

Revealing Our Superpowers: An Autoethnography on Childhood Abuse and How It Shapes Educators

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Starting Point

As a college professor, I have a few letters after my name—certainly nothing outstanding from my colleagues. A friend joked (awkwardly) that the letters were impressive: PhD, NBCT (National Board Certified Teacher), etc. He then asked me to refrain from using the auto-signature on my emails to him. Obviously, he was finished being impressed. That being said, there's another set of letters that are equally a part of me, yet I have been reluctant to share with anyone, except for a very limited number of close friends and my spouse.

PTSD.

Post-traumatic Stress Disorder. That's very much a part of who I am.

And there are times when it feels like that's ALL I am. There is more to me than that, of course, but there are days when the PTSD blankets everything, clouding any personal relationships or professional accomplishments. My version of PTSD slips into self-doubt and a deep belief that I am not deserving of anything of value in my life—loving husband, amazing daughters, and a host of caring and inspiring friends and colleagues and, of course, my college students.

It was with a great deal of hesitation that I even began this project. With nearly a quarter of a century in newspaper writing and editing, I remember one of the first lessons I learned was a reporter keeps himself or herself out of the news; it's about the story, not about you. That philosophy was engrained in me, from the time I was a 17 year old stepping into an old-school, male-dominated professional newspaper office for my first day on the job as an office girl who desperately longed to become a reporter. Serious news articles have no room for the first-person I. First person belongs in either a column or a diary, and only for light, personal reading and not valued at anywhere near the esteemed level of news articles.

More than a few years have passed, yet in my current career as an education assistant professor at a university, I find the first-person rule seems to generally apply to most of my professional writing. Thus, I have been apprehensive to write in first person and to share my own experiences as an educator. While I fully realize the importance of the sharing of other educators' stories, I could not see any research value in documenting such stories, especially my own. They were, after all, simply stories with no "news" value.

However, autoethnography—a research and writing approach making use of personal experience to provide greater understanding of cultural experience (Ellis, Adams, Bochner, 2010)—has become a more widely respected form of qualitative research (Dyson, 2007; O'Connors, 2011). This approach provides an opportunity for researchers to make use of what can be a rich history of experience, especially in regard to classroom teaching and seems to lend itself well to this situation. This article is designed to highlight an autoethnographic approach pinpointing key

effects of my life and how my experiences have shaped my teaching philosophy and methods in the classroom. The goal with this paper is to demonstrate how such research can be applied to the education field—with a specific teacher and his or her classroom, but, most importantly, how the lived trauma of educators can come to the surface in their educational approaches, whether knowingly or unknowingly, as the case may be. Using autoethnography pushes the story of an individual's life beyond an autobiography and into the realm of research, while yielding powerful qualitative information about a given topic.

This writing also serves as a professional memoir—connected to an autoethnography. It is designed to help us come to terms with our own demons—taking what we have learned from our individual stories to provide compassion and generosity to the varying levels of trauma individuals before us in the classroom have experienced. It is our job to make use of our own negative life experiences to help provide grace and understanding to these students, instead of serving as harsh gatekeepers determining who can carry on our sense of society's class and possibly unintentionally punishing those who show signs of our own personal childhood struggles.

Autoethnography As Qualitative Research

Research is developing to show the importance of such personal narratives. Autoethnography is evolving into a respected approach to qualitative research that merges the ethnographic approach with biography, as well as self-analysis (Ngunjiri et al., 2010). As it gains momentum, the method of autoethnography is being more closely examined—its abilities and its potential in the field of qualitative research. Wall (2006) points out its combination of “the personal and the cultural” (p. 155). Meanwhile, the range of possibilities for this approach is widening as researchers understand its uses. Wall (2008) uses the approach to record her personal story of international adoption, while sociologist Chaplin (2011) moves beyond experiences and examines applying autoethnography to a photo diary. In such a growing field, it becomes even more vital to determine the value of the autoethnographic method of research. In their work, Hughes et al., (2012) examine the method in regard to research standards of the American Educational Research Association (AERA). They conclude it should be treated as empirical research, with their suggestion that a rubric be considered to demonstrate autoethnography as a valid form of qualitative research.

Simply stated, our stories DO matter.

At first glance, it seems that teachers, having completed somewhat comparable education programs and met somewhat similar licensure requirements in the various states, are entering the classroom on fairly similar footing. But, as we know, they do not. There are those teachers who excel at content knowledge and/or pedagogy. Others are more able to make personal connections with students and teachers. Then there are some who are able to balance the three areas successfully. Each teacher emerges with individual strengths and weaknesses.

Having a knowledge of these approaches, as well as the value of an autoethnographic research approach to education, I wanted to address more specifically my background and childhood

social situation to see how those could be connected to what have emerged as my approaches and practices in the classroom.

For this example, we will examine my background, with a decade of abuse while living in a small town, and how that permeated my approaches in my teaching career. My career includes teaching eighth grade English/language arts for one year, followed by seven years at the seventh-grade level, then five years teaching 10th grade and my last year at the secondary level teaching 10th and 12th grade English. Based on 36 weeks as a typical school year, those 14 years of teaching at the secondary level equates to more than 500 weeks of being in the classroom, or approximately 2,500 school days spent with my students. With that extensive amount of time, it would seem appropriate that my interaction with students would provide a significant look into the relationship of my personal story and how it affected my teaching.

From as early as I can remember, I was never good enough. I was a straight A student throughout elementary and high school—except for a GPA-busting B+ in Driver’s Education. I was valedictorian of my senior class of 23 students, National Honor Society (NHS) president, editor of the school newspaper, and first chair trumpeter in band. However, the main comment from my father—after I’d walked across the stage wearing my NHS and valedictorian cords on my gown, was that he was appalled that I had crossed my legs on stage.

Teaching Background

After 14 years teaching middle school through 12th grade, I moved to the university level, where I am now concluding my fifth year teaching a variety of education courses for future elementary and secondary classroom teachers.

Through my years of teaching, I have developed a teacher persona, if you will. At the middle school, it became visible when various students would spend time with me in my classroom before school, sit at my table over lunch when I ate in the cafeteria with the students, and gather in my room after the last bell of the day. My principal and I referred to them as my posse—often, but not always, they were students who were experiencing bumps in their lives. For some, it was their parents’ divorce; a remarriage; some with self-image issues who didn’t fit into the athlete/popular cliques that seem to dominate a middle school landscape. Others were dealing with outright tragedy—often an abrupt and devastating loss of a parent or friend. It was an interesting collection of humanity—from the gifted students to the at-risk students whose parents/role models had dropped out of high school before receiving a diploma.

Concerned my teaching was becoming stagnant, I reluctantly decided I needed a (slight) change of scenery and curriculum and transferred a few blocks away to the high school in the same district. My middle school teaching position had become too safe and too predictable, even with middle schoolers, and I feared I was becoming complacent. By shifting to high school, I faced a different curriculum and a more mobile set of clientele. Teaching at the high school level, I found my posse’s identity remained consistent with that from my middle school, but in a slightly different direction; their problems were intensifying with age. Of course, there were

representatives of similar categories—they didn't fit in, their parents didn't understand them, school was a waste of time. Teaching sophomores, though, put me in the not-so-enviable spot to deal with dropouts who made it official. They, along with the parents, would drop by my classroom to get my signature that they had returned all textbooks and materials for my class before they officially quit. One parent went as far as to say that they had “saved the best for last,” meaning my signature was the final OK they needed before he was officially dropped out of high school. That was meant as a compliment, though it felt a lot like one of my saddest failures. Then there were those who kept plugging along at school with numerous pushes and shoves of encouragement from me and other educators, while we all knew they could walk away at any time. Additionally, there were the young teens who were pregnant and needed support as they found their lives taking a dramatic turn.

Somehow, my classroom became a safe house of sorts for all of these students. They were all wounded, at some level or other. The pregnant teens signed up for my classes, and I created a bulletin board where they could later post pictures of their growing babies. If it made them feel more comfortable in my classroom, then maybe they would stay with it and not become another dropout statistic. I took some criticism on this—some colleagues felt I was glorifying teen pregnancy. Upon reflection, I am not really sure one can glorify teen pregnancy.

About 14 years into my teaching career, I experienced one of those perfect storm moments that would provide some explanation for my existing knack for connecting with students I now refer to as the have-nots. My mother died from pancreatic cancer, and I finally admitted a secret I had kept for 40 years: I had been abused by relatives over a 10-year span of time.

Connecting the Pieces

Our wounds—at whatever level—affect who we are and how we interact with each other, and that transfers into our classrooms. It's important that we rise above our own struggles—to provide assistance and to serve as an example to others quietly or not-so-quietly facing similar burdens. That, of course, sounds much simpler than the reality because it involves coming to terms with our own wounds. We, most likely, have or are in the process of dealing with our own limitations...our own feelings of being an outsider. We can recognize it in how some colleagues push to the front, sometimes quite literally, trying to get the best seat at a meeting, while others quietly slip to the back. We are all still debating our value.

As a child, I lived in a rural Midwestern town that was known for outstanding girls' basketball (I excelled at softball)—and flooding (I never learned to swim). Through rainy seasons which involved every month of the year except when the water was too frozen to flood, our little river would gush above its banks and encircle the town of 200. I would spend those days slushing through the flood waters, saving whatever critters needed saving. Our back porch became my biology laboratory, with a table covered with old mayonnaise jars holding snakes and frogs, a

box for a turtle, separate buckets for salamanders, tadpoles, and fish, and a wire cage for my lizard. I spent many hours caring for my critter collection.

My first year of teaching, I had a classroom filled with energetic eighth-graders. For me, it was love at first sight. But our “family” was shattered by numerous tragedies—parents killed in horrific accidents, an upperclassman dying, etc. At one point, they decided their class was cursed. Between classes, one student ran up to me crying, “This is so hard.” Without thinking, I hugged her and comforted her as best I could. Right then, I knew my content needed to take a back seat to their emotional needs. I brought class to a halt, and we spent the time talking through it, finding ways to smile, and supporting each other.

In my newspaper class a few years later, a new student—she had moved to our small school a few short months before—was somewhat quiet and disconnected from the rest of the class, most of whom had known each other since kindergarten. No one was rude to her; the other 10 or so students just hadn’t really demonstrated she was part of the group. Those things take time; the older the students, the more time it seems to take.

One morning she was called out of my class. Her sister, who lived in another town, had died in an automobile accident just minutes earlier, and the counselor and parent were telling her the news in the school’s conference room. I was unaware of this—until a counselor came to the room and called me into the hall to tell me. The real issue was that—surprisingly enough—the student wanted to return to my class to tell her classmates.

“She said she wants to tell her newspaper family before she leaves,” the counselor said.

My class was an eclectic mix of human beings; add to that the fact that they didn’t know her all that well, and I was unsure how her classmate would respond. In teacher education programs, after all, we have no way to practice our own ways of handling such unique situations as teachers. My only warning to her classmates—before she joined us, was that she had something she wanted to share and that they should listen. I then put my trust in my students to respond in a caring manner.

They were shocked when she walked in and shared the news. But—without any prompting (verbal or nonverbal) from me, one classmate asked if it would be OK to give her a hug. The girl nodded, and the hugging line began. One by one, they lined up—some more awkwardly than others—to console her.

It was a magical moment—born out of tragedy—when I realized there truly are amazing young people who are compassionate and not nearly as self-absorbed as we sometimes assume. I was in awe.

When the school year was wrapping up, that same group was sitting around a table, and I told them to look around at each person at the table. “You’ve been a wonderful team—enjoy this, remember this, appreciate this. It doesn’t happen very often.”

Recognizing Our Superpowers

Today I teach a Core Teaching Skills course—the introductory teaching course for elementary and secondary students in all contents in our education program. Previously, the course was separated into elementary and secondary sections; however, in the past two years, we have merged the two.

In one class, we were discussing diversity—and the wide array of different experiences students bring to our classrooms—poverty, abuse, PTSD (manifesting in worrying, jealousy, etc.), Asperger's, teen pregnancy, anxiety, depression, low self-esteem, foster home situations, military-related concerns, illnesses, etc. Then there was that slight pause, where I felt a few of them were staring right through me. I realized that they're just as likely to have some of those issues, as well. We were talking about their future students, but we were also talking about them.

I shared—somewhat simplistically—that I was abused as a child and that teachers saved my soul. Unaware of my situation, the teachers provided steady support for my learning and a safe environment.

I explained that, while they too may have had some bumps in their school years that made them feel different than their classmates, those bumps can be their superpowers as teachers. Those negatives can become incredibly positive elements of their teaching skills. If they rarely had enough to eat at home, they'll know what it's like for those students sitting in the classroom trying to quiet an empty stomach rather than focusing on an essay that needs to be written. If they had an alcoholic, authoritarian father, they'll know what it's like for those who anxiously expect to be reprimanded for doing something to disappoint the adult in the room. The situation with my father was sans alcohol, but just as volatile. In any of these cases, having that perspective will make it easier for them to relate to the students who are in similar situations and help them through those bumps.

This, of course, brings to mind two ideas—one educational and one philosophical. In math, we learn that there are two kinds of numbers—positive and negative. In this case, it would seem that a negative can indeed become a positive; no math required. The other is a saying that I had tossed my way numerous times by my parents: Two wrongs don't make a right. However, in this situation, an infinite number of wrongs can definitely be turned into rights.

I now mention (albeit briefly) my abuse when addressing my Core Teaching Skills students early on in the course, and each semester at least one individual will find his or her way to my office to share his or her own story. And those are just the ones who step forward; I must assume that there are others who are not yet at a place where they feel comfortable sharing—or that I am not the person with whom they choose to share their struggles. For some, it's a matter of sitting in my office and sharing their stories; for others, it's a more urgent plea for help. I have, indeed, taken steps to assist, from contacting the student services office on campus to walking a student to the university counseling center.

My experiences have gotten me to look at situations differently, as I try to connect students' actions with what may be the underlying cause of the problem. As we look at our own demons, we begin to have a more realistic perspective of those that others may be facing. Thus, it triggers the question, "What's the problem beneath that behavior?" Those problems, no matter how long ago, can manifest in various ways. Instead of instantly becoming frustrated with a student's behavior or response, I make an effort to look beyond that. Likewise, our behaviors and responses are often triggered by our own perceptions—often defensive strikes to cover our insecurities such as not feeling worthy of acceptance by others.

My story should not be seen as unique nor heroic; indeed, I believe it is quite the opposite. I believe many other teachers—at various levels in schools—are turning their own demons into superpowers and reaching out to assist struggling students who are facing similar challenges. I have seen evidence of this at every level I've ever taught. The true heroism becomes a merging of the educator's past difficulties and the students' current ones. Because these students sense that relationship—that connection, they are willing to speak up and, directly or indirectly, ask for support. Because of some deep-rooted feelings—from possibly their autoethnographic story, many educators are able to provide support for those "have nots." Teachers, whether consciously or not, send signals of their own experiences and are able to connect with students facing similar struggles.

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