AGAPE: LOVE AS THE FOUNDATION OF PEDAGOGY AND CURRICULUM

A thesis submitted to the College of the Arts of Kent State University in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Master of Arts

by

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CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION

Agape: An Unexpected Test of Theory in Practice

The decade of experiences and trials I had persevered and excelled through became a mere drop in the bucket when viewed through the hindsight of the assault that occurred halfway through my tenth year in the classroom. Until that pivotal morning, I believed my red badge of courage had been earned through years of, not only survival in challenging and extreme environments, but, through the insistence that a pedagogy centered on an ethic of love had led to the many heartwarming stories of success that I wore as proudly as the tattered art apron I put on each day. I could have never foreseen that stepping out of my art room before first period that day would mean stepping into months of fear and uncertainty and a new existence in which I questioned everything I thought I knew about myself and the profession. Yet, as if taking part in a masterfully scripted plotline bound for publication or the silver screen, it was (and continues to be) the research I have been conducting on transformative learning, holistic education and teaching with an ethic of love that eventually provided the life-line I needed to regain my footing. It is, therefore, fitting to allow the following recount to serve as an introduction to the heart of my thesis.

*That cold, wintery Tuesday had begun like any other school day, except for the fact that I had arrived earlier than usual to get things set up. My classroom was on the bottom level in a remote wing of the dilapidated junior high building. Cut off from the rest of the population, it made for the perfect site to draw a crowd and settle a score. Rushing around to prepare for the sea of students readying themselves to flood my room, I was halted by the alarming and unfortunately familiar sound of a gathering hyped by*
adrenaline and bad decisions. Instinct quickly drew me to the hallway where I was shocked to discover more than fifty students circled around two young ladies poised for a brawl. I asserted myself through the chaos; unsure of what I would do when I reached the eye of the storm. Before having a moment to decide on my own how I would engage the scene, I was forcibly thrust into the action, by a student whom I knew and cared for, the moment the girls went to blows. Without consent, I became a casualty of their misguided aggression and the star of a locally viral Instagram post that kept the incident alive in the aftermath.

In its totality, the fight had only occurred over less than three minutes. I had not been the source of the girls’ venomous feelings toward one another but, my presence was not going to serve as a deterrent for their anger. As one of the young ladies took the distinction of delivering my very first punch to the face, the other responded with several to the back of my head. Falling to the ground at that point would have probably saved me from any further physical contact but, I was confused and fought to stay on my feet. Each of the girls had older male cousins in the 8-12 alternative school program whose entrance was nearby. The two young men joined the scuffle as I tried to break free and get help. It felt like an eternity before the principal of the alternative program and the school officer arrived to diffuse the scene. Seconds later, the mob of spectators dispersed, and their excited chatter slowly dissipated into the flow of students in a race to beat the first bell. Trembling, I followed the principal and officer as they escorted all involved parties to the office.

Five students left in handcuffs that morning and, after I had finished filling out a police report, I returned to my art room (with a swollen mouth) in time to teach second
period. I could have gone home but, I was in shock and had determined that I needed to somehow save face and make it through the day. In truth, that day proved easier than the ones that followed. Aside from learning the fight had been recorded by several students, posted on Instagram and rose to an obscene amount of views, I trudged through five court appearances, a rape and death threat and was forced to get a restraining order against the student whose careless shove had thrust me into an altered universe. I missed several days of school that semester and emotionally coasted to summer break on autopilot.

This is where my research became a provocative force in need of reconciliation. Running congruent with parenthood and teaching, I had continued to pursue my graduate studies. Surrounded by research and self-reflections focusing on the positive outcomes of teaching with an ethic of love, I was suddenly confronted with the gut-wrenching realization that everything I thought I believed was only good when it came easy. Now, at least for me, there was an asterisk attached to love. In that moment, I could not see beyond the fact that my love had not been reciprocated. I had dried tears, sewn clothes, fed hungry stomachs and performed countless other selfless acts that had nothing to do with our art curriculum. How could all those students stand by and watch me get hurt? Why did no one care about me when I needed them? Where was the love?

Like a compass whose navigational abilities have been thrown askew by outside forces, it was the flashbacks of the anger and excitement on the faces of the students that encircled us during the fight which kept me in the struggle to regain my true north. Finally, after months of uncertainty, a breakthrough came when I returned to the same school to ready a different classroom for a new school year. A poster that read “Art Community Motto: Agape” was among
the first decorations to adorn the blank walls. *Agape*. A Greek word signifying the highest form of love. A word Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. had frequently used to rally *love* into action and, most immediately, *the* word that had served as the central focus of my pedagogy.

In an almost anti-climactic, yet deeply authentic manner, the epiphany I had been hoping would suddenly gush over me and restore my passion for teaching was given an opening. It came slower than I wished and took a great deal of effort to reach but, it came. Ultimately, I had to confront the fact that I *had* shown love. The assault, amongst the constant student strife that made most days a challenge, was not about *me*. To truly show the love I had been preaching

*Figure 1. “Art Community Motto: Agape”; a poster on prominent display in our classroom.*
about meant accepting an unwavering willingness to fight through the struggles with them. The research and experiences interwoven into this thesis are a part of an on-going investigation into the transformative and holistic approach that places love at the apex of my teaching pedagogy and curriculum.

**Overview of the Problem**

Although there are a number of scholars who view love as a vital element of critical education (Cloninger 2008; Goldstein 1997; hooks, 2003; Hoveid & Finne 2014; Lanas & Zembylas 2014; Lumpkin 2007; Phillips 2003), it remains a marginalized topic that is often overlooked or avoided by educators who feel an obligation to maintain a sense of objectivity (hooks 2003; Palmer 1998). For the purposes of this master’s thesis, I have investigated how an ethic of love manifests as a fundamental component of my pedagogical practices and art curriculum to nurture a heightened degree of student engagement and inspire creative exploration. I intend to add strength to the value of practicing an ethic of love and have employed action research and narrative inquiry to collect, analyze and reflect on the experience and outcome of designing and teaching an art unit stemming from this ideology.

**Purpose and Justification**

According to Maslow’s Theory of Human Motivation and Hierarchy of Needs, an individual cannot begin to act upon growth needs if deficiency needs are not met (Eldridge, 2012). Among physiological, safety and security needs, Maslow places belongingness and love under the deficiency needs category of the pyramid. When teachers foster nurturing, loving relationships in their classrooms, students “…respond by optimizing their commitment to learning and putting forth greater efforts to reach their potential” (Lumpkin, 2007, p. 160).
While there have been many prominent leaders, scholars, and educators advocating for a focus on love and care in schools, more research is needed to bring love as praxis to its tipping point. It was my hope that this study would continue to strengthen the validity of an ethic of love as a critical component of pedagogical practice; drawing a connection between an ethic of love as manifested through purposeful methodology, classroom management and art curriculum and increased student engagement and meaningful artistic production.

As postmodern principles work to transform the ideologies that comprise education in the twenty-first century, educators must remain vigilant and continually reassess what factors determine a favorable student outcome and whether the ends are justifying the means. Literature, research, and first-hand experiences have elevated love as the most impactful common denominator in both cases. The following sections lay the foundation for the previous revelation and establish why practicing an ethic of love is as relevant to contemporary education as it is effective.

**Art Education in a Postmodern World**

Historically, art education has evolved to meet the needs of the most widely adopted ideologies of the moment (Anderson 1997; Eisner 1972; Gaudelius & Speirs 2002; White 2004). Today’s high-stakes testing and data-driven accountability necessitate an art curriculum with a measurable set of standards to satisfy national and state requirements and legitimize the program. On one hand, art educators are forced to conform to the relatively antiquated prescripts that characterized the field in the Modern Era; charged with finding ways to comply with evaluation systems that require quantifiable Student Learning Objectives (SLO) to assess both student growth and the teacher’s impact on learning. Personal experience within a public school district using SLOs to determine half of a teacher’s performance evaluation revealed that my
administrators (unfamiliar with fine arts) found objectives centered on the elements and principles of art to be the most solidly applicable construct. Fortunately, in spite of a modernist structure that seeks to establish and support universal conventions to measure success, the field of art education has planted itself firmly within postmodern contexts. The contemporary art educator must understand, accept and work within the current climate of answerability in the field of education, at large, while fully embracing the expansiveness of postmodernity within the classroom. In the following sections, I discuss postmodernism, as a reaction against modernism, and how critical pedagogy inspired social reconstruction theories. Those descriptions will, in turn, set the broader context for the emergence of transformative learning and holistic art education.

**Postmodernism as a Reaction against Modernism**

In order to fully grasp the significance of current issues and movements within art education, one must first understand how, and why, postmodern principles emerged in the mid-to-late twentieth century as the battle cry of scholars reacting against the inequities and constraints of modernism. While modernity hailed reason, rationality and an adherence to universal truths, postmodernists recognized the potentially subjective nature of certain so-called truths and insisted that culture played a key role in the interpretation of knowledge (Barrett, 1997). According to Barrett (1997), postmodernists ultimately believed modernity led “to social practices and institutions that legitimate[d] domination and control by a powerful few over the many” (p.18). As postmodernism gained momentum, art education (as a social institution) began to reflect its embrace of critical inquiry and inclusivity. Anderson (1997) expounds that the goal of postmodern art education “…is to understand ourselves and others better, allowing more intelligent and meaningful action in the arena of life” (p. 73).
Critical Pedagogy and Social Reconstruction

Critical theory and liberatory pedagogy, born from postmodern ideology, forged to create critical pedagogy in the mid-1970s. A retort to counter the limitations of traditional education theory, early critical pedagogues, like Freire, sought to “analyze schooling within the larger contexts of society… and examine teaching for its ideological content and functions for the purpose of social transformation” (Gaudelius & Speirs, 2002, p. 14). Ultimately thrust into political discourse by its societal focus, critical pedagogy positions teachers and learners in a state of perpetual contemplation and civic responsibility; a positive and welcomed challenge for members of academia that subscribe to this school of thought.

Initially touted in the 1930s (during the Great Depression) as a movement with aims toward a utopian society, social reconstruction shifted the focus away from the individual and concentrated its efforts on the greater-good. In art education, importance of self-expression took a back seat to viewing art as an image of society and a fundamental aspect of life. During the 1960s and 1970s, the civil rights and female equity movements demanded inclusivity, and social reconstruction theories expanded to reflect a political awareness of “multiculturalism, feminism, disability rights and environmental awareness” (Gaudelius & Speirs, 2002, p. 14).

Impact of Transformative Learning and Holistic Education

In recent years, a return to graduate studies inspired a more active consideration of my own professional practices and pedagogy and a desire to understand where my orientation fits into the postmodern paradigm. The following sections discuss transformative learning and holistic education; two postmodern movements, born from critical pedagogy, that have significantly impacted art education and established the theoretical framework and justification
for my teaching philosophy. I describe the key issues involved with each movement and address subsequent concerns and opposing views.

**Transformative Learning**

Mezirow introduced his transformative learning theory, created specifically for the education of adults, in the late 1970s and continued to cultivate it over the following decades through critiques and numerous research studies. Unlike Mezirow’s uniquely adult methodology, other theorists developed transformative theories intended for a wider audience; including Freire’s concept of social transformation and Boyd’s transformative education model (Taylor, 1998). In the years that have ensued, educators have built on key aspects, spearheaded by the aforementioned individuals and, in some cases, even adapted transformative education concepts for specific disciplines.

Sullivan’s (2012) work deals primarily with the relationship between transformative education models and art education. He proclaims that “art is a creative and critical practice that has the capacity to transform individual and collective understanding” (Sullivan, 2012, p. 18). He discusses art as a relational entity and art education as the “agency of communication and change” (Sullivan, 2012, p. 18). In this context, art educators are charged primarily with the task of guiding their students’ transformative inquiry as they move through the critical process of art making (Sullivan, 2012).

Like any educational theory, the transformative learning model is subject to the ridicule and criticisms of those who do not subscribe to its validity and/ or effectiveness. Hyoejin Yoon (2005), for example, makes a compelling argument against the “noble sentiments” associated with critical pedagogy and the “transformative intellectual” (p. 718). She questions the ethics of an approach to education that authorizes a teacher to “promote and uphold Western culture’s
highest and noblest ideals” without considering the effect of their dominance (Hyoejin Yoon, 2005, p. 718). Acknowledging that there are sentiments that pose no harm for the learner to adopt, her oppositions are offered more as a check and balance for educators; a call to reflect on their motivation.

Boyd (1935), on the other hand, poses an interesting paradox with regard to the notion that all education is essentially indoctrination in some form or another. On a positive note, he asserts that much of the knowledge imparted is that “which every normal individual acquires by virtue of his membership in the social order” (Boyd, 1935, p. 18). Similar to Hyoejin Yoon’s (2005) argument, the indoctrination of beliefs is not necessarily a bad thing, but educators must remain critically aware of their motivation.

Beyond that awareness, a responsible proponent of this ideology must also take care to address questions surrounding its implementation. For example, taking Hyoejin Yoon’s (2005) argument about the ethical dilemma of a dominant culture seeking to transform learners based on their belief system into account, how can academia certify the merit of transformative learning models? Taylor (1998), a leader in contemporary research on transformative learning, elucidates the importance of a “recognition of difference beyond its universal perspective in order that future research designs include participants that ensure diverse (class, race, gender, sexual orientation) perspectives” (p. 61). He believes that strengthening the diversity among research participants is a necessary means to dissolve concerns that transformative education inadvertently oppresses the minority.

Another common question raised with respect to this methodology is how educators should approach power struggles. Transformative learning methods intend to reprogram the pupil’s current understanding of something but, should there be a recourse for a student showing
an unwillingness to be molded? Educators must acknowledge that a situation may arise where a student’s belief system prevents acceptance of the proposed stance. For instance, if the topic at hand is tolerance regarding sexual orientation and a student’s beliefs make them either incapable or averse to adopting an open-minded outlook, the teacher must accept the student’s position; while, at the same time, making it clear that derogatory or hurtful statements will not be permitted. Opponents of this approach would most likely prefer that educators avoid such scenarios altogether. However, the overarching principles of critical pedagogy (from which transformative learning has evolved) maintain that education include a focus on social transformation. The aforementioned example impacts the lives of many students. It would, therefore be an injustice to avoid the acknowledgement of issues our youth experience for fear of the repercussions.

All things considered, transformative education provides a theoretical framework for educators who strive to affect a positive influence on society. Boyd (1935) shared a quote from Dewey (1934) that provides a sufficient summation of why transformative learning models have been (and continue to be) an important part of education in postmodern, democratic societies. He cites Dewey (1934) stating, “[t]he actual status quo is in a state of flux; there is no status quo, if by that term is meant something stable and constant” (Boyd, 1935, p. 18). We, as humans, are constantly evolving. Unlike the modernists who believed in universal truths and unchanging human nature, postmodern educators must engage in critical pedagogy and maintain a willingness to use education as a platform for positive social transformation.

**Holistic Education**

The principles of holistic education are rooted in centuries-old theories first brought to light by philosophers, like Plato and Rousseau, who proclaimed that education should center on a
multi-dimensional consideration of the individual and how they fit into society (Campbell, 2011). According to Campbell (2011), ideas on this approach to education were carried into the modern era by Dewey and have been reframed, once again, to fit into postmodern contexts. As Campbell (2011) explains, “…today’s version also addresses the relationship of education to personal transformation and self-transcendence” (p. 18). In The Heart of Art Education: Holistic Approaches to Creativity, Integration and Transformation, she and co-editor, Simmons III, specify that within the context of art education, a holistic art curriculum includes “physical/sensory, emotional, and cognitive functions, as well as social, moral, and even spiritual attributes” (Campbell & Simmons III, 2012, p. xi).

Holistic educations takes a primarily learner-centered approach, however, a careful distinction must be made between (modern) child-centered practices in education and contemporary approaches to a (transformative and postmodern) holistic model of learning. Focusing, first, on self-actualization, a student is encouraged to explore and reflect on their mind, body and soul. The understanding is that, through this practice, they will then be better prepared to interact with others, understand their place in society and be better equipped to critically examine the world around them.

Burton (2012), a proponent of holistic art education, claims current trends in education have disenfranchised students; making them “the objects of education, rather than inviting them as participants into a shared enterprise” (p.2). In holistic art education, the shift to a learner-centered approach intends to increase student engagement through meaningful and open dialogue. She stresses, “An effective dialogue will allow an interweaving of personal sensory, affective and cognitive responses as youngsters reflect on their experiences and, through imaginative reconstruction, give them voice in and through visual materials” (Burton, 2012, p.
14). In order to reach this level of teaching and learning through dialogue, however, it is necessary to develop a classroom environment with a strong sense of community and trust.

Teachers need to stay current and in touch with their population’s interests in order to build trust; without trust the child will perceive the teacher-learner relationship as one of dominance and will most likely be less willing/inspired to open up and make critical reflections (Burton 2012; Cloninger 2008; Goldstein 1997; hooks 2003; Lumpkin 2007; Weissbourd 2003). One of the most effective ways to establish a common ground and engage learners is to foster empathic connections. Jeffers’ (2012) research on holistic art education revolves primarily around the powerful impact an art curriculum centered on such connections has on student involvement. According to Jeffers (2012), “Empathy, like the arts, prompts us to imagine, to project, and thus to feel with others” (p. 33). Culture is created from a desire/need to document/share experiences; thus, we essentially create art to connect. A holistic art curriculum that focuses on empathy engages learners by striking at the very core of why we create.

Despite the myriad of positive outcomes of implementing a holistic art education model, there are also some noteworthy concerns regarding this approach. On a broader level, Campbell explains how earlier holistic educators’ subscription “to a kind of ‘New Age’ mysticism” left critics with an unsatisfactory view that educators adhering to this movement were “romantic, ephemeral elitists left over from socio-political movements of the 1960s” (Campbell, 2011, p. 19). This has, somewhat understandably, led some to view holistic education as merely a hokey, far-out concept with little grounding in reality; a position that is simply untrue and easily refuted with data (Campbell, 2011). Consequently, it is imperative that holistic educators take care to distance themselves from the current political climate that has polarized our nation. Holistic
education is not about the right or the left. It is about engaging a student’s whole being to empower growth and achievement.

Beyond this unsavory visual of the hippie-dippy educator, a more substantial argument against holistic education is its inclusion of spirituality. Because spirituality and religion have a well-established connection, some may fear that a holistic education violates one’s First Amendment right to a separation of church and state. Fortunately, views of spirituality have expanded and holistic educators are now able to define it in demonstrably secular terms. According to Campbell (2011), spirituality, in the context of holistic education, is “an awareness of our interconnectedness as well as its association with existential concerns such as the search for the ultimate meaning and purpose in our lives” (p. 19). Unlike religion’s prescribed answers and beliefs, spirituality deals primarily with natural inquisitions of the human experience.

As it was discussed with regard to transformative education, advocates of holistic education are accountable for addressing questions raised in accordance with its’ practices. In viewing holistic art education with a broad and critical lens, it is necessary to respond to concerns surrounding how teachers will deal with students’ emotions. With a concentration on mind, body, spirit, and soulful connections (empathy), holistic art educators are encouraging students to tread into their psyche and critically reflect on their approach to learning and the art making process. Because there is no guarantee the thoughts and feelings that may arise will always be favorable, what is the follow-through for a student who enters too deeply into an unpleasant emotion? A responsible art teacher choosing to take this approach must be prepared to reach out to the guidance department, guardians, or any other resource that may provide additional help to a student in need of support.
Another key question to address surrounds how to adequately prepare teachers who wish to take a holistic approach. Regardless of how we may feel some times, teachers are not trained therapists or social workers. Therefore, is it socially, morally, and/or ethically responsible for educators to delve into the realm of feelings and emotions without the proper training? The answer to this question is complex because it is not a definitive one. Without hesitation, there are topics and themes that are inappropriate for an untrained professional to address in a classroom setting. It should never get that intense and it is up to the teacher, as facilitator, to keep the experience a positive one. It is important to note, however, that while the conjuring of ill feelings is not the intention or purpose of a holistic methodology, it is sometimes a natural result of the curriculum. Fortunately, wisdom and the power to heal old wounds are often made visible by the reflections of hard-learned lessons and pain. A student troubled by difficult emotions may, thereby, be guided toward a newfound sense of strength as a result of confronting their feelings.

Holistic art education’s mission to engage the whole learner is perfectly timed for the world our students encounter today. Adolescents in contemporary society are, oftentimes, more disconnected than preceding generations are able to reconcile with. Observations made of students over the years have revealed that far too many lack an understanding of themselves, are less apt to feel comfortable sitting with their own thoughts and, given more than five seconds of down-time, will quickly resort to sneaking peaks at their phones in search of mind-numbing social media. Holistic art education prioritizes self-exploration. It is a highly effective means to turn students’ thoughts inward; thus helping them understand their place in the broader context of life.
Art Education: A Perpetual State of Flux

Art education has continually undergone dramatic changes; morphing into whichever form or structure was necessary to promote the most widely accepted system. When our society was war-torn, art education performed its civic duty and aimed to provide healing hands. When our economy needed to remain globally competitive in industrial affairs, art education became more design oriented in order to meet those needs (White, 2004). Although I am limited in my depth of knowledge, it appears as though twenty-first century technologies have positioned our educational goals on a much broader platform than the afore mentioned catalysts for reform. To simplify, I do not believe that any single issue, today, could have the unifying power required to influence a shift in the entire paradigm of how art education is structured; particularly not into one-size-fits-all methodology.

Our world has expanded and contemporary art educators have a variety of diverging options to explore. For example, programs like STEAM (science, technology, engineering, aesthetics, and math) are becoming increasingly more popular among professionals who feel the aim of art education should be to teach students to think critically and draw on art and design principles when taking an engineering approach toward real-world problems; while building on their math and science base. Meanwhile, on the other end of the spectrum, some view art education as a means for understanding and expressing visual culture or a vehicle toward social justice and transformation.

The battle has shifted. Several decades ago, in the late 1980s, Giroux warned against methodologies that denied teachers the professional discretion to develop critically appropriate “curricula to fit [the] specific pedagogical concerns” of their students (Giroux, 1988, p. 122). He claimed, “…the standardization of school knowledge [to be] in the interest of managing and
controlling it” and, as I have previously expressed, I have become all too familiar with the constraints of this pragmatic tactic (Giroux, 1988, p. 123). Without question, art teachers have more options now in terms of our approach to pedagogy and curricula within the classroom, however we are not exonerated from the push for data-driven accountability. In other words, we have the freedom to choose our orientation but, we have to be savvy about how we package and sell it. The primary research questions presented in this thesis aimed to provide a comprehensive understanding of what that so-called package contains, on a personal level, and how it influences the academic successes of my students.

**Primary Research Questions**

- How does an ethic of love manifest in my teaching pedagogy and art curriculum?
  - How do the theoretical frameworks of holistic education (paired with the concept of empathy) and transformative learning manifest as a means to structure the implementation of pedagogy and art curriculum focusing on an ethic of love?
- How does a focus on love transform student engagement and learning outcomes in my classroom?

**Definition of Terms**

- *Love* as it is defined by bell hooks (2010) in relation to school and schooling:
  An interplay of care, commitment, knowledge, responsibility, respect, and trust.
- For the purposes of this study, *love* will be defined as:
  An unselfish and benevolent concern for the good of another; an interplay of care, commitment, knowledge, responsibility, respect, and trust (hooks, 2010).
Assumptions and Limitations

A personal recognition of the positive effects a pedagogy and curriculum centered on an ethic of love has had on student engagement and creativity led to the discovery that love and critical education have shared a long-standing, yet scarcely touted, partnership. Uncovering research that dates this topic back to Socrates (Cloninger, 2008) and his teaching practices drove home the realization that although this dialogue has existed for centuries, it still lacks depth in terms of data supporting the positive learning outcomes associated with practices focused on an ethic of love. This shortage of evidence is undoubtedly due, in part, to the narrow scope of research methods that may be actively employed to collect data in select fields of study. More specifically, data reflecting student achievement, such as test scores, are easier to collect from certain subject areas. Other than a vivid narrative from prolonged observations and engagement with participants, the data available in a subject like art are not as easy to document; making it more of a challenge to measure and produce manifestations of success.

Through a critical ethnography, Cloninger (2008) explored the facets of love in the classroom and described the omnipresent results of this orientation to teaching as highly successful primarily due to the security and confidence that is fostered through meaningful, deeply caring relationships. Lumpkin (2007) also supports this claim and has cited several examples in which a caring teacher’s commitment to developing a significant connection with their students gave rise to higher levels of academic achievement. Both Cloninger (2008) and Lumpkin (2007) place the establishment of a sincere relationship between a teacher and their students at the heart of educational accomplishment because, as Lumpkin (2007) asserted, “When teachers genuinely care, students sense it and respond by optimizing their commitment to learning and putting forth greater efforts to reach their potential” (p. 160). While findings such as theirs may not be as
easily obtained and proven, it would be an injustice to critical education to dismiss its ability to enhance student potential, altogether. Thus, despite the criticism that would seek to discredit a pedagogy centered on an ethic of love, based on a lack of objectivity (hooks, 2003) and a wealth of scientific proof, love does have a triumphant legacy in the classroom (Cloninger, 2008) and must be upheld as a method proven to be effective and worthy of further investigation.

**Summary**

This first chapter utilized an intentionally holistic format to establish the basis for this thesis. The decision to begin with the narration purposely set a deeply personal tone and was meant to convey a strong investment in both the literature discussed, and the research conducted, as I journeyed toward a further understanding of who I am as an educator. Additionally, the previous sections defined the specific nature of my research, established the broader context that justified a need for the answers that were sought, and acknowledged the assumptions and limitations that potentially impacted the outcome.
CHAPTER II
LITERATURE REVIEW

Overview

This review of literature provided a scholarly rationale for a pedagogy focused on the idea and fulfillment of love. Falling largely under the qualitative paradigm, the work discussed, places an ethic of love firmly within the theoretical framework of critical education and establishes it as an ideology worthy of further investigation.

Love as a Pedagogical Practice: Defining Love in the Classroom

In chapter one of the book, *Teaching with Love: A Feminist Approach to Early Childhood Education* (1997), Goldstein details the feminist ethic of care, shares the ideas of the leading proponents of the issue and makes an interesting case for why she concludes an ethic of *love* should replace the ethic of care in theory and practice. Goldstein’s (1997) description of Carol Gillian’s alternative model of moral development hails her ground-breaking work as the catalyst that “gave women permission to let their hearts play an active role in their thinking” (p. 12). According to Goldstein (1997), because of Gillian’s work, “…women’s reasoning seemed both careful and care-full, deliberately valuing human interaction and experience” (p. 13). Being a female educator, I found Gillian’s research and findings to be simultaneously obvious and profound. It is noteworthy to insert, here, that Cloninger, author of *Giving Beyond Care* (2008) explains, “Plato, Emerson, Gandhi and Martin Luther King Jr. indicate love to be a key ingredient in the search for happiness, well-being, and nonviolence,” and does not attempt to justify *their* use of love in the same manner that Gillian’s work validates women (p. 198).

Interestingly, and perhaps not surprising, the literature reviewed for this topic reveals a myriad of interpretations and definitions of love (as it translates to the classroom) and a broad
spectrum of love as a pedagogical practice. However, among the many descriptions of love, it is a combination of Martin Luther King Jr.’s (1962) explanation of *agape* and bell hook’s (2010) interpretation which will serve as the adopted definition for this particular research. Cloninger (2008) cites King for the following words;

*Agape* means understanding, redeeming good will for all men. It is an overflowing love which is purely spontaneous… and creative. *Agape* is not a weak, passive love. It is love in action. *Agape* is love seeking to preserve and create community. It is insistence on community even when one seeks to break it… In the final analysis, *agape* means a recognition of the fact that all life is interrelated. All humanity is involved in a single process, and all men are brothers (pp. 198-199).

Ingrained in the structure of a classroom, this heightened concept of love has the ability to transform education and profoundly impact the young lives we serve. Cloninger asks one to, “Consider the phrase, ‘I care for you’ and contrast it with the phrase, ‘I love you’” (2008, p. 198). The latter certainly assumes a greater degree of recognition, involvement, and commitment to the individual. Described as a combination of care, knowledge, responsibility, respect, trust, and commitment, hooks’ (2010) version of love also aligns with Martin Luther King Jr.’s (1962) vision for *love in action* (*agape*). When interpreted in such a manner, the idea of practicing an ethic of love in the classroom makes sense in a way that sharply contradicts arguments that deem love in an education setting as taboo territory.

Although this research aims to maintain love at the zenith of classroom practices, one would be negligent to discuss love/care in reference to education without referring to the work of Nel Noddings and her views on the ethic of care. Although her writing was not directly investigated, her name is clearly synonymous with care in education (Cloninger 2008; Goldstein
1997; Hoeptner-Poling, Suominen-Guyas & Keys 2012; Lanas & Zembylas 2014; Lumpkin 2007; Maleuvre 2005; Phillips 2003). Noddings is well-known for her stance on what a caring encounter entails and has defined the roles of both the “one-caring” and the “cared-for” (Goldstein, 1997, p. 14). It is Noddings’ role of the cared-for which drives an initial response that her notion of a caring encounter is exclusionary in its failure to consider the varying emotional capabilities of students.

To clarify this claim, it is Noddings’ insistence on reciprocity which I find problematic. She has claimed that it is the sole role of the cared-for to display some form of reciprocity (Goldstein, 1997). According to Goldstein (1997), Noddings explains that “reciprocity can take many forms… but it must occur in every caring encounter” (p. 14). Goldstein (1997) quotes Noddings as she writes, “These responses are heartwarming; they make caregiving a rewarding experience” (p. 15). While I do not share Noddings’ intellectual accomplishments, I pose the following rebuttal based on years spent working at an alternative school, serving students with severe emotional disturbances and behavioral disabilities, and eleven years at schools with high-needs populations. It has been my experience that not all students are capable of reciprocating care; which Noddings’ suggests is necessary in every caring encounter. It is my suggestion that a student’s lack of reciprocity does not necessarily indicate a lack of care. Furthermore, reciprocity does not always take the form of a heartwarming gesture. For some students, Noddings’ caring encounter is not enough and implies an inadequate depth of the commitment described earlier by King (1962) and hooks (2010). Ultimately, every student needs to experience agape and all students would unequivocally benefit from this love in action.
Unconditional Positive Regard: Practicing Agape

Cloninger (2008) writes about how many educators seem to be unaware of the power of promoting loving relationships in the classroom and asserts that the issue is often absent from the critical education dialogue. According to Angela Lumpkin (2007), a teacher-learner relationship is founded on the fundamental need to know that a person is cared for. She writes, “Students know when they are recognized, understood and respected for their unique abilities and interests by their teachers” (Lumpkin, 2007, p. 158). When teachers foster nurturing, loving relationships in their classroom, students “…respond by optimizing their commitment to learning and putting forth greater efforts to reach their potential” (Lumpkin, 2007, p. 160).

Love, as Maleuvre (2005) explains, is “a connection with the particular and the unique, a face, a person, a body, a moment or a gesture” (p. 82). Showing love for your students means showing them an appreciation for their uniqueness and an unwavering devotion to helping them meet their challenges head-on. A student needs to know that they are accepted, for better or for worse, and that no matter what, they will be shown an unconditional positive regard. A situation with a student, whom I will call “Yasmina”, is a perfect example of how unconditional love helped to change a student’s outlook and sheds light on the damage that can unknowingly be wrought by a teacher that fails to display love. Moreover, her story illustrates Dr. King’s explanation of how agape can, at times, involve “pure spontaneity” and requires the teacher to have the ability and willingness to adopt a loving disposition.

_Yasmina is a spirited young lady and is well-known by teachers and administrators. While working on a drawing of a personal artifact (an initial lesson plan idea inspiring my further study), she suddenly slumped over her picture and began to cry. I walked over and placed my hand on her shoulder. As she lifted her tear-soaked face,
she revealed her drawing of a giant blue and white pill with “P14” written on it. Under the pill, she had emphasized the letters “ADHD”. I asked Yasmina to step into the hallway for a moment to help her process the emotions she was feeling. With a smile, I thanked her for the inspiring bravery and courage to share something so personal. I listened as she spoke about the pain and uncertainty she had been experiencing regarding her mood and the decision to be medicated. I wrapped her in love and reassurance with kind words and encouragement and sent her back into the room with a smile on her face and a new mission to document her incredible story. At the end of class, Yasmina asked if she could have a few more minutes to finish writing. With a sense of pride in her efforts, I called Yasmina’s next teacher to notify her that she would be just a few minutes late. The response on the other end of the line was disheartening. Before I was able to explain, the teacher began to rattle off a list of complaints about Yasmina and warned me not to be fooled. There was no love present in her voice and it became clear why Yasmina felt she could not be successful in that class. Unfortunately, the sentiments this teacher projected were not surprising and highlight a common issue that needs to be addressed in professional development. This teacher was more concerned about Yasmina’s disruptions to her class than she was about Yasmina. I realized that her response lacked the empathy and love that I had shown Yasmina to bring her back to a state where she would be able to concentrate on learning. The experience may or may not serve as a memorable or life-changing moment in this student’s life, but it certainly left a lasting impression on me and inspired this current path of research.

It is a daunting task to ensure that each student’s individual needs are being met, but it is the role of the teacher to never stop trying. Weissbourd (2003) reports that even caring teachers
“...become overwhelmed when they realize what it would take to work effectively with every struggling student in their classroom” (p. 9). Although it is easy to understand how a teacher can be overcome by the ever-expanding job description and a loss of patience in moments of frustration or hopelessness, it is critical that the educator remain cognizant of the power of their approach with the student. Lanas and Zembylas (2014) cite Daniels’ article, *Fighting, Loving, Teaching: An Exploration of Hope, Armed Love and Critical Urban Pedagogies* (2012), and explain his concept that love includes “a strong and deep commitment to protecting, caring for, and empowering students in the face of social barriers and oppressions that surface in their everyday lives” (pp. 34-35). When the bell rings at the end of school, each student carries home with them the feelings accumulated during a day of interactions. As a teacher and a mother, I feel a moral responsibility to send my students on their way with love.

**Love as the Aim of Teaching**

In his article, *Art and the Teaching of Love* (2005), Maleuvre makes several poignant statements that build on Martin Luther King Jr.’s definition of *agape* being love in action; using the experiencing of art as both the *action* and the love itself. He implies that to teach art is essentially to show love. According to Maleuvre (2005);

> The aim of art is not art. Its destination is elsewhere; its aim is reality encountered and lived with. And the vehicle by which art travels into reality is not just skill, insight, knowledge or intelligence. It is love… Art is less concerned with delivering information about the world than teaching us about how to stand in relation to it, how to find our place in it, and live with it: through art we do not seek to master the world so much as become its denizens. It is a teaching of love (p. 78).
In a similar vein, it could also be argued that the aim of education is not just education. The aim of education is also moral (Weissbourd, 2003) and civic development (Eisner, 1972) and, as Maleuvre (2005) so eloquently expressed about art, a vehicle by which students learn about the world and “how [they] stand in relation to it” (p.75). Love speaks to the deepest facets of people and can be universally experienced (Cloninger, 2008). According to Cloninger (2008), “This universality is important for it allows one to teach simultaneously about subject matter and teach in an implicit or indirect way about love” (p. 209). Students learn from more than just the information that is being presented to them; like sponges, they absorb everything in their environment. Therefore, when an educator teaches from a platform of love, the students are most certainly aware and, in turn, are more likely to be successful in the classroom (Phillips 2003; Lumpkin 2007; Weissbourd 2003).

**Drawing a Parallel between Teaching and Parenthood: From Caring to Loving**

Goldstein (1997) discusses how a curriculum centered on love “gives a new twist to the teacher’s responsibility to act *in loco parentis*” (p. 24). She asserts that by placing love as a primary focus, “Teachers are no longer being asked simply to act as parents: now they will be expected to enter into the feeling and thinking realms of parenthood as well” (Goldstein, 1997, p. 24). To further explain this point, Goldstein (1997) shares the opinions of Mem Fox, an educator who also draws a comparison between teachers and parents with her view of the parents as being natural teachers. Cloninger (2008) cites Nel Noddings as he explains that she, “…challenged teachers to ‘care’ in schools arguing that teachers must be more like parents trying to raise a huge heterogeneous family” (p. 197).

It is important to clarify that this does not imply that being a good parent will necessarily make one a good educator or that one needs to be a parent in order to be a good educator
(Hoeptner-Poling, Suominen-Guyas, & Keys 2012; Goldstein 1997). However, there is certainly a parallel between the two roles. As it is explained in the article *Mothering Curricula* (2012), “…parenting and similar experiences of dependent rationality and heightened sense of responsibility for another human being profoundly change[s] how one views and practices education” (Hoeptner-Poling, Suominen-Guyas, & Keys, p. 70). From personal experience, becoming a mother changed the way I view my students and deeply impacted the way I manage my classroom. As a mother, I am aware that when I am dealing with an individual student, I am ultimately dealing with someone else’s baby. I instinctually use my own role as a mother to provide the checks and balances necessary to ensure the just and loving treatment of that child. Being a mother has, on many occasions, stopped me from responding to a defiant student with anger and has unequivocally extended my level of patience and tolerance. Motherhood shifted the heart of my pedagogy from care to love. Parenting and teaching do not have to go hand-in-hand, but the role of parenting certainly influences the role of the teacher. It is imperative to note, however, that not all parents would agree to the previous comparison. To present both sides of this issue, Goldstein (1997) reviews the work of Lilian Katz and discusses various dimensions she feels distinguishes the roles of teachers and parents. Referring specifically to motherhood, Katz sites factors such as the “scope of functions” as she asserts that, unlike teachers, a mother is essentially on the clock at all times (Goldstein, 1997, p. 26). While Katz does point out some interesting discrepancies, I question her rationale for feeling it necessary to distinguish the two roles. As I will discuss in a later section, while they may not be *ours*, every student is *somebody’s* son or daughter.
Making the Classroom a Home with Love

Jane Roland Martin, as Goldstein (1997) explains, “…advocates for the notion of a school as a moral equivalent of a home” (p. 28). She expounds on Martin’s ideas of the “school home” and stresses the growing need for nurturing school environments. According to Goldstein (1997), “Martin suggests that many of the traditional responsibilities of the family – support, socialization, moral education, community – have become crucial parts of a child’s formal education” (p. 29). Unfortunately, for many of the students I have worked with over the years, school is often a more stable, consistent and nurturing environment than their homes. The experiences I gained from and survived at the alternative school I taught in for several years put faces and names to the many alarming disparities that had only existed, to my knowledge, in the form of examples. The feelings garnered from the ambiguity of knowing that there are children out there being neglected or abused, traumatized by personal issues, struggling through poverty, and other challenging circumstances is much different from the emotions that arise from the revelation that the students looking to you for inspiration, have just relinquished the aforementioned obscurity and put real faces to these concerns. A teacher will never know all of the issues each student brings into the classroom each day; making the mood and structure of the learning environment an even more vital factor in the determination of each child’s level of success (Cloninger 2008; Goldstein 1997; Lumpkin 2007). When a student feels at home, they are put at ease and “respond by optimizing their commitment to learning and putting forth greater effort to reach their potential” (Lumpkin, 2007, p. 160).

In the article, You Have to Give of Yourself: Care and Love in Pedagogical Relations (2014), Hoveid and Finne assert, “In love, there is openness and when it happens, one can both approach it and be approached by it. There is a creation of a space as we are formed by love,
rather than us forming it as an intentional act” (p. 256). A classroom built on a foundation of love creates a space capable of meeting the diverse social and emotional needs of every student.

**Summary**

This review of related research laid the groundwork for this investigation by unpacking scholarly publications that detail what it means to teach with an ethic of love as the central focus of pedagogy and curriculum. The claims made about this approach’s connections to increased student achievement were combined with personal classroom experiences that related to the data and findings that were supported by the information shared.
CHAPTER III
RESEARCH DESIGN

Overview

This qualitative study utilized action research, with aims to investigate how love manifested in my teaching pedagogy and art curriculum, and systematically examine how a focus on an ethic of love transformed student engagement and art production in my classroom. In addition to the action research that examined personal practices, a pilot study (conducted at the school where I was previously employed) used teacher interviews to consider where/how an ethic of love fits into the broader framework of educational practices. Narrative inquiry produced narratives/stories and self-reflections and helped to provide a context for data analysis.

Methodology

The research design employed a qualitative methodology to explore the primary research questions/phenomena (Clandinin & Connelly 2000; Smilan & Marzilli Maraglia 2014). In this case, a qualitative approach was most appropriate because the primary goal of this study was to gain a holistic understanding of how love manifested in my teaching pedagogy and art curriculum and how a focus on love affected student engagement and art production in my classroom. In qualitative research, the role of the researcher, and their natural setting, are of key importance (Fraenkel, Wallen, & Hyun, 2012). This methodology, therefore, served as the best way for me to investigate my own practices within the setting of my art room. Furthermore, because the goal of my research was to understand how love was present and how it impacted the students, it was necessary to collect data in the form of words and pictures, as opposed to numbers (as it is in quantitative research) (Fraenkel, Wallen, & Hyun, 2012). The qualitative
research provided a “systemic approach” to the inquiry and a deeper understanding of my professional practices (Smilan & Marzilli Maraglia, 2014, p. 35).

Methods

**Action Research**

Action research examined/explored the design and implementation of an art unit (specified in the following chapter) created for this study. The data/field texts collected included: the unit plan (appendix 1), field notes (including observations and reflections taken during and after participation in the unit), student writing samples and photographs of their completed art work, and post-experience interviews (Smilan & Marzilli Maraglia, 2014). The field notes were taken in two forms. I kept a clipboard with me and jotted down short notes about the observations I made during each class. At the end of each day, I recorded my reflections in a journal (this also included reflections on the other time I presented this lesson to students). The determination of which student projects would be included in the data collection, I first, factored in which students had felt their work was complete, then made selections that would be representative of a spectrum of the human experience.

**Narrative Inquiry**

Using narrative inquiry, experience became “…both the phenomena under study and the method of study” (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000, p. 4). Drawing inspiration from Clandinin and Connelly (2000), I used the metaphor of a three-dimensional space as I moved backward and forward, inward and outward, and eventually arrived at a conclusion. I channeled Dewey’s belief that the key to education is found by examining life experiences (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000). This method is used throughout my entire thesis; particularly in chapter five, where narrative is interwoven with literature and data/field texts to answer the research question.
Data Source One: Narratives/Stories of Past Experiences

In order to understand how love manifested in my pedagogy and art curriculum, it was also necessary to investigate how I came to use this approach. Narrative/stories were, therefore, documented for contextual purposes. At least one example of a narrative account, constructed as a single event or more, can be found in each chapter. Each story is linked to either the literature (chapter one and two) or the action research that was conducted for this thesis (chapter four and five). In chapter five, multiple stories are interwoven to create a nexus with personal life stories, literature, and research findings. All narrative/stories in this thesis always appear indented and italicized and are written in vivid language (in first person) as they combine stories and reflections. In the pilot study interviews (chapter three), representation of the art unit experience (chapter four), and post-experience interviews (chapter four), the data is presented in a story-like form, as somewhat of a reenactment.

Data Source Two: Pilot Study

For this pilot study, titled, Love as a Fundamental Component of Effective Pedagogical Practice, I interviewed two education professionals from the location of my previous Art teaching position. This study was conducted early in my exploration of love within the context of education. Previously, I had investigated the topic through a comprehensive review of related literature. At the time I conducted the interviews, I was interested in learning what my (now former) colleagues views were on the topic. I wanted to understand how love fit into the bigger picture in terms of pedagogical practice. I have included it in this thesis as a source of data because it is what inspired me to want to investigate love within the contexts of my own teaching practices and curriculum. It drove me to want to understand what kind of impact a love-based approach had on my students.
Through individual interviews about their methodologies, the line of questioning aimed to determine what the teachers thought about teaching with an ethic of love. Once the Kent State University Institutional Review Board approved the study (IRB #15-552), the participants (whose names have been changed) were invited to take part in the study via email. Once an informal consent had been given, the teachers committed to a meeting time and place for their interview (both were audio-recorded). The following questions were asked:

- How long have you been teaching? Describe your experience in terms of student population.
- How would you describe your teaching methods and your classroom environment?
- What strategies do you have for managing classroom behaviors?
- Do you believe that love is a valid component of effective pedagogy? Explain your answer.
- Do you believe that love is an appropriate element in the schooling of a child?

Setting

The two teachers interviewed for this pilot study worked at a junior high school in a metropolitan neighborhood within northeast Ohio (the site of my previous Art position). Although the location of the junior high was once considered an upper-middle class neighborhood, more recent years had wrought drastic socio-economic changes, and the once polished suburb began to reflect the financial hardships of the families moving in. The junior high school was the most dilapidated building in the district. In such a sorry state of disrepair, it would have cost the tax payers less money to bulldoze it and start from scratch than it would to fix it. When the district’s students entered the middle grades, they transitioned from the aesthetically pleasing comfort of their elementary years, and were left to bide their hormonally-challenged time in a rapidly deteriorating building that was filled with very few resources.
Participants

Both teachers interviewed for this study exhibited notable swagger; though, in very divergent ways. The first interviewee, “Charlene”, was a soft-spoken, African-American woman who described herself as a “…displaced worker in the banking industry…” who found a passion for teaching Language Arts as a second career path. Charlene did not make a habit of socializing with the other teachers in the building, but was known by students and staff as a teacher who did her job with exceptionality. Charlene’s smile was as moving as her disapproving-teacher-face and, based on interactions I observed in my time working with her, she commanded a great deal of respect and was obviously adept at building positive relationships with her students.

The second interviewee, “Jake”, was a Caucasian male who taught Financial Literacy. He wore a shirt and tie every day, but his wrists revealed a small glimpse of the full-sleeve tattoos that adorned each of his arms. From observation, he appeared to establish a positive rapport with most students. He explained that he was content with his position, but would have preferred to work with older students.

Interview Data

Each interview began with an invitation for the teachers to share the story of their teaching career. They described their number of years in the profession and the student populations they had experience working with. I was surprised to learn that both teachers had only taught within that one district. My former colleague’s personalities were quickly revealed from the very beginning of each interview. Charlene leaned toward me in her seat, almost pressing forward as she kept her hands folded in her lap. Jake’s posture remained very formal and his hands rested on the table with very little movement. Similar to the body language they exhibited, each teacher described a very different methodology for classroom management.
Interestingly, both teachers also believed their pedagogy to be indicative of a loving approach. Charlene expressed that she was careful to be firm, but loving. Her facial expressions matched her words when she spoke; making it easy to infer how her students most likely receive her. Charlene came across exactly as she intended too. She explained that it was important for her, as a woman, to be assertive and seemed to feel it necessary to explain her assertive demeanor before she continued with her approach to managing her classroom.

Jake had no apparent qualms with his approach to classroom management. His methods were strikingly different. They did not reveal the style of love that was, presumably, being investigated in the pilot study, however, it must be recognized that love takes many forms, and as Jake continued to speak about his methodology, it became clear that he simply loved differently.

Both teachers agreed that it was nearly impossible to teach without expressing some form of love or care for one’s students. Charlene’s explanation of the need for love in the classroom, and the many ways it is shown, was reminiscent of the sentiments often expressed by bell hooks. Jake looked at showing care/love as more of an investment. Except, in relation to education, the teacher made the deposits and the student benefited from a larger withdrawal; a fitting analogy for a Financial Literacy teacher.

As I previously mentioned, this pilot study delivered insights into how other education professionals view love and care within the contexts of the classroom and led me to want to know more about how love manifested in my own teaching practices. It made me curious about what kind of impact practices centered on an ethic of love had on student engagement and learning outcomes. At the time, I was struck by how differently my former colleagues defined love and care and how dissimilarly they exemplified it. That finding inspired me to want to reflect on how I defined love and care and how I exemplified it. This pilot study was pivotal in
shaping the curiosity that led to the primary research questions investigated/explored and answered in this thesis.

**Data Source Three: Art Unit Experience and Post-Experience Interviews**

This research was approved by the Kent State University Institutional Review Board (IRB #17-564). The art unit observed for this study titled, *Personal Artifact Memory Box* (appendix 1), was designed and implemented in keeping with my love-based teaching practices. The unit originally designated a minimum of two weeks for completion, however, it had to be amended for timing purposes and ended up taking place over six class periods. Seven of the students’ art projects and writing samples (selected based on the criteria described above) were photographed to provide visual examples of the work that was created during the unit (figures 13a-19b).

Once the unit reached a conclusion, a random sample of five students (whose names have been changed) participated in post-experience interviews the following week. The students and their parents signed consent forms prior to the interviews. I had initially drawn six names, however, one of the students chose not to participate. Due to scheduling, the students were separated into two groups (both group interviews were audio-recorded). The following questions were asked:

- What did you think about the artifact lesson?
- Was it difficult to choose your artifact?
- What was it like to think about one thing that is the most special to you, and create a work of art based on the experiences and memories associated with it?
If one of your friends said, “Hey, I’m thinking about taking art, but I’m not sure. What’s Mrs. Spooner’s class like?” …how would you answer them? How would you describe me as a teacher?

Did you feel cared for/loved in this class?

Did feeling loved have any effect on how well you did in the class? Did it impact the way you came in and did your work?

The data collected from the art unit experience and post-experience interviews are represented in chapter four. During the art experience, the data are organized by day and are titled correspondingly (Day One – Day Six). Although the post-experience interviews were conducted in two separate groups, they were woven together under several major topics discussed (reflecting on the art unit and reflecting on the course, my teaching methods, and how love impacts success).

Setting

My current Art teaching position provided the location for this study. Situated in northeast Ohio, the large junior high is responsible for the education of youth from three densely-populated, surrounding suburbs. It was only six years ago that the building lost its original identity as a high school in the newly-merged district. Fortunately, it has been to the benefit of the students that the amenities of the old high school were bestowed upon them. The current students have access to multiple gyms, an indoor track, a competition size pool, spacious surroundings, and multiple athletic venues with modernized renovations still to come. The location of the building is ideal; surrounded by community parks and fields and quaint housing. A surprisingly large number of the current staff is splattered with alumni and local residents that used to walk as students in the halls they now teach amongst.
All things considered, the district continues to be challenged with appropriately serving the diverse demographic and increased population inherited several years ago. To properly accommodate the initial influx, the junior high was tasked with housing and educating the freshman that would not fit in the newly designated high school. Therefore, the culture of the building adjusted as appropriately as possible; considering the spectrum of physical and emotional development that naturally accompanies junior high and freshman aged students. Although the merger increased diversity amongst the student body (the district has identified a significant spike in the representation of Hispanic and African American students), the demographic of the staff remained the same. Before the merger in 2013, the school had a diversity score of .28 which increased to .38 afterwards. The district defines the diversity score as the likelihood of selecting two students at random and having them be from different ethnic groups. The diversity score is a rating from 0 to 1, with a score of 1 being highly diverse.

**Participants**

The two classes that took part this study were taken from a convenience sampling of the three, eighth grade Art classes I was teaching at the junior high school described above. The data collected for analysis and reflection, therefore, represent the experiences of those specific students.

In general, both classes presented a refreshingly manageable size; with student enrollment capped at twenty-eight. This factor was vastly different from my experiences in previous school districts and proved to provide an advantage in my ability to accommodate a broad range of needs and academic abilities, and to build individual relationships. Out of the fifty-six students in both classes, only five were on an I.E.P. and four had a 504 Plan.
The demographic make-up of the student body was predominately Caucasian and, although the Minority population was smaller by comparison, it represented a broad range of ethnic backgrounds. Based on observations made at the beginning of the semester, the students were mostly conscientious and well-mannered. They displayed a willingness to adhere to the established expectations of the classroom and a desire earn high marks for participation and projects.

**Role of the Researcher**

The combined experiences of teaching art in extreme, sometimes violent, environments have transformed the ideology that initially characterized my pedagogy as a beginning educator. Over the span of my career, I have experienced a gamut of highs and lows and have been tested in ways that even caused me to question my longevity in the field. Through it all, I have remained reflective, and can firmly grasp that it has been my insistence on maintaining a pedagogical practice and curriculum grounded in an ethic of love that may be credited for the consistently favorable learning outcomes and transformative moments my students and I have shared over more than a decade. For the first time, this school year, I found myself working in a more affluent, middle-class neighborhood. In spite of their many differences, my new students’ basic emotional needs were actually quite similar, and their responses to an intentionally nurturing and loving methodology, proved to be equally effective.

To be clear, I do not wish to imply the kind of ideal, overly-romanticized love that has been glamourized by fictional educators in a number of blockbuster hits. The type of love I am referring to has been much more authentic. It has required patience and perseverance; sometimes, even through pain. It has taken an immense amount of work and the ability to surrender ego and a need for dominance; a notion that has often, in my experience, proved
extremely difficult for some educators to grasp. Prior to returning to school to pursue a master’s degree, I had no idea that my intuitive methodology for, not only survival in the classroom, but an art program that effectively, meaningfully and successfully engaged my students could be validated on a scholarly level and categorized under the umbrella of theoretical frameworks such as teaching with an ethic of love and holistic and transformative educational practices.

It is my academically-backed finding, thus far, that I have successfully organized and engaged the sea of youth that have flooded my classrooms over the years because I have worked hard to ensure that their most basic needs were being met. Structure and order have been established with words and visuals that have aimed to motivate students to want to behave and fully engage because they have felt safe and loved. Posters and student art displaying the word “agape”, and others associated with it, have been prominently arranged around the room. Students have understood that when I spoke of agape, I was referring to the highest form of love; a love that requires an unselfish and benevolent concern for the good of another. Most importantly, they have understood that, in our room, it is put into action (Cloninger, 2008) through an interplay of care, commitment, knowledge, responsibility, respect and trust (hooks, 2010).

Empathy, defined as a shared experience, has been used as a vehicle to connect the students to one another and to me as the facilitator of their experience with art in the classroom. It has created a sense of community, invited the students to “buy in” to the structure of classroom expectations, and inspired a heightened level of engagement. Referring back to Maslow’s Hierarchy of Needs, when students feel cared for/loved, they achieve at a greater level. Early in my graduate studies, I discovered research on a holistic approach to art education that resonated with an aspect of my teaching philosophy; placing it decisively within a scholarly context. While
reading *The Heart of Art Education: Holistic Approaches to Creativity, Integration and Transformation*, I was struck by a particular chapter that focused on teaching empathy as a central theme for each lesson. As Jeffers (2012) wrote, “Lying in the heart of culture, the arts develop our capacity for empathy, even as they amplify experience and invite us to make meaning. Empathy, like the arts, prompts us to imagine, to project, and thus to feel with others” (p. 33). Modern day students are bombarded by information that seeks to influence their feelings in continually unprecedented ways; as they are caught-up in the shallow connectivity created by constant scrolling through newsfeeds and social media sites. Therefore, while there may be little doubt that most students know what it means to be *connected*, it is less certain that many know how to genuinely *feel with others*. Incorporating empathy into classroom practices, and an art curriculum focused on an ethic of love, requires students to learn to feel with others; thereby creating a sense of community and providing the sense of belonging and security that satisfies the deficiency needs at the bottom of Maslow’s Pyramid.

I have acknowledged that an argument may arise, for some, that a focus on *feelings* and *feeling with others* without follow-up action could potentially give rise to a sense of helplessness. However, I would offer that because the adolescent years are awkwardly dominated by ever-changing emotions, young people’s *already* prevalent feelings are, oftentimes, left unattended or un-nurtured. It has, therefore, been my assertion that promoting empathic connections using an ethic of love actually counters the omnipresent, helpless angst by placing their feelings within the safety-net of a classroom and art curriculum structured in such a manner.

*Struggling, at one point, to achieve a calm classroom environment at my previous school, I turned toward meditation and the practice of mindfulness. To introduce the concept, I started with a guided meditation exercise I had gotten from one of our school’s*
counselors. I dimmed the lights, played soft, instrumental music with ocean sounds, and read a passage that took the students’ minds on a journey to the bottom of the ocean. Throughout the exercise, they were instructed to remain aware of their breathing as they slowly descended into the depths of their imagined ocean scene. Once they reached the bottom, they were told to notice a box and open the lid. After guiding them back to the top, they were instructed to open their eyes and draw what they had seen. Overall, the activity was a huge success. At the end of that class I explained what mindfulness is, stating “It is a mental state achieved by focusing one’s awareness on the present moment while calmly acknowledging and accepting one’s feelings, thoughts and body sensations.” I explained that we were going to start doing a mindfulness meditation, similar to the guided meditation we had just done, twice a week. Later that week, I hung the word “mindfulness” (which students designed and painted) and a poster defining it in the front of the room (figure 2-3).

Similar to the way I had introduced it, I dimmed the lights and played soft, instrumental music each time. Later, brought in an aroma-therapy diffuser to make the
room smell good. Each time, the activity would only last about five minutes, but it really had a positive impact on how the room, as a whole “felt”. There were only a few students that did not want to participate and they were permitted to sit quietly and draw. It became such an important part of our routine, students would remind me on days I forgot. Many admitted that they loved how it made them feel relaxed.

Defining Boundaries

Within the context of education, love has remained a marginalized topic. More specifically, it is overlooked by those who believe it skews their perceived necessity for objectivity (hooks 2003; Palmer 1998) and/or those who shy away from an ethic of love based on a belief that showing love for one’s students enters the realm of taboo or questionable methodologies. Although there is a wealth of data to counter both of these veins of concern, the aforementioned counterpoints make it critical to address the importance of defining and maintaining clear boundaries when proclaiming an embrace of love-based teaching practices.

In my classroom, this begins with a clear definition of love, in relation to the classroom setting and both teacher-to-student and student-to-student relationships. On the poster, “Art Community Motto: Agape” (figure 1), the Greek, agape form of love is established as an unselfish and benevolent concern for the good of another. It is coupled with bell hook’s (2010) definition of love as an interplay of care, commitment, knowledge, responsibility, respect, and trust to define what love means in our classroom. The poster also acknowledges what type of love we are not referring to in our classroom. Even though students often find it comical, drawing the clear distinction between a benevolent concern and passion is important because it eliminates any question that the love in reference charters into taboo territory. Most importantly, the students understand that an agape form of love is an unselfish love in which care,
commitment, knowledge, responsibility, respect, and trust (hooks, 2010) are put into action (King, 1963).

The way love manifests through actions is also clearly defined through established boundaries; both those imposed by the district, and those created specifically for the art room. While teaching with an ethic of love elevates the importance of developing meaningful relationships, it feels necessary to clarify the obvious boundary that the relationship does not extend beyond the scope of school or school activities. For example, going to a school play or a sporting event to support one’s students is entirely appropriate. However, many other things beyond that, have the potential to cross that boundary. The same boundary that draws the line between school time and personal time, also holds true in relation to social media. Although my particular school encourages teachers and coaches to share their students’ accomplishments, those stories are filtered through school administrators before being posted to the official school news feeds. Outside of submitting accomplishments to administration, any further connections via social media would be completely inappropriate. The boundary established between school-related and personal is the most important one to clearly define and uphold. This boundary should be reflective of the employee handbook, and laws surrounding those liabilities, for any educator and does not impact a teacher’s ability to teach with an ethic of love. This hard line simply defines what is appropriate.

Boundaries within the classroom are also defined by what is appropriate. For example, while I encourage students to share their thoughts and concerns, I am clear to establish my role as a Mandated Reporter; maintaining a clear understanding that I am legally bound to sharing certain information with school officials and, to a lesser degree, that I acknowledge there may be some issues or concerns I am simply not trained to address and must refer to the guidance
department. I support my students through appropriate actions that show love through the interplay of care, commitment, knowledge, responsibility, respect, and trust.

“Sam” is an expressive young girl who wears her heart on her sleeve. Seemingly placing friends and social interactions as her top priority, it was commonplace for her to exhaustively share and expound on the current events of her life. One day, without any particular exceptionality, she called me to the hallway to vent about a problem she was having with her girlfriend. After actively listening to her woes, I suggested that it was a case of jealousy and implored her to, instead, focus on projecting an air of confidence. After our brief exchange, she entered the art room with a smile on her face.

The next week, I attended a 504 meeting (with all of Sam’s teachers, her parents, her guidance counselor, and one of our administrators) to discuss her special accommodations. As Sam’s parents addressed their new concerns, a heightened focus on “hanging out with bad influences” and an awareness of Sam’s growing frustration and sadness, I started to wonder if her parents knew she identified as a Lesbian. In that moment, I began to understand “why” her social circle was so important. With her friends, Sam was able to be exactly who she wanted to be, and no one felt disappointed. In this instance, I knew my “responsibility” was to Sam and not “outing” her before she was ready to share it with her parents on her terms. I mostly listened during the meeting, but made it a point to share some of Sam’s accomplishments.

A few days after the meeting, Sam and a friend she had in the class exploded into a shouting match that produced a stream of profane remarks. I quickly moved to separate them; sending Sam to the hallway to calm down and her friend to guidance (based on her request). After a few minutes, Sam walked into the room and apologized for disrespecting
her classmates and me. I sat down at the demonstration table with her as she started to cry. Sam expressed that she felt like everyone hated her, even her parents. I took that opportunity to ask if she had “come out” to her parents. After confirming that she had not, I asked if that was why her friends were so important to her. The last question sent tears streaming down her face. I looked her in the eyes and smiled as I said, “Sam, I sat in that meeting with your parents and I could see how much they love you... and I love you... for exactly who you are... and I know Ms. A. loves you... you are very loved!” She still had tears, but her lips curled into a smile as she said, “Thanks Mrs. Spooner, I love you too.

**Researcher Bias**

Based on the information provided to explain my role as the researcher, my bias clearly leaned toward the assumption that practicing an ethic of love influences the achievements of students in a favorable way. Because the research outlined in this paper was *based* on an embrace of the aforementioned pedagogy, data was not skewed by this factor. However, it must be acknowledged that I approached this study with a predetermination, formed by personal experiences and corroborated by literature, that love is an unequivocally vital component of effective critical pedagogy.

As a woman, I own that my gender, potentially, presented another form of bias. While reading about the feminist ethic of care (Goldstein, 1997), I immediately felt empowered by Goldstein’s (1997) unapologetic use of love-based teaching practices. Although I fully acknowledge that nurturance is an inherently female trait, I find it equally important to stress that, even within the contexts of education (Cloninger, 2008), it is not solely feminine. However,
due to established gender roles and biases, female educators who teach with an ethic of love bear a greater burden to justify the scholarly merits of such an approach.

In reference to nurturance and gender roles, I must also acknowledge my role as a mother as another bias; a concept discussed at greater length in chapter two. This latter bias is one I accept with a greater comfort and willingness than my gender bias. Without question, motherhood changed the way I viewed my role as a teacher and how I managed a classroom. Ultimately, it was the catalyst that shifted my pedagogy from one centered on an ethic of care, to one centered on an ethic of love.

**Summary**

This chapter provided the rational for utilizing a qualitative methodology to investigate how love manifested in my teaching pedagogy and art curriculum, and systematically examine how a focus on an ethic of love transformed student engagement and art production in my classroom. The data sources were presented and described. Finally I discussed my role as the researcher and noted that personal bias did not impact the collection of data/field texts.
CHAPTER FOUR
RE-PRESENTATION OF DATA/ FIELD TEXTS

Overview

This chapter re-presents the data/field texts that were collected during the implementation of the specifically designed art unit and the post-experience interviews with students. The data/field texts include field notes, narrative, student art and writing samples, and interviews.

Art Unit Experience

Overview

The art unit designed for this study was implemented with careful consideration of the student participants. Taking a holistic approach, the activities presented intended to engage them on an emotional, physical, and spiritual level; by inviting the students to explore an endearing memory, taking them through the process of creating art that represented the visual embodiment of the feelings those memories provided, and guiding them through the process of navigating the experience (respectively). From the introduction to the conclusion, details of the unit’s events were documented and collected for data. The observations made during the study are analyzed and reflected upon in the following chapter.

Prelude

The original unit plan designed for this action research project had to be edited in order to meet the time constraints imposed by factors beyond my control; the most pressing issue being the fact that the semester was coming to an end and different students would soon be filling the seats. The unit observed for this study could not have been carried out with a new group and remained in keeping with a pedagogy centered on an ethic of love.
A key factor of the love-based approach to my curriculum is a strategically ordered series of unit plans. The media, processes, and studio projects vary, however, the themes are sequentially meaningful. For example, the first two days the students in this study were in attendance, they created “mini masterpieces” illustrating a word that best described what art is to them. It was only a basic activity, but I used it as a way to learn a number of things; observing which students were quick to get to work and which ones needed more prompting, as well as discovering those who already displayed some advanced technical skills and those who were easily discouraged by their abilities. The small works of art were collaged onto a long strip of bulletin board paper and hung in the hallway as a means to establish the students’ shared claim to the room for the duration of the course (figure 4).

*Figure 4. Hall display of the student’s “mini-masterpieces”.*
The theme of the first unit was self-exploration. While the students worked on self-portraits (figures 5-6) that included visual representations of their favorite things, I bounced around the room and used their interests as conversation starters.

Figure 5. Student sample: self-portrait.

Figure 6. Student sample: self-portrait.

The establishment of relationships, both teacher-to-student and student-to-student, is a vital component of my love-based teaching practices. The decision to start with the aforementioned theme was a manifestation of that factor. Themes that require a higher level of
comfort and trust, such as the one planned for this study, are therefore reserved for later in the course.

The art history portion of the unit was, unfortunately, cut to save time. If everything had run smoothly, there would have been nine, fifty-five-minute class periods left for the project once I had received the green light to begin. Ultimately, Mother Nature had other plans. I began the unit with only two days to work before winter break. After two weeks off, we jumped right back into the lesson. True to Murphy’s Law, that anything that can happen will, an arctic vortex swept across northeast Ohio and forced the cancellation of school for the next three consecutive days. The jubilation that would have typically resulted from our Superintendent’s call at five o’clock in the morning was, instead, met with panic by the third day in a row. The inclement weather took our remaining timeline down to just three days to complete the projects, and although it had initially felt like a catastrophic blow, there still proved to be just enough time to bring the project (and the semester) to a meaningful conclusion. The following sections detail what occurred during the combined involvement of the two classes in this study and reveal some specific ways love was present in my approach throughout the experience.

**Introducing the Study**

The students received a small packet of information about the study and permission slips prior to starting the unit. I excitedly described what we would be doing and how I would be documenting the process for, as I put it, “One of the coolest and most important things I have ever done!”; a statement that would later reveal itself as a catalyst for unintentional pressure. I answered any questions the students had and tried to downplay the fact that I planned to record our final critique together. My desire was for everyone to want to participate and hoped that the
official Kent State University letterhead used for their packets did not make it feel too intimidating.

Day One

After welcoming the students to class, I invited everyone to gather around a cluster of three large tables at the front of the room. The intention was to create a more intimate gathering than the distant proximity our studio tables could afford. Without much explanation, I held up an enlarged image (figure 7) of a photograph from my childhood.

![Figure 7. A photograph of my mom and me (1985).](image)

The unveiling of this snapshot into my past was met with a roar of mixed reviews. Some students moaned with heart-felt sentiment and many laughed; most notably, all were engaged and appeared to be present in the moment (even the students who often struggled to focus). I entertained a series of questions relating to my age when the photo was taken, what my mom was like when I was a kid, and even humorously defended the popularity of the wagon-wheel print on our sofa. After satisfying their curiosity to the best of my ability, I admitted that this was one of
my favorite photographs from my childhood because of the other memories and feelings I associate with it. I explained that while I no longer remember the details of the exact moment that was captured, it evokes a number of fond memories. Holding up an enlarged image of a rose pendant (figure 8), I expounded on the notion of endearing memories by offering that material possessions, or personal artifacts, could be equally powerful in their ability to trigger memories and garner a strong emotional response.

![Figure 8. My mom’s rose pendant and chain.](image)

With everyone still gathered together, I read the following passage aloud:

*The personal artifact I have chosen to share with you is technically not my own possession; yet the feelings I associate it with are so tangible, it is as much mine as anything else I own. I do not picture my mom without seeing this rose pendant resting on her chest. With very few exceptions, my mother has worn this necklace every day that I can remember. In fact, a short bout of troubling medical issues, which led to a series of surgeries and hospital stays, comprise the only instances I can recall her without her*
signature adornment. It is, therefore, not so surprising that I find myself overcome by nostalgia and flooded with emotion as I write about it.

In one of the classes, the mention of surgeries resonated with a student whom I shall call “Sara”. Leaning in toward her friend, she whispered, “It’s true. You have to take off all your jewelry and whatever (December 19, 2017).” Hearing the statement, I paused and asked if she knew this from experience. Tucking her hair behind her ear, and appearing slightly embarrassed to have drawn attention to herself, she quickly mumbled, “Well, I’ve had surgery on my leg a couple times and they made me take out my earrings… and I was like really mad ‘cause I had just gotten them pierced (December 19, 2017).” She faded back into her seat and I noticed that a few clusters of students had begun to murmur. I drew the students back in, stating, “This is why I love this project! It’s amazing how one simple object can hold so much power… can get people thinking… wanting to share their own stories!” I continued:

I have very early memories of resting my head on my mom’s freckled chest and watching the rose rise and fall with her breath. I picture her moving the pendant back and forth on the chain (a sign that she was worried or concerned) or holding it in her mouth while she was thinking. I love my mom and I adore the courageous and wise woman I have come to know her as in my adult years. I have never made the comparison before, but as I reflect, my beautiful mother is very much like the rose she wears around her neck. Like a rose, she is outwardly stunning and her always caring demeanor beckons people to stop and take a moment to dwell in her presence.

With both classes, I paused here, and took a moment to paint a visual of my mom. “You think I’m nice? …well, you should meet my mom! She is usually always happy and smiling… she makes people just want to hang out with her!” In an up-beat tone, I admitted how I used to get
annoyed when I was in high school because my friends would want to hang out in the kitchen with her to talk. This statement drew giggles from several girls each time. Returning to my free-write, I shared:

*Conversely, like the thorns that protect the flower, my mom, against all odds, evolved from the adversity of a life that would have stifled many and learned how to protect herself and persevere.*

Stopping once again, I briefly shared that my mom has had to overcome a lot of obstacles throughout her life. I explained that she grew up in poverty and struggled through a couple of years in foster care. I wanted them to understand that she *smiles* often because it is how she has found *strength*; a point that resonated with both groups and drew nods of recognition each time.

Continuing on to the final paragraph, I read:

*One evening, not too long ago, I asked her about the pendant, while she played with my children, and discovered a few things I had never known. That night, I learned that my dad bought the necklace for my mom on her twentieth birthday; when she was pregnant with me. They didn’t have much money at the time (my dad was a young Private in the Army) and he purchased the pendant and chain at the local pawn shop they frequented often; out of necessity. My mom affectionately explained how my dad knew how much she wanted a necklace because she used to borrow her friend’s. When I asked why she wore it every day, she laughed and explained, “Because it was from your dad... and it was real gold”.*

Hands went up into the air the instant I had completed the passage. In both groups, the students had clearly been drawn in by the description of my mom and her necklace and intrigued to find out what they would be doing. Before sending everyone back to their seats, I explained that they
were going to do the same free-writing exercise I had just shared with them and showed four student examples (figures 9-12) from the first time I had worked with this theme. I was aware that examples can sometimes stifle authentic responses but, thought it would be helpful to share work created by individuals their own age.

Figure 9. Student artifact exemplar: figurine.

Figure 10. Student artifact exemplar: dress.

Figure 11. Student artifact exemplar: baseball.

Figure 12. Student artifact exemplar: pill.
Next, I instructed each of them to reflect on which of their personal artifacts held the most sentimental value. I asked, “What one thing would you consider to be your most treasured possession based on the memories and feelings you associate with it?” Referring back to my example, I prompted the students to picture their personal artifact in their mind and allow their memories to collect on the drawing paper I had given them. I explained that the rest of the class period would be dedicated to brainstorming and writing and that the next day we would be using that information to create an art piece similar to the student examples I had shown.

Both classes responded with a similar enthusiasm as they returned to their tables. A majority of the students in each group were very eager to get started and put their pencils to the paper right away, some required one-on-one interaction to make their selection, and two young men (from the same class) spent the rest of the period insisting that nothing was special to them. As the students worked through the initial writing activity, I observed many of them sharing their chosen artifact with the other people in their group and engaging in meaningful conversations about them. Interestingly, as I collected the work at the end of each class, I perceived a general hesitation and uneasiness. I was not sure what to make of it initially; as it had not been what I expected. However, it became a bit clearer when a student in the second class, whom I shall refer to as “Arianna”, pulled me off to the side of the room before she would hand me her paper. With a worried look, she asked, “So are we going to like… be reading these to the entire class so you can use it in your paper (December 19, 2017)?” It made me feel guilty; like I was selfishly forcing my students to step out of their comfort zones for the sake of my own academic endeavors. It felt like the furthest I could get from practicing an ethic of love. I immediately reassured her and emphasized that she did not have to share anything she didn’t want to share. Once I began to read what she had written, several things became clear.
The student example featuring a medication for Attention Deficit Hyperactive Disorder (A.D.H.D.) had struck a nerve. Arianna had been inspired by the example and felt comfortable sharing it with the friends (whom she had chosen to sit with) at her table and me. The thought of sharing her artifact with the rest of her peers made her completely uncomfortable. Putting it all together, I adjusted my body language to reflect the concern and love that I felt and asked, “Does the fact that I said this was part of my school project make you feel like you have to share your artwork with everyone, or I will feel upset?” The honesty in her, “Kind of…” showed me that I needed to address the concern with everyone the next day, before we did anything else.

It is important to note that every aspect of the presentation of this initial activity was approached systematically. I intentionally created a more personal gathering by drawing the students into a circle, took several pauses from the slightly formal tone of my writing sample to illustrate certain points, and allowed questions and shared student experiences to become an organic component of the introduction to our project. On a broader scale, the unit’s theme (which I had previously explored at another school with a different demographic) was purposely saved for the final project of the semester; when classroom expectations are routinely followed, relationships have grown and been nurtured, and the students have adopted agape (care, commitment, respect, responsibility, trust, and knowledge) as the tone and culture of the class.

Day Two

The second day (the last day before our two-week winter break), I welcomed the students to class and explained that I wanted to clarify something about the project we had started to work on the day before. As always, I was careful to make sure that my body language reflected the sentiments I was about to relay. I began, “Yesterday it was, thankfully, brought to my attention that some of you may be feeling uncomfortable about the idea of sharing all of the memories
associated with your personal artifact with the class during our critique at the end.” Looking around the room, it quickly became clear that I had spoken the words many had been reluctant to share. To ease their apprehensions, I reiterated that they could choose to opt out of any part of the unit, without consequence, and work on an alternative assignment.

Revisiting the details that had been explained when I first handed out the consent forms for participation in this study, I took time to describe what we were going to be doing over the remaining days and revealed an important change to the plan that had been laid out for them. I had originally envisioned that their story boards would be displayed alongside their artifact memory boxes during the critique on our last day, however, I explained that it would no longer be necessary and stated, “The most important thing is that you have a meaningful experience exploring this theme. Today, you will take the ideas you wrote down yesterday and create something like an illustrated journal entry. This part of your project will not be on display for the critique, anymore. It is for you. It is a place for you to share the memories and feelings you associate with your chosen artifact.” Holding up newspaper collages they had made earlier in the semester, for a project that ended up taking a different direction, I continued, “Instead of using plain white paper like the student examples I showed, we are going to put these to use. You may approach this however you wish, as long as the final product includes a drawing of your artifact and a description of why it is special to you.” I explained that they could use any of the available supplies and would have two classes to complete them. Before I allowed the students to get started, I explained, “When we return from break, you will have one more day to work on these and then we will move on to the memory box. The interesting thing about working with a box, is that you will be able to decide how much you want to share about your artifact, and what information you would like to keep to yourself. When we look at the boxes for our final critique,
you may choose to open the lid, or leave it closed. The class will only see as much as you are comfortable sharing.” After satisfying the questions raised in each class, I instructed the students to begin while I walked around the room to offer assistance.

With both groups, I observed a lackluster desire to get started. The last day before an extended break from school is typically filled with fun activities that do not require extensive effort. Many of the students that had seemed eager to get started the previous day, showed less motivation to stay on task. While this factor initially caused me concern as I worked with the first group, in terms of the limited amount of time left in the semester, I determined that any progress was going to have to be celebrated. Adjusting to the excitement of the day, I shifted gear and spent time visiting each table; asking questions about the students’ artifacts and what they planned to do over break.

As I moved around the room, I encountered a number of students who were eager to share their artifact, and some who swiftly made it clear that they preferred I move on to the next person; both sentiments were accommodated correspondingly. Similar to the first time I worked with this theme, many of the students’ chosen artifacts presented rich microcosms of their lives. The stories revealed feelings associated with loss, perseverance, humor, love, regret, hope, fear, achievement, friendship, family, and many other equally significant elements of the human experience. The emotions expressed during each exchange were, therefore, also incredibly varied. I had anticipated that some artifacts would evoke less desirable emotions and was prepared to deal with those scenarios. In hindsight, the project was poorly timed. I stand by the decision to save it for later in the semester, but I regret that I presented it to my students before a long break. In the future, I would not do that again.
Day Three

Our first day back from break was electrified by news reports warning of an impending winter storm. After welcoming the students back, I recapped what we had been working on, spoke briefly about exploring the theme of endearing memories, and asked general questions about the experience thus far. Citing the potential for a snow day, I urged the students to utilize their class time wisely and set completing their story board as the goal to be reached by the end of class.

Day Four

As luck would have it, the predicted polar vortex encroached upon our region and decided to stick around. School was subsequently canceled three days in a row. Under normal circumstances, this gift would have been accepted with celebratory cheers. Unfortunately, it significantly impacted our timeline, and left me grappling over how I should proceed; for the sake of both my students and the study. Three days remained in the semester. That left only two days to work on the memory boxes, and one day to conduct a final critique and bring the class to a close. I worried that two days did not allow the students enough time to complete a quality product and, most importantly, I had grown increasingly apprehensive about leading them into a critique that I knew had become a source of anxiety. After seeking consultation, a decision was made to forego the critique. Although they had served as a poignant way to reflect on the experiences and artwork produced in previous lessons, asking the students to participate in a group critique for this lesson would not have reflected the ethic of love I had consciously worked to adhere to each day in class. The unit plan created for this study had felt rushed and choppy up to this point, and I was determined to bring it to a meaningful conclusion.
After greeting the students, and taking a moment to revel in the shocking reality that we were returning from three unexpected snow days, I proceeded with our new plan of attack. I explained, “We have three days left together and we are going to make the most of it. We are going to skip our group critique and use the remaining time to create the artifact memory boxes.” In both classes, this statement was met with audible sighs of relief. Feeling a bit more at ease, myself, I continued, “I know that some of you are not quite finished with your storyboards but, I would like you to begin working on your boxes. They are small and you should be able to create a piece you are satisfied with by the end of class tomorrow. On the last day, you can add any finishing touches that will make your storyboard and box complete.” Before allowing the students to choose a box, I offered the following suggestions, “The last time we met, I explained how you can use the concept of a box to enrich your design. As you read through the story you have written about your artifact and the memories you associate with it, ask yourself which information may be encountered on the outside, and which information should only be revealed by opening the lid.” I explained that they could work with any of the available materials and that I would, as always, be walking around the room to offer assistance and answer questions.

The boxes were ordered in a variety of shapes to enhance the individuality of each piece. Despite the additional preparation and work it can take to offer choices, I have always felt that it is a vital part of the creative process and wanted to give the students an opportunity to select a shape that best suited their artifact. Even though there were a limited number of each kind, only a few students were unable to receive their first choice; a factor that did not seem to really bother those affected. In general, a great deal of excitement revolved around the simple act of selecting a box. In the first class, I observed a young lady smile and lift her heart-shaped box in the air as she chirped, “It’s like a little treasure box!”
Once the students were in possession of their boxes, the rest of the class period went by very quickly. Based on my suggestion, most of them spent their remaining time either painting or collaging a foundation for the words or images they planned to include. Overall, I was pleasantly surprised by their willingness to jump right into the execution of their designs; a result I can only attribute to the enthusiasm many expressed for the box they had chosen.

**Day Five**

On the fifth day, the students worked toward completing their artifact memory boxes. I filled a cluster of tables with a variety of supplies, including: scissors, glue, magazines, construction paper, printed papers, sequins, glitter, and ribbons. The students were given permission to use any of the materials they needed to finalize their design.

At this point in the unit, I had accomplished the task of making my way around to every student, several times. As I grew familiar with their chosen artifacts and actively listened to their stories, I reflected on the value of nurtured relationships. It was the end of the semester and I had built a good rapport with every student, yet, there was something very powerful about the new connection that was formed when individual students allowed me to share a piece of their existence. This concept is explored in greater detail in the following chapter.

**Day Six**

The last day was primarily dedicated to returning the students’ artwork, reflecting on the semester, and group discussions. There were a few in each class that had not quite finished and they were given the opportunity to complete their work as they saw fit. The following student samples (figures 13a-19b) represent only a fraction of the spectrum that embodies the human experience.
This is my artifact. It is a stuffed elephant. It’s important to me because I got it on my first surgery day. The nurse gave it to me because I was scared so I took it into the room with me. This surgery was 2 years ago. I had another one 1 year after.

*Figure 13a. Student artifact sample: stuffed animal.*

*Figure 13b. Student artifact sample: stuffed animal (detail).*
This necklace is special to me because my dad made it for me when he was in the hospital after a suicide attempt. It reminds me every day how lucky I am for him to still be here with me. It helps me when I’m sad and it makes me thankful for him being here. I keep the necklace in a box in my room so I don’t lose it.
Student Artifact Sample: Unicycle

My personal artifact that’s important to me is my unicycle. Every time I ride it reminds me of how long it took to find it and how I learned to ride it. And ever since I learned how to ride I’ve been in a parade with my mom. So every time I see it also reminds me of the whole story about my mom and how she learned about it. So it all started with my mom wanting to learn how to ride it and eventually becoming good enough to audition for the circus. She did all sorts of crazy things like going on people’s backs while they ride the unicycle and other things she didn’t say. So after I heard her say this story to me I just knew that’s what I wanted to do next so it was just a matter of time before I knew how to ride.
I take a Bi-Polar and ADHD med to help me control myself. My life has been...bad. But it got better when I took my meds. But, even when I miss one day I get off track and start to be bad and depressed again. I’m better now though, and I hope to stay this way. That’s my story!

| Figure 16a. Student artifact sample: medicine. |
| Figure 16b. Student artifact sample: medicine (detail). |
Student Artifact Sample: Ring

My personal artifact is my Pandora princess ring that I got from my boyfriend on our one year anniversary. I have never taken it off because it means absolutely everything to me. We were out at dinner when he gave it to me and I was so happy he got it for me. It’s a symbol of our love and all the memories we have together. Whenever I’m nervous I fiddle with the ring and whenever I look at the ring I think of him and his big smile and his blue eyes and all the memories like, when we first met, or our little adventures, movie dates or even just staying home playing video games. My ring will always be important to me because it reminds me of all the amazing memories I have with such an amazing person.
Student Artifact Sample: Game Ball

This was my...first homerun and my coach gave me the game ball!

Figure 18a. Student artifact sample: game ball.

Figure 18b. Student artifact sample: game ball (detail).
Before my grandfather passed away I wrote him a note when I was at his house. While he was in the hospital we asked if he wanted anything. The only thing he wanted was the note I wrote him. That note is really important to me.
Art Unit Summary

The description of events and observations made during the implementation of the art unit intentionally encapsulate the experience on a level that goes beyond a simplified, sequential listing of events. In order to procure the information needed to meaningfully investigate how love manifests as a vital component of my pedagogy and curriculum, it was necessary to include the narrative that encapsulated my thought process throughout the duration of the project. This data is cross-referenced with the interviews in the following sections in the next chapter.

Post-Experience Interviews

Overview

Post-experience interviews were conducted during the students’ study hall periods one week after the art unit, *Personal Artifact Memory Boxes*, and semester concluded. The participants were divided into two groups in order to accommodate their schedules. The questions aimed to collect data representative of the students’ point of view. All of the following quotes are from the personal communication on January 18, 2018.

Selection of Participants

There were a total of twenty-eight students in each of the two classes that were chosen for participation in this study. Thirty-four out of fifty-six students handed in a signed permission slip. To obtain a truly random selection of students for the post-experience interviews, each of the thirty-four students who had submitted an approval form were assigned a number. The numbers were all placed into a bowl and six were drawn. Out of the six that were selected, four had study hall the same period, and the other two had study hall later in the day. I planned to conduct two interviews, in order to accommodate the students’ schedules. On the day the larger group met for the interview, the only young man in the group declined to participate after he
learned that he would be the only male with three other female students. I reassured him that I completely understood and proceeded with the three young ladies that remained. The interviewees in the other group both happened to be male and displayed no apprehensions leading into the meeting.

**Description of Participants**

The three girls who participated in the first group interview differ a great deal in terms of personality, interests, and style. “Jenna” and “Mia” were in the same class, but they did not make it a point to interact with one another. Throughout the course of the semester, Jenna showed herself to be a very sensitive and outgoing individual. She was often among the first in her class to arrive and would commonly fly into the room with an insatiable eagerness to share the many dramatic events that were impacting her day. Jenna is very proud of her Puerto Rican heritage and often incorporated associated symbolism in her work. She was always quick to knock her artistic abilities, yet never seemed to let that stop her from jumping into a project.

Mia had two very close friends in the class and did not interact beyond her inner circle unless it was absolutely necessary. She is an introvert. An accommodation in her Individualized Education Plan (I.E.P.) specified that Mia be allowed to step out of class when she was feeling too overwhelmed and in need of a break; a life-line she thoughtfully requested less than a handful of times. Mia is on an I.E.P. for A.D.H.D and Bi-Polar disorder. Unlike Jenna, and many others in her class, Mia did not actively seek my attention and it took time and effort to build a positive relationship with her.

“Kara”, the third girl in group one, is characterized primarily by her smiling eyes. Had it not been for the cheerleading uniform she donned on game days, I may have easily mistaken her quiet demeanor for shyness. This such attribute I can only presume to be the antithesis of one
who cheers for sport. Always pleasant and kind, her interactions in the class remained more reactive than proactive. Kara expressed an affinity for art-making, but usually struggled to come up with ideas and often needed an extended amount of time to complete her work.

The two boys being interviewed in group two were from the same class as Kara. As members of the school’s wrestling team, they had become good friends throughout the course of the season and eventually began to sit at the same table in class. “Seth” is a bright, respectful individual with a penchant for delivering hilarious one-liners; frequently finding his comedic inspiration from aspects of his Asian culture. During our daily interactions, I observed him place a great deal of emphasis on his personal appearance and quickly learned that earning good grades was central to his motivation to participate in class.

“David” is an all-around nice person. A natural, yet understated leader, he habitually redirected classmates that were off task or disrespectful. David is on an I.E.P. that allows him additional time to work on his assignments, however, he was generally on pace with the rest of his classmates. Similar to Seth, he humbles himself through humor and utilizes it as a way to connect with others.

**Reflecting on the Art Unit**

The interviews began with a few questions about the art unit that was designed for this study. The group of girls were noticeably giggly and awkward the second I started the recording. Mia was particularly jittery.

I’m nervous about talking on that thing. [Shaking her head and pointing to the recording device] I’ve never been asked questions about teaching stuff.

I smiled and did my best to put them at ease.
Awe, please don’t be nervous. [Leaning in] Try to think of this as a casual conversation...as if we were in class. If there’s a question you don’t feel like answering, you can just sit there and smile. That’s okay too!

First, I wanted to know what they thought about the theme of the unit; using a personal artifact to explore and visually represent a special, endearing memory.

Okay, so let’s talk about our project first. I’d like to know what you thought about it. Was it difficult to choose your artifact?

Jenna was the first to chime in.

I liked it a lot. [Throwing her hands up into the air] I liked all our projects. But, yeah...it was really hard to pick my artifact because there’s a lot of things in my life that meant a lot. So, it was hard choosing which one...I don’t know...meant the most.

Kara’s experience had been different.

[Gripping the necklace (her chosen artifact) that she had gotten from her father] Not really. Because it was the one thing that I like to lean on I guess. Even though it’s just a necklace. It was still the one thing that I knew was there.

Mia had finally seemed to relax a bit.

Mine was very important to my life. [Referring to the Bi-Polar and A.D.H.D. medication she had chosen as her artifact] It changed my life, basically. It’s gonna change my life forever. And I think that now it’s gonna be a little harder ‘cause someone passed in my family. So it’s gonna be a little harder. But what I made my project about is helping me get through this.

I broke from the interview to spend a moment uplifting Mia’s spirit and to offer her my support.
When I asked the boys the same question, they looked at each other and laughed. David was the first to speak up.

Yeah, it was a pretty cool project, I guess… [Laughing] I mean I don’t know. I wasn’t really sure what to do, so I just picked my wrestling trophy.

Seth had gotten into the project a bit more than David. He didn’t make any eye contact when he spoke and rolled his water bottle back and forth between his hands.

I wasn’t sure at first either but, I really like my dad’s dragon necklace that he got from my mom. Every single day, I see him wear it. It can’t see him without it…so, that’s why.

Next, I sought to discover how the process of selecting an artifact and exploring the memories associated with them had affected the interviewees.

_I’d like to know how doing this project made you feel. What was it like to think about one thing that is the most special to you, and create a work of art based on the experiences and memories associated with it?_

This time, Mia was the first in her group to respond. She straightened her posture and spoke with a new confidence.

Well, I don’t really tell my friends that side of me [referring to her medical diagnoses]…and part of me really wanted to be able to tell them. So, when they asked about my artifact, I just said everything. And it was cool [smiling]... they didn’t judge me or anything.

Jenna was emotional on the first day we started the project. Her artifact was a chocolate rose that her grandfather had given her grandmother while she was battling cancer. She got a little choked up as she answered the question.
It was kinda hard and kinda good, in some ways. Sometimes just reading what I wrote and thinking about it would get me teary-eyed because [looking down]… I don’t know. Abuela (Spanish for grandmother) was like my best friend. She was like [long pause]… my best friend and I thought, “Oh my God, I’m actually doing this.”

Jenna expressed that there were moments it felt surreal to be thinking about the loss of Abuela in the middle of class. Recognizing that she was getting a little upset, I attempted to put a positive spin on her recollection.

*Did it help when I suggested that your artwork and memory box were a way to memorialize her? …to kind of honor her? Or, did it just feel painful? You can say that too.*

It was a little bit of both, I guess. But, I got through it. [Smiling] I put the box on my dresser. It was a fun project.

Kara did not have much to say on the matter.

[Smiling and nodding] I liked it.

The boys were in a very silly mood and they laughed when I asked the question. David took it as an opportunity to playfully tease his friend.

Well, [laughing] I learned that Seth can be fruity sometimes.

*You mean sentimental?*

Yeah, okay. That’s better wording.

Seth hit David on the arm as he offered his rebuttal.

[Laughing] Jerk! It’s not like I cried or anything… my dad’s necklace it cool.

It was clear that trying to get them to discuss their *feelings* about the project was not going to go down without a struggle, so I laughed with them and moved on.
Reflecting on the Course, My Teaching Methods, and How Love Impacts Success

From my perspective as the teacher, the semester had been a success. Eager to learn how the class would be described from the student’s point-of-view, I posed a hypothetical question.

Okay, so... I’d like to know how you would describe this class. If one of your friends said, “Hey, I’m thinking about taking art, but I’m not sure. What’s Mrs. Spooner’s class like?”...How would you answer them? How would you describe me as a teacher?

The girls skimmed right over my attempt to get them to talk about how they would describe the class and focused on their impression of me. Jenna put her hands up to her cheeks and spoke first.

Oh my God, you’re funny! [Laughing] You’re really funny and you’re really nice and you actually teach... but you don’t teach. You make it fun, I guess? I don’t know.

She made all of us laugh (with her) because of the way she had gone from excitedly blurting out the first part to slowly trailing off. Mia was the next to answer.

You’re outgoing and you like actually... I don’t know. I had a fun time teaching [her eyes grew wide as she drew her hands to her mouth]. I mean, [laughing] not teaching! I had a fun time with you teaching!

We all laughed again. Kara offered a different perspective.

I thought you were strict. [Leaning in] But, the good kind of strict where you kept all the kids in line most of the time. Then other times you let us joke around and have fun with you... [Pausing] and that’s what I’m trying to say.

Mia continued with Kara’s line of thought.

Yeah, you were kind of strict, but I thought it was really cool that you let us listen to music and pick our own seats.
The other girls nodded their heads in approval as she continued to make her point.

To be honest, you got me back into making art a little bit because of the projects we’ve done. They were really cool… and now I got my dad back into drawing. He’s probably going to get a tattoo job, he thinks. Wait, what was I…?

Realizing that Mia had lost her train of thought, Jenna shared how she had also been inspired by the projects and started to create more art at home.

I loved the mask you helped me make with all the vines and stuff. I went home and drew a tree on my wall… and it has birds and stuff on it.

The boys were more pragmatic about their responses. David dramatically drew a deep breath and I braced myself for a long-winded response.

Your class was fun. I liked it. I would take another semester.

I laughed at his brevity while Seth nodded in agreement.

I liked the projects. I liked the projects we did. [Snapping his fingers in the air] Oh, and you let us listen to music and you’re really nice. Nice and very chillax.

David spun off of Seth’s response and elaborated on it.

Yeah, like chilled out. You’re a cozy person [laughing]. We could joke around with you and everyone else in the class. You would let us have privileges, but you would take them away if we were being stupid. Just to be fair.

Seth agreed.

Yup, you’re fair.

I had to interject. I was curious about what made me a cozy person.

A cozy person? So, what made you feel that way?

David continued.
The environment.

What was it about the environment?

It’s good.

He and Seth looked at each other, shrugged their shoulders, and laughed. David tried to be more specific.

I don’t know. It was just…

Seth helped him finish his sentence.

It was cool.

Following hearing some of their opinions about the class, I hoped to learn whether they felt love was present in my approach.

Okay, the next thing I’d like to learn more about is... well, I want to know if you felt cared for, or loved, in the class. Did you feel like I really cared?

This question drew exaggerated nods of affirmation from each of the girls. Jenna began with an example.

Oh, definitely. Because even if you could see somebody’s off, you’d take them to the hallway and be like, “Is everything okay? Is anything wrong?”

Mia agreed and shared a specific incident that corroborated Jenna’s example.

Yeah, when my friend was upset and crying, you let me and her talk for a while and that actually helped… and you respect if someone is going through a hard time. You would [looking around]… I don’t know how to explain it. You would be very kind to all the students, no matter who they were or what they did. If they were bad, you wouldn’t be mean about it, but you would… [Trailing off] I don’t know.

Jenna interjected.
It’s kind of like you were a second mom to all of us.

Mia and Kara shook their heads. Kara offered another example.

And every day you made your way around the room to talk to all the tables and see how they’re doing… and see our artwork and how far we’ve gotten. See how we’ve improved.

Once again, the boys remained very short and straight forward with their responses. They both laughed when I asked if they felt cared for/loved. Seth through his water bottle into the air as he answered.

Yup.

David tried to snatch Seth’s water.

Yep.

Sensing that the question had sent their adolescent minds into an awkward silliness, I attempted to rephrase my question.

[Smiling] I’m sure that probably sounded really corny, or whatever, but...

Before I could get another word out, David interjected.

[Laughing] Oh, you’re always corny, but in a good way. It’s cool. And we can come talk to you about anything, unlike other teachers that are just like, I don’t know, whatever.

Seth crushed his water bottle.

Yup. And you encouraged me a lot too.

After establishing whether the students felt like I had projected an ethic of love, I wanted to investigate if/how that had any impact on their level of success in the class.

Now, so… We’ve talked a little bit about how you felt about the class and the way I am as a teacher. Did feeling loved have any effect on how well you did in the class? Did it impact the way you came in and did your work?
The girls’ body language suggested that it had made a difference. Kara, who had usually been the last to respond to each question, spoke up immediately.

I feel like it did make me wanna do the work. But, I was gonna do it already [laughing]… But, I feel like you always coming around and helping us really helped me with that.

Because, I took forever to finish the projects. I’m still not done with some of them. But, when you would come over and help me, I’d get it done.

Jenna had a more ephemeral reply.

Yeah, it definitely did.

Mia’s facial expressions hinted that she was struggling to formulate an answer.

I would say it definitely did. I had a teacher, I think in sixth or seventh, they were just so mean that I couldn’t even take their class. So I said, “I don’t care anymore.” If they don’t care about me, I’m not going to care about my grade. And I won’t care about how… or I won’t care about doing my work because that’s what they want me to do.

Mia’s statement sparked a side conversation, among the girls, about teachers they had in the past. Citing both those who cared and those who must have clearly shown they did not, they shared names back and forth and connected with one another through affirming gestures and groans.

Like Mia, the boys seemed to find it easier to show how a loving approach positively impacted their level of achievement, by sharing examples of teachers whose lack of love had negatively affected their learning potential. David began with a reference to his I.E.P.

Well, you know [motioning toward me], because certain things I struggle with and certain things I don’t struggle with. If you’re… I can’t say it… a mean teacher or disrespectful, I don’t want to be in your class. I don’t want to talk to you. I want to stay away from you. It’s like Ms. B [looking at Seth]. She was a dictator!
Seth also had Ms. B in elementary school and he groaned the second he heard her name.

She was a Social Studies teacher… fourth grade. She screamed every single day. We barely even did anything. We did all of her work. She was not fair at all. She didn’t let us have water or anything.

I listened as they rattled off a few more teachers whose names triggered strong displays of disapproval and disgust. In an effort to remain on topic, I posed another question.

So, you’ve described teachers you didn’t like. Would it have helped if those teachers had tried to build a relationship with you? Do you think it’s important for a teacher to do that?

Seth was quick to answer.

Yep!

Although I was hoping for a more involved response, David laughed and delivered a consistent reply.

I would say, “Yeah.”

Post-Experience Summary

The interview questions delivered an interesting series of responses from the students who participated. Some of their answers revealed experiences and outcomes I had hoped to hear, and some were surprising. In the next chapter, I reflect on the insights their candid conversations provided and discuss how the information pin-points specific ways love manifests in my teaching and demonstrates the need for love to be present in all educational practices.

Summary

The data collected and described in this chapter were a result of my on-going quest to discover if my mission as an educator is reflected in my pedagogy and curriculum and, in
broader terms, my desire to build a strong case for the connection between teaching practices centered on an ethic of love and heightened levels of student achievement. These data points were infused with related literature and previous experiences in the following chapter and aided in a resolution to the problem sought after in this thesis.
CHAPTER FIVE

CONCLUSION

Overview

The introduction to this thesis began with a flashback to a pivotal moment in which my insistence on a pedagogy centered on an ethic of love was (temporarily) thrown askew. That particular story, in conjunction with others, played a key role in the search to discover how an ethic of love manifests in my teaching practices and art curriculum. Interweaving narrative with the various data/field texts collected also revealed how a focus on love transforms student engagement and learning outcomes in my classroom. Reading *Narrative Inquiry: Experience and Story in Qualitative Research* (2000), by Clandinin and Connelly, helped me understand how to position the research texts, field texts, and personal experiences in a way that meaningfully answer the primary research questions and thoughtfully conclude this thesis. I relied on Clandinin and Connelly’s (2000) description of a three-dimensional inquiry space to influence the “ultimate integrity of [my] work” (p. xiv) and solve the research puzzle. The three dimensions addressed include Dewey’s explanation of experience as a combination of *situation* (place), *continuity* (past, present, and future), and *interaction* (personal and social) (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000).

Setting the Context: The Story Behind the Research

To understand why love manifests in my pedagogy and art curriculum, it is first necessary to understand how love was present in the first place. Temporally, I begin with a brief insight into how my parent’s love shaped the course of my undergraduate studies and, in turn, led me toward the pursuit of a career in academia. Then, I highlight a particularly impactful incident that occurred during my pre-service schooling, and briefly chronicle the sequence of teaching
positions that set the coordinates of my current knowledge landscape. After reading several examples Clandinin and Connelly (2000) share detailing the work of other narrative inquirers, I realized that my story was the one that needed to be told in order to set the context for analyzing the data. Once context has been established, I interweave literature, data/field texts, and narrative as I answer the research questions.

After completing the two-year foundation program at the Cleveland Institute of Art, I had determined that graduating with a fine arts degree was too impractical for a girl from a working-class up-bringing. Although I had been awarded a substantial scholarship to attend, it did not cover the balance left after the maximum amount of federal loans had been deposited. Neither of my parents had gone to school past the ninth grade, and they were so proud of my sister and me for attending college, they were willing to do everything they could to make it a reality for us. To help supplement the out-of-pocket expenses needed to cover the rest of tuition, my father (who had only just retired from a full career in the military five years prior) committed to leaving a full day at his maintenance job just to earn extra cash doing more manual labor. Comfortable with my decision to leave, I used my father’s connections to secure a job with a small construction company that specialized in welding and creative cement sculpting and took the following semester off to save money and think about what I wanted to do next; to settle on a career path that met all of my needs and honored the encouragement and support I had always received from my family.

It was spring, 2002, when I transferred to Kent State University and began my first semester of classes. On an experimental whim, I took an education class to determine if teaching would spark an interest and, almost immediately, became certain
that I had stumbled upon the path I was always meant to follow. One day, in a general education course, I was energized by the stories a guest speaker (a rather grisly, Caucasian man) had dramatically delivered about his experiences in the trenches. Contracted by school systems as a kind of intervention manager, he was not an educator in the traditional sense. Most of his interactions with teachers and students placed him in the role of a “fixer”; someone who was hired by districts struggling with extreme behaviors to provide aid and expertise. Coming fresh on the heels of our class discussion on Jonothan Kozol’s (1996) documentary, Children in America’s Schools, our speaker’s intense recounts fueled an interest and curiosity about whether “I” could work in a school where the resources were scarce and the challenges were in abundance. With an intense sincerity, I raised my hand to ask him an, admittedly, naïve question. Unexpectedly, his response filled me with an utterly unwarranted sense of shame and sent me recoiling in embarrassment.

I no longer recall my exact wording, however, I remember the point I was trying to inquire about. In summation, I shared that his stories (coupled with Kozol’s work) had made a significant impression and, essentially, asked how I could know if I was tough enough to work in a school like the ones we had been discussing. Many years removed, I can now own that I must have come across a bit silly, yet, I am certain I did not deserve what happened next. I remember the smug look on his face as I spoke and the way he laughed just before he roasted my existence. In a matter of seconds, he had stereotyped me as the posterchild of advantaged-white-women, disillusioned by a belief in their divine power to save the world by hugging one underprivileged kid at a time (or at least,
that is how he made it seem). He heard my soft-spoken voice, noted my blonde hair and blue eyes, and thought he understood my entire mode of operation. I was mortified.

From the somewhat-seasoned vantage point I reside in, at this particular moment in my life and teaching career, I could craft a true page-turner detailing the many ways that guest speaker had been profoundly wrong in his hasty judgment of my pre-service naïveté, but I know it is unnecessary. In truth, he may have been wrong about me, on one hand, but his reaction was not deprived of societal truths. I fully understand the concept of white privilege, but my particular naïveté had a different source. As I previously alluded, my father was a soldier in the United States Army. His enlistment in the armed forces required my family (at least from the time I was born) to re-establish our lives in several places, including: North Carolina, Alaska, Alabama, Germany, and finally, their home-state of Ohio. Until he retired, I had no idea how different my childhood had been from my counterparts. To illustrate my point, I suggest that one refer to The Giver (1993), by Lois Lowry, as a comparison. In that novel, a boy named Jonas comes to learn that his society has developed “Sameness” as a means to eradicate pain and suffering (Lowry, 1993). While I do not wish to imply that “sameness” was prescribed to military dependents, it was a very interesting by-product of life on a military base. Our living quarters were modest and, unless your parent was an officer, everyone on base lived in the same type of dwelling. At school, my classes were always comprised of students experiencing a life uniquely similar to my own. I did not know how unusual my childhood had been until my father retired and we entered the realm of civilian life. Thinking back to the encounter with that guest speaker, what he had judged as a position stemming from privilege, was actually a result of my military-dependent upbringing and a fascination
with the “lack” of “sameness” in our public education system. The product of an environment where most people were living very similar highs and lows, I felt enraged by the injustices of the inequalities that plagued schooling in our country. Regardless of his inaccuracy, it is a moment that had a profound impact on me.

My first teaching job was at a K-12 alternative school in northeast Ohio. I was hired midway through the school year and became the agency’s first certified, special-area teacher. It serviced students from the metropolitan area that were diagnosed with severe emotional disturbances and/or exhibited delinquent behaviors that made them unable to attend school in their home districts. Part of my job description involved special training to de-escalate crises and physical restraints. I was scared, but eager to discover what it was like to put theory into practice. During my first week on the new job, I experienced a deeply traumatic event within my personal life; one that marked a significant turning-point in my adult-life. In truth, I made it through my days there because of the personal challenges I was overcoming at the time. I was so numb, I was immune to the ridicule and banter the students threw my way in an attempt to see if I would run, like so many of the other adults in their lives had done. I showed love the only way I knew how. I owned my differences and allowed the experience of making art to bridge the gap in our life experiences and open a space for building relationships. My presence provided color and life to the building even though I had been personally struggling. At the end of that school year, I needed a big change and secured a new teaching job in Atlanta, Georgia.

The two years I spent teaching in the metropolitan area of Atlanta presented interesting new perspectives. It was not the first time I had lived in the south, but I still
had to adjust to the culture. I worked at an elementary school on the south-east side of
the city in an area with an almost exclusively African-American population. The staff at
my school was also predominately African-American, with the exception of four teachers
(including me). The biggest take-away from my time there was the value of building trust
and the important role it plays in developing a relationship based on mutual care/love.

Looking to return home to northeast Ohio to be closer to family, I was fortunate
to be welcomed back to the same alternative school that had provided my first classroom
experience. Because it was a therapeutic school that prioritized upholding an
“unconditional positive regard” for our students, the four school years I spent there,
undoubtedly, played a key role in shaping my love-based practices. It is not an
exaggeration to state that every single day there was filled with intensity, but I loved it.

Although I loved my job at the alternative school, I wanted to establish a career in
a public school system. I excitedly accepted an Art position at a junior high in a
metropolitan neighborhood in northeast Ohio. The student population was primarily
African-American, but unlike my experience in Georgia, an overwhelming majority of the
staff members were Caucasian; a factor that created a multitude of observed tensions
among staff-to-student relationships. In general many of the teachers seemed disgruntled
and most of the district’s veteran teachers were quick to discuss “the good-old-days” and
how much the district had changed; which I understood to mean that they found it
difficult to adjust to the school’s shifting demographic. In the colorful oasis of my art
room, I found the creation of a nurturing environment and a pedagogical practice
centered on an ethic of love to be, not only the best (and most rewarding) means to
bolster the students’ levels of engagement, but also, the only way to effectively manage
the thirty-five to forty (plus) students that were packed into my room six times a day. While in that position, a return to college and the pursuit of a master’s degree in Art Education, led me to the work of bell hook’s and other remarkably influential pedagogues. Their work helped to situate my own teaching practices among the education milieus and aided in the development of improved classroom management strategies. More specifically, this is where and when I began to tout “agape” as our class motto and to describe this unselfish and benevolent concern for the good of another as an interplay of care, commitment, knowledge, responsibility, respect, and trust (hooks 2010). The assault narrated at the beginning of this thesis occurred in the middle of my third year in that position. Although a reliance on love helped me to make it through one more school year there, the incident permanently damaged my feelings of safety and I began seeking employment elsewhere.

My current teaching position is at a junior high school that draws from three suburbs in northeast Ohio. It was described, in greater detail, in the “setting” section where the research was conducted for this thesis. This district is different from any of my previous places of employment. Most notably, the student population consists of a demographic reflecting both racial and socio-economic diversity. Additionally, this district benefits (at least from my perspective) from a sufficient amount of funding.

**How Love Manifests in My Pedagogy**

As I began to analyze the data/field texts that were collected, I bore in mind that the data “re-presented” an “inevitably interpretive” documentation of experience (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000, p. 94). According to Clandinin and Connelly (2000), “…field text is shaped by the selective interest or disinterest of [the] researcher or participant” (p. 94). Fascinated by this
understanding, I began to look through my field texts for any themes that emerged with respect to the information that was recorded. As I read through my notes from the art unit and post-experience interviews, I became aware that the classroom environment (physical space, structure of expectations, and atmosphere), relationships, and attunement were the top themes to emerge. The following sections draw from literature, narratives, and field texts/data to illustrate the presence of love in the environment, relationships, and attunement that structure and, therefore, manifest in my pedagogy.

**Classroom Environment**

In chapter two, I discuss the importance of making the classroom a home with love. As I previously stated, a teacher will never be able to know all of the issues each student brings into the classroom each day; making the physical space, structure of expectations, and overall atmosphere of the learning environment an even more vital component of a student’s level of engagement and success (Cloninger 2008; Goldstein 1997; Lumpkin 2007). In keeping with my holistic approach to teaching, I am intentional in my facilitation of the art room as an environment that appeals to the students’ bodies, minds, and spirits.

As I looked through the notes I took during the art unit, I was struck by something I had included in the “Prelude”. In that section, I explain an opening day activity and how I immediately display the students’ work as a way to establish a sense of belonging/personal ownership of the space within the first few days. This activity has been an established part of my routine for incoming students for the past several years, although, it has taken many different forms in terms of display.

*Thinking back to my childhood as a military dependent, I remember how excited my family would be when our housing goods arrived at our new duty station. Unpacking*
our household items and personal artifacts always helped to transform the government quarters into our “home”, and hanging my artwork on the walls of a new room, somehow, always made it feel like it was mine. Once the comfort associated with “home” had been established, it made it easier to exist in the new place.

In the first years of my teaching career, prior to implementing this introductory routine, I had always made it a point to display student artwork around the classroom throughout the working process. Similar to the way I have described how important it was for me, as a child, to hang art and personal items as a way to establish a sense of home and help me comfortably exist in the new environment, I understand that students also thrive in a classroom where they feel at home.

Beyond an attention to the physical characteristics that transform a classroom into a home, building love and trust into the structure of classroom expectations also creates a space that cultivates a student’s optimal potential (Lumpkin, 2007). Going back to Hoveid and Finne’s (2014) assertion, that “…there is a creation of a space as we are formed by love”, the presence of love in the structuring of classroom expectations creates a space that appeals to the intellectual constructs of home. Building on love, the establishment of trust is prioritized as a necessary ingredient in the formation of a community.

I was not consciously aware of working to build a community in the art room until my experience with the junior high students in the eastern, metropolitan suburb. There, the excessively large class sizes and particular stage of adolescence presented far different challenges than my previous positions. At the alternative school, the art classes were more like small-group art therapy sessions and my strong relationship-building skills provided the platform for classroom management. In Georgia, I coaxed positive behaviors with the daily rendition of a song that put melody and movement to classroom
expectations. At the east-side junior high, I quickly learned that getting the students to buy into a community vibe would be the most effective way to manage the intellectual/emotional environment. I understood that if I could establish mutual love and trust, both teacher-to-student and student-to-student, the students would “want” to exhibit positive behaviors and be more willing to engage in the art making process. To set the tone for this strategy, I changed the use of “I, me, and my”, to “we, us, and our”.

In my teaching strategies, building a strong sense of community is prioritized because it replaces the need to establish dominance as the defining factor motivating positive behaviors in the classroom. In Keeper of Hope: Teaching in Communities (2003), hooks and a colleague discuss how an educators’ “…single most important realization is the need to establish a genuine sense of community, based on trust, and not just expertise and knowledge” (p. 109). In order to create a fully engaged community of learners, the teacher must project love and build trust by fostering empathy and maintaining an open dialogue (Campbell & Simmons, 2012). In addition, hooks (2003) expresses the importance of recognizing and embracing our differences. With the understanding of our differences, comes the greater understanding that we are also more than our differences. “It is not just what we organically share that can connect us, but what we come to have in common because we have done the work of creating community, the unity within diversity, that requires solidarity within a structure of values, beliefs, yearnings that have to do with the spirit” (hooks, 2003, p. 110). An educator that works to create a strong community environment involves the whole student (mind, body, and spirit) and makes it possible for them to engage in critical inquiry (hooks, 2003).
During the post-experience interview with the girls, it was interesting to learn how they viewed my style of classroom management as one that was strict, but fun because it left room for playful banter and “cool” privileges. Kara had been the first to make this point.

I thought you were strict…but, the good kind of strict where you kept all the kids in line most of the time. Then other times you let us joke around and have fun with you… (January 18, 2018).

Mia had agreed with her.

Yeah, you were kind of strict, but I thought it was really cool that you let us listen to music and pick our own seats (January 18, 2018).

The boys did not use the word “strict” in their explanations, but they implied similar sentiments and offered fairness as a justification for the perceived strictness regarding their adherence to classroom expectations. For Seth, the environment, coupled with his expressed interest in the projects we had done, had been a key factor in his approval of the class.

I liked the projects we did. Oh, and you let us listen to music and you’re really nice. Nice and very chillax (January 18, 2018).

David piggy-backed off of his explanation.

Yeah, like chilled out. You’re a cozy person. We could joke around with you and everyone else in the class. You would let us have privileges, but you would take them away if we were being stupid. Just to be fair (January 18, 2018).

When I asked him to elaborate on what made me a “cozy person”, he gave an intriguing response.

The environment…it’s good (January 18, 2018).
David’s reply is provocative because it implies a reference to the space that is created by love. In this case, love was manifested through what was perceived as strict, but fair, classroom expectations. Before explaining why I was pleased by the student’s responses, I must make a careful distinction between a firm stance on an adherence to positive expectations and dominance. As I have previously stated, love cannot exist in a relationship where one seeks to dominate (hooks 2003; Ladson-Billings 2009; Palmer 1998). With respect to classroom management, I have learned that safety plays a key role in building a trusting relationship. In order to fully place their trust in a teacher, students must first believe that their teacher is going to keep them safe.

While teaching in Georgia, I was observed and reviewed by one of my colleagues as a means to promote reflections on my teaching practices. I had grown close to the music teacher, who was tasked with observing me, and assumed that I would receive nothing but accolades. When I read her criticisms regarding my classroom management, I was (initially) hurt. In all honesty though, I was much too laid-back in those days. Still green, in terms of experience, I thought it was okay (and more fun) to allow the room to reach a certain degree of chaos. My incredible colleague (and friend) pointed out, however, that some of the unwanted behaviors the students exhibited were a direct result of, not only my lack of structure, but also their own perceived lack of safety. As she offered constructive criticisms, she explained the important partnership shared between structure and safety and taught me that maintaining a set structure was also a very loving thing to do.

I believe there is value in pointing out that the interviewees did not appear to be put off by my insistence that classroom expectations be up-held at all times. Instead, they delighted in the
freedom of certain privileges, like being allowed to listen to music and the ability to choose their own seats, and understood that their behavior directly affected the classroom community. This is because the expectations were not structured for the purpose of establishing dominance. They were structured for the purpose of establishing safety and trust.

Holistically, the atmosphere of the classroom environment impacts the students on a metaphysical level. Although the boys had been unable to delineate specifics, both agreed that I presented an overall “chillax” and “cozy” demeanor; descriptions that imply a favorable degree of comfort. Comfort is a product of community and trust. According to hooks (2010), a teacher’s integrity simultaneously encourages their students work and behave with integrity. In terms of my classroom management practices, love is established as the rule that guides the structure, and safety and trust serve as the path to building a strong sense of community.

**Relationships**

In my approach, teacher-student relationships are founded on the fundamental need individuals have to know that they are loved, and all that love implies. (Eldridge 2012; Lumpkin 2007). As I previously explained, showing love for one’s students means showing them an appreciation for their uniqueness and an unwavering devotion to helping them meet their challenges head-on. It also means showing them that they are accepted, for better or for worse, and that no matter what, they will be shown an unconditional positive regard. During the post-experience interviews, I sought to discover if the students felt there was love present in my approach. I wanted to know if they felt loved. Interestingly, for Jenna and Mia, a recognition of my love for them was most notable when I would show genuine concern in times of difficulty. Jenna shared an example.
Because even if you could see somebody’s off, you’d take them to the hallway and be like, “Is everything okay? Is anything wrong (January 18, 2018)?” Mia had agreed and shared a specific incident that corroborated Jenna’s example.

Yeah, when my friend was upset and crying, you let me and her talk for a while and that actually helped… and you respect if someone is going through a hard time. You… I don’t know how to explain it. You would be very kind to all students, no matter who they were or what they did. If they were bad, you wouldn’t be mean about it, but you would… I don’t know… (January 18, 2018).

hooks (2001) describes the “trauma of feeling unwanted [and] out of place” (p. xv) and explains how that can lead to feelings of worthlessness. While hooks’ (2001) statement mainly reflects the challenges she faced as an African-American, her sentiments also speak to the pain of any student who feels unaccepted. As I attempt to illustrate the importance of a student feeling understood, and how I set that as a priority, I am reminded of a line from the movie Avatar (2009). In this film, Jake, one of the main characters, inhabits a human/alien avatar and sets out to learn the ways of an alien civilization known as the Na’vi. Initially thought to be savage, Jake discovers that the Na’vi are actually highly evolved beings whose existence is centered on the interconnectivity of everything in their world. Thriving on what are essentially empathic connections, the Na’vi acknowledge one another’s presence with the statement, “I see you”. In many ways, this powerful declaration beautifully summarizes what students need to believe in order to feel loved. As hooks and the students being interviewed expressed, the need to be truly seen, and accepted no matter who they are, is a strong one. For Jenna and Mia, I met this need through an acknowledgement of their feelings and unwavering support.
Attunement

“Malik” was one of those students you hear teachers complaining about in the teacher’s lounge. I had him for Art three years in a row, and each year was equally challenging. He was not on an I.E.P., but he may have benefited from one. Malik was practically incapable of staying in his seat; often bouncing around the room in the same erratic manor a metal ball flies through a pinball machine once the trigger has been released. In addition to his boundless hyperactivity, he was loud and seemed to lack the ability to recognize the social cues his classmates offered in repetitive attempts to thwart off his nagging behaviors. Yet, in spite of the exasperation I frequently experienced as a result of the aforementioned traits, getting to know Malik, and learning how to teach him, will remain among my most endearing classroom experiences because of his creativity, kindness, and courage.

When he first came to me, as a sixth-grader, it quickly became clear that we would have to institute a special set of boundaries and expectations to keep him on track and help him be successful in the class. Early on, Malik shared that he had grown accustomed to being yelled at by his teachers. He tried to convince me that it did not bother him, but I could see through his attempt to deflect from the sadness it caused. I promised I would be different and worked with him to create a plan that would accommodate his unique needs. It was not easy (for either of us), but our system worked (on most days). By the time Malik was in eighth grade, not much had changed.

One seemingly ordinary day during his eighth grade year, I noticed that Malik had gone through an entire class period without leaving his seat. As I recall, he did not appear to be upset, so I let it go. The next day, the same watered-down version of Malik
came and went with zero need for redirection and very little interaction. I praised his work during class, but knew something was off. After a few more days spent witnessing the same puzzling shift in behavior, I asked him to stay after class to help me clean up. Once the room had cleared, I shared my observations and tried to joke that I kind of missed having to get on to him. As we both moved around the room, collecting supplies and washing the tables, Malik opened up. Two months earlier, he had defended his high-school-aged-sister against his mother’s boyfriend during an attempted sexual assault. His mother had been asleep and, when she came to her children’s defense, she was badly beaten. Malik made the 911 call and held her until the paramedics arrived. The boyfriend stole their car, and days later, death threats forced them to leave their home and go into hiding. His family had been sleeping on the floor at a friend’s house for several weeks. Malik had been struggling and no one knew because, until then, he had not exhibited any “behavior” that was out of the ordinary. He had managed to mask his trauma until the day his family returned to their home. The next day was the day he had not gotten up from his seat. He was scared and explained that he had been staying up all night to watch over his family. Malik sat because he had nothing left.

This instance is extreme, however, it illustrates the primary reason why love needs to be present in the classroom. I did not choose to share this story to highlight the love and patience that went into Malik’s tailor-made expectations, or the fact that I had earned enough trust to get him talking. Those are obvious examples. A teacher who had not taken the care or time to invest in Malik would probably have been relieved when he, finally, quietly did his work and accepted it without question. Because I had made the extra effort to build a positive relationship, built on the principles of agape, I knew that his silence was not golden.
As educators, we have to be mindful of our students, in a holistic sense, in order to lay a foundation for optimum success. In many ways, the students are a beautiful personification of the artifact lesson. Similar to how each personal artifact revealed endearing memories, each student is the embodiment of a rich collection of the memories/experiences. Like the artifacts, it is the memories and stories that make them special.

**How Love Manifests in My Art Curriculum**

Teachers must stay current and in touch with their population’s interests. This aids in the formation of trust. As it was previously discussed, without trust, students may perceive the teacher-learner relationship as one of dominance and will, therefore, most likely be less willing to open up and make critical reflections (Cloninger 2008; Goldstein 1997; hooks 2010; Lumpkin 2007; Palmer 1998; Weissbourd 2003). As Burton explains, “It is critical that teachers are knowledgeable enough about development and contemporary culture to help each child in their classes contextualize and situate learning in the context of their own experiences” (Burton, 2012, p. 13). As I reflect on the field texts/data that were collected during the art unit, it has become clear that a keen awareness and attention to relevance is one of the primary ways love manifests in my art curriculum. From the very first day a student enters the art room, I am working to learn what their interests are. Because most of my projects involve self-exploration, in some form, I am then able to use a knowledge of their interests as a way to help guide them through their reflections and art making experiences in the class.

The artifact unit is one example of a highly relevant lesson. Each time I have presented it to a class, there has been an overwhelmingly positive response, and the students have been highly engaged. As it was re-presented in chapter four, the students’ chosen artifacts revealed rich microcosms of their lives. The associated memories of loss, perseverance, humor, love,
regret, hope, fear, achievement, friendship, family, and many other equally significant elements of the human experience, led the students through deeply meaningful, critical reflections. Throughout the art making process, our community was strengthened and further united each time one of the students elected to share their story. For Mia, working on the project had helped to remind her of her strengths.

Mine was very important to my life. [Referring to the Bi-Polar and A.D.H.D. medication she had chosen as her artifact] It changed my life, basically. It’s gonna change my life forever. And I think that now it’s gonna be a little harder ‘cause someone passed in my family. So it’s gonna be a little harder. But what I made my project about is helping me get through this (January 18, 2018).

She also explained that the artifact project had given her the courage to open up to her friends. Well, I don’t really tell my friends that side of me [referring to her medical diagnoses]… and part of me really wanted to be able to tell them. So, when they asked about my artifact, I just said everything. And it was cool…they didn’t judge me or anything (January 18, 2018).

Mia’s experience while working on the lesson is moving. As an art educator, I am committed to presenting lessons that encourage critical reflection and help students place an understanding of themselves in the greater context of life. When the students are set free to explore the themes I introduce, love provides an interplay of care, trust, commitment, respect, knowledge and responsibility as their safety-net.

**Exploring Beyond Oneself**

Art education in a postmodern world tasks art educators with the responsibility to require their students to think in broader contexts; to explore making meaningful art that seeks to
somehow have a positive impact on lives beyond their own. In the future, the artifact lesson designed and implemented for this study could be expanded to include challenging the students to create a work of art for someone else. After identifying how their artifact, and endearing memory associated with it, relates to conditions of the human experience, they could create a new art piece that resonates with, and inspires, others. As I have previously discussed, the ability to grow and strengthen empathic connections is an essential twenty-first century skill.

**How Love Transforms Student Engagement and Learning Outcomes in My Classroom**

As it is presented by Maslow’s Hierarchy of Needs, it is only when a student’s basic needs are met that they are able to risk learning (Eldridge, 2012). Teaching practices centered on an ethic of love recognize the vulnerability experienced on behalf of the learner and utilize love as “…a foundation for learning that embraces and empowers everyone” (hooks, 2010, p. 159). Assiter (2013) suggests that this means a teacher must sometimes be willing to “take on the perspective of the vulnerable other” (p. 259). The artifact lesson provides a great example of my own willingness to exhibit this type of openness. To introduce the theme of the lesson, I shared my personal artifact and the memories I associate with it. I projected my emotional response to the artifact as a way to model the level of engagement I was hoping to inspire in my students. Furthermore, I allowed my story to open the door for dialogue and did not shut any students down as they began to share stories of their own.

> Throughout my teaching experiences, I have often had cause to reflect on the story I previously shared about the embarrassing moment I experienced during one of my pre-service education courses. In that situation, learner-engagement was quickly squelched when the guest speaker exploited my vulnerability by putting my naiveté on classroom display.
To put it simply, love empowers learners, and an empowered learner, is an engaged learner. As I began to analyze the data/field texts in search of ways an ethic of love manifests in my teaching practices, I noticed that the students expressed several ways they had genuinely felt motivated or empowered by my methods. Humor is one of the tools I use to build relationships and provide encouragement. At some point in the interviews, each student mentioned that I am funny and expressed that they had fun in the class. Jenna seemed to enjoy it so much, it took her a moment to realize that she had been learning and having fun at the same time.

Oh my God, you’re funny! You’re really funny and you’re really nice and you actually teach… but you don’t teach. You make it fun, I guess? I don’t know (January 18, 2018).

Daily, individualized attention is another manifestation of love in my teaching practices. When I asked the students if feeling loved had any impact on their level of success in the class, Kara agreed that it had, and attributed it to the personal attention she had received.

I feel like it did make me wanna do the work. But, I was gonna do it already… But, I feel like you always coming around and helping us really helped me with that. Because, I took forever to finish the projects. I’m still not done with some of them. But, when you would come over and help me, I’d get it done (January 18, 2018).

I have never been the kind of teacher that sits behind their desk or lectures from the front of the room. From the moment my students walk through the door, I am fully engaged; whether that means helping them to brainstorm for ideas, formulating a design or composition, hands-on assistance with their project, or just talking about their day.

At the junior high in the metropolitan neighborhood, I often struggled with how much time and attention went into maintaining order in the classroom. Unlike my current position, which caps enrollment at twenty-eight students, the classes at that school were
allowed to seat up to forty-five students. As I previously explained, that experience is where I learned to value the importance of building a strong sense of community. It was how I maintained the order and bought enough time to provide as much one-on-one attention as I could. I believe that I am good at what I do, but there is only so much that one person can accomplish in a situation where the numbers are that high.

To explain how love had impacted their level of engagement and success in our class, Mia and David seemed to find it easier to explain how other teachers’ lack of care had negatively impacted them. Mia described how a particular teacher’s mean demeanor had once led to a complete loss of, not only a desire to participate, but also any type of concern for her grade. Most poignantly, she even describes intentionally disengaging just to spite the “mean” teacher’s requests.

…I had a teacher, I think in sixth or seventh, they were just so mean that I couldn’t even take their class. So I said, “I don’t care anymore.” If they don’t care about me, I’m not going to care about my grade. And I won’t care about how… or I won’t care about doing my work because that’s what they want me to do (January 18, 2018).”

David’s response had been very similar to Mia’s.

…If you’re…I can’t say it… a mean teacher, or disrespectful, I don’t want to be in your class. I don’t want to talk to you. I want to stay away from you… (January 18, 2018).

Based on their recounts, it was obvious that they equated meanness with dominance; a trait which has detrimental effects on student learning outcomes. On the contrary, the interviewees all agreed they were more engaged, put in greater effort, and had fun in our class because I had fostered nurturing, loving relationships.
Further Study

Joe Kincheloe is a critical pedagogue whose work deals mainly with the concept of radical love. In many ways, the precepts of radical love are very similar to agape; particularly in the context of education. According to Kincheloe (1993), a “radical ethic of agape, [is] a love without strings attached, that is ready to learn from those who are exploited by manipulative social practices” (p. 59). As he elucidates, radical love “creates knowledge as it reclaims and legitimizes the voices that power has insidiously silenced – for example, women’s voice of caring” (Kincheloe, 1993, p. 59).

The concept of radical love is very similar to agape. Based on a recommendation from one of my thesis committee members, I started to research Joe Kincheloe’s work regarding radical love within the contexts of the education. In truth, after reading through a few articles, I felt dumbfounded as to how I could have been investigating a topic, so closely related (and for quite some time), without coming across it sooner. As I began to skim the surface of his work, I soon understood that I had also only barely waded in Freire’s work regarding critical pedagogy. In a metaphorical sense, it made me feel as though I had been contently surfing on the ripples in a lake; only to have someone show me the ocean. Kincheloe’s work and the concept of radical love deeply resonates with my mission as a teacher and I will be exploring it more in the future. Ultimately, I did not include radical love in this thesis because I did not want to “squeeze” it in and I did not feel I was quite ready to adequately do it justice.

Future Implications

To quote Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. (1963), one of the most prolific peacemakers of our time, “Darkness cannot drive out darkness; only light can do that. Hate cannot drive out hate;
only love can do that”. In today’s political climate, a majority of our country’s citizens are polarized toward party-lines; a divisiveness that now threatens to corrode our public education system. As a nation, we have been drawn so far apart by diverging views on the policies regarding our schools, I believe we have lost sight of what our children actually need. Now, perhaps more than ever, it is time to acknowledge love as one of those needs. As hooks (2001) declared, “The transformative power of love is the foundation of all meaningful social change” (p. 17).

_The day after Valentine’s Day, I walked into my current classroom with an awkward uncertainty. The previous day, usually designated by our calendars as a time to celebrate love, students at a school in Parkland, Florida had been the latest in our country to experience a mass shooting. As a teacher and a parent, I was shaken and worried that my students were similarly rattled. I wondered if/how other teachers would be addressing the tragedy. I have never been one to shy away from controversy, but as the facilitator in an educational setting, I am careful to remain politically neutral (or at least, I try my best). As my first group of students began to fill their seats, it became clear that “we” needed to confront the elephant in our room._

_Every student had either seen the news, or been informed of the tragedy by a friend or family member, and were aware of the darkness that had ensued. Completely unscripted, I spoke from my heart, addressed concerns, and did my best to shed some light. To counter the hate, I spoke of love. I pointed to the poster (figure 1) displaying our class motto, “agape”, and reminded them that we are a community. I touched on the importance of empathy and implored each of them to “see” the people around them. To_
conclude our conversation, I urged them to find comfort in the fact that, while we may sometimes feel alone in our struggles, there is always someone willing to listen.

Samuel Rocha (2009) warns of the grave concern that schools, education, and philosophy have fallen silent on the issues that are of greatest importance to our lives. He claims, “Teachers and philosophers who are able to see and speak to what is meaningful, the ones who love, are the rare (and odd) exception” (Rocha, 2009, p. 588). There is more truth to this assertion than we should be willing to accept, however, I do not entirely agree. While my love-based methodologies may make me an oddity, I am confident that I am not an exception. I am, more accurately, a product of my environment. As Cornel West (2009) once proclaimed in a speech, “I am who I am because somebody loved me”. Fully owning the benefits I have received from the loving relationships in my life, I acknowledge that I have been able to work toward self-actualization (a growth need at the pinnacle of Maslow’s Pyramid) because my deficiency needs have been met.

According to Lovat and Clement (2008), “Extensive evidence-based research… [has] repeatedly demonstrated that the quality of teaching and learning environment far outweighs disadvantages of gender, school principals, other school effects, family background, socio-economic status, or disability” (p. 3). From first-hand experience, a pedagogy centered on an ethic of love, supported by an environment founded on the same principles, helps to bridge disparities, heighten student engagement, and has a positive impact on student learning outcomes. In chapter one, I explained that while there have been many prominent leaders, scholars, and educators advocating for a focus on love and care in schools, more research is needed to bring love as praxis to its tipping point. After engaging in action research and narrative inquiry to investigate how an ethic of love manifests as a fundamental component of my
pedagogical practices and art curriculum, I believe I may know why this has been the case. To put it simply, there are no handbooks or curriculum guides offering educators the specifics on how this approach plays out in the classroom.

During the pilot study I conducted at my previous school, my former colleagues both agreed that it is nearly impossible to teach without expressing some form of love for one’s students. However, in spite of that affirmation, they each found it difficult to articulate what that meant. In many ways, Charlene’s description of her classroom management strategies were reminiscent of those often expressed by bell hooks (2010). She spoke of building trust and shared that, although she is an assertive leader, she never seeks to control or dominate. Charlene’s strategies revealed a loving approach, yet she laughed when asked, specifically, about the need for love in the classroom.

First of all… any educator should love learning. They should love sharing information, and they should… if you’re going to teach children, you have to love children. Whether you have children or not. I think you have to love them, and that doesn’t mean that you’re hugging and kissing your kids like you do with your own children [laughing], but it does mean that they know they can rely on you. They know that, that’s a form of love (November 10, 2015). Jake, who admitted that he sometimes uses negative reinforcements to manage a classroom, had also spoken about the importance of building relationships. Although he agreed that love was needed in the classroom, he breezed past any specific mention of it, and instead, shared an example of a way he believes love is shown.
Students need to know that you’re invested in them. And, they want you to be invested in them… to know that you’re not just somebody… just some adult. They want to know that you are somebody who is there (November 10, 2015).

After conducting their interviews and reviewing their responses, I began to think about the questions I was asking them in broader contexts. I have come to surmise that love, as it pertains to the schooling of a child, still feels too taboo for some educators; making them less comfortable claiming it as a strategy.

Our next educational revolution must incorporate an ethic of love. We need to shift the dominant culture that currently values meaningless results over an empowering process. The homogenized curricula promoted by high-stakes testing is not getting us anywhere. In his song, Own Light (What Hearts are For) (2017), a contemporary rapper named Brother Ali exclaims, “I am animated by love… I don’t move by chance.” The literature, field texts/data, and narratives presented in this thesis provide an evidence-based claim that a pedagogy and curriculum centered on an ethic of love has a profoundly positive impact on student engagement and learning outcomes. So, why not animate our students with love? They are not going to move by chance.
Appendix 1

Personal Artifact Memory Box:
An 8th grade unit plan with a focus on: form, texture and emphasis

Theme: Endearing Memories

“We are all the pieces of what we remember. We hold in ourselves the hopes and fears of those who love us. As long as there is love and memory, there is no true loss.”
— Cassandra Clare, City of Heavenly Fire

“I think it is all a matter of love; the more you love a memory the stronger and stranger it becomes”
— Vladimir Nabokov

Unit Introduction and Rationale:

This unit invites the students to explore a concept I was first introduced to by Julia Marshall’s inspiring approach to postmodern pedagogy (2002). Marshall explains that “a meaningful lesson derives from prior experience and evolves from there to the creation of new knowledge, experiences, and a deeper understanding of life” (2002, p. 280). Enlightened by her proposal of viewing art making as a form of research, I will present this personal artifact unit to my students with the intention of fostering a similar response in them.


Ohio Department of Education Visual Art Standards:

Enduring Understandings:

Critical & Creative Thinking: Students combine and apply artistic and reasoning skills to imagine, create, realize and refine artworks in conventional and innovative ways.

Literacy: As consumers, critics and creators, students evaluate and understand artworks and other texts produced in the media forms of the day.

Progress Points:

A. Recognize that examining the artistic works of others leads to understanding about cultural traditions, history, politics and their world.
B. Describe, interpret and evaluate artworks empathizing with and challenging the opinions of others.
C. Select, manipulate and refine arts concepts and processes to produce artworks that visually communicate their experiences, ideas and viewpoints.
D. Develop and use criteria for making judgments about artworks and visual imagery and use descriptive language when talking and writing about works of art.
Content Standards:
PERCEIVING/ KNOWING (PE)
1PE: Identify how an artist’s choice of media relates to the ideas and images in the work.
2PE: Develop awareness and articulate various functions of art.
4PE: Understand how social, cultural and political factors affect what contemporary artists and designers create.
5PE: Discover how culture, age, gender and background influence audience perception of art.

PRODUCING/ PERFORMING (PR)
1PR: Select, organize and manipulate skills, elements and techniques appropriate to the art form when making art.
2PR: Demonstrate increased technical skill and craftsmanship by using more complex processes and materials to design and create two and three-dimensional artworks.
3PR: Use critical thinking and visual literacy to communicate a specific idea.
4PR: Present personal artworks that show competence in the use of art elements to create meanings and effects.

RESPONDING/ REFLECTING (RE)
1RE: Examine various qualities in artworks to understand how an artist’s choice of media relates to the images and ideas in the work.
2RE: Explain and defend their artistic decisions using visual art vocabulary.
4RE: Recognize how public discussion can affect beliefs about the nature and value of art.
6RE: Develop and apply criteria to assess personal works for content and craftsmanship.

Connections to Common Core:
Standards for Mathematical Practice:
- Use appropriate tools strategically.
- Attend to precision.

Standards for Speaking and Listening: (Comprehension and Collaboration)
- Engage effectively in a range of collaborative discussions with diverse partners; building on other’s ideas and expressing their own clearly.

Vocabulary and Concepts:
- Artifact
- Endearing Memory
- Form
- Texture
- Emphasis

Artists/ Visuals:
- Art dealing with the concept of memory:
Materials:
- White drawing paper (9” x 12”)
- Drafting paper (9” x 12”)
- Various drawing supplies
- Cigar boxes
- Collage materials
- Glaze
- Paint
- Scissors
- Glue (Mod Podge, epoxy, hot glue)

Unit Duration:
- 10 (55 minute) class periods

Instructional Activities:
DAY 1:
The teacher will:
- Introduce the unit by sharing her finished personal artifact memory box (Appendix B) with the class and reading a short essay explaining the significance of (and memories associated) with her chosen personal artifact (Appendix A).
- Provide each table of students with a folder including four color images of a selection of artworks dealing with memory as a theme. She will instruct the students to spend approximately fifteen minutes viewing the artworks and participating in a collaborative discussion about them. She will provide a handout for each table of students to complete as a group (Appendix D).

The students will:
- View the images provided, speculate the possible purpose/meaning/significance of each artwork and work collaboratively to complete the handout. They will form...
opinions about how each represents the time, culture and individuals from which they were created and consider the important role context plays in influencing an audience’s perception of the art/object.

**The teacher will:**
- Motion for the students to end the activity and reconvene as a class. She will hold up one image at a time and call on groups to share their answers regarding the purpose/meaning/significance of the artifact/artwork. Following group responses, she will provide the associated context and background information.

**The students will:**
- Begin to understand that context is critical to understanding the true purpose of an artifact/artwork.

**DAY 2:**

**The teacher will:**
- Present several student samples (Appendices E-J) of a brainstorming activity for their studio project. She will note that this drawing/free-writing activity should be approached as a journal entry and encourage the students to concentrate mostly on their emotional response to their artifact and to not worry as much about precision.

**The students will:**
- Decide which personal possession is their most treasured, based on sentimental value.
- Draw (from memory) their best rendition of the chosen artifact on white drawing paper (9” x 12”). On the same sheet of drawing paper, the students will create a journal-like entry expressing their personal connection to the object. They will have various coloring supplies available to them and will be directed to use any of the means necessary to complete a visually pleasing “journal” page.

**DAY 3:**

**The teacher will:**
- Set out a variety of cigar boxes (collected from local shops) and allow the students to choose one, based on their own preferences for size, shape and depth.

**The students will:**
- Select the cigar box that best suits their artifact and creative vision. They will paint it with a white primer and set it aside.
- Spend the remainder of the class period sketching potential compositions and designs for their artifact/memory box including: artifact drawing/relief sculpture, related images and text. They will make note of materials (i.e. magazine collage, etc.), colors and anything else necessary to complete their design.

**DAYS 4 & 5:**

**The teacher will:**
- Prepare the classroom with necessary materials.

**The students will:**
- Spend both class periods using air dry clay and the tools provided to create a sculptural version of their personal artifact. Scale will be determined based on the size of their chosen box. Depending on what their chosen artifact is, each student will
need to determine whether it makes more sense to create a free-standing or relief sculpture of the object.

The teacher will:
- Leave the students’ finished work out to dry over the weekend.

DAY 6:
- The teacher will:
  - Prepare the classroom for painting.
- The students will:
  - Utilize the entire class period to paint their artifact sculpture.

DAYS 7 & 8:
- The teacher will:
  - Prepare the classroom with paint supplies and collage materials.
- The students will:
  - Develop the interior and exterior of their artifact box using the available materials.

DAY 9:
- The teacher will:
  - Return the sculptural artifact reproductions.
- The students will:
  - Use epoxy to adhere their artifact reproduction to the inside of their memory box. They will spend the remainder of the class period adding embellishments and finalizing their piece.

DAY 10: Critique (project sharing)/ Unit wrap-up.

Instructional Strategies (Marzano):
- **Cooperative Learning:** Students will participate in a group activity and class discussion on artifacts.

- **Reinforcing Effort and Providing Recognition:** Teacher will consistently acknowledge students’ efforts and achievements throughout the unit.

- **Setting Objectives and Providing Feedback:** Teacher will set clear goals, on a daily basis and provide constant feedback during class.

Assessments:
- The project will be graded with a rubric.

Diverse Learners:
Based on individual needs, students will be permitted to have an extended length of time to complete their assignments. When necessary, assignment criteria may be restructured and the final evaluation may be scored on a modified grading scale.
Appendix A

Personal Artifact/Endearing Memory Free-Write Exercise

By: Holly Spooner

The familiar object I have chosen to write about is technically not my own possession; yet the feelings I associate it with are so tangible, it is as much mine as anything else I own. I do not picture my mom without seeing this rose pendant resting on her chest. With very few exceptions, my mother has worn this necklace every day that I can remember. In fact, a short bout of troubling medical issues, which lead to a series of surgeries and hospital stays, comprise the only instances I can recall her without her signature adornment. It is, therefore, not so surprising that I find myself overcome by the nostalgia and flooded with emotion as I sit here to write about it.

I have very early memories of resting my head on my mom’s freckled chest and watching the rose rise and fall with her breath. I picture her moving the pendant back and forth on the chain (a sign that she was worried or concerned) or holding it in her mouth while she was thinking. I love my mom and I adore the courageous and wise woman I have come to know her as in my adult years. I have never made the comparison before, but as I reflect, my beautiful mother is very much like the rose she wears around her neck. Like a rose, she is outwardly stunning and her always caring demeanor beckons people to stop and take a moment to dwell in her presence. Conversely, like
the thorns that protect the flower, my mom, against all odds, evolved from the adversity of a life that would have stifled many and learned how to protect herself and persevere.

This evening, as she watched my children while I did homework, I learned things about my mom and her necklace that made the selection of this artifact infinitely dearer. Tonight, I learned that my dad bought the necklace for my mom on her twentieth birthday; when she was pregnant with me. They didn’t have much money at the time (my dad was a young Private in the Army) and my dad purchased the pendant and chain at the local pawn shop they frequented often; out of necessity. My mom affectionately explained how my dad knew how much she wanted a necklace because she used to borrow her friend’s. When I asked why she wore it every day, she laughed and explained, “Because it was from your dad… and it was real gold”.

I love what I learned this evening and I am excited to bring this experience to my students.
Appendix B
Teacher Example
Appendix C

More Memory Box Examples
Appendix D

Art Investigation Group Activity

Names: ____________________, ____________________, ____________________ and ____________________

Directions: Work as a group to analyze and discuss each work of art. Answer the following questions based on a consensus of your group’s responses.

Questions:
A. Look carefully at the work of art in front of you. What do you see? Describe it.
B. What ideas and emotions do you think this work of art expresses?
C. Do you have a sense of how the artist might have felt when he or she made this work of art? Does it make you feel one way or another?

Art Visual # 1:
A.
B.
C.

Art Visual # 2:
A.
B.
C.

Art Visual # 3:
A.
B.
C.

Art Visual # 4:
A.
B.
C.
Appendix E

Journal Entry: Student Example

My special item is a bear holding my birthstone. My father has given it to me. It has tiny blue wings with a sapphire birthstone. I wish my dad was still here. My parents got divorced last year. I miss him so much. This is so old it used to break off the wings. It means so much. This is what it looks like. It is made of glass. It reminds me of the good times with my dad.
Appendix F

Journal Entry: Student Example

This bike is special to me because I got it from my father. He isn't with us any more but he taught me how to ride and how to do most of the tricks and stunts I know. And every time I ride it I imagine him right next to me.
This is the dress my great-grandma, my grandma, my mom, my sister, and I wore for our first communion.
I remember anticipating wearing the dress weeks before I made communion. I remember walking through the church, every other girl wearing a plain white dress, and people admiring mine. I remember getting home for the party, all my cousins that were teenagers then so playing around as my relatives pictures. I remember when I was six years old, my grandmother was still alive, and she couldn’t wait until next year, when I’ll wear her favorite dress. She never got to see that day. Last summer, my sisters and I got rid of all the dresses that were too small for all of us. This is the only one that was too small that we kept.
Appendix I

Journal Entry: Student Example

ADHD change my life forever
this pill represents my courage and hope.
My life changed for the better and the worse.
When I would go to the brain doctor it felt like
they were trying to say I was crazy. It made me feel
like I was not normal. After I told people at my
school they said you just like us.
Appendix J

Journal Entry: Student Example

My no hitter baseball because it was my 1st game ball I got in a game where I’m the pitcher and for the whole game the batter didn’t score any points. I was 11 when this happened. At the end of the game they poured a big jug of water on my head when I wasn’t looking. We came in 3rd and my team was the Indians.
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