

COURAGEOUS FEATS: STORIES OF ONTOLOGY,
PLÁTICAS, AND PEDAGOGY

by

Elizabeth Ann Garcia, M.Ed.

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Committee Members:

Miguel Guajardo, Chair

Mike Boone

Steve Gordon

Leticia Romero Grimaldo

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DEDICATION

This dissertation is dedicated to...

...the memory of my mother. You taught me my first lessons about love and that I can do and be anything I want. I have finally allowed myself to love, live, and feel again because I have had the space to go back to the memories of all that you taught me. Your spirit is always with me. I love you.

...the memory of my Memo. You taught me to be ethical and that I can be strong and gentle at the same time. Because of you, I know I can make it through anything. Te amo.

...my father. You taught me to be brave and confident and not to put up with any BS. I have always felt safe because of you, which is exactly what I needed. Thank you for always having my back. I love you chingos!

...Rick's daughters and others who are "survivors of suicide", the label given to those left behind when a loved one commits suicide. My story is yours and your story is mine. May we all find our way with love.

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Community...is about the experience of belonging...to belong is to be related to and a part of something. It is membership, the experience of being at home in the broadest sense of the phrase...To belong is to know, even in the middle of the night, that I am among friends (Block, 2008, pg. xii).

It has taken a community of family and friends to complete this work. Family and friends who have helped me find my place of belonging, who have given me membership even when my physical presence has been missing so that I can do this work. I am eternally grateful to my community for their continuous encouragement and support.

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because you'll always be my kiddos) you are becoming and find myself reflecting on how much I have learned from each of you. Kristen, I love your positivity and zest for life. That coupled with your commitment to your education makes me excited to see what the future has in store for you. Emily, thank you for your authenticity and for your advocacy for things that matter. You and your voice have the power to help so many others. Victoria, my dear, you were the first kiddo I developed a real connection with. You made me a better teacher. Thank you. All of you make me very proud and I am honored to have had the opportunity to be your teacher. I love you all.

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ABSTRACT

This qualitative study is an exploration of the ontological story of self, the merging of our stories with others through *plática*, and the meaning making our stories hold for the work we do as educators. The guiding question for this research is: What are the lived experiences that have informed who you have become as an educator? The sub-questions that guided our research were: 1) What do these lived experiences look and feel like?, 2) How do we organize and make meaning of these lived experiences?, and 3) Why is exploring our lived experiences important in knowing who we are as educators? We used story, *pláticas*, and reflective journals as data collection strategies. Each research partner was interviewed at depth to gather their individual story, followed by a group *plática* where we shared our individual stories and explored our collective story. The analysis of the data was ongoing as I made researcher comments in my field notes after each individual conversation and *plática*. A hybrid model was used for analysis of data by combining analysis of critical life moments, anatomy of story, and ecologies of knowing to organize the data to understand the ways in which research partners use their stories to make sense of the world. This process allowed us to filter, organize, and place the data into a medium that made sense from the rhythm and balance of our stories (Guajardo & Guajardo, 2010). Implications of these findings for policy makers, teacher training institutions, teachers, students, parents, educational researchers, and others whose work consists of learning, teaching, and leading are provided within the context

of: what has been missing from school improvement; how we create and sustain healthy personal dynamics for our selves, our organizations, and our communities; and why we should invest in understanding ourselves and others.

OPENING REFLECTION

In November of 2012, I walked into the second day of a three-day workshop in San Antonio. As I walked over to my table, excited about the day ahead, I noticed someone had put their stuff down in my spot from the previous day. A little annoyed, I sighed and put my belongings in the seat next to “mine” and headed over to grab some breakfast. As I returned to my table, my hands balancing pastries and coffee, I found that someone had **MOVED** my belongings to another seat; a seat that put me with my back to the presenter, Dr. Brené Brown, whom I highly respected and admired, and I had invested a lot of my own money to spend three days learning from her. *OH HELL NO!* Without a word, I grabbed my things and walked away to find a new table to sit at.

The workshop was on a psycho-educational shame resilience curriculum and we spent the morning of day two learning to recognize shame, how to move through shame, and how to use it to develop more courage, compassion, and connection. One line from the morning that stuck with me was “As long as connection is valuable to us, we will fear disconnection.” We were talking about shame and shame resilience and there I was oozing with shame from a morning of chair shuffling. We learned four attributes for developing shame resilience...

1. “The ability to recognize and understand your personal shame triggers
2. High levels of critical awareness about your personal shame web
3. The willingness to reach out to others when you experience shame
4. The ability to speak shame—to describe your experience of shame to another person.” (Brown, 2009, pg 68)

Numbers one and two were internal. I felt like I had mastered those: I recognized, understood, and was self-aware that the morning chair situation was a trigger and I understood I was experiencing shame right then. Numbers three and four are external and have to do with me sharing with others...did I really have to?

Number Three—During the lunch break, I mustered up the courage to mention my experience to one of the ladies from my original table. She looked at me and said, “You know you have to come back, right?” I nodded and took a deep breath. At my original table, the woman with whom I shared my story made space for me to sit in a spot where I would not have my back to Brené. I was welcomed with smiles but did not get a chance to explain what had happened to anyone else. I thought I was going to get away without having to say anything more, but the very first activity after the break was to identify shame screens or strategies we use to disconnect (Hartling, Rosen, Walker, Jordan, 2000), and the physical location in our bodies where shame triggers show up. We use these screens to hide behind when we experience shame, and our bodies often help us recognize our avoidance strategy.

Number Four—I learned three shame screens: to ‘move away’ or withdrawing, ‘move toward’ by seeking to please, or ‘move against’ to gain power over or to be aggressive (Hartling, Rosen, Walker, Jordan, 2000). I did not have to think very hard to come up with examples for figuring out what my go-to strategy for disconnection was or where in my body I get triggered. We all stood up and hovered around a chart paper with an outline of a body. We had to circle where in our bodies shame shows up, and then we took turns explaining why we circled what we did. Many of my colleagues circled their stomach or throat. When it was my turn, I confessed, “I circled the feet because when I

experience shame, I use my feet to remove myself from the situation. My strategy for disconnection is withdrawal. For example, this morning when I walked in and found someone had taken my seat from yesterday and then someone else moved my things to a spot where I would have my back to Brené, I grabbed my things and used my feet to remove myself from the group.” One lady’s body sulked as she realized she was the one who took my spot and another apologized for moving my things. Another woman said she felt abandoned because I left the group and felt like I might have found people I liked more at another table. They all had different reactions to my story. It took courage for me to share that story with them, knowing there might be a domino effect of hurt feelings or guilt when they realized they might have had a role in what I experienced. Through that vulnerability, my eyes were opened to two new ideas: a) the effects of my moving away, and b) the stories others may tell themselves about why I withdraw. I also felt as if a huge weight had been lifted after I shared my experience with them. As a result, I felt a stronger connection within the group because we all had a better understanding of each other.

This dissertation has been an opportunity to explore, experience, and apply what I learned about the four attributes for developing shame resilience. Internally, I have grown in my ability to recognize and to think critically of my own story. This study is the courageous and vulnerable part of sharing my story with others. Throughout this study, my feet have withdrawn in more ways than I can count. I even used my feet to take up ballroom dancing classes and trained for two triathlons...but I digress. It has taken a lot of courage to keep my feet grounded through the process of this dissertation and I have considered walking away a time or two. The awareness of my feet being the part of my

body I use to implement my strategy for disconnection has empowered me and helped me find the courage to stay the course and be vulnerable by sharing my story with you.



Figure 1. Courageous Feet

My research...For much of my life, I have used my feet to withdraw from situations which may require me to reveal a portion of my story which I have carried silently in shame. This research has served as the development of shame resilience for my story. By courageously sharing my story with you, it is no longer hidden in the darkness of shame and instead shines brightly in the light of my truth. This study is a safe space created for me and three others to courageously share our stories with you, the reader. Together, we vulnerably explore stories about how we see ourselves as educators, the experiences we have in understanding our stories, sharing our stories with others, and the impact this has on our pedagogical practice. Through *pláticas*, this study will capture each participant's story and explore the meanings our stories hold for the work we do, individually and collectively (Senge, 2000; Waite, Nelson, Guajardo, 2007). This study will engage participants in dialogue and reflection to look inward at their story, that is, their ontological reality and pedagogical space, and understand more about how this impacts their educational practices as they explore new ideas in conversations with

colleagues. We invite you to join us by engaging with us in our stories and also by exploring your own lived experiences as you read and reflect with us.

I. ESPACIO SEGURO: MY SAFE SPACE

In the first ten years of my life, my mother taught me to be strong, to have fun, to be responsible, and that I could do anything or be anyone I want. She communicated regularly with family and we often visited them in Houston, Corpus Christi, Mexico, California, and places I can't seem to remember. My friends loved her and she was by far my cousins' favorite tía. Mom was a single parent and I was an only child so we were partners in all that we did. Every weekend we split the chores equally and she never let me get away with just the easy ones. I must have been five or six when I started mowing the lawn and taking out the trash. Somehow, she managed to make most of the chores fun by playing music or turning the chores into a game. She once lined up about five neighborhood kids on the driveway with little sandwich baggies in hand. Whoever picked the most weeds would get a popsicle; a treat we were excited about given the hot weather we had in the Rio Grande Valley. She yelled, "ON YOUR MARK...GET SET...GO!!" Off we went on our hands and knees clumsily feeling through blades of grass to be sure we got every last weed because we knew she would inspect the yard once we were done. In the end, we all got popsicles but it was the adrenaline she created that was so addicting.

On a Saturday morning in August of 1987, the summer between fourth and fifth grades, I woke up just like I did most Saturdays and turned on the little twelve-inch TV in my room to watch cartoons.



Figure 2. Elizabeth Garcia, 1987 5th grade school picture, a few months after Mom died

My concept of time for this day is blurred, but it wasn't until the phone rang that I left my room. My grandmother, Memo, was calling to speak with Mom. Memo had been through a surgery to amputate her foot so Mom was spending a lot of time helping take care of her. I thought Mom was with her so we were both confused as to where she could be. Since Mom was not with Memo, I peeked outside to see if her little red Nissan truck was in the garage. It was parked there, like always. Why would the truck be there when my mom was not? I wandered around the house looking for her. It was only an 800 square foot home- two bedrooms, one bath- so it didn't take me long to check every room. I eventually made my way outside and headed towards the garage. The garage was small, but Mom's truck fit perfectly inside with enough space on both sides for either of us to squeeze out the doors to get out. The garage was detached from the house, about fifty feet away from the back door, and was painted white with red trim. Sometimes on hot summer

days, a neighbor and I would put on our bathing suits and climb up on that garage roof to layout and get some sun.

Mom and I often played jokes on each other, so when I first saw her body I thought she was playing a joke on me. “MOM, that’s not funny!” When I went to push her, I realized it was no joke. Her body was there, but my mom was gone. My mom was dead. Everything became fuzzy and shifted into slow motion. Autopilot kicked in. I ran inside and called my tío. My cousin told me he was in the shower, I said – in the most calm and casual ten year old voice, as if it was no big deal– “Tell him to call me back because my mom is dead.” When my tío called me back, he was in a panic. He told me to stay inside, so I did. I stood at the back door, staring out towards the garage. I tried to cry, but I couldn’t. I couldn’t feel anything. I was numb. My tío arrived just as an ambulance pulled up. I didn’t understand why the ambulance showed up; my mom was already dead. Ambulances help save people, and I knew they could not save her. My mother committed suicide on August 8, 1987.

My mother’s suicide is an integral part of my story. I carry it with me wherever I go and consciously or not, it is a part of my everyday interactions with others. Social constructivist theory tells us that knowledge is socially constructed and that our social context—how we live and interact with and in our world(s)— provides the experiences from which our learning is constructed (Freire, 1970; Giroux, 1997; Vygotsky, 1978). The experience of losing my mother is the foundation from which many of my learning experiences are built upon and as my ontological reality, it will be embedded throughout this study.

My reality, as I knew it, crumbled on that Saturday morning, but somehow I was left standing; I still existed. I recognize the moment I found my mother's lifeless body as an instantaneous shift into my life on autopilot—my life as an observer. The shift was one of heightened awareness and attention on others and my external world. Today, I recognize this shift was my defense mechanism to avoid feeling the loss of my mother. I became keenly aware of what everyone around me was doing and filtered my behavior through what my interpretations of these observations taught me I should be doing. I got good grades, played sports, and pretty much stayed out of trouble. I did not realize it at the time, but my ontological ways of knowing—my being, my reality, my existence—shifted when my mother died (Crotty, 1998). As I focused on the external, I became increasingly curious about people—their stories, the meaning they made from their stories and how they showed up and interacted in conversations. I paid attention to what people said, how they said it, the words they used, body language, whether they said or did anything at all, and what happened as a result. I noticed how little attention most people pay to conversation and the importance of what, how, and why we speak to one another, especially when we have opposing views or are exploring new ideas. I became a student of story and of conversation, though it has taken me 26 years to be able to articulate this in an academic context.

After Mom died, I was forced to see a therapist or a counselor; I don't remember her exact title. Aside from playing with toys in her office and drawing pictures, the one question I remember her asking me was "Do you think what your mother did was right or wrong?" I remember thinking in that moment, "How could I answer that? If I said she was wrong, then I would be betraying my mother. If I said she was right, then this lady

would think I might be at risk to commit suicide too.” It was a trap question! I was not about to pass judgment on my mother, so I shrugged my little ten-year-old shoulders and said, “I dunno.”



Figure 3. Elizabeth Ann Garcia and Maria Enedina Salazar

My experiences have led to my passion and desire to better understand the relationships between how we understand our own stories, how we engage in conversation to share our stories with others, and how this impacts our pedagogy. My research interests originate in the social experiences from which my learning has come, especially the death of my mother. Although not all have lost a parent to suicide the way I have, we all have stories that have shaped who we are today. For much of my life, I did not feel I had a safe place from which to explore and share the story of my mother with others. I was consumed by shame anytime I muttered the word ‘suicide’ and refused to share as a means to protect her from the judgment of others.

This study is my *espacio seguro*; a safe place to explore, share, honor, respect, and hold each other's stories in a sacred and loving way. I have waited for this space since I was ten. Who knows, if my mother would have had a safe place to explore and share her story, she might still be with us today. "Social, psychological, cultural and other factors can interact to lead a person to suicidal behavior, but the stigma attached to mental disorders and suicide means that many people feel unable to seek help" (World Health Organization, 2014). While I cannot bring my mother back, I can honor her by sharing my story and I can create a safe space for others to share their stories.

II. KNOWING SELF...INTO MY ONTOLOGY

During a coaching school workshop in 2007, I was tasked with creating my life purpose statement. I struggled with how I could convey my ENTIRE life's meaning in just one sentence. It was the question, "What is your life's purpose" that pushed me to realize I'd been operating on autopilot and going through the motions of what others thought I should be doing. I went back and forth with words to capture my heart and soul, pondering what matters most to me. My wrestle with this task occurred because I had not thought critically about the meaning of my existence; I had been operating on autopilot. Even throughout my graduate coursework when we had opportunities for critical reflection, I was still operating on autopilot, focused on a good grade and pleasing my professors. I did not know myself. Identifying my life purpose statement was the first step toward getting to know me. Coaching school provided a new place for me to begin to know my authentic self. The learning was for "me" and in a safe non-judgmental environment. Up to this point, I thought my life was meaningful: I was happy, had great friends, a successful career, and I was pursuing my doctorate degree. Life was busy and I felt fulfilled. What I had not recognized was the passive stance I had taken in life; I was a quiet observer of others. I understood the concept, but had not yet developed what Senge (2000) refers to as personal mastery or individual aspiration and awareness. I was lacking the agency and critical consciousness (Freire, 1970) to articulate what mattered most to me and what gave my life meaning. Critical consciousness is a level of self-awareness that would allow me to understand and evaluate how factors such as history, culture, and politics influence the ability to construct and better understand lived realities (Freire, 1970). The moment I found my mom dead sent me into an alternate 'life of shoulds'

where I automatically, without question, did what I thought I should do in the eyes of others. I lost myself. It was like getting into a car, a car that represents my life, and having a backseat driver tell me which direction to go as opposed to deciding for myself what my destinations would be. The backseat driver changed; sometimes it was my dad, friends, a boyfriend, society, religion, or even my mom's memory. I was on autopilot and did not even know it.

While I struggled with the task of developing my life's purpose statement, it gave me an opportunity to think critically about my life and what I want for myself. The statement I developed is: *My purpose is to positively impact my environment and sprinkle giggles along the way.* This statement serves as my navigation system as I sit behind the steering wheel of my life and decide for myself which direction I want to go. I am here to serve; to serve in a way that leaves my environment in some way better than I found it and to have fun and laugh with others while I do it. How I serve others depends on need. Sometimes it is just helping them discover or clarify their need(s), or simply listening to what someone has to say. What really excites me in serving others is helping them develop their own critical consciousness, their personal purpose, and supporting them in figuring out how they can create a life doing what matters most to them. Ironically, I became a facilitator of the very same coaching training that led me to this discovery and I began asking others, "What is your life's purpose statement?"

Professional Self

My career as an educator began in 1997, when I volunteered to be a big sister at a local elementary school in San Marcos, TX. I was working on completing my undergraduate degree in chemistry so that I could become a pharmacist. I did not have

much experience with children so I had no idea I would love working with kids. After a few months of volunteering, I decided I wanted to become a teacher so that I could do work that inspired thought and learning. In 2000 I found myself teaching at the very same elementary school where I had volunteered as a big sister. I served as a teacher of second and third grades, grade level team lead, and as an instructional coach for kindergarten through fourth grades on this campus during the years of 2000-2006. Upon completing my Master of Educational Administration degree, I began to search for other roles in which I could continue to grow and serve in a larger capacity as an educator. In 2006, I began school improvement work in a state-wide support role for schools not meeting standards in Texas. Through this role, I had the opportunity to provide various resources to schools which included visiting schools and engaging in conversations with leadership teams about their schools. These conversations consisted of celebrating accomplishments as well as areas they felt were a struggle for them. I visited classrooms and took note of instructional practices. The result of our conversations was a document identifying strengths, areas in need of improvement, and recommendations, accompanied by an action plan and a list of resources for improvement. This process and this document were meant to be created collaboratively with the campus and to help provide an outsider's fresh perspective to the everyday workings of their school. Mine were the eyes that helped make the familiar strange (Spindler & Spindler, 2000). Initially, many saw me as THE STATE coming in to tell them what they were doing wrong. It took many interactions at our conferences, over emails, regional visits, and campus visits for us to develop the kind of trusting relationships (Guajardo & Guajardo, 2013) that created openness in conversation. This was my first experience in recognizing the power of

conversation (Wheatley, 2009; Guajardo & Guajardo, 2013) in schools and also the disappointment in knowing that we only had half a day. There was so much left to uncover about the campus, about its strengths, and finding creative opportunities to explore. Margaret Wheatley (2009) shares, “there is no more powerful way to initiate significant change than to convene a conversation” (pg 26). She adds that, “its not easy to begin talking to one another...we stay silent and apart for many reasons. Some of us never have been invited to share our ideas and opinions...many people are longing to be in conversation again” (pg. 28). I always left a campus with a bit of disappointment, knowing the conversation would not continue because they did not have systems or time set aside to continue the conversation.

My desire to inspire thought and learning has remained constant. The desire is not just to inspire learning for others, but also for myself. Beyond my work to support struggling schools, I have expanded my professional roles as a leadership and personal development coach, professional development facilitator, and as a learner pursuing my doctorate degree in education. The coaching school activity where I came up with my purpose statement was part of my own professional development. In addition to waking my critical consciousness, attending coaching school created a trajectory in my professional career I was not expecting and set me up to do work which mirrors my purpose statement. I spent six years working to develop leadership coaching services for educators across the state of Texas. This work included coaching educational leaders, curriculum writing and training for coaching school, hiring and training of educational leadership coaches, continuing education for active coaches, implementation of a coach certification to ensure high standards of coaching, delivery of coach orientation for new

clients, and matching new clients with coaches based on skill and preferences. As I continued to develop leadership coaching services for educators I also expanded my professional development offerings by becoming a Vital Smarts certified trainer for Crucial Conversations, Crucial Accountability, Influencer, and Change Anything. In 2011, I was introduced to the work of Dr. Brené Brown, who studies vulnerability, courage, worthiness, and shame; as mentioned in the opening reflection. Since my introduction to Brené, I have attended her trainings and have attained her certification for facilitating *The Daring Way*TM (Brown, 2013) curriculum. It is the combination of these formal learnings and experiences which have helped me move beyond the place of observing others in conversation to learning the skills and processes for facilitating conversations that lead to improved relationships, understanding of self, change, and reaching mutual understandings. A recent development in the trajectory of my professional experience includes a new role as the Director of Coaching for a national educational non-profit whose focus is to further develop teacher leaders by providing a variety of supports, including leadership coaching. My hope is to be able to contribute my knowledge and experience and also to learn from a national pool of educators.

It is my personal and professional experiences that bring me to the topic of interest for this dissertation.

Understanding Self and Others Through Story and Conversation

It is first important to know who we are.

People are hungry to be seen for who they are, and to be accepted as they are, gifts and challenges alike. When the work allows people to be who they are, they keep coming back to do the next phase, to take on the next challenge, to be in the

work as a way of life—as a journey and not just a series of goals to be met.

(Ruder, 2010, pg.15)

Having a clear identity creates internal support and allows us to take risks and experiment with new relationships because we know what we bring to the exchange. Without knowing our identity, we can get lost in the exchange (Ruder, K. 2010). As an educator, knowledge of self is necessary (Reeves, 2009) in large part because educators need time to evaluate their own assumptions, beliefs, and values as part of assessing current teaching practices in their classroom (Bartolome, 2008). Teacher beliefs and agency are shaped by the conviction that human beings have the ability to influence their lives and environment while they are simultaneously shaped by the cultural, historical, social and individual factors (Bourdieu, 1977; Kinecheloe, 2003; Vygotsky, 1962).

When we tell our story, we begin to better understand who we are (Guajardo & Guajardo, 2010). Story allows us to

put a face to a place, ground values and history in context, and has assisted in the construction of an identity of people and community...It has given voice to people who previously have not been part of the public discourse on how we can best teach, learn and lead (Guajardo & Guajardo, 2010, pg. 89).

Waite, Nelson, & Guajardo (2007) emphasize the importance of continuing to share our stories.

Despite the pressure to conform, especially under the regimes of standardization and accountability, it is important that we continue to tell our stories and to create spaces for others to tell their stories and to be heard. Such processes invoke our shared humanity, while simultaneously honoring our differences. Stories of

becoming, stories of survival and resistance, among others, fuel our faith and hope—in humanity, in our students, and in ourselves and the work we do as socially responsible educators. (Waite, Nelson, & Guajardo, 2007, pg. 221)

We all carry stories that have shaped our lives, just as my story of losing my mother when I was ten shaped my life. We are all human. Story allows us to explore and share our histories and our present reality so that we are able to direct our actions toward the future we want. Not only does the story we tell ourselves play a powerful role in our actions, but the story we tell to and with others also shapes us. Guajardo & Guajardo (2008) state,

Every part of our work is driven by the stories we have learned, the stories we create, and the stories we imagine. We nurture and transmit stories to our families, our students, and to the public at large through *pláticas*.” (pg. 62)

Pláticas are the sharing of “ideas, experiences, and stories” (pg. 66). The English translation for *plática* is a conversation or dialogue.

Rachlis (1974) says:

Real dialogue means standing one’s own ground and allowing the other to stand his [or her] own ground even when you disagree with him [or her]. Such disagreement should not lead to hardening of hearts, however; it should be seen as an opportunity for both parties to change in the encounter.” (pg. 18)

When we begin to understand what life is like for others, we begin to open ourselves up to see possibilities for what changes need to be made, including our own perceptions (Ruder, 2010). Senge (2000) identifies dialogue as a container for inquiry and contends it is the most effective practice for team learning. Through dialogue we are able to learn

how to think together in collective inquiry, take positions and have them challenged and altered, as well as suspend assumptions and explore them from different angles (Senge, 2000; Miller, 1995). Knowledge, or the exchange of ideas, is often the focus of dialogue and has the potential to transform understanding, change people, and ultimately create a deeper level of human activity by altering long held mind-sets (Wortham, 2011).

Wheatley (2009) describes conversation as a gesture of love:

I think of gestures of love as anything we do that helps others discover their humanity. Any act where we turn to one another. Open our hearts, Extend ourselves. Listen. Any time we're patient. Curious. Quiet. Engaged...we become more human through our generosity, when we extend to another rather than withdraw into ourselves. Conversation does this—it requires that we extend ourselves, that we open our minds and hearts a bit more, that we turn to someone, curious about how they live their life...Speaking to each other involves risk. It's often difficult to extend ourselves, to let down our guard, especially with those we fear or avoid. When we're willing to overcome our fear and speak to them, that is a gesture of love.” (pgs. 160-161)

By sharing our stories, listening, and asking questions of each other, “we begin to find talents within ourselves that we did not know existed...[and] from these connections come unexpected solutions” (Ruder, 2010, pg.1) as well as create a new story for our community.

I have taught and facilitated multiple day workshops focused on conversation. Many of my participants have not only confided their biggest personal and professional conversation challenges, but they have celebrated their growth in conversations with me,

as well. Often times the contexts of the situations they describe are similar, but how they feel and what they think about their situations is different. The lens through which they view their circumstances is unique to them, dependent on their story and its impact on how they think and what they feel about a situation (Patterson, Grenny, McMillan & Switzler, 2012).

For the purposes of this study, I will use *plática*, dialogue, and conversation interchangeably to mean a container for collective inquiry that yields opportunities for learning through thinking; exchanging ideas, opinions, and observations; transforming understanding; and creating human connection.

Research Problem

...a glimpse into the literature & practice

“Too infrequently are teachers in university, student teaching, or in-service professional education encouraged to confront why they think as they do about themselves as teachers—especially in relation to the social, cultural, political, economic, and historical world around them” (Kincheloe, 2003, pg. 47). As educators, we are bombarded with a myriad of ideas and directives for WHAT work we should be doing but little guidance is provided for HOW or WHY we should create and sustain relationships that foster a rich learning environment for the adults and children in a school. Researchers point to relationships and learning environments as characteristics of effective schools (Byrk & Schneider, 2003; Olson, 2005; Reyes, Scribner, & Paredes Scribner, 1999; Senge, 2000; Wilson, 2008).

In many of our communities, people feel powerless and too isolated to believe that anything can change in a positive direction. Often, people who have great

talents and gifts lack the confidence to see them and claim them because they have never had the loving support needed to test their own limits. Too often, well-meaning outsiders have gone into communities, seen this lack of confidence, and applied answers that worked somewhere else. Without a full understanding of the differences in local traditions and history, these answers are not likely to yield the intended results. (Ruder, 2010, pg.3)

Bryk & Schneider (2002) state that school improvement approaches have included structural changes to the conditions of schools, transforming teaching practice to improve knowledge and skills of teachers. They add that the missing piece to improving schools has been personal dynamics. “Unless substantial attention focuses on strengthening the social relationships among school professionals... efforts at instructional improvement are unlikely to succeed...building respect, trust, and collegial spirit are central to positive developments” (pg.8), yet we do not have development or systems in place to support schools in developing collective leadership (Ruder, 2010) or community learning (Guajardo, Guajardo, Janson, & Militello, In Press).

Learning Environments

According to Senge (2000), organizations are a product of how their members think and interact and that all members of the organization should be involved in learning and change. He adds that effective schools create individualized and safe learning environments for both students and adults where connections are made, community is established, and learners in this community have opportunities to learn, seek, share, and act on their learning. Learning environments also have shared values, shared decision making, and develop human capital (Senge, 2000). Hughes (2013) identifies human

connectivity as the next frontier for exponential growth in individuals and organizations and says that we must find ways to communicate well if we want to execute wisely. She adds “To truly transform the work environment, employers and employees need to bring courage to their collaborations and venture into the unknown together” (pg. 24-25). What we learn is contingent on the quality of relationships because ideas are explored in relationships between people (Miller, 1995).

Relationships

Relationships are integral to the culture and sense of community on a campus (Olson, 2005). When we are vulnerable enough to share our stories in public we see that others share similar experiences and challenges, which brings us to common ground and a common power (Brown, 2007; Waite, Nelson, & Guajardo, 2007). Strong relationships enhance levels of trust, respect, and caring on a campus (Olson, 2005; Wilson, 2008; Chenoweth, 2010) and create an environment conducive to the collaboration necessary in effective schools (Olson, 2005; Reyes, Scribner, & Paredes Scribner, 1999). Effective schools have relationships that create an immediately identifiable positive climate of happy and productive individuals with a sense of purpose and strong values as opposed to an oppressive, threatening, and joyless climate (Wilson, 2008). More specifically, the social relationships among teachers, students, and professional colleagues are the fundamental feature of the day-to-day operations of school communities and the condition that allows for improvement (Byrk & Schneider, 2003). Social relationships are of integral importance due to overlapping dependencies among all participants. Teachers must have a good rapport with students as a resource for successful learning and parental support. Principals rely on teachers to maintain social order and the reputation of the

school with the community. Teachers rely on each other for school-wide instructional practices (Bryk & Schneider, 2003).

Community and Connection

Community and connection are integral to both learning environments and relationships. The word community is derived from ‘kim’ meaning everyone and ‘moin’ meaning exchange; to be shared by all; to make available to everyone. The original meaning of community is rooted in the sharing of life, a place not defined by boundaries (Senge, 2000). “A community of people is a place, rooted in the biosphere, rife with activity, mutual respect, and the recognition that everyone in that place is responsible for and accountable to one another, because the lives of all are interdependent” (Senge, 2000, pg. 460). Creating community requires us to have the courage to acknowledge that we need each other (Block, 2008). Healthy communities emanate connection, which Dr. Brené Brown identifies as “the energy that exists between people when they feel seen, heard, and valued; when they can give and receive without judgment; and when they derive sustenance and strength from the relationship” (Brown, 2010, pg. 19).

If we want to improve we must first look at the ways people think and interact together (Senge,2000).

Changing the way we think means continually shifting our point of orientation. We must make time to look inward: to become aware of and study the tacit “truths” that we take for granted, the ways we create knowledge and meaning in our lives, and the aspirations and expectations that govern what we choose from life. But we must also look outward: exploring new ideas and different ways of thinking and interacting, connecting to multiple processes and relationships

outside ourselves, and clarifying our shared visions for the organization and the larger community. Changing the way we interact means redesigning not just the formal structures of the organization, but the hard-to-see patterns of relationships among people and other aspects of the system, including the systems of knowledge. (pg. 20)

A key role for schools is to create an environment where individuals have time to reflect on their personal vision and build awareness for the sources of their thinking without telling them what they should want or think (Senge, 2000). We each come to our work with our own unique story. My story of losing my mom at age ten has a large impact on the educator I am today. As Senge suggests, taking the time to look inward to understand my own story and why I think as I do brings tremendous awareness of how I show up when looking outward in exploration of new ideas with others. This sounds simple, but it has taken me 26 years since my mother's death to be able to look inward at my story. Our stories impact the interactions and conversations we have with others that in turn create the relationships and community that are necessary for effective schools.

How important is it to meet people where they are. Often, where people are, most immediately is in the space of their own lives, their own bodies, their own longings and dreams. So much intellectual thought in our culture does not try to engage people where they are; instead, it tries to aggressively push people to move from where they are to some other place. This is not an effective means of educating for critical consciousness. (Waite, Nelson, & Guajardo, 2007, pg. 825)

The purpose of this study is to explore lived experiences that have influenced us as educators, the experiences we have in understanding our stories, sharing our stories

through *pláticas* with others, and the impact that has on our pedagogical practice.

Through group *pláticas*, this study will capture each participant's story and explore the meanings our stories hold for the work we do, individually and collectively (Senge, 2000; Waite, Nelson, Guajardo, 2007). This study will engage participants in reflection to look inward at their story, that is, their ontological reality and pedagogical space, and understand more about how this impacts looking outward, exploring new ideas in conversations with colleagues.

Ecologies of Knowing

From the multitude of life experiences we all carry, one way to organize our learning from the micro, meso, and macro levels, is through the three ecologies of knowing: self, organization, and community (Guajardo, Guajardo, Oliver, Valadez, Henderson, & Keawe, 2012; Guajardo & Guajardo, 2013; Guajardo, Guajardo, Janson, & Militello, In Press). “These ecologies are not isolated. They spiral inward and upward, weaving within developmental processes as our experiences inform our schema” (Guajardo, Guajardo, Janson, & Militello, In Press, p. 22) The micro level of *self* serves as the foundation for the world we know. We constantly seek balance between the “I” and the “we”, hence our necessity for a solid foundation of self. Family is often our first experience with the collective. It is where we learn of our need for others in order to have our own needs met; creating the context for learning about ourselves and the social world around us. *Organizations* such as family, schools, churches and other social institutions and groups—at the meso level—mediate between self and society. The world at a macro level is our *community*; we live and grow in community. Dialogue between the micro of

self and the macro of community creates our ability to transform our communities by leveraging our collective relationships.

Research Questions

...a safe space in education

Bryk & Schneider (2002) state the missing piece in education has been personal dynamics. Through the exploration and understanding of self, we can become aware of our individual purpose, and commitments, as well as recognize how our environments and community influence our development as humans (Guajardo & Guajardo, 2008). The informing of our ontological realities begins with the “home” of the internal self and expands to the multiple educational homes where we learn, grow, and struggle with others (Waite, Nelson, & Guajardo, 2007). Vygotsky (1978) explains that an event is experienced twice: once socially and once cognitively.

It is through the relationships that are being developed that the cognitive experience of co-constructing knowledge occurs. This social and cognitive learning process is informed by opportunities to story the experience, reflect on the experience, re-author or re-narrative the experience, and finally, by acting on the experience. (Guajardo, Guajardo, Janson, & Militello, In Press, p. 17)

Through story, we construct a new covenant with people, institutions, and communities that search for a better world for themselves and for their children. Stories allow us to dream together, grow together, trust each other, and in solidarity create different stories that give us hope. The relationship that is nurtured in this process also begins to create a field of trust where adults, children, and strangers alike can walk into a space and feel safe to share their story; in short, these relationships allow us to take risks

and cross our comfort boundaries in a public setting. (Guajardo & Guajardo, 2010, pg. 98)

It is the interplay in sharing our stories of self with others in community—the personal dynamics— through the vehicle of story and *plática* that this study investigates.

This study is an exploration of the ontological story of self as it merges with story of others. My guiding question is: What are the lived experiences that have informed who you have become as an educator? The sub-questions for my research are:

- What do these lived experiences look and feel like?
- How do you organize and make meaning of these experiences?
- Why is exploring our lived experiences important in knowing who we are as educators?

Through this research I seek to help inform educators, institutions responsible for the development of educators, researchers, and policy makers about the importance of human dynamics and *pláticas* in education so that we can begin to develop school cultures that focus on the inward understanding of self and the outward elements of meaningful exchanges with colleagues and students as integral to change and school improvement.

III. METHODOLOGY

When I first began thinking about the structure of this study, I knew it would be heavily influenced by my work as a teacher and coach. It has evolved from a broad and general study of coaching to a deeper dive into what I consider the nucleus of learning: the self. My greatest successes as a coach, as a teacher, even as a friend have come when I truly know and understand the educators, students, and colleagues I am working with and when they in turn know and understand the authentic me—becoming fully human and visible to each other. Knowing each other's background experiences, beliefs, influences, desires, and goals has led to the trust necessary to share truths about successes and challenges in what we are learning together. I have found this relational approach to learning to be most meaningful for myself and for those I have worked with.

While I left the role of classroom teacher in 2005, the lessons and students I served forever remain with me and I hope in some way I too remain with them. In 2014, I received a call from a former student, who was in my third grade class in 2004-2005. I had not seen or heard from her in several years, and was surprised to not only hear her voice but to be overcome with emotion when she shared some exciting news with me. Becky (not her real name) wanted me to know she was salutatorian of her class. This news alone brought me to tears as I was overtaken with pride and elation for her accomplishment. She continued to share that she was asked to name the most influential teacher she has had and she chose me. This part brought me to a full on sob and left me speechless. What an honor. To further emphasize my influence on her, Becky shared the following essay she wrote as part of a scholarship application.

Heroes come in all forms, but they are the model of strength and courage that give people hope in someone's time of need. They not only embody help, but influence people in ways that can drag someone out from the chaos and confusion that surrounds someone in a difficult part in one's life. The last time I saw my hero was four years ago. Her smile was contagious even from across the room; not only my teacher but a person who was like my second mom, her name was Elizabeth Garcia.

I was eight years old when I walked into Ms. Garcia's room. Being very shy and quiet I did not have many friends, and was unlikely to get new ones in this flood of kids whose huge eyes were staring at me. I remember still holding my dad's hand as I walked through the door, wearing some hand-me-down clothes from my sister, and then she appeared. Her smile was inviting and she held out her hand for me to follow her to my desk, and I am so glad I did because following her to my desk made me follow her to the open adventures that I was about to go on in the next year of my education.

Ms Garcia not only helped me come out of my shell, but pushed me to do things I had never done before. She introduced me to many things in my school, and showed me what potential really lay within the shy person I was. She helped me in hard times and was always there for me in good times, attending my karate belt graduations and giving me my first college t-shirt that opened up the world of school and learning for the years to come. I had always had knowledge, but Ms Garcia made me extend that knowledge to outer barriers, challenging me to push the boundaries I had once set for myself and make me reach for more. This is not

the only reason why she was my hero, the true reason lies in this one moment in time when things were rough, resources were scarce, and she was the person who helped me through it.

I remember when she taught me a lesson that will never leave my mind. It was my first time going to Gattitown, and I was so excited. There was a buffet of food in front of me and that was all that really mattered, but when it came down to the games I was less than thrilled to join the fun of everyone else. Every child got a card with a balance of \$2.50, and it seemed when I looked around every other kid had cash in their little plastic baggies to put on their card for more games, more fun, more adventure. This was the first time I felt somewhat embarrassed because while everyone had fun, I was left watching them laugh as they rode the rides without me. I suddenly felt a gentle touch on my shoulder and a little whisper in my ear saying "Becky, come with me," said Ms Garcia. I followed her to the area of tables and watched as she pulled out a five dollar bill and handed it to me. She explained to me that she knew my financial situation, and knew that we had trouble even paying for me to go on the Gattitown trip. She wanted to help me through the rough times, and show me that there was always someone there when I needed help.

That is why she is my hero. Not because she gave me money, but she helped me believe that no matter how hard times get, there will always be someone there to help you through it. She wanted me to experience new things, and not let something as simple as money stop me from going on adventures. I remember the last thing she said to me too, four years ago because it was the same thing she

always told me right before she walked off into the new adventures she was having. I have held what she said ever since third grade; she told me “I believe in you Becky. I expect nothing but your best, and know that you will deliver your best no matter the circumstances.”

The oddest part about Ms Garcia is that she always comes back into my life when I am in a state of confusion or in the middle of difficulty. It is like she appears the times when I need her most, to reassure me of the lessons she taught me so long ago, and I barely realized that right now, at this very moment I am typing. Whether I get this scholarship or not, I know everything will be okay because I have a hero looking out for me, and her name is Elizabeth Garcia.

My influence on Becky stems from the authentic relationship we were able to cultivate all those years ago when she was a shy nine year old in my third grade class. It is this depth of humanness that I am after in this study—so that we may authentically look inward at understanding self and outward at understanding others.

This study is a qualitative exploration of the lived experiences that have had the greatest influence on our learning, teaching, and leading by first understanding our individual histories and then creating our collective story. It is a study of understanding personal dynamics among educators and the impact of lived experiences on pedagogy. Qualitative aspects of this study include investigating relationships, activities, and/or situations and emphasizing holistic representation with detailed description of what goes on in a situation as opposed to comparing the effects of an activity. Fraenkel and Wallen (2003) identify characteristics of qualitative research to include:

- research that is done in the natural setting to best understand the activity being studied;
- researcher is the key instrument;
- data is collected in the form of words or pictures rather than numbers;
- focus on process as well as product by investigating how things occur, meanings given, how attitudes translate into actions, etc.; and
- research that is concerned with how people make sense of their lives with special interest in perspectives of subjects of study-what they think, why they think it, assumptions, motives, reasons, goals, and values.

Philosophical assumptions of qualitative research indicate that the individuals involved in research construct reality and that reality exists in multiple mental constructs. We will not come to a generalizable *law* through this study, rather a deeper and unique individual understanding of ourselves and each other as learners, teachers, and leaders. We will, however, claim reader generalizability and give power to the reader to own whatever is relevant to them.

Co-Constructing Knowledge

Narrative inquiry involves a researcher describing, collecting, and telling stories of other lives (Clandinin & Connelly, 1995). These stories help us understand the meaning of everyday life (Kaufman, Ewing, Montgomery, Hyle, & Self, 2006), playing a central role “in the formation of the self and in the construction, transmission, and transformations of cultures” (Witherell & Noddings, 1991, p. 3). The telling of stories “is a way, perhaps the most basic way, humans make meaning of their experience...active construction and telling of a story is reshaped and, so too, is the meaning of the world in

which the story refers” (pp. 2-3). Both researched and researcher are a part of the process as narratives of participants and researcher become a shared narrative construction and reconstruction through the inquiry (Connelly & Clandinin, 1990, p. 5).

The proposal for this study described three participants for the exploration of their individual ontology and how they explore new ideas in conversation with other educators. These three women have become so much more than just participants in this study. We have become co-constructors of knowledge, making them my equals in this study, thus I use the term research partners to describe them.

I set out to use purposeful sampling (Patton, 2002) to strategically and purposefully select information-rich cases so that an in depth understanding of the phenomenon being studied would be achieved. I was aiming for three partners from schools in central Texas—a district leader, campus leader, and teacher leader—who would participate in one-on-one interviews as well as a group *plática*. I was looking for educators with greater than three years of experience in their current role. Most importantly, I wanted partners who would have the courage to be vulnerable and provide rich meaningful descriptions of their stories and who would be willing to dig just as deep to explore a collective story with others. I needed partners who could stay grounded and have courageous feet with me. I knew that in order to do this in the timeframe I was after, I needed to include individuals with whom I already had a strong trusting relationship so they and I could hold each other accountable to fully embracing this work. The embedded assumption in this research is that relationships are important and a necessary condition. To decide on partners, I listed three or four individuals I knew in each of the roles I was seeking. From this list, I prioritized those who met the above criteria and then ranked

them according to who would be most ready for the level of vulnerability I was after. I contacted my first choice from each role and invited them to consider joining this study. I met with each of them individually to review the details of the study and they all accepted. I presented each of them with a consent form and acknowledged the confidentiality of their participation. They were also informed of their right to discontinue participation at any time during the study (see Appendix A). We acknowledged the understanding that our participation is pedagogical in nature and for the purposes of our continued growth and development as individuals and as parts of greater organizations and communities.

Some may see selecting research partners with whom I was already familiar as convenient or easy. On the contrary, this has been the most difficult learning experience I have encountered, not only because of who I selected, but also because of my dissertation chair. Dr. Miguel Guajardo, with whom I have never taken a formal class, has nurtured a strong trusting connection with me, largely through our informal connections at Texas State University, the use of *pláticas* during the proposal development, and our similar backgrounds being strongly rooted in the Rio Grande Valley. His use of *pláticas* as inquiry, pedagogy, and community building (Guajardo & Guajardo, 2013) scaffolded a process for a level of self-consciousness that did not exist prior to this study. These trusting relationships created the safe space for research partners to be vulnerable with each other because we would know if either of us was just sharing shallow surface level information. We opened up to experiences and truths of our story that were not easy to explore but were necessary for the transformation of selves and understanding of how our histories inform how we learn, teach, and lead.

Role of Researcher

All stories offer a glimpse into people's lives and souls during a particular time in history...The story continues to be a key vehicle for building relationship and understanding the values of individuals and groups. When stories are authentic and successful, they are powerful relationship-building tools...Not all stories are noble and not all stories are honest. What is certain is that great power lies with the storyteller; with that comes great responsibility. Storytelling requires a critical eye/I on both the telling and listening sides. We must always be aware of the context, the purpose for the story and the relationships that need to be nurtured to give currency to the story. (Guajardo & Guajardo, 2010, pg. 96)

My role as researcher includes the responsibility of storyteller. I will serve as a weaver of the stories gathered in this study and speak on behalf of the research partners (Ruder, 2010). Behar (1996) refers to the vulnerable observer as a role that requires "a keen understanding of what aspects of the self are the most important filters through which one perceives the world and, more particularly, the topic being studied" (p. 13).

Theoretical Framework

Exploring the lived experiences that have had the greatest influence on our learning, teaching, and leading is the focus of this study. The relationship among critical consciousness (Friere, 1970; 2005) and ecologies of knowing (Guajardo, Guajardo, Oliver, Valadez, Henderson, & Keawe, 2012; Guajardo & Guajardo, 2013; Guajardo, Guajardo, Janson, & Militello, In Press) are at the center of the framework for analysis. Each research partner was asked to share two to three critical moments or lived

experiences which have had the greatest influence on shaping who they have become. Our experiences at the micro, meso, and macro levels of self, organization, and community or the ecologies of knowing (Guajardo, Guajardo, Oliver, Valadez, Henderson, & Keawe, 2012; Guajardo & Guajardo, 2013; Guajardo, Guajardo, Janson, & Militello, In Press) served as a means to organize our critical lived experiences. Emphasis was on creating a safe environment of mutual respect where we engaged in the process of thinking together, sharing of stories, and delving inward at self so we could connect outward with others to create our collective story (Block, 2008; Brown, 2007; Brown, 2010; Bryk & Schneider, 2003; Chenoweth, 2010; Hughes, 2013; Miller, 1995; Olson, 2005; Senge, 2000; Waite, Nelson, & Guajardo, 2007; Wilson, 2008). As each research partner recounted their oral histories, I listened for details at the levels of self, organization, and community as well as the locus where these three levels intertwined.

Critical consciousness helps to shape our daily existence with the capacity to think and act critically about who we are, who others think we should be, and whether or not we choose to engage in our communities (Freire, 2005; hooks, 1994). Careful attention was given to how historical, cultural, and political factors influenced the systems and structures of understanding self and others. It is the critical consciousness that brings about a level of self-awareness that elucidates a person's lived realities (Freire, 1970).

Similar methods that validate personal experiences as sources of knowledge, incorporate narrative, and acknowledge learning as a social and cognitive construction include memory work and collective autobiography. Memory work (Haug, 1987; Crawford et al., 1992) is a feminist based theory of the socialization of women in which

the subject and object collapse as one and the same individual. Memory work involves each participant writing memories in third person in as much detail as possible describing the event and avoiding any interpretation, justification, or biography. After their memories are written, participants gather for collective discussion and analysis of memories, yet continuing to avoid autobiography and biography (Haug, 1987; Crawford et al., 1992; Kaufman, Ewing, Montgomery, Hyle, & Self, 2006). “In collaborative autobiography, coresearchers cycle through sequences of oral and written interactions to express, witness, understand, and ultimately act on their own and others’ autobiographical narratives” (Lapadat, 2009, pg. 958). The aim of collaborative autobiography is for coresearchers to gain a deeper understanding of self as well as the interpretation and influence of culture (Neumann, 1996).

Observables

The stories and descriptions of research partners were analyzed using analysis of story from the data sets of critical moment stories, group *plática*, and reflective journals. Using story, I employed thick description in narrative text to present the reader with insight into each partner’s oral histories and experiences (Fraenkel & Wallen, 2003). Through a collaborative process, we explored how critical moments in our lived experiences have influenced our learning, teaching, and leading.

With the permission of research partners and approval from the Institution Review Board (IRB), multiple data sources for the ecologies of knowing at the levels of self, organization, and community (Guajardo, Guajardo, Oliver, Valadez, Henderson, & Keawe, 2012; Guajardo & Guajardo, 2013; Guajardo, Guajardo, Janson, & Militello, In Press) were collected. Story served as the vehicle for collecting and analyzing data

(Guajardo & Guajardo, 2010). I served as the research instrument for the study, relying on my skills and experience as observer, listener, and storyteller (Patton, 2002) to collect data from one on one interviews, a group *plática*, and reflective journals so that the findings adhered to the integrity of our stories. Together, we made sense of our individual and collective stories and analyzed them for understanding.

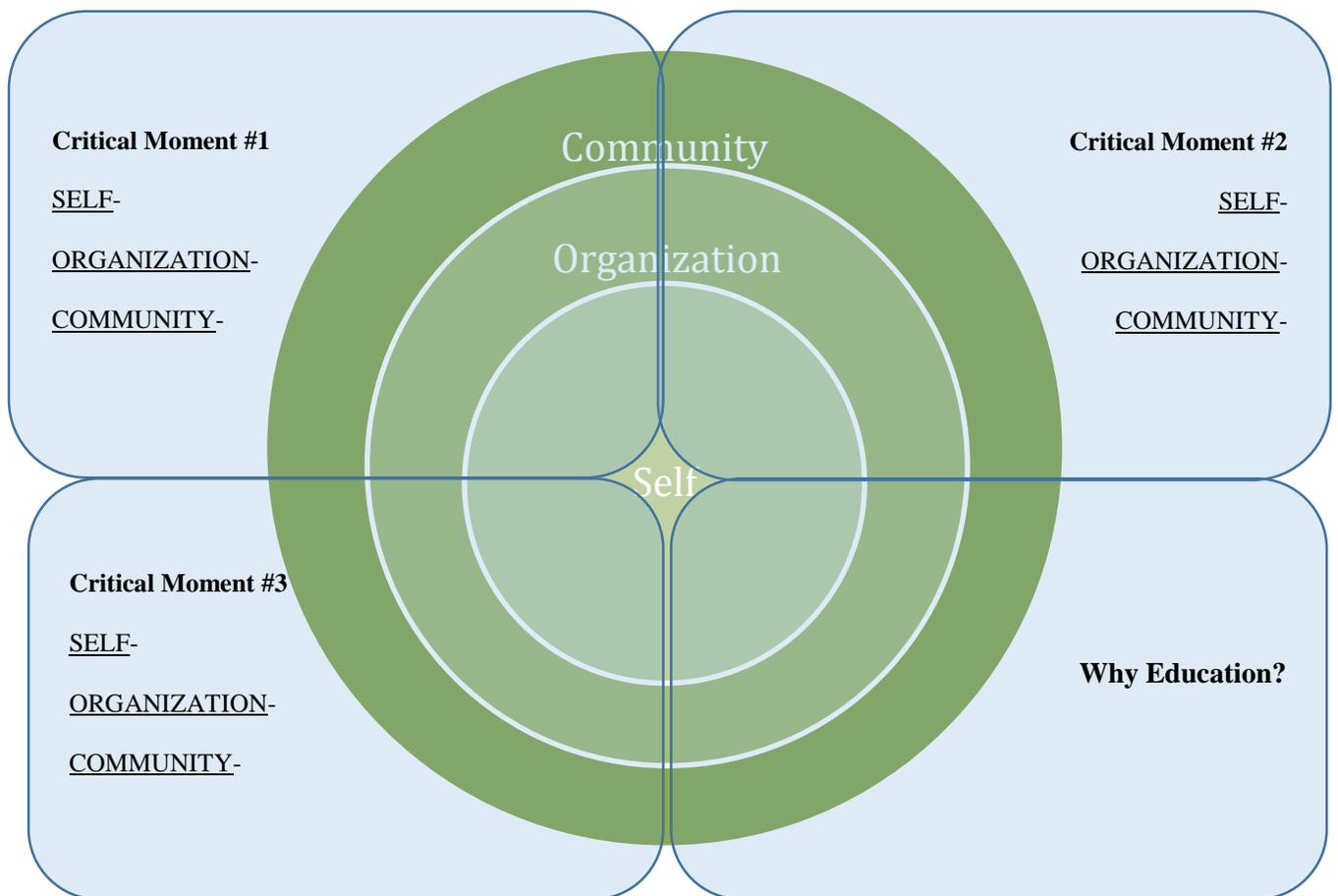


Figure 4. Framework for Analysis

Interviews

The use of one on one conversations is common in qualitative research (Fraenkel & Wallen, 2003; Patton, 2002). In-depth, flexible, semi-structured interviews were used to explore how research partners thought and felt about their histories and how their

stories have influenced their pedagogical practice. I attempted to make the familiar strange in order to have a true reflection of partners thinking (Spindler & Spindler, 2000). A combination of open-ended background, experience, opinion, and feeling questions were used to understand and capture partner perspective with the flexibility to have a more naturally occurring conversation (Fraenkel & Wallen, 2003; Patton, 2002).

I conducted one in-depth interview with each partner, prior to the group *plática*. Partners identified the location for the interview to be conducted. Each one-on-one interview was approximately one hour in length and was audio and video recorded. Upon completion of the initial interview, I documented my reflections in a research log. Each interview was transcribed personally by me and was sent to the research partner for member checking to ensure what was said was what they had meant. A portion of our time during the initial interview was used to provide an additional overview of the study, but the bulk of our time was spent on collecting the research partner's background using the life history interview (Wolcott, 2008) with a focus on critical moments or lived experiences which have had greatest influence on shaping our learning, teaching, and leading (see Appendix B for Interview Guide). Prior to closing our interview, partners were informed of the purpose and content for the upcoming group *plática*. I also used the data gathered from the initial interviews to help guide planning for the group *plática*.

Group *Pláticas*

Our group *plática* [informal conversation] was modeled after Guajardo & Guajardo's (2008) description of *pláticas* where partners share "ideas, experiences, and stories" (p. 66). Guajardo and Guajardo add that *pláticas* require the researcher to be open and vulnerable, often pushing the researchers' comfort zone as information is

shared between the researcher and research partners. My role as researcher was to share my experiences and stories alongside my research partners. The study included one group *plática* (See Appendix C). This exchange was an opportunity to collect valuable data and served as a means to share and explore our individual and collective stories as well as examine the impacts on our pedagogical practices at large.

The four of us agreed on the location and gathered around my dining room table for the group *plática*. Two of the research partners had previously met at an event I hosted but otherwise knew little about each other. We began the group *plática* with informal introductions, each of them sharing their connection to me as well as something most people would not guess about them. We used chart paper and markers to organize how we wanted to share our individual critical moment histories we had identified during the one on one interviews. To help create a safe environment, I volunteered to share my story first and then we proceeded to share around the table. After individual stories were shared, we engaged in a *plática* to analyze the meaning of our collective stories (See Appendix C).

The *plática* was a safe space for partners to share and discuss topics they would not normally share in their everyday lives. Partners shared their thoughts and feelings, listened to others' thoughts and feelings, and made additional comments beyond their original sharing (Patton, 2002). The group *plática* was approximately two and a half hours in length and was audio and video recorded. I personally transcribed the *plática* and presented it to the research partners for their review to ensure what they said was what they meant. My reflections from the *plática*—including my experience, additional

questions and ideas for future research—were written in the research log following our meeting.

Reflective Journals

The study includes a reflective journal which I gave to each partner during our initial one on one conversation. Partners were asked to take notes of their thoughts immediately after each time we met for one-on-one interviews or group *plática* and in between our time together. Partners were asked to share their reflections with me in between our meetings and after they reviewed their written story. The reflective journals were collected at the end of our last meeting to make copies and then were returned. Any reflections completed after our group *plática* were collected via email.

Data Analysis

The framework for analysis serves as the filter through which we organized our ubiquitous everyday global experiences. Research partner's stories were woven together through our group *plática*. *Plática* was the mediating tool to further organize our thoughts, experiences, and meaning making process of the daily experiences we have. The analysis of the data was ongoing through the collection of the data phase (Merriam, 1998) as I made researcher comments in my field notes after each individual interview and *plática*. I used a hybrid model for analysis by combining analysis of critical life moments and ecologies of knowing to analyze the data to understand the ways in which research partners use their stories to make sense of the world. This process allowed us to filter, organize, and place the data into a medium that made sense from the rhythm and balance of partner stories and our conversations (Guajardo & Guajardo, 2010).

Anatomy of Story

We view story as a complex and organic process that is at the core of human activity. It is also a highly skilled process. These skills include the understanding of social context. Story is a product of human agency and formation informed by cultural dynamics, local ecology, and history. These different components are molded through a process that filters data, organizes it, and puts it back out in a medium that makes sense. Using the anatomy metaphor, story then flows with a certain rhythm and balance (Guajardo & Guajardo, 2010, pg. 94).

The anatomy of story was used to help present research partners' stories as findings in the next chapter. The five parts to the anatomy of story include: the navel, heart, mind, hands, and legs. Guajardo & Guajardo (2010) describe the navel as the umbilical cord, representing 'the core of human anatomy,' articulating the core message and values of the story. The heart provides the passion and 'ultimate meaning.' The mind carries 'analytical thinking' for creativity. The hands mold the rhythm of the story, and the legs of a story move people to action.

Trustworthiness

Reliability and validity of analysis were conducted through member checking and triangulating the transcriptions and partner stories (Fraenkel & Wallen, 2003). Partners reviewed transcripts from their one on one interviews as well as the group *plática*. Additionally, research participants reviewed their written stories as I prepared to include them in the study's findings. Each partner was asked to provide any edits and additional reflections on what had been collected. A research log enabled me to keep my reflections and document activities as they occurred throughout the study. Triangulation

of data sources between literature, personal experiences, and participant stories validated data collection.

Ethics

To begin the study, I sat with each partner to share the purpose of the study and presented each of them with a Consent Form (see Appendix A) outlining minimal risks associated with participating in the study as well as details explaining confidentiality. Names and any personal information that could reveal their identity are not disclosed. Participation in the study was voluntary and partners were notified of their option to opt out of the study at any time.

Challenges to the Study

A challenge for me as the researcher was in recognizing and managing my biases and assumptions throughout the study. Given my experience and understanding of my own story, I did not want to sway partners in any way as they revealed their own experiences. At times this meant I walked away from an interview or the group *plática* wishing I had asked more questions. Luckily, all research partners allowed me to follow up with additional questions and clarifications that arose as I was writing our stories.

This is a personal study stemming from my own experiences and a need that developed out of my own personal and professional growth. There is little written about our stories as educators and even less is understood about how our individual stories impact the collective stories of our organization and communities. It is my intention to shine a light on the need to approach school improvement from the inside out.

IV. OUR STORIES

Framing the Conversation

We employ the method of *plática* to tell our stories, which we use as observables. While my own ontology and pedagogy have been informed by my three research partners, this study provides a space for all of us to share and explore each other's ontology and pedagogy in a more public setting; both individually through one-on-one interviews with me and collectively through a group *plática*. This methodical point of entry is important to create the necessary conditions to explore the research topic and invites a deep exploration and analysis of our individual ontological positions. We make sense of our stories through the three levels of the ecologies of knowing: self, organization, and community (Guajardo, Guajardo, Oliver, Valadez, Henderson, & Keawe, 2012; Guajardo & Guajardo, 2013; Guajardo, Guajardo, Janson, & Militello, In Press). We began exploring our stories through the critical moments method, i.e. the initial prompt: *Share two or three critical lived experiences that have had the greatest influence on your learning, teaching, and leading.* This prompt revealed stories consisting of interwoven elements of the three ecologies of knowing, but rather than dissect our stories into the ecologies, I will present our stories as they were told with story and then provide an analysis of the ecologies following each research partner's story as a process for meaning making.

We began with introductions of research partners to get to know their demographics and context. Following the introductions, each partner's story was shared and we closed with a collective analysis discussion of what was explored during the group *plática*. We invite the reader to explore and create his or her own experiences with

our stories to create your own meaning with us. Tools to help you journey through this document include the anatomy of story and the ecologies of knowing. The anatomy of story (Guajardo & Guajardo, 2010) will support you in knowing how to create a rhythm and balance to tell your own story: the navel is the core message, the heart represents passion and ultimate meaning, the mind provides analytical thinking, the hands mold identity, and the legs move people to action. The ecologies of knowing (Guajardo, Guajardo, Oliver, & Keawe, 2012; Guajardo, Guajardo, Janson, & Militello, In Press) help to make sense of new data: the self as the foundation for the world we know, organizations as the groups or networks which mediate between self and society and are the context for learning about ourselves and the social world, and community as the world in which we live and grow. For an overview of the analysis of raw data from our individual and collective stories, see Appendix D.

Introduction of Research Partners

Isabel, Ruby, and Jane have all been a part of my own development in some way. I purposely chose these research partners because of the amount of time I have had to develop strong trusting relationships with each of them. This study asks deep and personal questions of all research partners and thus requires tremendous trust for each of us to be our authentic selves. I cannot imagine how asking these questions of strangers could have revealed the same level of detail. This requires a different methodological consideration I will call readiness, which lends itself to the method of *plática*. This too requires a different level of accountability that comes with what my dissertation chair calls relational accountability (Guajardo, personal communication, 2015). I have known Isabel the longest. She and I met during our undergraduate years at Southwest Texas

State University in the late 1990s. We lived together as roommates for a short period of time. I was around for her first heartbreak, I have met her family, she helped me get a job as a PE coach at her charter school while I was still finishing up undergraduate education, and we continue to stay in touch regularly. Ruby and I know each other from my time as an elementary teacher and instructional coach. We worked at separate elementary campuses, but had similar roles. She and I connected when our district sent us on a professional development trip to Chicago during the summer of 2005. We are often asked if we are sisters because we look alike, I was at the hospital for her first born, we celebrate our birthdays together every year, I know all of her family, and I consider her children to be like my own. Coaching training is where I met Jane in 2006. We both began our journeys to becoming coaches together and have had some powerful self-discoveries as a result of that process. I have seen Jane lead and facilitate trainings, I have led and facilitated trainings for Jane, we have worked together on multiple projects for coaching development and we continue to connect around our work and personal development as coaches.

Each research partner is currently engaged in the work of education in different school districts and with varying levels and roles within their district. I purposely selected partners with roles at the three levels of classroom, campus, and district so that this study could gather various perspectives within education: classroom teacher, campus administrator, district support, and external professional working with a school district. This selection process also mirrors the ecologies of knowing as we work to connect the micro to the macro levels of education (Guajardo & Guajardo, 2004).

Name	Level	Role	Relationship
Isabel	Campus	Assistant Principal	College Roommate
Ruby	Classroom	Teacher	Same Roles in Previous Work
Jane	District	Leadership Coach	Coaching School
Liz	External	Director of Coaching	Self

Figure 5. Presentation of the Research Partners

Isabel’s Story

I always had a strong connection to being Puerto Rican. The sound of my childhood is Spanish. I have the lightest skin and hair in my family and I didn’t realize how that would affect me as I grew up.

Isabel is an adventurous soul in her late thirties with brownish-blond spiral curls. When asked about the critical events that have most influenced her, Isabel recounted stories about identifying early on as a reader of books and magazines; moving from Los Angeles, CA to Round Rock, TX at age sixteen, and attending graduate school. Isabel’s formal educational career has included work as an elementary charter school teacher and principal. For the last ten years, she has been an assistant principal at an elementary school in Central Texas, which serves approximately 800 students in grades Pre-K through five. The campus student population is mostly Hispanic and economically disadvantaged.

Literacy as opportunity. *One reason I feel like I took a different path than a lot of my friends and even my sister, who was a teenage mom, is I identified as a reader very early on. In fourth grade, without telling my mom, I became part of Scholastic Book Club. All of a sudden all these books would come and she had to pay every month. In fifth grade, I subscribed to YM Magazine without telling my mom and those started coming in. By middle school, I was already getting Seventeen Magazine. Magazines and books were my little escapes where I learned that life could be different. Magazines allowed me to see that other people lived differently. I didn't necessarily have to experience all the things I was reading about but I knew they existed and I had the idea of being able to be anything I wanted because of it. The first time I realized I wanted to go to college was in middle school when I read about these girls living in a dorm and I thought, 'oh yeah, I want to do that.' I had friends who would come over to eat at my house because no one was feeding them at their house. I knew people whose mothers were crack whores. My friends were having sex and doing drugs and all that stuff I didn't do. Growing up in L.A., the gangs and pregnancies were ridiculous. I was a good kid who often hung out with the wrong crowd. In seventh grade, my friend Temeka got into a fight when we were walking home from school. Temeka punched that girl's face and it was so violent to me. It still makes my stomach hurt. That was the kind of environment I grew up in. I realized I wasn't in her situation and I didn't have to defend whatever she thought she had to defend. I also felt like I couldn't see her for any less than what I knew of her just for punching that girl's face. Part of my experience with Temeka was realizing that*

while that fight was a part of my environment, I didn't necessarily have to be a part of it and I've always felt like I could still be someone's friend even if I didn't do the same things they did.

Isabel grew up in Los Angeles, California with a sister who is 11 years older, a brother who is 7 years older, and younger sister who is only 10 and a half months younger. Isabel says her younger sister was a firecracker and always felt like the much older responsible sister of the two, even if they were only 10 and a half months apart. Her parents were divorced when she was 12 and even though her dad was an 'ass' through the divorce she says her mother never spoke badly about him in front of her and her siblings. She does not remember her mother ever speaking ill of anyone and says she learned more from her mother's actions and internalizing things her mother said to other people. *She never talked to me about the harmful effects of drugs. I do remember her saying, "Thank God they are good. Thank God they've never done drugs" and I remember thinking "I can't ever do drugs."* Isabel describes the environment where she grew up in L.A. as one surrounded by poverty. When in middle school, they got put on lock down because high school students rioted and were headed to their campus. High school friends died in gang related deaths. A second reason Isabel attributes to taking a different path than her friends was that in eighth grade, she asked her mom if she could go to a private high school because both of the high schools she could have gone to had gang and pregnancy problems. *Even some of my friends in eighth grade were pregnant. My little sister went to one of those high schools and she was pregnant her sophomore year. I just knew the chances of that happening to me were high if I would have gone there too.*

Identity. *I was always aware of my identity and my place in relation to my environment. Childhood flowed into being a young adult and it wasn't anything I really had to think about. I knew family. I knew friends. I knew my place at school. When I was sixteen, my family moved from L.A. to Round Rock, Texas. When I moved, I had to make some choices. Growing up, I had a strong connection to being Puerto Rican. The sound of my childhood is Spanish. I've always had the lightest skin and hair in my family and my grandpa called me gringa. I was aware, but I didn't realize how that would affect me as I grew up. I've always been able to get by with people thinking I'm not Latina. Which could have its advantages, but that would take away from my identity so I always resented being in those situations. I never tried to be less Latina. I have a vivid memory of walking into the High School and immediately I could see how kids gathered in the student center. It was very, I guess, racial. I don't know how else to explain it. All the White kids were on the stage. All the Black kids were against the wall. All the Mexicans were close to the Black kids but not close enough. Then there were the Kickers. The groups didn't seem to come together. It was very strange to me. When I was in L.A., there were so many cultures and even when we had separate groups it still flowed. Sometimes I wonder if people who grew up in Round Rock felt the same way I did or maybe felt like they could go from group to group. That just wasn't something I could see from an outsider's perspective. I don't know if that was just because I was new, but that's what I felt was going on. So I think I really did have to question where I fit. I identified mostly with the*

Black and Latino kids. My two best friends were White, but felt like identity and finding my place was with Latinos and Blacks.

Isabel's identity is rooted in her Puerto Rican heritage, yet because of her outer appearance of lighter skin and hair Isabel has been called White and recalls people making inappropriate comments because she believes they viewed her differently than she views herself; they thought she was White.

Equity and social justice. *There have been plenty of moments where I feel other people have forced me to evaluate my identity. In my mind, it's very clear to me who I am. I am a Latina. It wasn't until graduate school that I realized this was bigger than just me. I always took it personal but my thinking changed to see it was an issue of social justice and not just about me. My thinking changed and my focus widened to social justice for all these babies that I've had and all my future kids and how they'll experience these things as well. It was a big aha when my grad school cohort did a whole day community walk in one of the first Black communities in Austin. Parents kept talking about prostitution being an issue and the people in my cohort had no idea that was going on because they'd never seen a prostitute. All of those people in my cohort were going back to schools and I wondered how they could be effective in their job if they don't even understand where these kids are coming from. That has a lot to do with where I am now and why I'm working with the kids I work with. I realize that just because a kid is in the same class with the same teacher, doesn't mean they all get the same education. I feel like I'm constantly questioning things that I feel need to be equalized. For example, when identifying kids for Gifted and Talented, having to*

question why we don't have any Black boys being recommended on a campus of 800 students. I feel that is my responsibility because of my experiences that others haven't had. I may not understand it all, but I understand it from my experiences.

It wasn't until graduate school when Isabel had a teacher who inspired her and she realized that the issues of social justice, equity, race, and class were bigger than just her personal experiences. The issue of social justice is a large part of why Isabel is working in the school she is in now. She has a strong connection to the community and to the kids and feels like her work there is not done.

Why education? *I was always a good student but never felt like I had a teacher that pushed me until graduate school. I only went to college because I knew I was going to college since reading that magazine article in seventh grade. My family didn't have the social capital to know how to help me. My counselor didn't want to talk to me about college because I wasn't at the top of my class. No one in my family had graduated from college, so why didn't the people who did tell me that I could do these things or help me get to where I needed to go? I had some knowledge, but not enough. It was disappointing. When I started college, I realized anybody could go to college. That was when I started to think about how I could help other people know you could do and be whatever you want.*

We each reflected on this experience and considered possible implications for the way that we teach and the way that we lead in our roles as educators.

Isabel's reflection on implications. *Relationships are really important. Depending on how well I know you, that affects the exchanges that I will have with you, whether you are a teacher or at central office. I try not to be judgmental*

but it goes back to what I think I know about you. I don't have the same relationship with everyone or even a close relationship but I have to make some kind of connection and not just things we have in common. I consider it my job to figure that out. I try to find all the things I'm connected to with everyone in the building; both adults and kids. Relationship is the place where we can move forward, where we can get the work done, where we can get on the same page about what works best for kids. My relationship with you has the biggest effect on the kinds of exchanges I will have with you

Isabel's Story Discussed

Isabel's narrative depicts how a young Puerto Rican girl uses literacy to learn about the world outside of her poverty stricken neighborhood and realizes that there is opportunity beyond the drugs, violence, gangs, and pregnancies that were consuming her peers. When she moved from Los Angeles to Central Texas at age sixteen, she was confronted with a racial divide in her new high school and was forced to question her identity and where she fit in. While her lighter skin caused many to believe she was White, her Latin family roots run deep and are the foundation for her identity. Her graduate school experience brought to the forefront the issues of social justice and inequity of race and class beyond what she had experienced as an individual to a much larger issue and passion she tries to uphold with her nieces and her students.

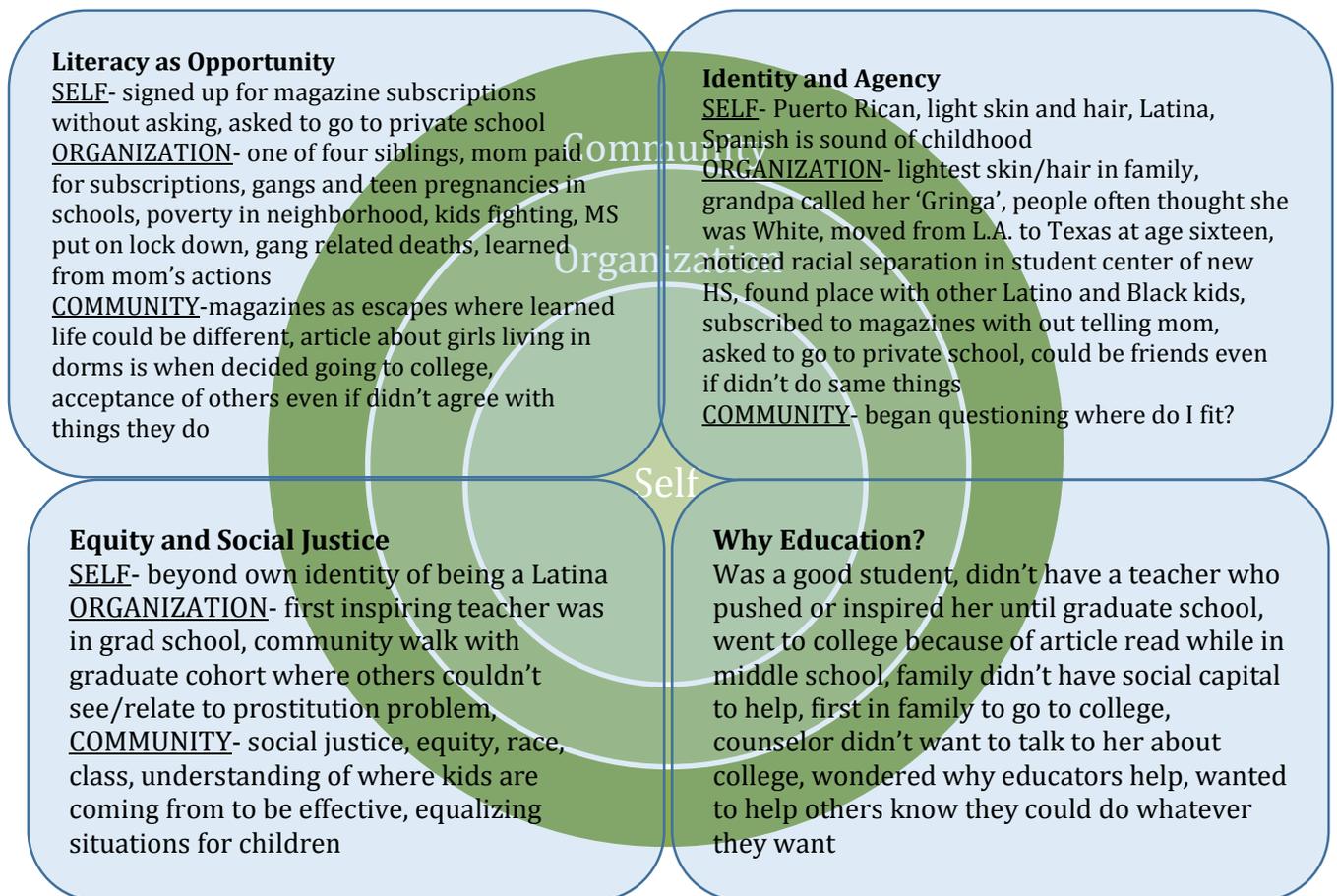


Figure 6. Analysis of Isabel's Story

The analysis of Isabel's story was based on the following questions:

- What are the lived experiences that have informed who you have become as an educator?
- What do these lived experiences look and feel like?
- How do you organize and make meaning of these experiences?
- Why is exploring our lived experiences important in knowing who we are as educators?

Ruby's Story

I wondered, 'why am I not like everyone else?' and it bothered me. I wanted to fit in so badly and be like everyone else. I wanted to be what I thought was normal.

Ruby is a 4'11" feisty Korean-Mexican woman who just turned 40. She is married and has two young children. Critical events that influenced Ruby include early

experiences of going to school in California and Texas, going to college, and meeting her husband. Currently, Ruby is a fourth grade teacher at an elementary school in Central Texas and has served as a second grade teacher, instructional coach, and fourth grade teacher over the past 18 years. Her campus serves just over 700 students in grades kindergarten through fifth with a population of mostly Hispanic and economically disadvantaged. Her classroom website includes an image of Ruby with a vertical line down the middle of her face. To the left of her face is the word “Outside” and lists the characteristics of her outer appearance “black hair, brown eyes, short, black shirt, brown shoes, blue pants.” To the right of her face is the word “Inside” with a list of her inner characteristics: “caring, smart, friendly, hardworking, funny, brave.” Below her picture is a quote, “I think if you understand yourself, you can begin to understand others. Only then can we begin to get along.”

Identity. *I didn't realize I was different until I went to school in San Marcos, Texas. I grew up in California and it was very diverse there. My kindergarten teacher was Hawaiian and many of the military families there were interracial; we were all diverse. In San Marcos, you were either White or Hispanic so being Korean and Hispanic, I was teased throughout elementary school with Japanese/Chinese taunts. I still find it offensive. I was often asked, “What are you?” I tried identifying with being Mexican since I had a Mexican last name. I used a lot of humor through it and still make fun of myself. At the time, I was trying to deny parts of me that were different. Now, I embrace it and love how unique I am.*

Ruby was born in Crystal City, Texas and moved to Vallejo, California at age three. Her dad was in the navy so they moved to a naval base near the city. When Ruby was in third grade, her family moved to San Marcos, TX. Her outer appearance was different from the largely White and Hispanic community. She recalls wanting to be “normal” like everyone else and realizes this took a toll on her self-confidence. Ruby is the oldest of five. Her mother went to school through the sixth grade in Korea because her family could not afford to send her to school. At that point, Ruby’s mother went to work at a factory putting buttons on clothes to help support the family. Ruby’s father’s family immigrated to Texas from Mexico. His mother was a single parent with three kids and they worked as migrant workers. Ruby’s father worked at the university as a mechanic and her mother stayed at home to raise five children. Ruby recalls her mom telling them, “If you’re clean and you’re well fed, you can do anything” and “If you look good and act right, people treat you right.” She says her mother’s goal was to make sure that when her children stepped out of the door that they presented their best faces. Ruby says she and her siblings get their humor from their dad. She recalls him saying, “They can take away your car, they can take away your house, but they can never take away your education. Whatever is in your head, they can’t repo that.”

Education and identity continued. *Going to college is not a big deal for some families, but for me and my family, it was for a lot of reasons. I was the first in my family to go. I went away to college, which was hard because I grew up in a big family and I was alone for the first time. I was paying for it; I filled out financial aid applications by myself for years and was afraid of being audited. I went to A&M so I went from a community of Hispanic and White to predominately White*

and now had disparity of color and money. Again, people were asking, “What are you?” and I had to revisit my identity all over again.

Ruby went to Texas A&M to participate in their Minorities in Education program without a backup plan so she did not have the option of failing or dropping out. She was paving the way for herself and her four siblings who were watching her from home. Once again, she struggled with self-confidence because she wasn't like everyone else. She was looking for groups she could relate to so she joined Hispanic clubs and Asian clubs and recalls her mother comforting her in times of doubt by saying, “Don't let them get you down. You are smart. You are beautiful. You work hard. Take those negative thoughts out of your head.”

Acceptance and legacy. *In 2000, I met my husband. He was the first person that saw me for me and meeting him changed my life exponentially. To go on a journey with the same values and beliefs, someone who's growing with you, sees you for who you really are, thinks you're beautiful when you don't think you are, thinks you're funny, and thinks you're smart. With all the self-doubt I had growing up and thinking I wasn't pretty enough or not good enough, he saw all of that and I don't know how I'm fooling him. I decided I should marry him.*

Ruby was emotional when talking about her husband. She describes him as embodying the ultimate risk in her life. She met him four weeks after having broken off an engagement and says their circumstances were not perfect but that he turned out to be the best thing that has ever happened to her. They met at an outdoor concert and he got her attention by trying to play Frisbee with her. When they began talking, they realized they both had Mexican last names but neither of them looked the part; they were both

interracial. She was attracted to him because he was funny and appealed to her sense of being yourself and no nonsense. He did not care about her past and they both wanted the same things for their futures.

Why education? *I want to teach kids the value of working hard, how to have goals, and to help make them better people. Someone has to be there to set their lives in motion and nurturing them to grow. I try to teach them to embrace their uniqueness and to have confidence, courage, and acceptance.*

We each reflected on this experience and considered possible implications for the way that we teach and the way that we lead in our roles as educators.

Ruby's reflection on implications. *I value sharing ideas face-to-face. I don't like communication through text, email, even phone. Face-to-face interpersonal connections hold such power. It builds stronger relationships. There's power in relationships. You can get anybody to do anything if you have a strong relationship. If we could approach situations through lens of empathy we would have better connections and better relationships and better communication. I find I am more accepting of people who don't follow the same path as me when I try to see the world from their perspective. I usually find that we have a lot more in common than I thought. We just have to make the time to listen, which is hard for me. I have found it harder to honor adult relationships than with kids because it requires you to be more thoughtful and calculated. It almost feels foreign because we are not used to having to navigate those waters. We are kept at guard because we are scared or nervous. We don't want to share our stories because it leaves a*

piece of you exposed. It leaves you vulnerable. Relationships feel more natural with kids.

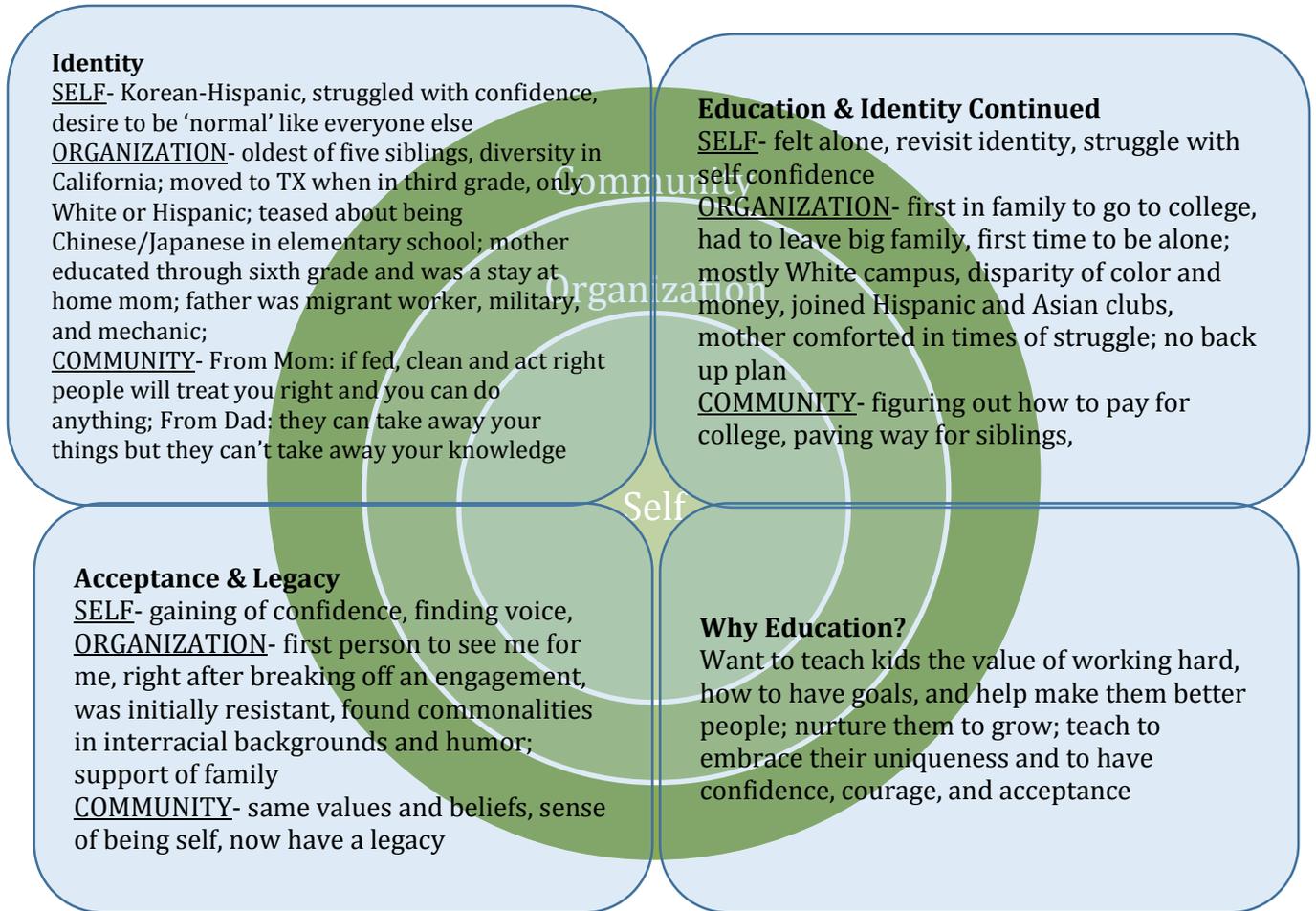


Figure 7. Analysis of Ruby's Story

Analysis of Ruby's story was based on the following questions:

- What are the lived experiences that have informed who you have become as an educator?
- What do these lived experiences look and feel like?
- How do you organize and make meaning of these experiences?
- Why is exploring our lived experiences important in knowing who we are as educators?

Ruby's Story Discussed

Ruby's story is one of struggle with identity and self-confidence. Her interracial Korean-Mexican heritage often left her feeling like she was not normal because she did not see anyone in her environment that looked like her. Throughout elementary school and college, Ruby wanted to be "normal" like everyone else. It was a combination of the time Ruby took to explore multiple ethnic groups in college and the ongoing support of her family that brought her to realize it is not her outer appearance that defines her. Ruby now has a sense of pride and embraces her uniqueness without hiding from it. Her college experience taught her that education is a door to opportunity and to never give up against all odds. She says she now has a legacy that she and her husband have created with their two children and they will get to carry out the work that her and her husband's families struggled to provide. The lessons she takes from her story are ones of pride, persistence, finding her voice, and acceptance.

Jane's Story

There is a huge need for me and always has been this need to belong and to feel like I'm a part of a group and vice versa. If someone doesn't feel like part of a group, it makes me feel uncomfortable.

Jane is a compassionate White woman in her early 50s, married with three boys who are becoming young men. She is often learning and sharing her learning with others. Critical moments influencing Jane's life have been attending Saint Joseph's College in Indiana, summer jobs through college, and the death of her sister Karen.

For the last four years Jane has been responsible for the professional development and coaching for a district grant program, working with 13 principals at the seven

highest-need elementary and middle schools. The aim of the program is to improve student achievement by increasing educator effectiveness and raising the retention level of effective educators. Prior to this role, Jane served as a coach for the entire district. She has also been a classroom teacher, assistant principal, and principal within the same district.

Identity, belonging & connection. *I grew up in a large family of five girls in east central Indiana, on the border of Ohio. There were over 500 kids in my graduating class, so it was pretty competitive and I couldn't quite find my niche. Both of my parents went to college and dad wanted all of us girls to go to college too. My decision to go to Saint Joseph's College was largely based on wanting to belong. It was an older campus and at the time I was exploring my faith. It had a historical and spiritual feeling; I felt at home. There were only 1,000 kids attending, which was a contrast from 500 in my high school graduating class. I found my niche and was able to shine at St. Joe's. You could truly be your own person there and it was so small that you couldn't get away with anything. Professors took their students under their wings and nurtured them. We had such strong connections there because it was such a small college in a small town. There were only four of us elementary majors so we became a tight nit group. I was a cheerleader for 4 years and was cheerleading captain for 2 years. I could never do that in high school because I could never make the team. It was a confidence builder.*

Jane spoke about how she applied to four different universities that looked similar on paper but that when she visited Saint Joseph's College, she knew immediately that

was where she wanted to go. She described her struggle in high school to find her niche and wanted to be with the popular crowd and then brushed it off as something that is normal for a teenager's experience during that time as they figure out who they are. Saint Joe's is where she realized her value for belonging and connection. As a testament to how strong the connection is, she goes back every five years for reunions.

Diversity. *This seems like the opposite of Saint Joe's and being in one place with the same friends. Saint Joe's was a safe bubble and summers were when I went on adventures. I did something different every summer for jobs. Between freshman and sophomore year, I went back home to work at the camp where I went as a young child. Between sophomore and junior year, I worked as a children's recreation director at a resort in New Hampshire. Between junior and senior year, I got a job as a nanny in Long Island with a family who had a totally different lifestyle. They had a butler and a gardener. I got a job taking care of their 2 year old. The mom was from England and somewhere between hiring me and getting me there, they found a real nanny from England so they told me they needed a cook and a housekeeper instead. That wasn't what I signed up for. I had an uncle in Connecticut who came and rescued me. He pulled up in the circular drive in his rabbit convertible. I didn't tell them I was leaving until I was walking out the door. I got to explore New York City for a day and a half by myself and then I went back home to work at a YMCA conference center in North Carolina. They hired around 150 college students every summer. Working there was called "rotating around the mountain." We had lots of different jobs that we rotated with: lifeguard, housekeeper, gardener, running the store, and dining room. The*

summer between graduating and my first teaching job, I went back to that YMCA conference center. They had a partnership in Japan for exchange students. I was accepted and went to Japan for a month then I came back to rotating around the mountain before I finally moved to Texas for my first teaching job.

This was before the Internet so Jane recalls going to the library and looking in a book for summer jobs. Throughout her descriptions, she talked about how she met so many different people that she is still friends with today; a testament to her value for connection and belonging. She says these jobs gave her an appreciation and understanding of diverse communities and individuals. *“I learned something from all of them.”*

Forgiveness. *In 2011 my youngest sister, Karen, passed away. Karen was pretty emotional, sensitive, and opinionated. You could be in a crowd of people and if she got mad, you would know it. I learned to be cautious because I never wanted to make her mad. When my youngest son turned 5, we had a birthday party for him and Karen, her husband, and their 3 kids spent the night. We had a great evening. The next morning as they were getting ready to leave and were packing the car, their daughter was in the backyard by herself and when she bent down to hug one of our dogs, she put her arms around him and he bit her right on her eye. We all went into motion and got her to the emergency room. Her eye was treated and ended up being fine. I remember thinking that night, “Thank God she didn’t go off the deep end and get really mad at us.” The dog bite happened in July. In October, we got a certified letter stating that Karen and her husband were suing us. That began a difficult time in our family. We didn’t speak to each other for 4*

years. Dad died during that time and we all managed to be together but we wouldn't go to family events because it was so stressful. In January of 2011, Karen was diagnosed with stage 4 cancer. She was very sick and trying lots of meds. She was going downhill really quick. I had to make a decision. I could continue to be the way we've been for the last four years or realize that I only had a short amount of time with her. I needed to go be with her. That's what my heart told me to do. I helped take care of her through some awful times. She lived for a few more months and we have pictures of all of us together. I look back and thank God for getting me to get past all that craziness and family drama that was really hard.

Jane has faith that everything happens for a reason and while difficult, she is grateful for the difficulties she experienced with her sister. She attributes a much stronger family bond with her remaining sisters as well as her nieces and nephews, Karen's children. Forgiveness is something she's learned to do sooner and there are things that used to bother her that don't anymore because of this experience.

Why education? *I want to help people and I want others to feel included. It's more of an internal thing, but being aware that this is my story and honoring somebody else's story. When sitting around in a meeting, talking about something that may be important work, I can be aware that everyone sitting there has something that they're going through; something that has made them who they are; something that has shaped and molded them to be the educator that they are. That makes me a lot more accepting and open-minded.*

We each reflected on this experience and considered possible implications for the way that we teach and the way that we lead in our roles as educators.

Jane's reflection on implications. *My story has caused me to build connections with others and to be lot more tolerant of possibilities of other people. If I am working with someone and I don't feel like we have a connection, I am more apt to ask them to meet up with me somewhere outside of work. Before my sister passed, I was quick to jump to conclusions in my head. I feel I am more open-minded and don't sweat the small stuff as a result. I try to teach and lead by my actions so that others learn from what they see me doing and are able to transfer what they learn into their own lives.*

Jane's Story Discussed

Jane's narrative revolves tightly around connection and belonging. She has a strong desire to make sure everyone feels included. Her first experience with belonging came from attending the small campus of Saint Joseph's College where she developed strong relationships with peers and professors and began to find her confidence. Her summer job adventures took her away from cornfields of Indiana to experience diversity of communities and individuals. The death of her youngest sister, and the struggle that previewed her death was a period of inner growth for forgiveness, letting things go, and the power of family connection.

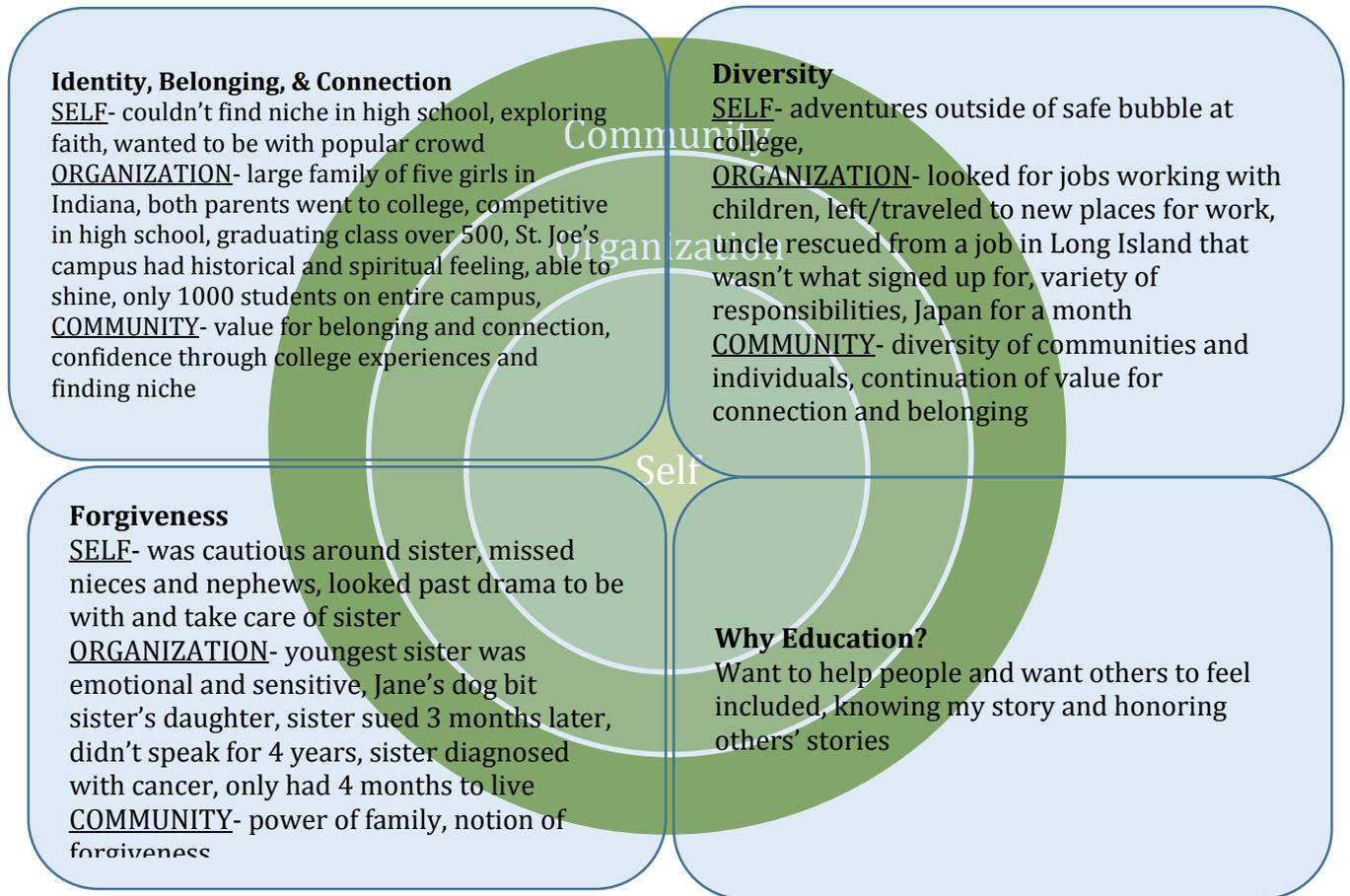


Figure 8. Analysis of Jane's Story

Analysis of Jane's story was based on the following questions:

- What are the lived experiences that have informed who you have become as an educator?
- What do these lived experiences look and feel like?
- How do you organize and make meaning of these experiences?
- Why is exploring our lived experiences important in knowing who we are as educators?

Liz's Story

I am a single Hispanic woman in my late 30s. The death of my mother when I was ten, leaving home for college, and beginning my training as a coach have been the critical moments which have had the most influence on my life.

For the past year and a half, I have served as the National Director of Coaching for an educational non-profit dedicated to maximizing the leadership development of

highly effective teachers across the nation. I have also been an elementary classroom teacher, instructional coach, and program manager for statewide accountability support and leadership coaching services. My passion has always been to serve students, teachers, and administrators who work in high poverty communities.

Autopilot: Lessons from Loss. *The first ten years of my life set me up to be the person that I am today. I had lessons in independence, love, responsibility, family, hard work, and sucking it up. My mother died of suicide when I was ten. We all make mistakes. Big mistakes, little mistakes. Mistakes that rarely cost us our life, but this one choice she made did. I have done a lot of work around processing all I have received from my ten years with my mother. I've forgiven her and can even understand in some strange bizarre way. Most people are not able to understand her suicide and that's ok. This work is about understanding my story, not the story of my mother. I am extremely protective of her and her story. When someone hears suicide, they don't initially know how to respond but there's typically a look of judgment or an "oh, I'm so sorry" which was hard for me to respond to. More recently, especially through the work of my dissertation, I have opened up to share more about my mother, which has helped me heal even more. I'm not done healing, I'm not sure if I ever will be. My mother was creative, determined, motivating, and strong. She is my foundation. The loss of my mom led to a numbing time in my life. I created a protective bubble around myself and lived on autopilot, observing all that was going on around me but not fully participating. I was a good student and stayed out of trouble by playing sports. I did what I was*

“supposed” to do because I didn’t want anyone to blame my mother’s suicide for me being a bad kid.

Leaving of ignorance. *I left home for college in the summer of 1995. Up to that point, I’d lived a very sheltered life and was very protected by my dad. College was about leaving ignorance, figuring out who I was and getting out from underneath my father’s rules to figure out what was right and wrong for me. I joined a Latina sorority; Sigma Delta Lambda was the first Latina sorority at Southwest Texas University. SDL gave me the opportunity to interact with other girls. These girls were different from the group of girls that I played sports and grew up with. It was challenging at times as we were all trying to figure out who we were. It was through this Latina sorority that I began to develop a little bit of my leadership and my communication skills. It was also through SDL that I participated in a big sister program at a local elementary school. That experience is what made me realize my love for children and why I decided to become an educator. I am forever grateful.*

Finding my voice. *I have lived much of my life without a voice; going through the motions, watching others live their lives, all the while avoiding living mine. I continued to pursue higher degrees as a means to avoid living my life; to avoid feeling or doing anything real. I couldn’t because I had to go home and study or I had to go to class. It was the perfect cover. Somewhere in my mid-30s between completing the coursework for this PhD and signing up for a training to become a leadership coach, I found my voice. I found me. Coaching provided me with a safe space to begin to identify and reflect upon my own goals and how I wanted to*

pursue them; a far stretch from doing what everyone else thinks I should be doing.

Why education? *During my junior year at Southwest Texas University, I volunteered to be a big sister through a volunteer opportunity with the Latina sorority I was a part of. Being an only child, I had little to no experience being around children and teaching was the last thing I thought I wanted to do because of the harsh treatment I saw many of them endure throughout my early education. I loved being a big sister and found myself looking forward to the days I would visit the campus to have lunch with my little sister and all of her friends. They actually listened to me and remembered things I had shared with them weeks prior. I felt like I was actually making a difference in those short amounts of time I had with them and that they were learning from me. I still get excited about learning conversations with my current little sister and I am convinced that my early big sister experience is the reason I found my passion in the field of education.*

Liz's Story Discussed

My story revolves around lessons from loss, leaving of ignorance, and finding my voice. From age ten through my mid-30s, I spent much of my time observing others live their lives while going through the motions of living mine by doing what I thought others or society thought I should do. My choice to do this was a result of my desire to avoid the feelings and experience from losing my mom and not wanting others to judge my mother for her suicide. While my journey to heal is not over, the process of this study and creating the safe space to explore and share my story has provided a shift and a desire to

explore, experience, and feel more from life. What lies beyond this study is unknown, but my desire to fully experience and enjoy life is now stronger than it ever has been.

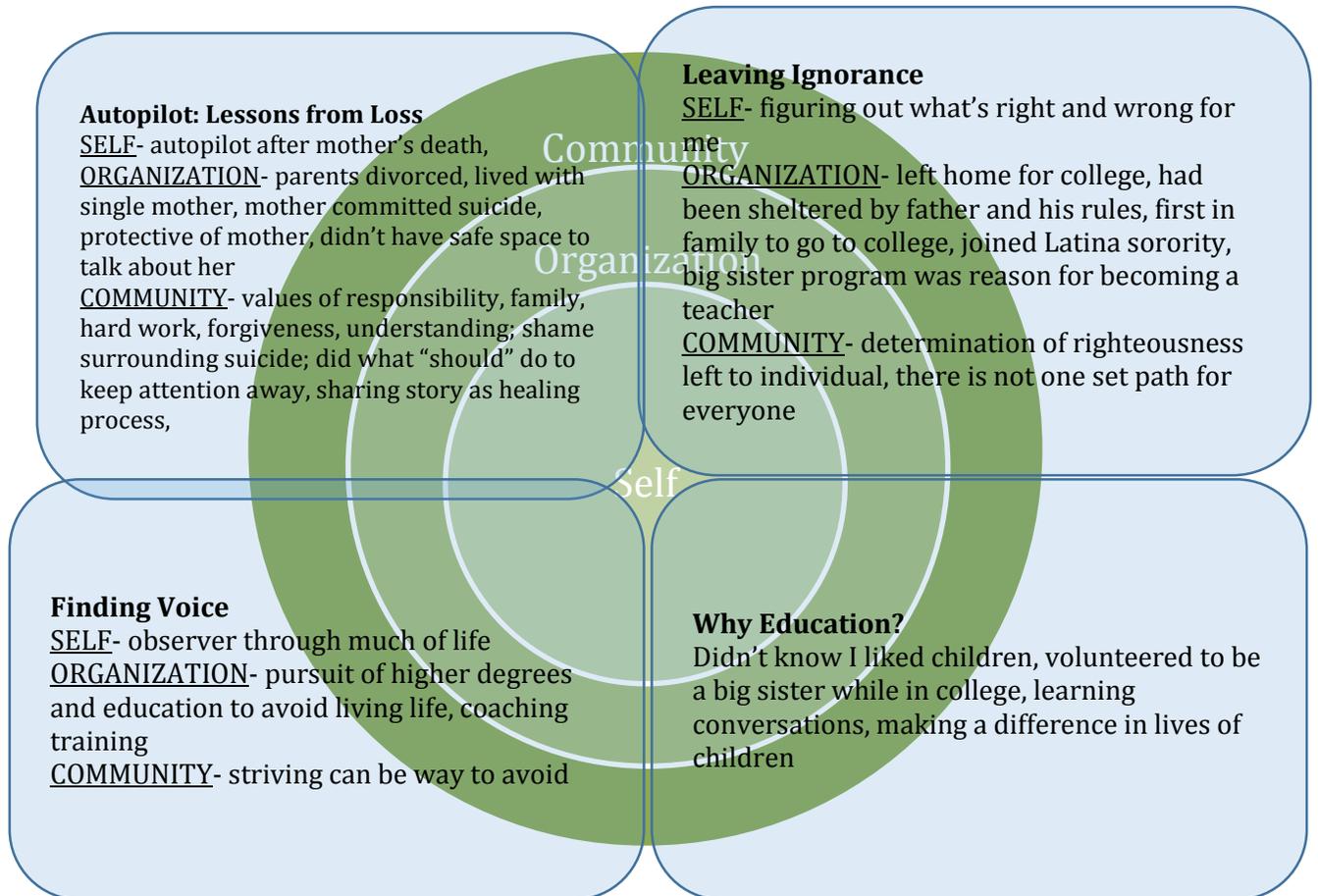


Figure 9. Analysis of Liz's Story

Analysis of Liz's story was based on the following questions:

- What are the lived experiences that have informed who you have become as an educator?
- What do these lived experiences look and feel like?
- How do you organize and make meaning of these experiences?
- Why is exploring our lived experiences important in knowing who we are as educators?

Group Plática

In preparation for the group *plática*, I informed each partner that we would be sharing our individual stories and engaging in dialogue to explore the meaning of our collective story. Partners agreed to meet at my home for this meeting so we gathered around my dining room table to engage in the group *plática*. We began the group *plática* with informal introductions, each of them sharing their connection to me as well as something most people would not guess about them. We used chart paper and markers to organize how we wanted to share our individual critical moment histories. Printed copies of their individual interview transcriptions were available to them as resources in case they wanted to refer back to the interview. To help create a safe environment, I volunteered to share my story first.

After sharing our stories, we engaged in dialogue to analyze and explore the meaning of our collective stories. I prepared the following questions as potential topics for us to explore:

- What connections did you make among our stories?
- How does our story impact how we make meaning of things (our learning)?
- What are implications for how we teach and how we lead?

Connections. We found similarities across all of our stories, some stronger than others. Common threads we identified were identity and discovering who we are, a desire for belonging and connection, college experiences expanding our perceptions of self, individuals who have been powerful influencers in our lives, race, diversity, and an early love of literature.

Both Ruby and Isabel experienced an early exploration of their identities when their families moved to another state. Jane and I did not have the same level of identity

discovery until we left our childhood homes for college. It seems as if moving to another environment, whether it was as a child or as a young adult, was a trigger for all of us to develop awareness for our own identities. We all attributed our college experiences to expanding our perceptions of self and wondered how much of this was typical of the age for self-discovery or as a result of having made similar choices to go to college and become educators. Belonging and connection were important to each of us. At times we craved belonging and tried our best to find the group we fit in with and would be accepted by. Other times in our lives we felt deep connections with someone who has had a tremendous influence on our lives: mothers, sisters, husbands, family, and teachers. Isabel's story of her early love of literature prompted Ruby, Jane and I to share how we too enjoyed reading books and magazines early on. We each recalled looking forward to reading the next magazine or book.

Making meaning. I confessed to being slow to make meaning; that I take my time to reflect and am cautious with what and how I share my meaning. I do not jump right in; I make meaning slowly and attribute it to the amount of time I have spent in 'autopilot.'

Isabel: *"I know very quickly what I think about something, but I don't necessarily always stick to my first judgment. I think that's one of the things I'm actually good at. I am a good active listener and I'm always willing to hear anyone out. I think that's really important. I want to be able to learn from other people."*

Isabel's desire to learn from other people allows her to listen and uncover what is going on, but recognizes that the drawback is that she does not always have the time to hear the other side.

Jane: *“Part of a successful project I’m doing has a lot to do with whether or not people make connections with each other.”*

Connections are important to how Jane makes meaning with others.

Ruby: *“I value connections with people. The people I connect with end up being my lifelong friends because there’s power in being able to connect with somebody. You’ll never forget them when there is something you can relate with them on.”*

Ruby added that she also uses humor to make meaning of things.

Additional discussion that arose for the group in this part of the *plática* included:

- how do we make connections with people who are uncomfortable with making connections?,
- the value of acceptance for others who may not follow the same path we have, chosen by trying to see the world from their perspective, and
- listening, while not always easy, is an important skill for meaning making.

Collective Analysis

Appendix D presents a cross analysis of themes and Ecologies of Knowing from all four research partners' stories with a look at each individual and a combined analysis across all four. The commonalities across all four partners included identity formation, desire for belonging and connection, and strong influences from family. At the micro level of self, we each struggled with shame in some way; Isabel's lighter skin and hair

created self-consciousness about where she fit in, Ruby wanted to look ‘normal’ like everyone else, Jane did not feel like she fit in and could not find her niche in a competitive high school, and I felt both judged and pitied because of my mother’s suicide. Finding our voice and knowing our selves came through our desires for belonging and connection.

One difference that arose at both the micro level of self and the meso level of organization, was in the area of race. Isabel and Ruby were confronted with issues of race as children when they moved with their families from California to Texas. Isabel, having the lightest skin and hair in her family, was often assumed to be White by others and carried resentment from being put in those situations because of her strong roots and Puerto Rican heritage. Ruby, a Korean-Hispanic, struggled with racial identity when she and her family moved to Texas. She started third grade in a new school where the community was predominantly White or Hispanic. She was teased with Chinese/Japanese taunts and struggled with self-confidence and identity as a result. I did not experience issues of my race as a child because I grew up in a predominantly Hispanic community, I do remember issues of race arising towards Whites and Blacks from others in the Hispanic culture. My first experience with issues of my race came when I left home to attend college at a predominantly White university. It was a culture shock and I struggled to identify with those around me until I found a group of Latinas in a community service organization, which after a year became the first Latina sorority at Southwest Texas State University. Jane, while not having expressed struggle with issues of race, shared her first experiences of encountering diversity during her summer jobs away from university and the eclectic group of lifelong friends she now has as a result. During our group *plática*

Jane contributed that most people would look at her and assume that she does not understand other races or diversity, but that she does not see herself that way. She also shared that her nieces and nephews are interracial (one sister married a Hispanic man and another married an African American man) and has had a large role in their upbringing and embracing of multiple cultures.

Three of us were the first in our families to attend college and we spoke of the struggle we experienced with the application process as well as figuring out how we were going to pay for college tuition. While both of Jane's parents attended college, she did have to work during summers and during the school year in order to pay for tuition. Jane and I both included the loss of a family member as one of our critical moments and as a result expressed a greater desire to understand others and identified forgiveness as an important value.

At the macro level of community, similarities included a value for belonging and connection; family's influence on our view of the world, literature, and education as opportunity; and increased acceptance of others as a result of our stories. For the three who paved the way by being the first in their families to attend college, the rules, policies, and procedures to gain the privilege of a college education were uncharted territory for our families. We did not always have the guidance and support to point us in the right direction, but somehow we managed to succeed. All four research partners showed elements of resilience through struggle. We found we are both privileged and disadvantaged in different ways. What we take from this process is a stronger sense of connection with each other, respect, and understanding for our stories and the stories of others, and an appreciation for the power in relationships.

V. STORY AS PRACTICE

Reflections: A New Awareness

Author's Reflections

It is hard to believe I am here, in a place where I am writing the final pieces of my dissertation; that I am even writing a dissertation. Aside from the doctors I saw for broken bones or stitches during my tomboy youth, I did not grow up knowing anyone who had a PhD nor did I see examples of professors who looked like me during my early years in college. The first Latina I knew with a PhD was Tina Deolloz-Daniels, my big sister from Sigma Delta Lambda, a Latina sorority. Learning of her doctorate pursuit was inspiring and for the first time I imagined that I could do it too. My hope is that I too am able to inspire young women, not just Latinas, with the knowledge and skills for self-discovery and the belief that they too can pursue their doctorate degree or whatever other big dreams they may have.

This study is symbolic of a transition from the known to the unknown and back again—a rite of passage. This work has been a reflection of my life, of witnessing my lived experience and a transformation into becoming an active participant in my life. The self-awareness resulting from exploring and sharing my story with research partners is something that can never be taken away. I am a Latina, a survivor of suicide—the label given to those who have lost a loved one to suicide—an educator, a student, a coach, a listener, a voice for the voiceless, and a creator of safe-spaces for others to reflect and share their stories. I am a product of time and experiences, my mother's struggle and sacrifice, and of friends and family who have supported me. My life's journey has not

been easy nor do I expect it to be after this process. The struggles have beaten and molded me into the woman I am today.

The stories of my research partners have interwoven with mine. I carry with me a new sense of self—of agency and voice from Isabel’s asking to attend private school so that she might have a better education, of embracing my own uniqueness and letting go of wanting to be *normal* like everyone else from Ruby, and of seeking people and places where I can develop my niche and shine from Jane. I carry with me a new sense of organizations—an appreciation for learning and understanding where someone comes from—their roots...families, neighborhoods, siblings, environment, and values that have influenced them. I carry a recognition and celebration of our differences—race, class, and experiences. I carry an awareness for the adjustments required to navigate the various rules of organizations, of our families, neighborhoods, and schools, and particularly of the intricacies of learning and navigating the rules of a new organization. I carry with me a new sense of community—of how literature and education lead to opportunity and that it is up to us to figure out what that opportunity could be, of our core desire for belonging and connection, and of the power that exists when recognizing we can decide whether or not to let our individual circumstances dictate our futures. I will carry these new understandings of self, organizations, and community with me always and use this knowledge to help others in discovering the same.

These discoveries have already begun to expand beyond the stories of my research partners and myself. This study has prompted me to have conversations with my dad about my mom, about the often silent life we lived after mom, and about his life experiences on the *rancho*. Our weekly two minute phone conversations consisting of,

“Hey *Mija*, how is the weather in Austin?...Is everybody doing ok?...Just called to check in. Love you” have turned into conversations where we are both beginning to share our stories with each other and developing a better understanding of the other. I have learned of his pain, his worries, his struggles, and his disappointments. Dad is even beginning to have similar conversations with his siblings to learn of their perceptions from growing up on the *rancho*. His unwavering support of me has always been there, sometimes hard and often in black and white absolutes, but always consistent, even if only in a two-minute conversation. He has been a solid and often silent support for me, which I have not appropriately captured in this study, not because he was not present but because he has always been present in some way, letting me experience life and always there if I needed him. He is proud of me; I know that. And I know my mother would be proud of me too.

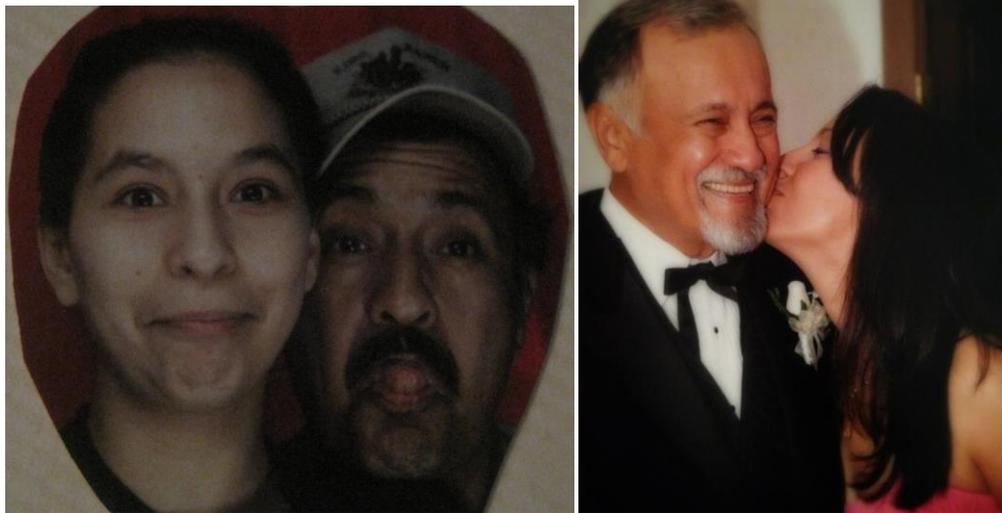


Figure 10. Liz Garcia and Jose Garcia

A Reflection from Isabel

I think this process was important for me as an educator. I really appreciated the space to think critically about specific events in my life and how they influence my work. It was also important for me to hear other stories and find connections with my own. Reflection is not a new idea for me, in fact, it is something I value and use regularly in my practice; however, this experience was different. A typical reflection goes something like this: A parent calls and is upset because she missed the science fair awards that were rescheduled late in the week. Typical reflection: Did teachers notify parents and by what method? Did teachers know they needed to notify parents? What do I need to do to ensure parents are notified of rescheduled events? Obviously necessary, but it only gets at the nuts and bolts of a school. Our experience allowed me to reflect on my practice beyond the day-to-day occurrences and really think about the broader purpose of my work. It grounded me and brought me back to the constructs that were instrumental to my own life experiences such as literacy, identity, equity, and social justice. Giving educators, at every level, a space to reflect beyond their day-to-day experiences can be a powerful tool not only for personal growth and development but making connections and building relationships as well.

A Reflection from Ruby

The implications for education: every good teacher knows the value of relationships. Fostering relationships with students and parents are key to getting kids to work hard and building trust. These relationships allow you, as an educator, to have honest conversations with students and parents about academic

progress and achievement. When these trusting relationships are built, then students and parents are able to realize your vision for them: success, achievement, growth, opportunity, knowledge, independence, perseverance, and determination. But more importantly, teachers are satisfied with their relationships in the classroom. It is often the relationships outside of the classroom that are not fostered. Every teacher has that person on their team or their hall neighbor with whom they share successes, vent with, or just relieve stress with. They usually trust this person. This person has the same experiences as them. They can connect with these situations. These conversations are not over email, or text—they are real, in the hallway conversations after the bell has rung or the students have left the building. It is not a planning session, it is a time to just connect, relate, listen, get it off your chest. These healthy, on the fly conversations are honest. But it is relationships with school leadership that is essential for building school culture and climate. Every school has a nifty vision or mission statement. But what does that really mean? Teachers crave a trusting relationship with their school leaders. They want someone to talk to have them listen to their ideas or problems. Sometimes they just want to share a life moment—engagements, pregnancies, a horrible sister in law.... The key is—when a teacher feels safe enough to come in and share these things, a trusting relationship is built. NO teacher should feel that a conversation they have "off the record" with their leadership is susceptible to a documented write up. If this ever happens, trust is broken. The damage is done. They will come to you with a guarded soul. Without honesty and trust, the school vision is never seen and the

school climate is compromised. School improvement remains stagnant. No amount of training or professional development can raise the level of a school like a good school climate can. School climate is seen and felt by all—parents, teachers, students, and visitors. Once destroyed, it will take a big effort to rebuild. When school leaders value relationships in schools over scores, central office, and other outside pressure, only then will everything else begin to improve. Teachers will work harder for a person who values them. It doesn't take much. The funny thing is this does not take money. Building relationships with people takes time. Face-to-face time. Make the rounds. Visit classrooms without an observation form. Be available. Ask personal questions. Notice things and compliment—bulletin boards, etc.

The people in my life that are dearest to me are people whom I have a deep connection with. We share stories, I know them, and they know me. We have a history. We have shared goals or values. These things are not trivial. They are imperative to our profession. So often we think our job is about testing, or the standards, our job is about developing people, fostering relationships, and growing character. The work we do now plants a seed in the lives of all we touch. Through this process with Liz, I feel I have made new friends. Isabel and Jane now know my story. They know more about me than many people I interact with on a daily basis, and I know about them as well. Through our stories, I see our connections even though our backgrounds are varied. We have similar goals, values, and desires. This process made me realize, at the heart of everyone, we

just want to be seen, heard, valued, and loved. When leaders see that same thing in their teachers, only then can we begin to change the landscape of education.

A Reflection from Jane

It REALLY IS all about the relationships! We are who we are because of our experiences with others: our family members, our friends, our own teachers. And, those relationships have shaped who we have become as educators. They seriously contributed to why we became educators in the first place, and they most certainly are why we "do what do", why we treat people in certain ways, and why we feel the way we do about those we impact in our roles.

I guess if there is one thing I would change, it would be to figure out a way to allow aspiring teachers to dig deep into their critical experiences, much like you did here in your dissertation, as part of their journey to becoming teachers of young children in our classrooms. Because the better we know ourselves, the better we can know others, and knowing our students is how we reach them.

What does this study have to do with leadership and school improvement? It is the educators—like Isabel, Ruby, Jane, and myself—who do the important work of educating the children and adults in our schools. What can we learn about ourselves as educators from the stories in this study? School reform efforts have largely focused on structural changes to the conditions of schools and transforming the technical aspect of the teaching practice. How do we disrupt the current test taking and accountability norms in schools so that we may create safe spaces to explore, share, and celebrate our stories so that we may learn from the many assets the individuals in our organizations and communities already possess?

Implications of Findings on Practice and Research

To begin, we must first look inside ourselves to uncover our own stories as educators and public people. My motivations behind this dissertation were about bravely uncovering my story with research partners who bravely shared right along with me. It required vulnerability and courage for each of them to share these stories; stories they had only shared with a small handful of people and rarely, if ever, in the education setting. It was their willingness that gave me the courage to do the same. This sort of space is rarely created in public schools and certainly not in any of our histories as public learners and educators. We can create the same collective willingness in our schools by creating the safe space through processes for engaging in *pláticas* so that we may better understand the strengths of others in our organizations and communities and create the belonging and connection that Jane described as central to her learning, teaching, and leading. By doing this, we can alter the way members of our schools think and interact with each other (Senge, 2000) to create the relationships required for effective schools (Brown, 2007; Hughes, 2013; Miller, 1995; Wait, Nelson, & Guajardo, 2007).

We must find the place where our stories intersect. We have each attained *success* and overcome obstacles through our journey. I worry about the kids who do not have the social capital (Yosso & Solorzano, 2005) and resources to push through as we have—the kids who do not have the mom or dad to comfort and build confidence in them, the family to love and support them, the friends to confide in—the kids who do not have a safe space. These are the children Isabel described in her story for whom she feels responsible to speak for. We must provide comfort, support, love, confidence, and a safe space for them. We must create not only awareness, but also appreciation for the vast

differences and similarities among those of us who walk through the hallways of our schools; honoring, respecting, sharing, celebrating and ultimately learning from each other. Our stories are something we should understand so that we can learn from and be proud of them. We need environments where we can safely share without feeling less than or unworthy because our story is not like the *normal* ones; because, as Ruby shared in her story—if we get down to it, we will see that there is no normal and we are all unique.

A Call to Action

To policy makers, teacher training institutions, teachers and others in the field of education, students, parents, educational researchers, and anyone whose work consists of learning, teaching, and/or leading—to all of us—below is a guide on the contribution of my research as a response to the guiding research questions.

WHAT has been missing in school improvement is personal dynamics—the cultural and political aspects of reform (Bryk & Schneider, 2002; Guajardo, Guajardo, Oliver & Keawe, 2012; Ramirez, 2013). Through this study, we have learned the value of knowing and understanding our stories as grounding of our identity, finding our voice and ultimately for our agency. We have also gained the value of understanding others and the building and strengthening of relationships through re-authoring our story.

HOW do we create and sustain healthy personal dynamics for our selves, our organization, and our community? This study revealed the importance of creating a safe environment where individuals are able to reflect deeply on their lived experiences and to consider how these experiences have influenced them as educators. We believe it is

important for all of us to know and incorporate the following in how we learn, teach, and lead:

- How to create a safe environment for people to share their stories
- How to facilitate and engage in *pláticas*
- How to carve out regular and sacred time for members of an organization to individually and collectively reflect and engage in *pláticas*
- How to tell and make meaning of our stories
- How to re-author our story

WHY should we invest time in the personal dynamics of understanding ourselves and others? When we take the time to share our stories and engage in *pláticas*, we are nurturing the desire for belonging and connection that was a thread throughout each research partners' story; creating the space where our individual stories become interwoven to create a new collective story for our organization and community. Sharing our stories allows us to understand and utilize the many strengths within our organization; altering the way members of our schools think and interact with each other (Senge, 2000) to create the relationships required for effective schools (Brown, 2007; Hughes, 2013; Miller, 1995; Wait, Nelson, & Guajardo, 2007). Engaging in *pláticas* and sharing our stories allows us to take advantage of learning from the most valuable resources in our schools—each other. Our lived stories become the text making the teaching, learning, and leading process relevant, important and critical (Guajardo & Guajardo, 2010; 2013; Guajardo, Guajardo, Janson & Militello, In Press).

Practice: Application of My New Knowledge

For myself, I am inspired to share my new awareness with others and to continue to provide a safe space for individuals to explore their stories through *pláticas* in the same way that we have in this study. I feel an inner calling to do this work not only with and for educators, but also with other survivors of suicide in an attempt to create a safe space for healing just as this study has done for me. Education is indeed liberating and it seems that it took me writing a dissertation to achieve this outcome. As we learned in our research, my partners got to a similar space and certainly it will impact who they are as educators but this should happen in every single classroom with every child every day!

For the organizations of schools, my hope is that we are able to create belonging and connections for both the adults and students in our schools. We need to invest the time in creating a safe environment for individuals to reflect on their stories and to engage in *pláticas* to learn from the stories of others. A critical lesson from our work together is that method matters in a way that pedagogy matters. It takes great attention to get educators and people in general to get to the point of being ready to share. It took me 30 plus years to really dive into the critical experience of my life. This experience has been with me forever, yet no teacher, professor, nor coach had asked me to explore the pedagogy of this moment and the subsequent impact it has had on me. The process required a personal readiness, a relational readiness and a political readiness that manifested itself into a reflective action that invited a public sharing. This too should take place in every classroom, every staff development and every curriculum writing session in this country.

For the larger community, the process of identity formation and self-discovery are critical for our understanding of self, but also necessary for us to be able to understand and engage with others for a thriving and socially responsible community. We must find ways to bring individuals together so that we may weave our collective stories together and create a new story of community. This work highlights the importance of training teachers and school leaders at all levels. My research partners and I work in different settings, yet we all found useful the process and the outcome of our learning.

Additionally, we should also consider how we include parents and families in this process. They are critical to the development of their children and parents learning these strategies could yield a different impact and contribution to the education of our children.

Another issue to consider at the macro level is the teacher and leadership preparation programs and their work in preparing future educators. The strategies outlined above could be part of the curriculum; as I reflect on my own undergraduate and graduate education, knowing how to make meaning of my story helps me frame and place the missing pieces of this learning experience. This work can contribute to this development.

Research: Application of My New Knowledge

Self: As an emerging researcher, when I began my dissertation I did not have the language, skills, or level of understanding necessary to be able to do this type of research. I was operating without incorporating self into my research and was leaving out the most important resource I have—ME. I have been privileged to work with a chair and mentor who invested the time and patience necessary to cultivate the relational, personal, and political awareness embedded within a method needed to do this work. He used the same methods to get me to a level of readiness and self discovery that I used in my study:

plática, story, and the ecologies of knowing. I can only imagine how my life may have been different if a teacher took the time to help me explore the story of my mother and I sooner so that I would not have lived much of my life on autopilot. We cannot afford to let our students operate on autopilot. For this type of research to continue to be practiced, the methods of *plática*, story, and understanding of self can be useful to help educators, students, and parents gain insights just as Dr. Guajardo did with me and as I did with my research partners in this study. We can do this by incorporating *plática*, story, and reflection in our methods for developing our selves as individual teachers, students, and parents; for developing our organization to understand our collective story and the valuable assets we already have within our schools; and for developing our community through the larger scope of how we prepare teachers and educators to do this work. More specifically, we can use the methods of *plática*, story, and reflection for training teachers to deliver lesson plans, engage with students and parents, and plan with teams.

For me personally, I will continue to seek research opportunities for uncovering more of my story and the stories of others around me. I will find ways to incorporate story into my work as a learner, a teacher, and a leader in both my personal and professional life. New curiosities that have resulted from this work include the impact of this practice on an entire organizations and/or communities as opposed to three individuals in separate organizations. I hope to find a community of practitioners and researchers with a passion for story so we can learn from each other and nurture others to have a curiosity and readiness for story to join us.

Organization: Method matters just as pedagogy does. As researchers and members of organizations, it is important for us to nurture the personal, relational, and

political readiness so that we may explore our own stories and share our stories with others. It is our duty to ask how we can conduct research with and not on educators, students, and educational leaders for this level of readiness. I urge us all to engage in *pláticas* about the critical moments that have informed our pedagogy, to celebrate the stories that emerge as a result, and to turn around and use the same methods to help our students and their families cultivate their own stories. I want to see schools that celebrate the stories of its teachers, its students, and its families so that everyone truly belongs and is valued for who they are as unique individuals who make up the collective as opposed to individuals who try to conform to the majority collective as I did on autopilot. As Guajardo & Guajardo (2013) share, *plática* can be useful as inquiry, pedagogy, and community building tool.

Community: For the larger community of education, our research to measure learning, effectiveness, and progress has focused on the technical and has largely left out the social, cultural, and political aspects of our work in education. We must reflect and consider what is the purpose of educational research? Is our larger purpose to develop knowledge to sustain the status quo or the human aspects of learning? I believe there is a bridge between the two. Without the real human applicability and understanding of learning, the technical aspects remain theoretical and external to our lived experiences. As a community of researchers in education, we must begin to use methods such as *plática*, story, and reflection to uncover the human aspects of learning, teaching and leading. This will allow us to develop authentic learning experiences for all of us to learn from each others' stories of real lived experiences and ground our learning in the human aspects of learning, teaching, and leading.

CLOSING LETTER TO MY MOTHER

Mom,

I'm not sure where to even begin...there's so much that I've experienced since I last saw you, but in actuality you've been here with me all along. Do you remember that last day we were together? You took me to the park and you sat in a swing and watched me play. That is what I've imagined you doing this whole time. You've just been chilling in a swing watching me ever since then.

I know that you worried about what life would be like for me after you were gone. Dad and I managed to survive on *Shake & Bake*, *Beenie Weenies*, and lots and lots of pizza. We both went through some growing pains, but he's always had my back and supported me. Grateful doesn't even begin to capture how I feel about him. He is definitely one of my blessings.

I didn't talk to anyone about you for a really long time. I thought about you every day, but I didn't share because I didn't want people to judge you and I didn't want people to feel sorry for me. I knew if I shared they would misunderstand and they wouldn't see just how lucky I am to have you as my mother. Somehow, you managed to fit a lifetime of love and lessons into my first ten years of life. You gave me my foundation and I wouldn't be the woman I am today without you. You taught me about hard work and fun—you even managed to somehow make the hard work fun by turning the work into a game, about love, forgiveness, strength, struggle, about independence and asking for help, about happiness and sadness, family, belonging, discipline, adventure (I will have a

popup camper and a VW van when I grow up so I can be like you), and ultimately knowing that everything is going to be OK.

Since I've started sharing my story, I have met others who have had similar experiences. I've had friends—old friends I haven't seen in years—former students, even family of friends thank me for sharing my story because they either know someone or they themselves struggle with depression and thoughts of suicide. It hasn't been easy, but I try to respond in a way that I would hope someone would have responded to you if you shared with them. I try to provide a safe space for them to share and not feel judged and I always encourage them to seek professional help. There's a community of people who are doing great work for suicide prevention. For the last three years, I've done the 'Out of the Darkness' walk with the American Foundation for Suicide Prevention. Some of Juan's kids have joined me. Rosie and her family have done it every year with me and some of my girlfriends have come to support me too. We always share stories we remember about you. You are still very loved.

I know that I can't bring you back physically, but my hope is that by sharing my story I am able to help give voice to the many others who have been silent and to hopefully give them the courage to speak up and ask for help. Thank you for all that you gave me and for all that you still continue to give me now.

I love you forever and ever and ever,

Elizabeth Ann Salazar Garcia

(the way you taught me how to write my name before I started "kinder")

APPENDIX A

REQUEST FOR PARTICIPATION AND CONSENT FORM

Dear _____:

I would like to invite you to participate in a study I will be conducting as a doctoral candidate at Texas State University. The purpose of this study is to examine the ontology of educator conversations and how they inform pedagogical practices. Ontology means the study of being so we will be studying who you are, or rather your understanding of who you are. More specifically, this qualitative study will explore participant (that's you) story, your experiences exploring new ideas with others through conversation, and how this impacts your pedagogical practices. You were selected as a possible participant because: _____

Your participation in this study is voluntary and confidential and this study is not a part of your regular work responsibilities.

If you are willing to participate in this study and/or you would like more information, please contact me via email at lizgarcia12@yahoo.com or by phone at 512-787-3621.

Thank you for your time and consideration,

Elizabeth Garcia
Texas State University
Doctoral Candidate

Consent Form

Please Keep This Form for Your Records

You are invited to participate in a qualitative research study. This form provides you with information about the study. The researcher, Elizabeth Garcia, will further describe the study to you and answer all of your questions. Please read through the following information below and ask any questions you might have before making your decision. Your participation is entirely voluntary. You can refuse to participate or choose to stop your participation at any time by notifying your researcher. Your decision will not impact your relationship with Texas State University.

Title of the Study: Courageous Feet: A story of ontology, pláticas, and pedagogy.

Principle Investigator/Researcher: Elizabeth Garcia, doctoral candidate, Texas State University, lizgarcia12@yahoo.com , 512.787.3621

Faculty Sponsor: Dr. Miguel A. Guajardo, Ph.D., Associate Professor for Educational Administration, mg50@txstate.edu, 512.245.6579

What is the purpose of this study?

The purpose of this qualitative study is to explore our histories and experiences as they relate to exploring new ideas with others through conversations and how this informs our pedagogical practices.

If you agree to participate in this study, I will ask you to do the following:

- Participate in two one on one face-to-face video or audio-recorded interviews about your experiences and reflections as educators.
- Participate in three face-to-face video or audio-recorded focus group sessions exploring our personal histories, experiences with exploring new ideas with others through conversations, and how this has impacted our pedagogical practices.

Risks and benefits of participating in this study:

- The risks involved with this study are minimal and not expected to be any greater than everyday life activities.
- Participation in this study should benefit participants by engaging them in reflective conversations regarding their personal histories, experiences as educators with new idea conversations, and the impact pedagogical practices. Further insight into self is a desired result.

Compensation:

There is no compensation for participating in this study.

Confidentiality and Privacy Protections:

- The data resulting from your participation will be used for educational purposes and will not contain identifying information associated with you.
- Data will be stored in a safe place to ensure it remains confidential. Upon approval, recordings from interviews and focus groups will be saved to a flash drive and kept in a secure place, locked in a filing cabinet at researcher's home. Pseudonyms will be assigned and actual names will be removed from all data. Only the researcher will have access to a master key identifying the participant's name and their assigned pseudonym. The master key will be stored separate from data.
- The records of this study will be stored securely and kept confidential. Authorized persons from Texas State University – San Marcos and members of the Institutional Review Board (IRB) have the legal right to review research records and will protect the confidentiality of those records to the extent permitted by law. All publications will exclude any information that will make it possible to identify you as a participant.
- Throughout this study, the researcher will notify you of any new information that may become available and that might affect your decision to remain in the study.

Contacts and Questions:

- If you have any questions about the study, please ask. If you have questions later, want additional information, or wish to withdraw your participation, contact the researcher conducting this study.
- If you have questions about your rights as a research participant, complaints, concerns, or questions about the research, you may contact Dr. Jon Lasser, Chair, Texas State University Institutional Review Board for the Protection of Human Subjects at 512.245.3413 or the Office of Institutional Support at 512.245.2348, or email ospirb@txstate.edu.

You will be given a copy of this form to keep for your records.

As the researcher conducting this study, I have explained the purpose, procedure, risk, and benefits involved in participation in this study.

Signature of researcher _____

Date _____

Statement of Consent:

- I have read the information above and have sufficient information to make a decision about participating in this study.
- I consent to participate in this study.

Your signature _____

Date _____

Please print your name

- I grant permission for the researcher to use the data collected as a result of my participation in this study for other educational purposes.

Your signature _____

Date _____

Signature of researcher _____

Date _____

Printed name of researcher _____

Date _____

APPENDIX B

ONE ON ONE CONVERSATION PROTOCOLS

Initial Individual Interview Guide

Prior to the interview, I sent each research partner an email reminding them that I would be asking them to share a part of their history with me by discussing two to three critical moments which have had the greatest influence on who they are today. I formatted the interview by following these main questions and allowed for flexible questioning for each critical moment.

Welcoming Comments:

- Thank you for agreeing to participate
- Review purpose of study
- Allow for any initial questions from research partner

Interview Questions:

- What would you say are the two or three most critical moments in your life which have had the greatest influence on who you are today.
- Tell me about critical moment number 1. What do you have now as a result of this event?
- Tell me about critical moment number 2. What do you have now as a result of this event?
- Tell me about critical moment number 3. What do you have now as a result of this event?
- Tell me about your decision to become an educator. Why education?
- Is there anything else you wish I would have asked?

Closing Comments:

- Thank you for your participation
- Next steps and preparation for group *plática*

APPENDIX C

GROUP *PLÁTICA* SESSION

8/10/14

AGENDA:

- *Welcome & Introductions*
- *Sharing of Stories*
- *Collaborative Exploration of Impact Questions*
- *Implications*
- *Next Steps*
- *Close*

List of impact questions to explore during group *plática*:

How does our story impact...

- How we make meaning of things?
- How we exchange new ideas with others (show up in conversation)?
- How we learn?
- How we teach?
- How we work?

APPENDIX D

A PRESENTATION OF THEMES AT EACH LEVEL:

SELF/MICRO, ORGANIZATION/MESO, AND COMMUNITY/MACRO

	Isabel	Ruby	Jane	Liz	Collective
Themes	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Identity/ Race • Environment of Poverty: gangs, fights, teen pregnancies • Magazines/ Literacy • Belonging/ Fitting In • Social justice • Relationships • Family 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Identity crisis • Family • Self-confidence • Finding voice • Acceptance/ Belonging 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Belonging and connection • Finding confidence in college • Diversity • Family • Sister's death and forgiveness 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Lessons from mom • Mother's suicide • Autopilot • Identity / Belonging • Finding voice 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Identity • Belonging • Connection • Others who have influenced us • Family

	Isabel	Ruby	Jane	Liz	Collective
Self/Micro <i>Me, Identity, Agency</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Puerto Rican • Signed up for magazines without asking mom • Asked to go to private school in 8th grade • Light skin and light hair, Spanish is sound of childhood • Did not identify struggle with self-confidence 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Korean-Hispanic • Struggled with confidence because teased in elementary about being Chinese/ Japanese • Desire to be "normal" like everyone else • Felt alone at college-revisited identity and struggle with confidence • Gained confidence and found voice through relationship with husband 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • White • Couldn't find niche in high school-wanted to be with popular crowd but did not feel like belonged • Exploration of faith • Belonging and connection strong values • Safety and small groups provided confidence and connection • Did not deal with struggle of race 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Hispanic • Autopilot after mother's suicide • Figuring out what is right and wrong for me • Observer through much of life • Found voice through coaching • Sharing story as healing process 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Shame/ desire to 'fit in' • Race • Finding voice and knowing self • Confidence • Belonging and Connection

	Isabel	Ruby	Jane	Liz	Collective
Organization/Meso <i>Family, Peers, School, Neighborhood</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • One of four siblings • Grew up in environment of poverty: gangs, drugs, teen pregnancies, kids fighting, middle school lockdown because of high school riot • Learned from mom by watching her actions • Grandpa called her “gringa” • People often thought she was White • Parents divorced when she was twelve • Moved from L.A. to Round Rock, TX at age sixteen- racial divide in student center and had to determine where she fit • Identified with Black and Latino kids • First in family to go to college • First inspiring teacher was in graduate school • Cohort community walk- cohort members did not see or understand prostitution as a problem in the community 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Oldest of five siblings • Grew up in California with diverse families in military • Moved to San Marcos, TX in third grade- only Whites and Hispanics, no one looked like her so she was teased • Mother was educated through sixth grade and was a stay at home mom • Father was a migrant worker growing up, joined the military and became a mechanic • First in family to go to college- left big family to be alone, mostly White campus, disparity of color and money • Joined Hispanic and Asian clubs • Husband was first to see her for who she is- both interracial; belonging and acceptance 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Grew up in large family of five girls in Indiana • Both parents went to college • Attended a competitive high school with graduating class over five hundred • Saint Joseph’s College had historical and spiritual feel with only total of 1,000 students; was able to shine and find niche • Looked for summer jobs working with children- traveled to new places, variety of responsibilities, met and made friends with a diverse group of people; still keeps in touch • Youngest sister sued Jane and husband- four years of not speaking until sister was diagnosed with cancer and only had four months to live • Some people may not view as understanding diversity and does not see self that way; early experience of diversity in summer jobs; now has diverse family with interracial nieces and nephews 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Hispanic • Only Child • Parents divorced and lived with mother til age ten when she committed suicide, then lived with dad • Protective of mother and her story • Did not have a safe space to talk about her • First in family to go to college- had been sheltered; leaving of innocence • Did not experience issues of race growing up because in largely Hispanic community; College was a culture shock because mostly White campus • Joined Latina sorority • Pursuit of higher degrees and education to avoid living/enjoying life; still doing what “should” • Coaching training provided space for self- discovery 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Three partners from large families • Two moved to another state as kids • Two have divorced parents • Three were first to go to college • Diversity • Three experienced racial divide when moved (as child and/or for college) • Fitting in/ finding one’s place • Discovering self/ finding voice • Influence of family • Two experienced loss of family that led to greater understanding and forgiveness of others • All pursued college education

	Isabel	Ruby	Jane	Liz	Combined
Community/Macro <i>Rules, Policies, Procedures, Economics</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Magazines were escapes-learned life could be different, read an article about girls living in dorm and that was when decided wanted to go to college Accepted others even if did not agree with the things they did Questioned-Where do I fit? Graduate school and community walk- Social justice, equity, race, class, Understanding of where kids are coming from to be effective, equalizing situations for kids 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> From mom- if fed, clean, and act right people will treat you right and you can do anything From dad- they can take away your things but they can't repo your knowledge Paving the way for siblings to go to college Uncertainty of how to pay for college Creating legacy with family-teaching same values, beliefs, being self to their two children 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Value of belonging and connection Gained confidence through college experiences Experienced diversity of communities and individuals Power of family forgiveness 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Values of responsibility, family, hard work, forgiveness, understanding Shame surrounding mother's suicide Did what "should" do to keep attention away Determining of righteousness left to individual- no one set path for everyone Striving as way to avoid 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Literature and education as opportunity Values of belonging and connection Family's influence on our view of the world Loss leading to forgiveness Accepting of others Struggle when paving the way as first to go to college- how to get in or pay; issues of race and economics

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