that employed them. They did not suggest at any stage that they knew it all, even after decades in the job. This impressed me.

In a sense, this is partly in keeping with what Cochran-Smith calls “collaborative resonance,” where teachers periodically reflect and act upon their work in collaboration with others. When I left the school after my 8 week placement, both teachers wholeheartedly thanked me for my contributions and new ideas, and one even thanked me for ‘re-inspiring’ her about the heart and soul of teaching, having seen my highly personalized approach in practice, and having read my autoethnographic paper “The Teaching Urge: And Seeking Amnesia” in *English in Australia* in 2006. I was similarly inspired by their support, encouragement, and capacity to collaborate with someone very much their experiential junior. *And this*, in the end, *is what it’s all about*: being activist professionals, reflective practitioners, and cold, hard theorizers about practice in collaboration and dialogue with others. For me, this is ‘pragmatic radicalism’ at work: about challenging assumptions and pushing reforms in ways that are accessible, context-sensitive, and achievable to all—in other words, of ‘compromising without capitulating’ (Boomer, *Metaphors* 149). Yes, such a teacher identity *is* possible and *does* count.

Can we influence the ethics and morality of future industrial and political leaders so that they place gross national happiness on an equal or higher scale of values than gross national product?

(Renzulli 77)



## Notes

Images 1, 2, and 3 were first published with short excerpts in 2006 in an article titled "The teaching urge: And seeking amnesia" in *English in Australia*, 41.1: 18-24.

Images *When I grow up I want to be a maniac* and *Fuck you I won't do what you tell me* appeared in 2006 in an unpublished Honours Thesis titled *Mystory: Raging Against the Mass Schooling Machine*.

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