

Reflexive Inquiry's Impact on Mindful Teaching for Student Wellbeing

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Abstract

This inquiry investigates the effects of trauma on students by analyzing personal experiences and teaching methods. Through the lens of autoethnography, a nonfictional storytelling approach, I reflect on my learning journey to identify compassionate and mindful teaching practices, aiming to foster a trauma-sensitive classroom environment. Emphasizing the significance of teachers sharing their stories through autoethnography, this exploration contributes valuable insights to the ongoing discourse on trauma-informed pedagogy for student wellbeing.

The Role of Reflexive Inquiry in Mindful Teaching Practices

Untangling myself from grief has taken an incredible amount of time and has compelled me to embark on a journey of profound introspection—a voyage that has brought me to the precipice of vulnerability and resilience. Even now I feel my hand resist writing these words, knowing the pain it might bring. In the aftermath of the heart-wrenching loss of my son, I find solace in the act of writing, weaving together personal narrative with scholarly inquiry to illuminate the transformative power of trauma-sensitive education within the realm of teaching and learning. I have experienced loneliness in my grief, and I do not assume that I am the only person who has ever felt this way; however, feeling connected to others brings a level of comfort.

Originating from the seminal works of ethnographer Ellis (1993, 1995, 2004) and Matthews (2019), autoethnography is a methodological approach that melds the personal with the cultural, foregrounding the researcher's subjective experiences as a means of understanding broader sociocultural phenomena. Ellis (2004) posits autoethnography as a reflexive praxis, wherein the researcher's introspection serves as both data and analysis, shedding light on the intricate interplay between self and society. Autoethnography allows for a window into the soul, with a level of vulnerability and open-endedness (Matthews, 2019), which differs from traditional ethnography. Building on this foundation, scholars such as Bochner and Ellis (2016) advocate for autoethnography as a tool for transformative storytelling, capable of fostering empathy, insight, and social change.

Simultaneously, the burgeoning field of trauma-sensitive education has garnered attention for its compassionate and holistic approach to teaching and learning. Rooted in the seminal work of van der Kolk (2014) and Herman (1992), trauma-sensitive education posits that adverse experiences, such as grief and loss, can profoundly impact an individual's cognitive, emotional, and behavioral functioning. Drawing upon principles of trauma theory and interpersonal neurobiology, trauma-sensitive educators

aim to create safe and nurturing learning environments that promote healing, resilience, and academic success for all students (Stokes, 2022). Central to this narrative is the concept of reflexive praxis in teaching—a pedagogical approach that encourages educators to critically examine their own beliefs, biases, and practices in relation to their teaching context (Lyle, 2023).

Inspired by the works of Lyle (2023) and Lyle and Caissie (2021), reflexive praxis invites educators to engage in a continuous process of self-reflection, dialogue, and action, fostering a deeper understanding of themselves and their students. Lyle (2023) and Lyle and Caissie (2021) suggest that teaching and learning are extremely personal experiences.

In this paper, I employ autoethnography as a methodological framework to explore the intersections of grief, trauma-sensitive education, and reflexive praxis in my journey as an educator. Drawing upon the rich tapestry of personal experience, I illuminate how the loss of my son has shaped my pedagogical philosophy, instilling within me a commitment to compassion, empathy, and authenticity in the classroom. Through the lens of storytelling, I chronicle my evolution as an educator, grappling with the complexities of trauma, loss, and resilience, and the profound impact they have had on my teaching practice.

By situating my narrative within the broader theoretical frameworks of autoethnography, trauma-sensitive education, and reflexive praxis, I aim to contribute to ongoing conversations within the field of education, advocating for a more compassionate and inclusive approach to teaching and learning. Through the sharing of my lived experiences and insights, I hope to inspire fellow educators to embark on their own journey of self-discovery and transformation, fostering healing, connection, and growth within their classrooms and communities.

Story I: Self Shattered Into Fragments

Time stood still in the early morning. There was a chill in the December air and a blue-gray haze of the morning light was beginning to fill my room. My soul felt it first. Something was wrong and as I crossed the room to the crib where my son was sleeping the feeling intensified. My legs started to collapse as life slowly started to drain from my body. A mother knows, a mother senses long before anyone else and when I placed my hand on his cold back, I knew he had left his body forever.

Life after the death was extremely disorienting and I found myself living in the space between dreaming and awakesness. My body and limbs were numb and somehow my aching heart kept beating in my chest. I had to break days into moments to survive and my life became a feat of survival. I felt like I barely had the strength to live let alone continue to be a mother and a partner. How would I ever return to teaching especially since I had lost all sense of self. I found myself daily crumpled in a ball, paralyzed by grief, and completely consumed by despair.

Heading to the office today because they need me to confirm and sign that my son is dead. Can they see me? I'm not even part of this universe. Can they feel me? I am walking with my soul bare. I can't pretend to be the "teacher" like I ought to. I am scared they can feel the pain as it radiates from my soul. I am not the professional anymore like they had trained me to be. I walk forward through the tunnels to the office, I have to complete the papers so they know my son is dead. Isn't my word enough? I hear their words as they explain all the details, but I don't know

what they are saying. I can't understand these words, my mind won't work. Someone puts a pen in my hand, and I move the ink across the page. Are you satisfied yet? I cannot move. I try to walk but I fall to the floor. I do not want to die, but I can't live here either. My husband helps me walk out of the office. I am floating above my body. I am unarmored and I know now that everyone sees the real me.

Reflection on “Self-Shattered Into Fragments”

Teaching is a vocation that has caused me tremendous joy and pain. Each day I put my heart and soul into my students, leaving me vulnerable to the interpretations of my students and society. I draw on the research of Palmer (2017), who suggests that teaching holds a mirror to a soul, and at times this has been a painful process. For as much as joy, I have faced extreme disappointment in the lack of humanness that exists in a school. I have always believed in a system that combined academics with spirit, soul, and intuition (Lyle 2023; Matthews, 2019). My experience has been cold and institutional, filled with rules and policies that go against creating a classroom community that allows for the growth of compassionate and critical thinking. As the research of Palmer (2017) suggests, teaching emerges from one's inwardness, so how can I teach when my identity has been shattered into fragments of myself?

I am drawn to the work of Lyle (2018, 2023), Bochner and Ellis (2016), and Matthews (2019), who use reflexive inquiry and critical thinking partnered with narrative as a methodological framework to understand the complexities of teaching and learning. It takes vulnerability to deep dive using reflexive inquiry to share narratives that truly examine assumptions and beliefs from lived experiences. From taking this internal position and critically examining oneself, we can use this research as a form of transformational change in the field of education. I use this approach to analyze the stories that I share.

Losing a child is often considered the worst thing that can happen to a parent. Society defines successful motherhood by keeping your children alive. For years after the loss of my son, I felt like a failure and questioned everything that I did. I could no longer trust my judgment because I had been so tremendously wrong and paid the ultimate price. Although grief responses vary from person to person, I was stuck in my emotions and suffered from increased depression and anxiety (Matthews, 2019). I had lost the meaning of my life, and I was not able to concentrate or be productive in any capacity. I often found myself in a state of disassociation, living between reality and dreams. I left my teaching position and focused on my living son, trying to get through each painful moment of the day.

When I think of my students, I realize that I saw my own struggles reflected. My students remind me that we are all on our own pathway and that trauma can shake our sense of *self* and how we connect to the world, to the point where we feel lost. My experiences helped me to become more attentive to my students' needs, and that vulnerability allows for deeper connection.

Reflecting on this story helped me to realize that teachers are multifaceted beings (Corkett, 2018), and it is important for me to recognize the deeper meaning beyond the classroom to be able to support my students. It is me who must be supportive and not expect that the one-size-fits-all approach to education will meet the needs of my students.

This experience made me realize the importance of knowing who I am on a deeper level and the importance of reflexive Inquiry. Palmer (2017) suggests that, “I do not know myself, I cannot know who my students are. I will see them through a glass darkly, in the shadows of my unexamined life—and when I cannot see them clearly, I cannot teach them well” (p. 2). This has led me on a journey to better know myself to inform my trauma-sensitive approach to education.

Deepening My Reflexive Inquiry Through Eye Movement Desensitization and Reprocessing (EMDR) Therapy

Trauma left me stuck in the space of complicated feelings, unable to process without further promotion. I would experience a sense of disassociation of flashbacks, and anxiety-induced isolation would make it challenging to leave my home. It was this sensation of feeling stuck that prompted me to seek out other methods of reflexive inquiry. EMDR therapy was developed by Dr. Francine Shapiro in 1987 to treat posttraumatic stress disorder (Juby, 2021). Juby (2021) describes this therapy that uses eye movements to change the way a memory is stored in the brain, allowing you to process it. It is based on the theory that traumatic events are not properly processed in the brain when they happen. When something reminds you of the trauma, your brain and body react as though it’s happening again (Juby, 2021). The brain cannot tell the difference between the past and the present. This is where EMDR becomes an important tool in restoring the self. The idea, known as the adaptive information processing model, is that you can “reprocess” a disturbing memory to help you move past it. This therapy aims to change the way that traumatic memories are stored in your brain, and once your brain properly processes the memory, you should be able to remember the traumatic events *without* experiencing the intense, emotional reactions that characterize posttraumatic stress (Juby, 2021). Using EMDR has enabled me to take a deeper look at who I am and separate from the suffering after the loss of my son. It has given me new insights as an educator and into understanding how developing a trauma-sensitive classroom is essential in today’s classroom.

Connecting to My Praxis

My disconnectedness after the loss of my son made it impossible to teach. I could not care for others being in a state of survival myself. I recognize now through the research of Palmer (2017), that teaching holds a mirror to a soul, and at times this has been a painful process, and indeed this was too painful. However, I also recognize, through the research of Jennings (2019), that individuals who experience trauma can be dynamic and exceptional professionals as they have had to concentrate on specific skills to adapt to extreme situations. Through my lived experiences, I have developed an understanding of the importance of a trauma-sensitive approach to education and weave this practice into my teaching. Understanding my trauma through reflexive practice has allowed me to identify how trauma can impact the development of the social, emotional, and cognitive skills of my students (Jennings, 2019 & van de Kolk 2014). Combining my experiences with the research of Jennings (2019), Stokes (2022), and van de Kolk (2014), I implement a trauma-sensitive approach in my course development and instruction. I focus on building supportive relationships and creating a safe, compassionate, and resilient community of learners. It is through this praxis that I can impact and shift the direction of students’ lives, as I did on my own, to create a more empathetic, respectful, just, and inclusive society now and for generations to come.

What Is Trauma?

Trauma, as defined by leading psychological theories such as those proposed by Herman (1992) and van der Kolk (2014), refers to an individual's response to an event or series of events that overwhelms their ability to cope, resulting in feelings of fear, helplessness, or horror. Drawing from Stokes (2022) and Tujague and Ryan (2021), recent research underscores the significance of trauma-informed education practices in addressing the needs of students affected by trauma or chronic stress. Contrary to traditional approaches that may resort to punitive measures or expulsion for students exhibiting behavioral challenges stemming from trauma exposure, current literature emphasizes the necessity of fostering connections, understanding, a sense of belonging, and community support for traumatized students (School District 27 Residential Schools and Reconciliation, 2015). Responding with harsh discipline can exacerbate trauma, leading to further behavioral and academic issues (Jennings, 2019; Stokes 2022; Tujague & Ryan, 2021). Trauma can manifest in various forms, including dissociation, extreme emotions, difficulties in social engagement, disproportionate reactions, forgetfulness, and lack of focus, often mimicking symptoms of other learning disabilities (Jennings, 2019). Jennings (2019) further highlights that individuals from marginalized communities, particularly people of color, are disproportionately affected by trauma due to systemic racism embedded within educational systems and social injustices. Therefore, cultivating mindfulness as educators involves a deep understanding of our students' backgrounds and the behaviors they exhibit in the classroom. By recognizing and addressing trauma-related symptoms in students, educators can create a more inclusive and supportive learning environment.

Mindful Classroom: A Framework for the Trauma-Sensitive Classroom

According to the research of Jennings (2019), Stokes (2022), and Tujague and Ryan (2021), a trauma-sensitive classroom is one that understands the student's needs and attempts to cultivate a safe learning environment and mitigate the impact of trauma symptoms on a student. I have found that being an educator requires an intense amount of emotional labor, and it is important to recognize that the role of a teacher is not to be a therapist or social worker, but rather to be supportive. Through my practice I have found that one of the most important actions I can take to help students exposed to trauma is to build positive relationships. Jennings (2019) describes the role of a supportive educator as a key component to a student's healing process, resulting in improved self-concept, academic performance, and social behavior. Building strong connections at school is an integral part of the trauma-informed approach as an educator.

Implementing a school-wide trauma-sensitive approach helps develop positive relationships between staff and students and cultivate commitment to the student's wellbeing (Jennings, 2019; Stokes, 2022).

In writing my stories and researching trauma-sensitive approaches to teaching, I started thinking about the pedagogical possibilities in these moments of reflection with my students.

Story II: I'm Not Good Enough

I have a lineup of students waiting to talk with me during our class break time. In my peripheral vision I see a student holding their computer to their chest, anxiously waiting to speak with me. When it is their turn, they open the laptop, and I can see the tears glistening on the rims of their eyes. They tell me quickly that they do not think they can present the lesson demonstration to the class because I told them last week it was not good enough. I am surprised because I remember our conversation and I did not say that the lesson was not good enough. I tell them that I apologize if they felt I was suggesting that the lesson was not done well. I ask them what I said that made them feel that way. They say nothing, and this prompts me to investigate further.

We sit down, open the lesson, and review the content. Before long the tears come, and the student reveals that in the class before mine, they received feedback from peers suggesting that the lessons and ideas were not good. The student was feeling extremely inadequate and that they were not good enough to be a teacher. At this moment, the student was vulnerable with me, and I recognized their need for deeper connection. They were feeling disconnected from who they were and the teacher they wanted to be. I asked the student if they had received any failing marks in our program to suggest that they were not good enough. The student confirmed that they had never failed anything, and we reflected together that there was no evidence to support the thinking that their work was not good. I reminded the student that the most important thing was how they were feeling about the lesson because as teachers we are not graded on if our lessons are excellent. That comes from the reflective process of evaluating our own teaching through a critical lens. The student apologized for crying in class and I reminded them of the importance of listening to their body and taking an emotional break from work. It is a good thing to cry and let emotions out; there would never be a reason to be embarrassed in front of me. At the end of our conversation, I reminded my student again that they and their mental wellness were the most important thing to me.

Reflection on "I'm Not Good Enough"

The research of Lyle (2023) resonates with me as she suggests that the learning process is deeply personal and as such, I believe that the student's self-reflexive process is complex, developing who they are and how this influences their identity. From my students, I learned the need for preservice teachers to develop reflection skills to help them form their teacher identity. The work of Grudnoff et al. (2017) and Syeed et al. (2020) identified the importance of having ongoing open-ended reflection for teacher candidates. It is the constant spiral of reflexive inquiry from self-practice-feedback that brings me self-awareness as an educator and to be critical about my practice to help create a more peaceful and just society (Tibbitts, 2016). It is this process that preservice teachers need to be cognizant of to seek alignment between practice and *self*.

To fortify resilience and foster mental wellbeing within my classroom, I advocate for the implementation of a journaling practice aimed at documenting both positive and negative emotions among students. Drawing from the insights of Brooks and Winfrey (2023), this approach is grounded in the principles of metacognition, affording students an opportunity to engage in critical reflection on their emotional experiences. Moreover, research by Lazarus and Folkman (1984) underscores the significance of understanding emotions as adaptive responses to environmental stimuli, highlighting the necessity of acknowledging both positive and negative affective states. By guiding students through the process of metacognitive awareness of their emotions, I seek to facilitate the development of emotional regulation

skills, as posited by Gross (2002, 2008, 2013), thereby equipping them with the tools to navigate and manage their emotional responses effectively. Through the cultivation of emotional intelligence and self-regulation, informed by the work of Salovey and Mayer (1990), my overarching goal is to cultivate resilience and promote mental wellbeing within the educational setting, aligning with the principles of positive psychology elucidated by Seligman and Csikszentmihalyi (2000).

Reflexive inquiry has allowed me to deeply understand who I am after the loss of my son. I have examined my biases, assumptions, and the values that shape the lens in which I view the world. Through this spiral of interrogation, I understand that for the 10 years after my son's death, I was in a survival mode where I could only focus on myself and get through the day. I could not take on the emotional weight of others in my personal or professional life. Living through these experiences and constructing meaning, I gained insights in empathy, compassion, mental wellness, and trauma's impact. This practice has enabled me to mitigate the biases that I held previously in my profession as an educator to understand the impact of emotions on learning. Reflexive inquiry has enabled me to look deeper into areas of trauma that I would not have been exposed to and thus increased the depth of my research around trauma and trauma-informed practices of teaching. Reflecting on the story helped me realize the importance of teaching my students resilience skills and the ability to reflect on their practice.

Story III: Imposter Syndrome

I am not in the right mindset to teach today. I could not find a parking spot at the university and that always makes me feel unsettled. I take deep breaths like my therapist has modeled to me, to reset my nervous system, and head to my class. This class has been tricky, I am not sure I am on the right pathway with the content that I am providing. Sometimes, I tell myself that I am not good enough to teach in the school of education, but I quickly shake that feeling of imposter syndrome from my head and remind myself that I am here for a deeper purpose.

As I am walking through the classroom during break, just building rapport with my students, one of the preservice students turns to me and says, "This is the best class I have had in the entire Bachelor of Education program. What you are teaching us is incredible and I thought the last two years were a complete waste of time until I met you. All the students in the program talk about how meaningful you make our learning." Pardon? Did I just hear correctly? I turn and thank them for giving me such meaningful feedback, express how much it means to me. I walk away with tears welling in my eyes and heart on fire.

Reflection on "Imposter Syndrome"

Reflecting on this story helped me to realize the importance and desire for vulnerability between people. My student wanted to connect through her engagement with me. Through her kind words, we were developing a deeper relationship and establishing trust. Since she expressed these thoughts to me in class, I have noticed an increase in her confidence and participation during classroom discussions. Through telling this story, I also recognize the importance of having a strong sense of self and teaching in alignment with who I am. When influences disrupt my alignment, I start to question myself and suffer a loss of connection in my teachings.

Risks and Vulnerabilities

I have found that a trauma-sensitive framework does not always fit into the one-size-fits-all institutional approach to education. The discordance between approach and institution highlights the rigidity of existing policies and procedures, which fail to embody the mindful practices that faculty strive to impart to their students (Lyle & Caissie, 2021). The institutional framework, by its very nature, overlooks the inherent humanness of the individuals within its structure. Such misalignment fosters a sense of distrust between faculty and the institution, sometimes escalating to feelings of resentment (Jennings, 2019; Stokes, 2022; Tujague & Ryan, 2021). Moreover, issues such as lack of follow-through, power imbalances, and the systemic oppression ingrained within institutional policies further erode trust. This discordance emphasizes the necessity of systemic change to accommodate trauma-sensitive practices throughout the institution. Reflexivity as an introspective process is essential for initiating a shift in teaching approaches towards creating more inclusive and just classrooms and institutions (Lyle, 2023). Reflecting on these dynamics, I recognize the profound openness of my students and their fundamental need for human connection. Envisioning the possibilities of a “whole school” approach, I anticipate the transformative impact it could have on both faculty and students, fostering a culture of trust, understanding, and support within educational communities.

Being vulnerable and putting my painful experiences on paper opens me to ridicule and judgment as I expose some of the dark places of my grief journey. I have found grief to be so lonely and it is a risk that I take to form human connections. Matthews (2019) argues, and I agree, that the understandings and “insights gained through autoethnography may not be uncovered through a less personal method” (p. 2). Thus, using writing as a form of therapy and point of connections, I know it is worth the risk of vulnerability.

Value, Importance, and Need for Stories of Vulnerability in Education

Writing about my experiences of trauma, particularly the loss of my own son, and its impact on my identity as an educator, has been a profound journey of self-discovery. Using an autoethnographical narrative offered me insights and deeper understandings beyond what traditional research methods offer. Grief is complicated and some experiences can only be understood when feelings are part of the research process (Ellis, 1993). It had been so difficult for me to come to terms with my loss that giving myself permission to write about my experiences provided me with a level of healing that I may not have uncovered otherwise. Autoethnography allowed me to process pain through writing and transform my grief into compassion and empathy in my teaching.

Through this process, I’ve cultivated mindfulness, compassion, and a vision of what a truly safe and inclusive classroom should embody for all learners. It has created a trusting space for my students to share openly, fostering a sense of belonging and support within our classroom community. This reflective practice has allowed me to live more intentionally, and to think critically about how to create a more resilient environment.

Engaging in the ongoing pedagogical process of writing stories about vulnerability and its intersection with teaching and learning has been enlightening. It's a journey of discovery that teaches me not only about my students but also about myself as a trauma-informed teacher. It compels me to examine the space between my intentions and the outcomes of my teaching, illuminating any biases or assumptions that may inadvertently influence my practice. This introspection cultivates mindfulness, resilience, and a commitment to continuous growth as an educator.

Sharing stories of vulnerability among educators serves as a catalyst for deeper inquiry and insight into compassionate and mindful pedagogical practices. It challenges us to reconsider conventional approaches to teaching and learning, urging us to adopt a more humanistic lens that prioritizes the wellbeing of our students. By acknowledging and addressing the ways in which trauma impacts both us and our students, we can create classroom environments that are not only inclusive and respectful but also safe havens for healing and growth.

As we embrace this journey of self-reflection and collective learning, we contribute to a broader conversation about the essence of education. By infusing our teaching practices with empathy, understanding, and a commitment to social justice, we pave the way for a more equitable and compassionate society. Through nurturing spaces of vulnerability and authenticity in our classrooms, we empower our students to share their own stories and experiences, fostering deeper connections and laying the groundwork for a future marked by empathy, inclusivity, and resilience.

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