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## Effecting Epiphanous Change in Teacher Practice: A Teacher's Autoethnography

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## Effecting Epiphanous Change in Teacher Practice: A Teacher's Autoethnography

### Abstract

This study comprises of a series of autoethnographic vignettes stemming from Karen's life experiences that provide a snapshot of her quest for equality and fairness in her personal life, as well as her professional life as a primary school and special education educator. Karen later became a teacher of teachers, keen to share what she had learned with her peers. It was when she began educating other teachers that she became even more self-reflective with the most poignant question being, what causes one to change their beliefs, attitude, or way of thinking? The included vignettes encapsulate significant stories, starting from early childhood, to the motivation behind Karen's teaching career and then the students that she met who shaped her adoption of the belief of equality and fairness for all. The vignettes provide the foundation for a qualitative study where one teacher's journey of transformative and epiphanous change are analysed using autoethnography, reflexivity and Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA). The study examines the value of tacit knowledge, and then segues to explore resonance with Dewey's constructivism, Kolb's experiential theory, Mezirow's transformational education theory and Tang's Synergic Inquiry. While these theories provide a foundation for how learning and personal transformation may occur and attempts to answer the aforementioned question; not one theory captured what Karen was seeking; which is: How does epiphanous, mind blowing, life affirming change occur? The author contends that to shift one's value's paradigm, one needs to incorporate the essence of all of the above theories to create a new integrated model.

### Keywords

Autoethnography, Autism Spectrum, Dewey, Kolb, Mezirow, Tang, Transformational Learning, Experiential Learning, Synergic Inquiry

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### Acknowledgements

Experience is a profound teacher and cosseted within those experiences have been many individuals who have shaped me personally and professionally. Some have been positive, some not so much; yet they have all played a crucial part in my life. I am thankful to each and everyone one. Thank you to my supervisor, Dr Jane Southcott for her guidance and encouragement. Finally, I owe great thanks to my children and grandchildren, who have been my greatest teachers. I love and appreciate you all dearly.

## Effecting Epiphanous Change in Teacher Practice: A Teacher's Autoethnography

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### The Researchers

The first author is a doctoral candidate in the Faculty of Education and a Sessional Teacher in Inclusive Education at Monash University. Karen completed an undergraduate Diploma in Primary Teaching in 1989 and spent a number of years teaching in mainstream classrooms across Victoria. She later completed a Graduate Diploma of Education (Professional Studies) and then a Masters of Education (Special and Inclusive Education). Due to a number of experiences teaching in Special Schools Karen realised that she wanted to work with students who had diverse needs. Karen began writing Professional Development (PD) about Autism for teachers and has provided PD Face-to-Face (F2F) and online in Australia and the USA. She has developed her own Consultancy, where she works one-on-one with families and students. She is currently employed as a Sessional Teacher at Monash University, which has added another layer to her work as an inclusive educator. The second author, Jane is an experienced researcher and writer of autoethnographies. Karen and Jane worked together to shape and interpret Karen's vignettes that form the data for this article. When we use the plural pronoun, we mean both of us. When Karen uses "I" she is writing about herself.

## Rationale

Before embarking on research for my doctorate, my online PD courses were exploding. Many teachers had written to me suggesting that the six-hour PD I provided caused profound changes to their thinking about Autism and inclusive practices, and they felt compelled to reflect upon their own teaching practices. This sparked my curiosity and compelled me to ask the question: “What beliefs and attitudes do teachers hold about children who have autism?” The question that then immediately arose in my mind was, “What causes profound change to one’s beliefs and attitudes that in turn triggers a change in practice?” This second question is the one that drives this study. Of course, I then had to ask another question, what event, or series of events deeply influenced my own practice and pedagogical beliefs? Whilst the topic of Autism drives me professionally and pedagogically; it is not the only issue that motivates me. For as long as I can remember my personal incentive to do anything has been wrapped in the concepts of justice, fairness and equality. Via this autoethnography, I will investigate and share my interest in equal and inclusive opportunities that stemmed from the challenges of my childhood and education. Borne out of empathy and compassion for others was an interest in educational minorities; ultimately a quest to find or invent innovative practices that addressed these problems. The story of my life reflected in the following vignettes expands across fifty years. Beginning with, negotiating childhood experiences attending school in a multicultural environment and simultaneously confronting the bigotry and racism within my own family. In other vignettes, I explore the difficulties of my childhood and the serendipitous occasions that led me to my future teaching career. This eventually drew me to Autism, and teaching children who have Autism and how these experiences transformed me both personally and professionally. I began to consider what is fair and equitable education for ALL! Moreover, what causes and compels an educator to confront her own beliefs, attitudes, which in turn revolutionises one’s individual practice?

This study also examines the juncture in my life when I had become a complacent teacher. My subsequent development as an educator has been a transformative process where I had to challenge and proselytize my own belief systems and narrow attitudes towards students of diversity. The question asked above, regarding “attitudes and beliefs” led to a dawning realization that I had to step outside of a box of my own making, then out of the next box, then out of another box *ad infinitum* and essentially get out of my own way. I believe I am a much improved, more creative and inspired teacher as a result. The journey does not end with one questioned answered...as I have discovered, one question leads to many more. In other words, one’s own pedagogical position is never dormant, but a growing and maturing transformation of mind, practice and soul.

### Methodology: Why Autoethnography?

To explore my experiences, understandings and assumptions, I chose to write an autoethnographical story (and I asked Jane to help me in this process). Bochner and Ellis (2016, p. 76) state that “we depend on stories almost as much as we depend on the air we breathe. Air keeps us alive; stories give meaning to our existence.” I wanted to use the autoethnography to articulate the meanings into motion, by way of anecdotes from my life. I gravitated to autoethnography to depict my life and experience via the medium of storytelling (Denzin, 2014). To understand how teachers construct their beliefs and attitudes, it was vital to understand my own evolution of consciousness as an educator.

Autoethnography is an autobiographical genre of writing and research that explores multiple layers of consciousness, connecting the personal story to a wider lens of cultural understanding. Autoethnographic stories can situate individuals in circumstances where they

must confront their predicaments to find and/or create some emotional truth from experiences they've lived through. This truth can be interpreted as an epiphany or epiphanous moment (Bochner & Ellis, 2016). Adams, Jones, and Ellis (2015) describe this type of research as researchers endeavouring to explore and understand their experiences "that have salience in our lives, whether these experiences thrill, surprise, intrigue, sadden, or enrage us" (p. 22). When designing an autoethnographic project, the following core ideals should be considered:

- Recognising the limits of scientific knowledge, instead creating nuanced, complex, and specific accounts of personal/cultural experience.
- Connecting the personal (insider) experience, insights and knowledge to larger conversations, contexts and conventions.
- Answering the call to narrative and storytelling and placing equal importance on intellect/knowledge and aesthetics/artistic craft.
- Attending to the ethical implications of their work for themselves and other participants, including the reader. (Adams et al., 2015, p. 25)

In this autoethnography, we have followed these guidelines and adopted a phenomenological approach. This embraces "a design of inquiry coming from philosophy and psychology in which the researcher describes the lived experiences of individuals about a phenomenon, as described by participants" (Creswell & Creswell, 2018, p. 13). I was also intrigued by the ability of the autoethnography to elucidate the "epiphanies - those remarkable and out of the ordinary life-changing experiences that transform us or call us to question our lives" (Adams, et al., 2015, p. 26). When writing the vignettes, I was exploring the value of the epiphany in altering beliefs, so using a methodology tailored to exploring this phenomenon was apt.

When creating the text, I was exploring the value of the epiphany in altering belief, so using a methodology tailored to exploring this phenomenon was apt. I approached my writing from an inductive stance, trying to avoid making assumptions. I acknowledge that I am the expert in my own experiences and that my stories are written and ordered to help me capture and explore layers of meaning. My stories offer complex data that I will discuss after their presentation, to engage in sense making and to relate my understandings to the work of other writers and researchers (Reid, Flowers, & Larkin, 2005). Ultimately, my aim is to understand how I could make sense of the events, relationships, and processes of my lived experience as a teacher in various situations (Larkin, Eatough, & Osborne, 2011).

Bresler (1995) suggests that these methods are more sensitive and adaptable to many mutually shaping influences and value patterns, which echoes what I am aiming to do in this autoethnography. What makes the autoethnography unique is that the researcher is also the participant (Reid et al., 2005). I am revealing the impact life's experiences have had upon my past and future choices as an educator and researcher. Consequently, this account acknowledges and accommodates subjectivity, emotionality and my own influence on the research, so the process has integrity (Ellis, Adams, & Bochner, 2011). Sharing pockets of personal information and illuminations can be both humbling and courageous because this process opens the door to conversation and controversy. I did a complete 180-degree shift from not wanting to teach children who had disabilities to cementing it as my life's work. I am frankly not proud of my early attitudes and preconceived ideas about children with disabilities; however, this is why my story is valuable as research. How and why I shifted my beliefs and attitudes about students who have Autism to one that was positive and embracing informs as a legitimate piece of research, via this autoethnographic process. Undertaking a phenomenological study of integral individuals around me, whilst shining a spotlight upon my own evolution as an educator enables myself, as the researcher, to be microscopic about how a shift in personal belief occurred. Whilst these series of happenstances are unique and life

changing for me as an individual, the emphasis on what was unique raises the issue of applicability to other cases (Bresler, 1995). In other words, first, what is significant about my individual recounts insofar as they qualify as research? Second, how do these experiences inform others in the field?

Phenomenologists ostensibly do not set out to explain, interpret or theorise (van Manen, 2017). They do not need a theory to drive the research but may use a theory to interpret in this inductive process. Van Manen explains phenomenology as the study of what appears in consciousness, what shows itself in lived experience, or “the quest for originary understandings and insights into the phenomenality of human experience” (p. 775). Autoethnographical research is quintessentially phenomenological as the retelling of illuminating and reflexive stories of my life will then be examined under the umbrella of the larger cultural context of educator experiences.

Phenomenology, if practiced well, entralls us with insights into the enigma of life as we experience it—the world as it gives and reveals itself to the wondering gaze—thus asking us to be forever attentive to the fascinating varieties and subtleties of primal lived experience and consciousness in all its remarkable complexities, fathomless depths, rich details, startling disturbances, and luring charms (van Manen, 2017, p. 779).

### **Data Collection: Writing my life**

Considering the applicability of what I have learned via self-reflection, and then communicating this to others is what I have been doing all my life. Whenever I have had a life changing moment, or experienced some new epiphany, my first inclination has been to share and teach what I have learned. For the last fifteen years I have focused on professional writing by way of professional development for Online Course Delivery; blogs, articles and online forums on teaching ideas and strategies; and academic writing and research. I have also integrated stories, case studies and teachable moments into my presentations. According to Bresler (1995), the researcher’s qualification, background and expertise are important factors to shaping research.

I have also had to rely upon memory to construct some sections of the vignettes. I have written many versions of my autobiography over forty-five years, so I have been able to glean details from these past manuscripts and integrate them into this study. The “significance of memory in the process of ethnography has been acknowledged” (Wall, 2008, p. 45) and the use of memory is a legitimate aspect of writing an autoethnography (Ellis, 2004; Ellis, et al., 2011; Denzin, 2014). As mentioned, I have recounted my emerging fascination with Autism and Autistic students many times in Face-to-Face and Online PD, and tutorials, so the stories are clear in my mind and memory. I have spent over fifteen years teaching children on the Spectrum, and many of those teachable moments I have integrated one way or another into my work.

Within a number of stories, I have mentioned particular individuals and students. I have been careful not to identify any particular location where I have taught and all the students (including childhood friends) were written as composites to avoid any identification. The only real people are my family members. Both my parents died a number of years ago, so my stories will not have any impact upon them.

### **Selection of Stories**

I wrote many stories that covered my lifespan from early childhood to the current day (in my late fifties). Jane and I then decided which stories to include that best punctuated my life and explored my research question. I selected five stories that I believe provide insightful,

poignant snapshots of the life of Karen and despite being truncated moments in time, are indicative of my life viewed through a wider lens.

## **Vignettes**

### **Vignette 1: My beginnings**

I grew up in the inner suburbs of Melbourne, Australia in the early sixties to a white Anglo-Saxon family. My parents were quintessentially working class and working poor and with that were attitudes of racism, bigotry and sexism. My mother was one of ten children (four of whom were girls) and grew up in an outer-western Sydney suburb, in an era when girls were considered second-class citizens. My father grew up in a suburb of Melbourne, where pastimes consisted of regular attendance at the local pub or football games. My father was by osmosis, the head of the family, where all of our lives revolved around him and his drinking. I was the eldest of four and the only girl and from as long as I can remember, I battled my upbringing. I do not know how or why, but from a very early age, I had alternate attitudes and beliefs to my parents. I could not and did not abide my parents' racist and bigoted ideas; which meant I was forever at war in a family where I felt like an alien outsider. A deep desire for fairness and equality grew within my psyche. I was a little girl who fought for every cause and injustice and now I am in my fifties, my sense of fairness buttresses everything that I do, including my professional life.

Growing up in the inner suburbs of Melbourne ironically meant I had to integrate into a multicultural school environment. I was one of only five Australian-born students in my class. The rest of the students in my classroom emanated from Italy, Greece, Macedonia, Turkey, China, England, Wales, and Japan. I was a minority in my own classroom, which overwhelmingly affected my own cultural position. It was impossible to maintain my parents' bigotry when confronted by my peers' humanity. I envied the students who could speak another language and found their homes and home life mysterious and alluring. I often found myself in the middle of cultural wars. The Greek and Italian girls often fought; I did not understand what these conflicts were about, because from my young Australian viewpoint both groups appeared to be identical (I thought they looked and sounded the same, so they must be from the same place). My family's understandings seemed narrow-minded and bigoted, and negotiating this multi-cultural arena made me acutely aware of the humanity in all people. I loved the exotic European names like Sia, Athena, Maria, Alena, so ultimately when my Aunt started calling me "Karina" instead of Karen, I eventually adopted Karina as my given name. I desperately wanted to know the Japanese girl, but she did not speak a word of English. I fell in love with a little Welsh girl called Sian - many years later I named my second daughter Sian based on my love of the name, but also my friendship with her. All my experiences, connections and friendships formed during my formative years would intrinsically mold my worldviews; and formed an antidote for the ongoing ostracism I experienced from my family. My multicultural friendships strengthened and emboldened my belief and attitudes, and my family's influence dissipated.

I have always been a writer. This medium came naturally to me and as soon as I learned to put pen to paper, no one could stop me. Perhaps it was because in real life I was barely allowed to speak, I always have too much to say. Writing gave me a voice and offered escape from a troubled, violent and abusive childhood. My mother was the abused wife, I was the abused daughter and my brothers were the innocent, sometimes complicit bystanders. We lived with my father's mother who was like the evil stepmother from a classic fairy story. She was a cruel and vicious woman with a deep dislike for me. When I was as young as four, just to scare me, she often locked me in the outside laundry. She would scowl and reprimand me for reasons

I did not understand. To say I was terrified of her is an understatement. I find it useless to extrapolate further on the other gruesome details of my childhood but suffice to say her abuse of me implanted a very early yearning for fairness and equity in the people and community surrounding me. I was also on a search for human connection, but the conundrum was that I was painfully shy and awkward, so I struggled to connect with anyone. I desperately wanted people to like me, but I did not know how to be a friend, so I was constantly seeking attention from peers and adults. Most considered me odd and weird, which made for tenuous, confusing relationships. Loneliness became my friend and enemy, as I immersed myself into the friendly place of words, read, sung and written. I resonated with the lyrics of Melanie Safka's "Look What They've Done to My Song, Ma" and would sing the words with gusto because everything she sang was about me:

I wish I could find a good book to live in, wish I could find a good book. If I could find a real, good book, I'd never have to come out and look at...what they've done to my song. (Safka, 1999)

I remember reading Roald Dahl's, *James and the Giant Peach* (Dahl, 2007) for the first time when I was ten and I convinced myself that James was my long-lost brother. I could have been him, just with different characters. I spent a good deal of time, planting apricot kernels and apple pips, just in case a special tree with "critter" friends grew in my backyard. Eventually my childhood finished and, with age came escape.

### **Vignette 2: The Accidental Educator**

As a young woman, I often heard the words, "you should be a teacher," but I balked at the idea. I did not think I had it in me. During my early twenties, I travelled Australia dreaming of writing poetry and stories about pioneering women, whose stories of courage, determination and resilience fascinated me. A stayover in a remote country town changed the direction of my life. What was meant to be a short trip was extended - I loved the artistic and alternative lifestyle in this small town. I became a teacher's assistant at the local school to make some extra money. In the early 1980s, a teacher's assistant could do anything from creating resources, assisting in the classroom, and teaching small groups. The school had received a donation of ten Commodore 64 computers. That was a big deal as computers were only just seeping into society and a few schools. I had always been interesting in technology. I imagined myself a Judy Jetson (from the 1960's futuristic cartoon, Hanna & Barbera, 1962) and could not wait to do everything by remote control. After the computers idled in a spare room for a month, I offered to put them together and work out how to use them. I successfully did this but since I was the only person comfortable with the technology, I became the unofficial computer teacher. I really enjoyed being able to teach students and other educators. The grateful recipients suggested that I should aim towards a teaching career.

I headed back to Melbourne after a troubling personal time. I had fallen pregnant and after a difficult time with the biological father, I decided that I would go home and raise my baby without him. Being fiercely independent, I knew that I did not want to sit on a Single Parent Payment, so buoyed by the recommendations of others I enrolled and was accepted into a Diploma of Teaching with Monash University. The teacher in me emerged with confidence and determination. If I was going to do this thing, I wanted to do it excellently, so I took my three-month old baby with me to University. I found myself again in a minority of "adult" students pursuing a career among the young and unencumbered. I pushed through sleepless nights; visits to hospitals with a sick child; and various childhood milestones; juggling



motherhood and student hood. I knew early that I would become a passionate, innovative teacher, as I was never content to sit with the mainstream and traditional. Every struggle I had ever experienced compelled me to be an advocate for the excluded, troubled and forgotten. My daughter was three years old when I finally finished my last exam. I passed in the top five per cent of my year.

### **Vignette 3: The Emergent Educator**

Fast forward many years later, my teaching career had become static and benign. This was a time when I was also growing my own family, so four children later; teaching had become just a job. It was difficult to be passionate about pedagogy and changing educational paradigms whilst managing both a classroom and a home. After my fourth child, I took some time away from teaching to focus upon my family. When it was time to me to return to teaching, I discovered that getting back into the classroom was extremely difficult. Sometimes you have to take any job you can get, so I was forced to enter the world of Casual Relief Teaching (CRT). After a few weeks working as a CRT, I was asked if I was interested in a term's work at a Special Education School. I am embarrassed to say I had NO interest in working in this field and knew nothing about the diverse students that make up the "special education" world. I needed work, so I reluctantly accepted. The first week was difficult and confronting, where I questioned being in this environment every second of each day. Again, this is painful to admit but my first impressions of working in a special school was that it was not for me. I viewed the children in these settings through the narrow filter of what was considered "normal." I was unable to view these unique children through a different lens. I felt sorry for them, and felt compassion for them, but mostly I looked at them with sadness and sympathy. Hence, I was unable to see the potential or possibilities of children who were differently abled. I focused on their disabilities, differences and labels. Brownlee and Carrington (2000) deduce that "this is because the way that teachers relate to teaching students with disabilities and special educational needs is influenced by their past experiences and by how they perceive and define difference and disability in society" (p. 99). If we are honest, many of us might admit to having the same thoughts when confronted with difference, disability or diversity, especially when the disability or impairment is considered to be extreme or complex (Avramidis & Norwich, 2002). There is a hidden form of bigotry and discrimination that persists in society - a bias against disability. Looking back, without knowing it, I was a disability bigot. I believed I was lucky my children were born normal. Ten years on from that defining moment when I walked through the special education door, I no longer hold those views. I underwent a paradigm shift of thought and then belief, which occurred during my immersion into the special education system. From that time on, my core belief was transformed to value acceptance and equality for all.

I first taught a group of teens who had Autism and/or Down Syndrome. I had no experience with either and felt overwhelmed by my lack of knowledge. I was grateful for the knowledge of the teacher's aide and the teacher in the adjoining room. She was extremely helpful and offered endless support. I realized quickly that my idea of teaching was going to be challenged. Most of the students were still at a very basic level, where they were copying texts pre-written for them; and was still only counting to 10-20. I especially knew zero about Autism, except what I had vaguely heard in the media; most of which was negative and discouraging. I believed that children with Autism were anti-social, difficult, had intellectual deficits, and were mostly unmanageable. Surprisingly, within this classroom I was confronted with a "fruit salad" of variegates (Williams, 2006). Of the six children who had autism, each student was unique. Some were chatty, some not; most loved to hug, a few did not; most would not look you in the eyes; one did; only one had meltdowns; all had some form of anxiety and

sensory issue; and they were hugely disparate intellectually. I was out of my depth because there was not one thing I thought I knew about teaching that was going to be applicable to these students. I had to go back to the drawing board.

During a conversation with an autistic student, my interest became piqued. Kyle was chatty, friendly and warm. He was keen to connect with me and to tell me about himself. He was not like the version of autism I had heard about - unsociable, cold and withdrawn. He began to tell me about how he liked dinosaurs and that he believed he lived in the time when the dinosaurs were still alive. He then proceeded to tell me all about the various categories of dinosaurs and what historical era they emanated from. I was fascinated and then perplexed. This same student could barely write his name, let alone a legible sentence; yet was able to recount with passion and in-depth knowledge about this one particular topic. Not only that, he was able to recall the scientific names of the creatures of this time with accuracy, interestingly also he was able to spell them (when writing on a computer). As I drove home that day, the perspicacity of this moment hit me and I knew that what I thought I knew was no longer credible. This sounds awful in a way, but looking back (and also forward), collectively we look at people who have disabilities as less human. Children who attend a special school are provided admittance if they are assessed as having an IQ below 70; so I naturally assumed this was the case for Kyle. Yet, his knowledge of dinosaurs, both historically and scientifically demonstrated the ability to comprehend one topic at a much higher level. I continued to think about this mystery for some time and questions appeared. How can he be unable to write, yet can recount, read, and type complicated words and names accurately from the Mesozoic era? There must be a part of his brain that was working above his assessed IQ level? If so, how do I (as the educator) access this part of his brain to help him to reach his full potential? How do I motivate to attend to things beyond his singular focus?

I went home and began my quest for knowledge on this subject. I became a researcher before I had even intended to be. I read everything I could find; searched YouTube and the internet; and borrowed books from the library. There was no social media at this point, so I was reliant upon web searches, and I discovered names of successful individuals on the Autism Spectrum. I also found both Temple Grandin and Donna Williams on YouTube and devoured everything that was on offer about their stories. They both classified themselves as autistic and were proud of the label. I was particularly fascinated with both these women, as they had become successful within the mainstream arena. Later I found Autism specialists, namely Steven Silberman, Dr. Simon Baron-Cohen, Sue Larkey, Suzy Miller, Dr. Tony Atwood and many more. I consumed all the knowledge I could find and was struck by one prevailing realization, that autistic individuals were not who I thought they were. My preconceived notions were false and based on poor societal representation and misunderstanding.

My paradigm had shifted and so had my tacit knowledge (TK) about this topic. My continued quest led me to complete my Masters in Education where I could expand my accumulation of knowledge, but it also led to a solidification of my evolving belief. By this time, I had spent another four years teaching a variety of children on the Autism Spectrum where my evolving pedagogical position was buttressed with experience, research and human stories. My changing understanding was that these children were unique, varied, diverse, interesting, quirky, fun and talented individuals. With a success-based learning approach; one that focused upon what children could do, rather than what they could not, they had as much opportunity to learn and reach their potential as anyone else. My quest became my mission to change the world perspective of Autism that then expanded to a bigger picture view of awareness, acceptance and equity. Once again, the acquired values of fairness and equality rose to the surface. I could not view disability and especially Autism in the same way every again! The more I learned, the more I realised that as a community we examine disability through a veil of sorrow, grief and pity. Whenever, an individual step above that vantage point, they are

applauded and celebrated for being special, so much so that these feats are considered extraordinary. I found this troubling because it meant that we do not see exceptionality as being achievable and normal for individuals with a “disability.” Professionals consistently tell parents of children who have a disability not to expect much from their child. The more I learned, the more my beliefs changed...what if we were to expect more?

#### **Vignette 4: The Students Who Proved Me Right**

I completed my Masters and worked in various Special Education settings until the end of 2011. I spent my last year with twelve students who were on various points of the autism continuum. One student was almost non-verbal, highly excitable and was unable to sit still. On the other end of the continuum was a young man, who was deep, intelligent and affectionate. He was highly capable but did not like to do any schoolwork. In between, was a range of students with diverse learning needs, some more extreme than others. I taught most of these students the year before, so I knew them well and was struggling to meet all of their needs. Being “Judy Jetson” I believed that my teaching career evolved and grew with technological advancements. I love technology and was willing to embrace each technological growth point and find a way to integrate technology into my classroom. I was already using the Interactive Whiteboard extensively for group lessons, group story writing, literacy activities, math modelling; and social studies lessons where we would combine photos, images, emojis and the written word. I found software on our class computers to supplement my literacy and numeracy programs; I discovered software like Google Earth, Reading Eggs Literacy Program, Mathletics, and Digital Portfolios; I involved my class in the Global Classroom Project; and used the Clicker Program for our daily morning circle, social stories, visual programs and personal skill development, such as learning to write their own name etc. By 2010 I had heard about a new tech tool that was coming out called the iPad. My children had given me an “iTouche” for Christmas, and I was immediately impressed. I excitedly thought that if the device had a larger screen then the possibilities would be phenomenal for my students. My son told me that a new mobile technology called the iPad would be out in the new year. My imagination ran away from me and I was ready when the first iPad was released in Australia.

I subsequently spent many hours researching apps and envisioning how they could be used with my students. One of my parents purchased an iPad for their son and asked me if I would consider using it to supplement his lessons. What a serendipitous moment! Given that I was already exploring this as an option, I was enthusiastic about the challenge. Greg was bright, bubbly and a fabulous personality. He did not like to sit still but loved to ask and answer questions. I quickly realised he had some interesting skills. He had an excellent memory and loved words. He also liked to know the order of things, like street names and train stations. He could recite every single train station, in exact order on the Frankston line. He could also tell you all the street names from his home to school. Whenever we were doing any kind of literacy activity, he was always interested in the words, the formation of words and how they were spelt. He did not like the work sheets offered to him during lessons (he would screw them up or tear them to shreds). He was dysgraphic and would get extremely angry during any writing activity; and was work “resistant” where myself or an aide would have to sit with him to fulfil any part of an activity. I had gotten into the habit of asking my students why they did what they did and asked Greg why he destroyed his worksheets and he told me they hurt his eyes. Knowing what I know now, I feel confident in suggesting that this was possibly due to sensory issues that Greg was experiencing. He would often withdraw from harsh light, anything with a white background, and he constantly struggled with paper.

I introduced using the iPad with Greg for most literacy activities, especially spelling, writing and reading. The difference in work engagement and production alone was remarkable,

but there were also significant increases in his learning outcomes. Greg was in many ways my first guinea pig. I learned a lot via trial and error and stepping outside of the box and then stepping outside the next box and the next box and so on. The other important element to this practice was collaboration with the parents. I have always believed that parents are a teacher's best resources and I needed Greg's parents on board with everything I was doing educationally. They had endured a lifetime of being informed by experts that Greg would never achieve anything, so they were delighted to see him accomplish small steps towards success and potential. This experience became a revelation to me because everything I thought was possible became reality. Before Greg, I only had supposition, yet after working with him using the iPad, utilising strategically tailored apps and programs, and then seeing results made me a believer in my own rhetoric.

My next greatest teacher was Jon. He was also on the Autism Spectrum, but he had a completely different personality to Greg. He was not friendly, barely gave a "grunt" to any of my greetings and questions and seemed sad and troubled. It did not matter what I suggested, he would say "no thanks." I ended up suggesting that he should try to find words, other than "no thanks" to use, but he still said, "no thanks." He was a conundrum that I was unsure I could figure out. I sensed, despite his uncommunicativeness that he was desperate for connection. I also detected behind the mask of autism was a young man who had significant abilities. I just had to prove it, not just to me, but also to Jon. I persevered for many weeks and felt like I was getting nowhere. One particular week Jon was having problems at school. He had emailed his classmates with what the school considered an unpleasant email. His parents were not happy, and the school suspended him for one day. When I spoke to him, Jon was disgruntled, animated and upset. He insisted he was trying to be funny, yet no one was able to understand his humour. I had learned to work intuitively with Jon and it hit me that to try to understand him, I needed to explore his idea of comedy. Like a bolt out of the blue I thought of Vyvyan from "The Young Ones" (Jackson, Posner, & Bye, 1982), an eighties British sitcom. Vyvyan is a difficult but likeable character and Jon was a little like Vyvyan. I decided to run with my hunch and introduced Jon to a few YouTube clips of Vyvyan. The response was miraculous because Jon giggled, laughed and was excited to find out more. For the first time, I felt that I captured a glimpse of what was hiding underneath Jon's autistic mask. We explored other comics such as, The Three Stooges, Charlie Chaplin, Robin Williams and Jim Carey. Vyvyan, made famous by the actor, Adrian Edmondson would remain his favourite. We then started to explore how Jon could use the iPad to create his own funny movies, and comic strips. Very quickly, he began creating iMovie's involving his cats and jump scares (a jump scare is intended to scare the audience by surprising them with an abrupt change in image or event, usually co-occurring with a loud, frightening sound); as well as a series of comic strips about Autism.

Later, I felt compelled to apologise to Jon because like all the other adults in his life, at first I did not get it; did not get him. I had not taken the time to try to understand him and his humour, but when I stepped back, I "got it" and whilst "getting it" is somewhat nebulous and not very academic, it is the best way to describe what happened. The epiphany was like the metaphorical lightning bolt. When Jon sent the email to his peers, he really was trying to be funny. There was also a dawning realisation that the reason he was cold and aloof was that he had very successfully built a wall around himself to prevent being hurt by others. Jon had been bullied and ostracized most of his school life. He was also acutely aware of his "differences" due to having this thing called autism. He saw autism as a blight on his life, whereas I sought to show him that (1.) He had many strengths because of autism and (2.) That he was not alone. We went on a journey of discovery, where I introduced him to others who had autism who had experienced success in the real world; we talked about his brain working differently and how he could make use of his skills and talents; and finally we worked on success, belief and confidence building. Three years later Jon is still one of my most powerful teachers.

Connection and truly listening to a student are vital ingredients to successful teaching. As un-academic as it sounds, listening to my gut instinct prevented what I believe could have been disastrous for Jon. The epiphanous moment was when I saw past what seemed obvious and trusted my student. The day I apologized to Jon would change our relationship to one founded on trust and equality. Jon would go on to form better relationships at school; successfully interview for an exclusive high school; and take risks academically that would highlight his potential. At the end of 2017, he was promoted to a higher grade and for the first time in four years admitted (to me) that he believed in himself.

My smallest, but most exuberant teacher was Amy, who was six and had cerebral palsy. She needed a walker and had calipers on her legs and was the gutsiest human I have ever met. She refused to allow anyone to treat her differently and wanted to do everything by herself, including sit on the floor with the other children. Fiercely independent, she would not let anyone help her. Every day she would bound through the door with a big smile, calling out, "Hi Karina"! No matter what kind of day I was having, she made me smile. I struggled to allow her to sit on the floor, because my instinct was to help her. She used to groan as she got down and grimace getting up and I used to think to myself, "How dare I complain about anything." The greatest lesson she taught me was the importance of not being an enabler or ableist. Ableism can be defined as assuming that those with a disability need help or need our sympathy. The prevailing notion can be that because they have a disability that they are "less than" and not equal in the eyes of society (Green & Barnartt, 2016). Amy refused to allow me to enable her. She wanted equal rights, even when I thought she could not do something. She demonstrated that when provided a way, she could achieve almost anything she wanted to; I (and all the other enablers) just needed to get out of her way.

### **Vignette 5: Teaching Teachers and "Tacit Knowledge"**

Ellis et al., (2011) contend that autoethnographers use this methodological tool to not only analyse life events, but to consider the ways that others may experience similar epiphanies, and in doing so, this illustrates and defines how that experience can be considered unified and familiar. Encasing autoethnography within a phenomenological construct empowers the subjectivity of storytelling to radicalize itself, so as to dislodge and confront the unexamined assumptions of our personal, cultural, political, and social beliefs, views, and theories (van Manen, 2014). Writing compels the writer to be introspective and reflexive where in the writing "we take leave of the ordinary world that we share with others" (van Manen, 2014, p. 305). Inside the written world, one is faced with many twists and turns and one traverses the landscapes of language and by developing a special relation to language; a reflective relation, this disturbs and jolts the story into the transforming epiphany (van Manen, 2014). Berger (2015) argues that reflexivity is effective when the researcher is part of the researched and as such shares the participant's experience. The researcher is also the central storyteller who influences the research process and outcomes by sharing their life and contexts; at the same time demonstrating transparency regarding beliefs, attitudes and values (Etherington, 2007).

The stories about my students sparked my curiosity about how teachers change their views, ideas and beliefs. Being an early pioneer of iPad use, combined with my research on Autism meant that I was offered a number of opportunities to teach other teachers by way of PD. I believed early that experience was the greatest teacher. I also understood that added to experience, a willingness to listen and be self-reflective was vital to making real change to one's beliefs and attitudes. Being that I am an open book, to share what I have learned and teach others seemed like the logical step forward. Teaching in a special school forced me to examine what I was doing in the classroom. I honestly felt out of my depth and I knew I had to go back to the "drawing board." I felt sure that by adopting new strategies, which included

using appropriate and effective technology that I could improve the social and academic outcomes of my students. I was like a pariah and spent night after night researching, reading and reflecting. Two main pedagogical concepts emerged: first, when you establish a relationship of trust with an individual, this opens the doors for connection that can springboard to a space for deep learning. Second, using technology is an integral tool to this process. My imagination was ignited when I discovered the iPad. I was certain that when used effectively, that this technology could make learning more accessible for many diverse students.

What became clear to me was that underpinning my role and responsibility of teaching the teacher was the need for the content to evoke the kind of heart and soul changes I experienced throughout my life and educational career. The preface for that change involved partly the development of TK of the individual. TK is the relationship between teacher thinking and action and purports that teacher's pedagogical knowledge influences what they do in the classroom (Rämä & Kontu, 2012). Grigorenko, Sternberg, and Strauss (2006) indicate that TK has been shown to be related to professional effectiveness. Berger (2015) continues that, "researchers need to increasingly focus on self-knowledge; carefully self-monitor the impact of their biases, beliefs and personal experiences on their research and maintain the balance between the personal and the universal" (p. 220). My natural inclination has been to continuously re-evaluate what I know and when I have felt out of my depth I have turned the researcher lens back onto myself to recognize and take responsibility for my own position inside each scenario. Without knowing it, I was applying TK to my own development as a teacher. I have been immersed in ongoing personal research, at the same time determining the effect that my learning may have on the setting and people being studied, questions being asked, data being collected and its interpretation (Berger, 2015). My desire to impart information became an ongoing pursuit towards ensuring I was imparting the right information. I did not want to be a just a deliverer of words, but wanted to somehow, through my teaching to help recipients to "get it." Again, I am aware that to "get it" is an elusive term, so it became (and still is) paramount that the impact of any PD I imparted was able to deliver the same kinds of epiphanies that I had experienced.

One of the epiphanies I had was the impact of sensory issues on students who have Autism who often have trouble effectively processing information that comes into the brain through the senses (sight, hearing, touch, smell, taste). This can interfere with the ability to understand and interpret what is in the environment around them. This is referred to as Sensory Processing Disorder or Sensory Integration Disorder. I was teaching in a Special School in South-East Melbourne and every afternoon the junior school would combine for a singing and movement session. I thought this would be a great activity. My class comprised ten six to eight-year-olds, many of whom had Autism and all had their individual quirks and uniqueness. New to this school, I followed the lead of the more senior staff. The very first week, we went as a group to a stuffy hallway that was crammed full of five classes of students. After the first song, I became horrified. Some of my students enjoyed the singing and movement, while others sat with their fingers in their ears, rocking back and forth, moaning. It was evident that for these students, this experience was not just uncomfortable, but intensely painful. I pleaded with the senior staff to remove these students. Despite initial resistance, the next week we were allowed to take those who had problems with the noise to a quieter space with soft, gentle music.

To help other teachers understand the importance of being aware of sensory issues I devised a PD activity. I had an iPod playing music, another playing background noise and lots of conversation. I found an audio recorder that emitted nature noises and an annoying flickering lamp. I also created minor physical chaos, shifting tables and chairs to random places. I asked teacher-participants to do a crossword whilst enduring the cacophony of sounds and visual disruption. This may not be exactly what a child with Autism experiences and in many cases, for the person with Autism, the phenomena is actually worse, however the activity partially

simulated the conditions someone who has sensory issues may endure. This activity had a profound impact on recipients, most of whom begged me to stop the noise and exclaim how awful the experience was; some were in tears; others were frustrated; and most were deeply reflective. Almost all walked away stating that the experience was overwhelming and had forever changed them. They reflect about their previous students, feeling like they “know” they must have been experiencing sensory issues. They vow that in future they will be mindful of sensory issues. This is what I want all PD to do; is to change and shape beliefs, which in turn influences practice. TK is a stepping-stone to a multi-layered, integration of a number of theories that will be explained in more detail in the next section of this article.

## Discussion and Implications

### Experience to Theory

Weaving educational theory throughout these vignettes reflecting my personal growth as an educator adds another layer to this study. As previously stated, discussing theory is not essential to the autoethnographical study, but in this instance, I contend that reflecting on theory is valid. While the tales provide perspectives of one teacher’s journey, the theory offers an integrative link between the two. The underpinning theme of the stories is my interest and quest for equality and fairness in life. Equally important is examining how a shift in an individual’s values, attitudes and beliefs can be simulated during teacher training or PD. Dewey asserted that educational growth is vital in creating a more democratic “provided that all members of society may have a full share in an education that offers them the necessary resources for making their own lives as well as the lives of others as rewarding as possible (Neubert, 2010, p. 488).

At each conjunction, I have constructed meaning, understanding and evolution of my own values, attitudes and beliefs. This process “recognises that remaking existing habits is always instigated and carried through by drawing on these same habits” (Pratten, 2015, p. 1039). My past is captured in short episodes to illustrate what defined me and led me to confront outmoded paradigms. I have always felt compelled to fight against any kind of inequality, discrimination and unfairness in my life and in my world. I have not changed and it feels like I am still fighting the fight. As an educator, I have felt obligated to improve my own practice with the intention to improve the life of others. The educational struggle to further the opportunities for all, including the socially marginalised and disadvantaged, to truly participate in the life of their society is vital to the evolution of a democratic society (Neubert, 2010). Diversity in education is the cornerstone of this democracy and it is vital that teacher practice reflect this. Training should not only impart these values, but also instill them as quintessential components to any education programme because the creation of “a truly humane society...involves cultivating a flexible and adaptable individuality and requires reconstructing social conditions so as to educate individuals in the habits of moral selfhood” (Pratten, 2015, p. 1046).

This powerful message broadcast by my stories is that, the longer I taught diverse students, the more passionate I became about their educational and social exclusion. I firmly believe that for society to evolve, inclusion of *all* should be its base, especially those who have so-called disabilities because I believe these individuals hold hidden gems of wisdom. It is not just okay to try to transfer knowledge by delivering a message or classroom lesson and then expect it to be adopted.

Anecdotal stories can add another layer to PD instruction to engender critical reflection about one’s teaching practice which can highlight specific experiences and the day to day running of a classroom (Lundgren & Poell, 2016).

The years I spent in Special Education were personally and professionally life changing. I now seek to provide PD to teachers that could potentially be as life changing and life affirming as my experiences. I use Kolb's experiential learning theory underpin the kind of learning I am seeking to crystallize, which is to devise learning experiences that are transformational in nature (Tomkins & Ulus, 2016). To engender this I tell stories, as I have within this autoethnography. I explicitly show how I relate my actions to theory, opening my normally private "process of transforming my experience into my knowledge. Expertise in modelling transformation seems to mean overtly linking the emergent ideas, reactions and feelings with the formal teaching-content" (Tomkins & Ulus, 2016, p. 168).

My life experiences were enriching and life changing, affecting my social and professional life, however I feel this is only one piece of the puzzle of what I call epiphanous change. The search continued for theory that extrapolated upon Kolb's model, which led me to Transformational Learning Theory (Mezirow, 1997). This theory is the process where one transforms their previous, taken for granted "frames of reference" into perspectives, habits of mind, and mind-sets that are more inclusive, discriminating, open, emotionally capable of change, and reflective so that they may generate beliefs and opinions that lead to action (Mezirow, 2000).

Transformational learning occurs when what we confront in life does not fit into our meaning perspectives and we experience a disorienting dilemma (Mezirow, 1991). In this we "are left with the feeling that life will not be as it was before, that this experience has created a sense that we cannot go back to the way we were before the experience" (Dirkx & Mezirow, 2006, p. 132). I knew that I could not ignore the anomaly I witnessed with my students, especially given my personal belief in equality and fairness, which brought about a "profound change [to] one's cognitive, emotional, or spiritual way of being" (Dirkx & Mezirow, 2006, p. 133). The "teachers" I met along the way brought out the best in me. I became an advocate and supporter of those with autism and diverse abilities, passionately espousing the need for fairness, equality and inclusion into the mainstream. This is why I provide PD that recreated disorienting dilemmas "that provoke critical reflection and facilitate transformative learning, allowing learners to experience learning more directly and holistically, beyond a logical and rational approach" (Taylor, 2000, p. 7).

We learn through combined practical, physical, emotional and cognitive conduits (Hager & Hodkinson, 2009). In doing this "a learner constructs or reconstructs knowledge or skills they are constructing themselves" (p. 633). Undoubtedly, "the ego and conscious awareness have critical roles to play in our abilities to discern the meaning of the messages arising within the unconscious" (Dirkx & Mezirow, 2006, p. 135). To do this reflection is crucial and involves reflecting upon an issue of concern by connecting to personal experiences (Lundgren & Poell, 2016). Theoretical reflectivity is the highest level of critical consciousness, which is central to perspective transformation (Mezirow, 1981). In this emancipatory process we become acutely aware of our previously held position, and realise that we must act and change based on these new understandings (Mezirow, 1981). In hindsight, when reflecting and asking myself, question after question, I was engaged in theoretical reflectivity which led to a change in consciousness evoked by a disruptive dilemma and then epiphanous change.

### **Reflection and Conclusion**

This study of self at various stages of my personal and professional life has provided an opportunity for me to reflect upon my own consciousness. I have also been able to self-examine my obsession with fairness and equality in life and the world. It almost seems cliché, but this reflection puts this drive into context, so that it all makes sense. I make sense! My account may be biased which needs to be taken into consideration when examining my



research. As I am a proponent of fairness and equality, it was imperative that, as the storyteller I made my stories as honest as possible. For me it was important to include the harsh realities of my childhood as one of the vignettes because I believe this set the tone of realness for the rest of the study. I did not want the cruelty and violence of my childhood to define me, because from a very young age I have had a self-awareness (beyond my years) that those events would instead empower me. Again, I feel like I am stepping into cliché territory, but without the life-changing, epiphanous moments, my conscious reality would most definitely have been different.

Another powerful message emerging from the vignettes was the impact of my students as “teachers.” Without their wisdom, courage and resilience, these stories would just be anecdotal. I reinvented myself as an educator through their lives and individual journeys because in a way, their stories were reflected in and complemented my own. I was able to extend my own consciousness with the desire to impact the consciousness of others.

Flowing through the personal stories was the quest to determine how PD can be made more effective. We note that our study is not generalizable to others and more general populations, but we believe that others may find Karen’s journey resonates with them and triggers reflection. It is our belief that real changes in attitudes, beliefs and then practice stems from epiphanous change that transforms consciousness. This area is not often explored in research, because a change in consciousness is difficult to quantify. It would be beneficial for there to be future studies in this arena, specifically it would be worthwhile for more educators to share moments of positive transformation to their teaching practice. It would also be beneficial to address how to quantify the effectiveness of PD; especially PD that produces profound change to a teacher’s beliefs and attitudes. We contend that using the methodology of autoethnographical writing could be one way to achieve depth in this area of research.

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