

Creative Play for Teaching Empathy to Young Children: An Inner Exploration of an Instructor's Process, A Visual and Narrative Journey

A dissertation submitted

by

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to

FIELDING GRADUATE UNIVERSITY

in partial fulfillment of graduate requirements
for the degree of

DOCTOR OF EDUCATION

With an emphasis in
Leadership for Change

This dissertation has been accepted
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ABSTRACT

Operating from the hypothesis that much of our prejudice and inequality results from a lack of empathy, my dissertation answers the research question: What reflective insights emerge from an autoethnographic study of creative story-telling and play, in online teaching of elementary grade children? This autoethnographic study, with video component, examines my online teaching and experiences that emphasize playfulness, empathy, diversity and inclusion, in the context of education and for general youth development. Through the use of documentary-style presentation, I offer excerpts of me teaching, an online version of storytelling and play, as learning tools to facilitate the understanding of empathy and shared humanity. I provide a recorded narrative of my reflections that I film, in addition to a prose introduction. The dissertation has three main dimensions: a) Excerpts of recorded online teaching of just me (no children are seen) and portions of already existing footage of interviews, b) Narrative of reflections for class planning, personal and academic discoveries, teaching, and other data comprised of journal entries, personal reflections, poetry, c) Intro, citations of research, literature review, and conclusions. I believe my illustrations will make for unique connections between playfulness and the development of empathy.

Keywords: Play, creative play, empathy, education, K-6 education, online teaching, puppets, story, storytelling, hierarchy, discrimination, prejudice, inequality.

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CHAPTER ONE: INTRODUCTION

Research Problem and Overarching Research Question

Our divided world is full of us versus them behaviors and hierarchical discrimination in its many forms. Hierarchy is detrimental for human cooperation. In fact, this sentence is the title of a National Institutes of Health scientific study (Cronin et al., 2015) that concludes, “hierarchy was detrimental to cooperation regardless of whether it was earned or arbitrary” (p.1). The authors’ findings replicate results from nonhuman primates according to the authors and other studies (Kappeler & van Schaik, 2006). There are also scientists claiming that human hierarchies, now ingrained in our dominant cultural behaviors are normal. In one study described in the online MIT Technology Review (2014), behaviors of participants in a virtual game about a futuristic universe where players compete economically were analyzed. The authors conclude that the hierarchical organization of human society is “deeply nested in human psychology” (MIT Technology Review). It is sad for me to think that we may be starting to believe that such ways of being in the world are natural to us instead of resulting from learned indoctrination from families, friends, teachers, books, films, and/or cultures. It is maintained by stories that continue to embrace it.

In fact, I propose that the multiple crises facing our world stem from our hierarchical systems and that prejudice and inequality that results can be corrected, especially for children, with certain kinds of empathy-developing stories, songs that implement creative play and use animals and fun to encourage non-hierarchical relationships. Unfortunately, most books and other media depict behaviors that support concepts that are the opposite of empathy, such as superiority, competition, us-versus-them thinking, violence, and discrimination. I believe an antidote to this is in learning via play early on. A society with sufficient creative play

opportunities in homes and education settings, by which social and emotional learning happens, is vital. I want to show how it can cultivate concepts of empathy and connection to all and has far reaching implications for societies and our world. Children grow into adults who are either empowered by their childhoods or plagued by ones with deficits. Creative play, implemented as a teaching and learning tool in a school context is undervalued. Creative play is misunderstood by many parents and teachers as frivolous and unnecessary at home or school, especially beyond pre-school, or it is relegated to an outside-of-school setting, according to Brooker, Blaise, and Edwards in the *SAGE Handbook of Play and Learning in Early Childhood* (2014, pp. 357-360).

In a 1987 issue of *Atlantic Magazine* Bruno Bettelheim writes in “The Importance of Play” that “Freud regarded play as the means by which the child accomplishes his first great cultural and psychological achievements; through play he expresses himself” (p. 22). In a book entitled *Play, Dreams and Imitation in Childhood*, Jean Piaget recognizes the correlation with cognition or thinking within play. He asserts that play is not a behavior but rather an extension of a child’s thought or thinking (Piaget, 2013). All learning happens quite naturally for children through them making sense of their world, while learning through play.

The undervaluation of creative play, as an essential component of children’s learning and development, is the problem I want to address. I want to show, using my own audio-visual approach, how creative play is a vehicle for teaching about things that matter for a peaceful world. I want to investigate how stories about seeking complementarity between apparent opposites and empathy for others can help children in ways that might ultimately reverse what is happening in our world. I hope to reveal in my study how storytelling that encourages playful activities has the capability to introduce authentic respect for our shared humanity, as well as for other-than-humans with whom we share this planet.

I have devoted my life and energies into doing this work. Through my autoethnographic analysis of my approach to creative play and storytelling, I better understand my motivations, fears, set-backs and successes, as well as, hopefully demonstrate positive outcomes. Self-discovery is a major goal of an autoethnographic work. In this journey I make connections between my work and passion as it relates or is influenced by my being a person with White privilege and as someone with traumatic brain injury challenges. I want to pause here to tell the reader that I thought hard about whether or not I would mention, my multiple brain injuries in this dissertation journey. It has always been important in my life to not lead with my disability but instead lead with my work ethic, servant heart, and what I can do well. To share this with the reader is difficult, knowing that my dissertation will stand as a record of this while I am here and long after I have left this earth.

I have learned on this journey that one reason I write fiction may be because I feel more or less insulated from having to express my disability. Perhaps this is why the fiction writer Elizabeth Gilbert said at a book signing that if you want to do a memoir, write fiction and if you want to write fiction, write a memoir. Her point is that when we write in the perceived safety of our fiction, we expose so much more of ourselves than we realized we would. In nonfiction we decide the content, details to put in and what to leave out, which makes it arguably less real and perhaps less vulnerable. Thus, in the YouTube presentation that is the main part of this dissertation, I share selected details from my life and work combined with scholarly reflection via the video narrative. My reflections are derived from journal entries, interviews, my memory of my feelings of preparation for classes with play as a main point that I created, rehearsed and co-implemented (with a high school-aged assistant) during the context of a worldwide pandemic called Covid-19.

It would be almost impossible in writing such an “Evocative Autoethnography,” the research method I describe in Chapter 3, without revealing issues related to my brain injury, especially since I believe it has served my impetus to recognize the value of creative play, for learning that led to my life’s work and that is the topic of this dissertation. Perhaps in sharing such details of my life, I can provide others with hope in finding ways to deal with whatever complexities and challenges they face in life. Communicating about our value and unique needs is of paramount importance. To admit in this format to a disability is terrifying, but it is a meaningful dimension of who I am. It is a challenge I wrestle then dance with daily, especially with the writing of this dissertation.

My dissertation took a serious pivot during the Covid-19 pandemic. I was not able to conduct the study I had planned as a result. The new direction is quite organic. It naturally evolved through wanting to help to serve kids, teachers, and parents with my teaching during this time. I volunteered to teach via virtual readings of my own books through an online non-profit platform called CILC (Center for Interactive Learning and Collaboration). As a result of children not being in school due to Covid-19, I served on a task force with CILC to teach K-6 grade-level students via online instruction at their homes. Anthony Hotakainen, a high school-age, unpaid intern of mine, assisted me in the classes. He was a part of planning, preparing (rehearsing), co-teaching, and performing musically.

Research Question

I use six of these classes for this study. They all featured creative play as a primary teaching point. My research question is: “What reflective insights emerge from an autoethnographic study of my creative storytelling and play in online teaching of elementary-grade children?” The classes and corresponding grade levels are Writing Lyrics (Empathy)

Grades 5-6; Writing Lyrics (Empathy) Grades 3-4; Writing Lyrics (Sparkle) Grades K-2; Play the Empathy Story Grades K-2; Playing Empathy Airlines Grades K-2; Empathy Through Puppets Grades K-2. I analyzed what we did in the online classes and why we did it via Zoom video-taped narrative to answer the research question. I recorded six online classes and analyzed the material for presenting in a video narrative. I extracted excerpts of video, provided a reflective narrative, and used citations to create a 120-minute video of my findings. I included citations to support my narrative as well.

Self-reflective research and video presentation is utilized to better understand myself and offer possibilities for others to understand how my approach to creative play can enhance the social, emotional, and cognitive learning in children. My approach includes intentions for cultivating respect for diversity/inclusion and a feeling of interconnection for all beings on earth. An autoethnographic study should include such self-discovery (Tilley-Lubbs, 2016, p. 3). I reflected on how my approach to teaching playfulness transferred to the online format. It is not possible to definitely answer my question, if the play interventions resonated with teachers, parents, or kids. There are some immediate reflections via an anonymous chat during classes that will be shared in video excerpts that provide at least some indication of the feedback and reaction. Whether I was successful at demonstrating the value of creative play will not be entirely possible to determine from the review and reflections of data from the study. Again, the feedback via anonymous chat and the reactions of the moderators from CILC may give some indications to this. Sue (moderator) echoed my sentiment of how kids need to play, saying, "Yes, kids do need to play at this time!" The connections that relate to my own challenges and successes emerge, primarily to me. In the review of all the classes (the study) as data, coupled with my memories, made my strengths and weaknesses clear to me, in both predicatble and

unexpected ways. I was more gracious and forgiving of myself, in what was a stressful live venue, than I would have thought. I know I am calm under pressure, but this was a quickly assembled collection of classes, created to fill a void, so they were far from perfected when I shared them. My playfulness and flexibility within the venue may have lent itself to possibly being an example to teachers, parents, and students of the value of what I was encouraging. An adult modeling it may have been one of the most unexpected but possibly, most effective ways to relay the value of creative play in the venue. As I conducted class, I purposely chose within the teaching components to be light, playful, and fun-spirited. It seemed to me that this venue required me to be more presentational in style to better support youth, their teachers, and parents. The time of Covid-19 (world wide pandemic) with the inherent stress all were experiencing, with the closing of regular schools in the USA, necessitated that in my estimation. It seemed people may appreciate a thoughtful teacher, one who acknowledged the challenges, but did not stay in that mode during an entire class. I sensed in fact that was an imperative. It really took all my inner emotional resources for me to switch gears from opening the class by acknowledging the pain and challenges, to then assuming a joyful and fun way of being. This choice felt like a way I could serve within the context in which we found ourselves, with regard to the global pandemic. The interaction among myself, the moderators, and a helper actually appeared to have served unexpectedly too, as wonderful examples. Without the explicit plan or rehearsal of such an outcome, we still modeled cooperation, creative collaboration, empathy, playfulness, flexibility, and fairness. We all in effect modeled social-emotional competence and positive, effective creative play, in flexing.

Within the video to illustrate how creative play, narrative, and songs work for the student or reader/viewer, I include some creative ways to offer such explanations. In these ways, I

explain an excerpt, illustrations from my books, a poem, lyrics, pictures from musical play based on my book, artwork and video collection of pictures with music. I believe this work will offer a unique contribution to the field of creative play, in the context of not only home use but in education too.

A Brief Personal History

Although an academic autoethnography is not an autobiography, it is still an unfolding of one's life as relates to a study of presumed related individuals and cultures. In this case, I am considering potential teachers, writers, publishers, environmentalists, and other cultures with interests promoting creative play for youth development that serves as impetus to emotional competence that can lead to empathy, shared humanity (diversity/inclusion), respect for a connection to the natural world, for all the right reasons. I feel the reader will benefit from some of my general history in this introductory chapter.

I was born in North Dakota, lived in Minnesota and Colorado, but most of my formative years were spent in Anchorage, Alaska, where I grew up. I was there from age 7-22. My dad was a law enforcement leader, then real estate entrepreneur. My mom eventually went into banking. I had a great childhood with outdoor activities, wonderful friends and divorced parents, who co-parented well. In fact, in my childhood, it is worth noting that I attended an open concept, experiential learning dimension of my elementary school. Chinook Elementary had three distinct sections with corresponding learning initiatives to the school. They were Team Teaching, Closed Concept, and Open Concept. In the Open Concept, there were all grades working with each other but not on the same curriculum. We all chose our own, based on our interests. Enter the planting of the seed for the intellectual curiosity and love of learning, I still have to this day. In this program, we had countless field trips to learn up close about nature and science. We also chose the subjects we studied, which we explored in depth and did so creatively too, oftentimes. I recall

making a 2D sculpture of Benjamin Franklin when I was looking into his life. Mine and my friends' sculptures were displayed in the library at the school for many years! We thought that was fun! Another notable memory was having been supported by teachers when my friend and I pitched an idea of creating a postal service for our entire school. To our surprise, our teachers empowered us to originate something like that in school. Can you imagine that? My friend Tristan and I made deliveries to every part of the school, not only our innovative Open Concept section of it. I have often contemplated the positive, strong influence my early childhood education probably had on my resilience with brain injury and career path to serve youth, in creative play for learning. The student experiential-driven education base I enjoyed in my Chinook Elementary in Anchorage, Alaska experience, coupled with the childhood I had, really provided me with an intrinsic, individual love of learning. It gave me a mind for critical thinking, a value of being innovative and creative. It is what, in retrospect, helped me navigate around the metaphorical brick wall I faced with my first TBI in 1992, as well as subsequent injuries and life challenges.

It seems likely that I am a problem solver, as a result of the kind of learning I had the privilege to enjoy as an elementary student! It was a great foundation that clearly remains today. It is ironic that the Open Concept, early childhood education was not valued at times by my parents. My mom was especially vocal and shaming even about comparing my standardized test scores with that of the brother, who was in the Closed Concept part of our school. Of course, he scored higher on those kind of tests; his program just prepared the kids for the tests. We, in Open Concept, all chose our own areas of learning, so the content was not on a standardized test. That took me years to realize—until I was an adult. It saddens me still to consider how many children have diminished self-esteem due to their parents, and then subsequently themselves, buying into

the ill-informed notion in regard to the value of testing. The times I taught full time at a high school and a middle school, I used any opportunity I had to dismiss this practice of young people allowing a standardized test to take away their confidence in their own intelligence or drive to learn. That is an experience I have made sure to share with students, as an educator. I asserted, this is not the only measure of intellect, or value of you!

It appears to me, as a result of a creative background, I was provided with a capacity to figure out another direction after a traumatic brain injury in my life in 1992. I flexed and problem solved to determine what I could do, even though there was plenty I no longer had the same skills to do! I lost the ability to read and write in the beginning that extended for a good amount of time. I had a degree in theater but now found pursuing acting with short-term memory trouble and other symptoms were not compatible.

Still, I was grateful my life had been spared that day in Manhattan, when I had been hit by a car, as a pedestrian. After a painful recovery period, my spiritual dimension was added to this base I had. I surrendered, asking to be used in service. An idea to use the art form I loved to mimic the play that wasn't happening for youth, came to me. Perhaps the strength of positive experiences in my early years also had given me the inner fortitude I needed to assume a role of support to my parents upon the sudden death of my brother when I was 17. He was 19 at the time. It was not an easy role. It had clear consequences for me, but most were ultimately positive. I chose to look at them that way! It seems likely that my heart of empathy or the muscle of using empathy, was developed, as I spent years offering understanding to my parents who were both devastated. Each of their lives was impacted by personally destructive choices. It was tough to watch but I could bear witness to it, be with each in their process, and offer my love and empathy. It was very lonely and tough to be a child who survives, since it feels like abandonment

due to the grief of one's parents, understandably so. Parenting stops abruptly in a circumstance of significant loss. I poured my love into Connor, which helped me give to him what I had wished I had still been given. I raised my son Connor alone, after a divorce. He is a kind, caring, intelligent person. Loving, playing, and raising my child reinforced my values of creative play. I saw it manifest in his wholeness, kindness, and intelligence. I wonder if engaging in it with him and my students helped my brain injury symptoms improve. But this study is not meant to prove that.

In 1996, 4 years after the New York City pedestrian vs. car accident that offered me a metaphorical brick wall, I founded an organization called Jelly Beans in Ann Arbor, Michigan. I would transplant Jelly Beans into Jelly Beans Creative Learning, in Minnesota, once we moved here. I ran the play for learning kind of programs for nearly 18 years. In Minnesota it was comprised of multi-city enrichment programming, teacher and child care provider training, keynote presentations to educators, and in school projects for youth. At times the projects included me modeling the play/drama (creative play) for learning technique I originated to the classroom teachers. This way they could see how to encourage social, emotional, critical thinking, brain and language development in their students, just as I did, in my programs with students only. The impetus for the organization came as a result of my concern that there were serious deficits in youth development that subsequently, seemed to be leading to violent choices among youth from all socio-economic levels. I also noticed that the youth who made poor choices appeared to not have had full child development opportunities. I set out to use the art form of drama I loved, I had a degree in, as a tool for development by taking away making plays or productions. Instead, I would use it to offer play for learning, in using drama to mimic the play that is essential for child development.

My initial research allowed me to focus on and respect the developmental needs of the ages I chose to target and to figure out a way to use creative dramatics to effectively mimic play. I had observed the decrease in spontaneous play, which I surmised was contributing to the deficits. So, I developed curriculum and ran programs in as many as eight cities concurrently, playing through stories, science, foreign language, African humanitarian experience (multiculturalism), and other themes. For many years, I built my proficiency and skill with the programs before sharing the best practices with others. I was recognized in my field for this play initiative and was even allowed to teach a master's-level class before having my master's degree because of the classification. Another instructor collaborated with me, with an advanced degree to accomplish this. I was honored the Jelly Beans Creative Learning work was so well received having been written about too in 12 regional publications. The technique was ultimately utilized across all ages and had been applied even at a high school level. It was implemented in inner-city settings as well.

The ability of my clients, who were school districts, to justify my work to the decision makers, grew more difficult. This change came about when the focus on testing became a permanent fixture in the education landscape. I recall a district literacy director sharing this with me: "Wendy twenty years ago we would have fully utilized your programs and training, considerably, since we understand the importance of everything you are doing. We know it makes a difference for youth in their brain, language and emotional development to engage in dramatic play. We know it also assists in reading readiness too but can't prove it." She went on to explain, "Anything we put money into now has to have concrete evidence—that as a result of that work, the test scores of the students have increased." Wow, that became a sad realization for both this client and me about the current educational climate! As we talked further, the literacy

director and I each lamented about how the needs of youth were not being served and that real learning could not take place in simply teaching to a test! Her hands felt tied. She, not surprisingly, retired shortly after that. As a result, of this conversation and realization, I needed to problem solve. How could I continue to impact youth in positive ways and aid in their full child development with this very serious road block to serving their needs? How could I continue in serving their teachers and schools? Ultimately, that conversation sparked an idea that was helped along by an experience in Africa I had been sharing in my programming.

The solution I discovered was to create meaningful books, since there would always be a need for those and literacy. That could be justified by districts more easily than my programs in this current climate that, I hope, is temporary. I decided I would design the books in such a manner that they would contain all of the areas of growth I knew needed to be nurtured in youth. So I would use books to encourage emotional competence (social /emotional), brain, language, and critical thinking development and encourage play/drama for learning as well. I would include teacher extras and a critical thinking page.

My heart had been on fire in serving with the Africa humanitarian curriculum within my organization. I had been using the play/drama for learning technique to share the beauty of the Barabaig Tribe, their culture, and about the scarcity of basic needs for the majority of the world's population. I had taught about how as a humanitarian, I traveled to stay with a tribe our Edina Rotary Club had helped by providing clean water. I had taught how girls could not go to school before this clean water was provided, since it had been their jobs to walk at night, miles and miles, to where the water source was. I had been teaching about our world family, to have empathy and care about the plight of humankind. However, it had not felt, in my estimation, I was doing enough in just doing programs. The need had felt so great in our world, that it did not

seem that the messages had been impacting enough youth or adults. I joyfully had contributed 4 years, leading with this curriculum in my organization, when I had an idea in how to spread the messages in a broader way!

This content would be the topic of my first children's book. I would create one to utilize character and story, to ignite the imaginations of young people, to teach about the beauty of the Barabaig Tribe, the scarcity of basic needs in the world and the need the Barabaig and so many have for access to clean water. I would meld fiction and reality together to show what empathy looks like between the fictitious characters, but offer the bigger message of empathy as it relates to caring about the plight, of all humankind. I would punctuate our oneness, relaying that we are one human family. I would use a cheetah character to draw in youth to care about him and his plight of being endangered, which would connect youth to our natural world. I played with the book as curriculum first, in the field to allow the reactions of youth to the story to inform how it was written but also so that I could share the play/drama for learning best practices in the back of the book and as extras on my website with and for teachers.

Finally, the first book, *Jelly Beans the Cheetah and Hope* created a way for me to continue to serve youth in their needs in the area of emotional competence (social /emotional), critical thinking, language, and brain development with content that offered more than that. It gave a world theme, African culture, cheetah conservation, clean water, racial equality, and messages of the power of empathy, kindness, and love. My hope is that the messages have the realized potential to circumvent bullying, racism, and help usher in a time of nonviolence, with its examples of empathy and kindness in the story. The book was made into a musical play, after H2O for Life Schools and Children's Performing Arts requested that I adapt my book into a script for a play. It served as the first FOCUS on A CAUSE play at the Hanifl Performing Arts

Center in White Bear Lake, Minnesota. It was a humbling invitation to serve that way. We all worked to raise money for a clean water project in Tanzania. I donated my fee to the project. There were 20 kids in the cast, with a range of ages from 5-16. Next, Anthony Hotakainen, a high school student, who played one of the village elders from the tribe in the book, produced an album from the play of the songs I wrote that he, the others, and I sang within. We plan to donate proceeds from that to these organizations. The play was produced in 2018 and then again in 2019 with a group of 3rd-5th graders. Anthony was the co-director in 2019 with the talented Carrie Carlson who directed both.

The second book in the Jelly Beans the Cheetah and Hope series came out in summer 2019. It is called *EMPATHY AIRLINES: Jelly Beans the Cheetah and Hope, Book 2*. Both books are included to varying degrees, as content to encourage creative play for learning and development in the six classes that I taught for free through CILC during the Covid-19 pandemic.

When I ran my organization, before becoming an author, I communicated to and encouraged parents, school districts, and so on to identify with my Jelly Beans Creative Learning work. I wrote to them: “Our youth are like Jelly Beans, they come in all sizes, colors and varieties. In fact, it’s our bright, bold and unique youth who hold the world in their hands! Let’s equip them with the skills to make good choices for our future!” I also sang a song with my students, I made up similar to that. We would sing it, while we skipped in a circle: “We are like Jelly Beans, bright, bold and unique, if you please, we’ll fill the world with hope, helping all others to cope, we’ll model embracing life, through both happiness and strife.” I believe this deeply. It is why I created the Jelly Beans the Cheetah and Hope characters for books. It also demonstrates why I sought out high school-age youth to illustrate the first book and many other

high school and college-age interns to ignite this mission to support social-emotional growth, with a focus on empathy for social and ecological justice. Thus teaching about our shared humanity has been infused in my work from the beginning of my education outreach. In this study, I was hopeful to learn how my approach can inspire empathy. As stated earlier, given the nature of this study, that may not be possible and is highly subjective due to limited feedback in the online format of the delivery of classes and personal method of reflection.

CHAPTER TWO: LITERATURE REVIEW

This chapter attempts to describe the unique contribution my dissertation may make in a number of fields of study as a result of using creative autoethnography to answer my research question, “What reflective insights emerge from an autoethnographic study of my creative storytelling and play in online teaching of elementary grade children?” The fields I address are (a) Creativity, (b) Creative Play for Healthy Development, (c) Technology and Creative Storytelling, (d) Traumatic Brain Injury, and (e) Empathy. (I combine TBI with empathy as they are related in my story.)

Creativity

In *The Cambridge Handbook of Creativity*, Kaufman and Sternberg (2010) look at the roles of creativity in society. They essentially define creativity as a novel yet appropriate solution to a problem or response to a situation. They write, “Despite all of this creativity related discourse and among practioners, policy makers, and scholars, surprisingly little attention has been paid to the question of why. What is the role in society?” (p.74). Creativity also includes the proactive devising, formulating, or framing of problems themselves (Runco & Chand, 1994). Each of these ideas resonate with my goal to teach how others can use creativity to serve youth in education, while encouraging and legitimizing creative play in the context of K-6 education and beyond, with stories or other creative methods!

Faste (1987) explains that just observing is an active creative event that relates to empathy whereby one’s recognition of one’s own needs allows for a creative feeling of involvement with that which is observed. In other words, it is rare that a person will see a need if she does not relate to it in some personal or professional way. For example, following an experience where I saw the need close up in Africa, of the tribe in Tanzania I stayed with, I was

inspired to share about this through compelling others to relate to the need too. I employed empathy through story to accomplish this. I came to ask more of those who were learning the need of the Barabaig Tribe for clean water, to see the connection of us all. I expanded the need to include the endangered cheetah and vulnerable elephants.

Creative Play for Healthy Development

Gregory Bateson, in *A Theory of Play and Fantasy (1972)*, relays human verbal communication can operate at many contrasting levels of abstraction. (p.177). He explains that play can only happen if metacommunication occurs. That is explained as the exchanging of signals which carry the message of play. Play is imperative for healthy development for humans so to discover that “The resemblance between the process of therapy and the phenomenon of it is in fact profound. In both play and therapy, the messages have a special and peculiar relationship to a more concrete or basic reality” (p.177). My dissertation will show that such ideas about play relate to my ability to communicate and process communication as someone with TBI.

In addition, the teaching I have done based in play strengthened my brain due to the inherent cognitive and emotional nature of it, which I believe advanced my recovery. It may be best explained in terms of brain plasticity. In *Train Your Mind Change Your Brain*, Sharon Begley (2007) states, “The power of neuroplasticity to transform the emotional brain opens up new worlds of possibility. We are not stuck with the brain we were born with but with the capacity to willfully direct which functions will flower and which will wither, which moral capacities emerge and which do not, which emotions flourish and which are stilled” (pp. 240-241). When I consider the teaching of creative play coupled with my nature, meditative walks, that were an adult version of play, it further relays and aligns with the findings in Begley’s (2007) work. “Connections among neurons can be physically modified through mental training

just as biceps can be modified by physical training” (p. 241). For me, it was even playful to write in rhyme and from this prose emerged, so I could learn and write at higher education levels.

I found it fascinating to come across a dissertation where Catharine M. Phillips-Bui (2000) investigates the use of creative storytelling to assess the executive functioning of those with brain injury. This indicated to me that my ability to engage in the level of storytelling I am utilizing it, in many forms, including published books, a musical play, and in the online teaching approach initiative reveals marked improvement in an executive functioning capacity. Her work helps convey a way of better understanding of my own fear and emotional paralysis in relation to writing a dissertation. However, my dissertation itself will hopefully give a living example that will be more useful to readers, as it relates to my being a person who has overcome multiple brain injuries. It helped me better understand why I am so hard on myself. The stories we tell ourselves and how we present ourselves in the world define us and our lives. In “The Psychology of Life Stories,” McAdams says that the stories people construct about themselves and their social worlds are key aspects of their identities (2001, pp. 100-122). In “Personality and the Coherence of Psychotherapy Narratives,” Adler et al. (2007) also suggest that adults tend to construe their lives as complex stories of personal transformation and growth. Thus, my dissertation will put into practice such theoretical assertions and help reveal how utilizing creative play in teaching empathy, creative storytelling, and songs is a motivation for self-healing, as well as helping others. According to Skehan (1989), motivation comes from interest, requisite skills to pursue them, and sufficient curiosity to persist. My dissertation will express this in my reflections on my life and work.

Other publications talk about play and teaching empathy creatively to youth but few offer an autoethnography to do so. For example, Kiefer & Tyson (2014) point out that, in addition to

the past experiences and stances, the developmental level of the child will also determine how he or she responds to a particular book. My autoethnography will surely show how I deliberately focused on such developmental levels, with a wide age range, for my books and songs. I had a good deal of pressure to adhere to a defined narrow age range of my books. I chose to write, like I raised my son, in terms of how I communicated, concept and vocabulary wise. I believed that when I used words in context, even though it may go over his head, he could likely connect the dots later. I believed strongly that when we use words in context with our children, this helps them either infer their meaning, or understand their meaning, down the road; the same is true with concepts.

As a children's author, playwright, and lyricist, my autoethnography shows that, through play-images and words, understandings of empathy can be advanced, especially for children. I never talked down to my son when I raised him; instead I purposely included higher level vocabulary, in context, when I talked with him. I had a deep respect for my son, as a person and in regard to his developing intellect and individuality. I had that same reverence for every child I taught. This led to replicating this in children's books, songs, and an online initiative. I show examples of how empathy can be related to kindness, connection to each other and to the natural world, through integration within creative play initiatives. It is shown in examples from teaching, in the online initiative, and with regard to reflections to be a natural companion to and outcome of creative play. I have recognized that creative play is undervalued and not seen as legitimate by parents, teachers, and possibly some researchers, in the context of K-6 education, as a powerful tool for cognitive and emotional development. According to Vygotskian theory, "play facilitates cognitive development. Children not only practice what they already know—they learn new things" (Vygotsky, as cited in Roskos, 2017, p. 189). In discussing Vygotsky's theory,

Vandenberg (1986) relays that “play not so much reflects thought (as Piaget suggests) as it creates thought” (p.21). An interesting study sought to find out the way teachers looked at and valued play in a school context.

PT Hyvonen in the *Australian Journal of Teacher Education* (2011) set out to study a school’s use of play in Finland, where it’s held in high regard. The study sought to determine how the 14 teachers in the study viewed and used play. A troubling but not surprising point was made in this article written this way: “Paradoxically, although there have been many studies of children’s play, few have specifically focused on play in education” (p. 1). Cheng and Johnson (2010) reviewed four educational and four developmental early childhood journals for 2005-2007. They found that only 57 articles out of over 1,000 included the term “play” in the title, abstract, or key words, and only 16 were primarily focused on play. Just seven articles focused on play in education. “Teachers need a new insight for play and learning, as merely increasing play possibilities in the classroom is not adequate for enhancing play and learning” (Pui-Wah & Stimpson, 2004, p. 51). In this dissertation, I seek to help legitimize creative play in the context of K-6 education, as a powerful tool for cognitive and emotional development through meaningful stories and songs.

PT Hyvonen (2011) relays that new insight is a necessity to relate to teachers’ “pedagogical knowledge to pay based teaching—something which is currently limited” (p. 51). They continue, “Teachers’ pedagogical views about how they implement play are essential in this study context” (p. 51). I will demonstrate that through sharing creative pursuits, play can be shown as valuable in K-6 education, across disciplines. Its value, I believe, must be raised in our society. One wonders if the very definition itself betrays the value of play as legitimate in education. As a verb in Oxford dictionary, play is defined as “to engage in activity for enjoyment

and recreation rather than serious or practical purpose.” As a noun it is “activity engaged in for enjoyment and recreation, especially for enjoyment and recreation, especially by children.”

Researching the origin offers more aid in offering a more expansive capacity of play. For in an Etymology online (etymonline.com) shares the Old English version is Plegan/Plegian “move rapidly, occupy or busy oneself, exercise, frolic; make sport of, mock: perform music.” It also was said to correlate to the modern German word pflegen meaning to “care.” This better aligns with how Scales et al. (1991) positively termed play “that absorbing activity in which healthy young children participate with enthusiasm and abandon” (p.15). The emotional value of play is expressed in *The Atlantic* article called “The Importance of Play” by Bruno Bettelheim 1987, sharing, “Freud noted how much and how well children express their thoughts and feelings through play. These are sometimes feelings that the child himself would remain ignorant of, or overwhelmed by, if he did not deal with them by acting them out in play!” (p. 22).

Since I use Creative Play as a descriptor in the research question, for the purpose of the study, I would be remiss not to consider the definition more closely. If one considers the meaning of the word “creative” in the adjective and noun versions, one may surmise that there are more positive connotations, as compared to the most current definitions of play, with a context of education or K-6 learning in mind. As an adjective, it is “relating to or involving the imagination or original ideas, especially in the production of an artistic work,” or the noun version which states, “a person who is creative, typically in a professional context.” I wonder then if when we use them together as opposed to dichotomously, can we elicit more legitimacy? I am hopeful the dissertation study may help in that way. We may not ever know. I suppose there are arguments that creative types are not valued as intellectuals and go another direction to disprove creativity, as a valued skill or being creative as less than. That is for another study. In helping remedy what I

acknowledge is an image problem of sorts for PLAY or even Play in the context of K-6 education, I share a contribution to the conversation with drawing a clear parallel with a more strongly established learning initiative, that of brain-based learning. Harvard University, in fact offers master's and doctoral degrees in brain-based learning. It is also called brain compatible. With 20 years of exposure and implementation, it has strong indications of legitimacy to impact learners and teachers across the globe. In the foreword of E. Jensen's (2008) book, *Brain-Based Learning: The New Paradigm of Teaching*, Jensen elaborates, "based on research from disciplines of neuroscience, biology, psychology, our understanding of the relationship between learning and the brain now encompasses the role of emotions, patterns, meaningfulness, environments, body rhythms, attitudes, stress, trauma, assessment, music, movement, gender, and enrichment" (p. xii). In Jensen's book, *Brain-Based Learning* (2008), he uses the initials "ESP" to describe how play can serve learning (p. 4).

E- the active engagement

S- of purposeful strategies

P- based on principles derived from neuroscience

He continues, "The brain is poorly designed for formal instruction, In fact, it is not at all for efficacy or order. Rather it develops best through selection and survival. Humans are creative and emotional; a more brain based approach would be to increase classroom engagement (p.5). An increase in social connectedness in things like music, theater, and dance was recommended (p.5). He explains the idea of brain-based learning as a way to align a learning approach, with how the brain naturally learns best.

Research about emotion and cognitive development, all the way back to Freud and Piaget, recognizes the benefits of play as a natural way to learn. One can't help but see this stark parallel

to brain-based learning. Could this more clearly defined education approach lend hand to legitimize Play or Creative Play? Did I and my students benefit from my approach, I term play or creative play that is actually brain-based learning? Are they the same but just with a different name? What is in a name may be the problem, as I stated earlier. I wonder too, if the reason I improved from brain injuries was due to being more true to how a brain naturally learns. So in seeing the benefit for myself, did this encourage me even more to advocate for this kind of learning for youth? Was it more than the educational experience in Alaska showing me the value?

Daniel Goleman, in his book *Social Intelligence* (2006), shares, “Playful fun has serious benefits; through years of hard play, children acquire a range of social expertise. For one they learn social savvy, like how to negotiate power struggles, how to cooperate and form alliances, and how to concede with grace” (p. 178). Goleman goes on to explain, “all that practice can go on while playing with a relaxed sense of safety” (p. 178). This is familiar to the brain-based learning or brain plasticity—Goleman writes, “Exactly why playing is so much fun has become clearer with the discovery that the brain circuitry that primes play, also arouses joy” (p. 178). He shares, “The scientist who studied the neural circuitry of play in the greatest detail may be Jaak Panksepp, at Ohio Bowling Green State University. He called it affective neuroscience. In it he looked at all major human drives including playfulness, which he sees as the brain’s source of joy! Panksepp sees signs of an active neural system for play.

Goleman notes that “the psychostimulant medications given to children for ADHD all reduce the activity of the brain’s play modules when given to animals, just as they can snuff out playfulness in children” (p. 180). Goleman, in *Social Intelligence* (2006), shares, “Given how the brain masters social resilience, children need to rehearse for the ups and downs of social life, not

experience a steady monotone of delight. At a neural level these lessons (practice) become ingrained in the OFC circuitry for managing distress” (p.183). In an article entitled “Pretend Play, Creativity, and Emotion Regulation in Children,” the concept of divergent thinking echoes Goleman. Through pretend play children display cognitive, affective, and interpersonal processes (Hoffman & Russ, 2012). A succinct and correlating notion about the value of what play yields is socially and emotionally stated this way by another pair of researchers: “Emotion regulation is the ability to manage one’s own emotional experiences to engage adaptively within the daily environment (Shields & Cicchetti, 1998).

Back to Goleman, but this time, in his book *Emotional Intelligence* (1995), he writes, “Being able to put aside one’s self-centered focus and impulses has social benefits: it opens the way to empathy, to real listening, to taking another’s perspective. Empathy leads to altruism and compassion. Seeing things from another’s perspective breaks down biased stereo types, and so breeds tolerance and acceptance of differences. These capacities are ever more called on in our increasingly pluralistic society, allowing people to live together in mutual respect and creating the possibility of productive public discourse” (p. 284). This is stated similarly too by Patrick Verriour in the book, *In Role: Teaching and Learning Dramatically* (1994). He sees social learning for children in what he calls dramatic playing, another way of terming play. He relays:

Through dramatic playing children learn the following:

- to learn to accept the ideas of others
- to develop interpersonal skills and a sense of group dynamics
- to know how a group functions
- to accept different learning styles

-to identify with other people's lives, their concerns and their problems at a personal, concrete level. (pp. 20-21)

In support of K-6 education, with approaches like the ones I did for specific ages with teaching that encourages emotional literacy, which is a byproduct of creative play in a school or education context, is Daniel Goleman again. For Goleman, in his first book, *Emotional Intelligence* (1995), writes, "In short, the optimal design of emotional literacy programs is to begin early, be age appropriate, run throughout the school years, and intertwine efforts at school, at home, and community" (p. 281). I am beginning to wonder if some of my early influences helped me to design my teaching, writing, and work with the ideas I had read in these books previously. The areas I highlighted many years ago in these books, I found myself equally drawn to now, given the specifics of my work!

Technology and Creative Storytelling

Technology is clearly a distribution channel and a venue for storytelling more so than for play or creative play. It is a unique, effective form of communication. Technology is an innovative way to share ourselves, in story with children. Due to the Covid-19 outbreak I offered to teach some classes as a volunteer to fill the void for K-6 grades. From the Office of Educational Technology came the publication, "Reimagining the Role of Technology in Education" (National Education Technology Plan Update; U.S. Department of Education, 2017). This written communication to parents and educators is compelling. It includes relaying the development of critical thinking, complex problem solving, collaboration via adding multi-media communication into the teaching of traditional subjects. The text, "Reimagining the Role of Technology in Education" (U.S. Department of Education, 2017), supports the role of creative play. "The Department of Education provides guidance with recognition that the technology use

should never displace creative play.” The distribution of story is used in a multitude of forms: books, apps, phone, TV, film, and other technology products. Although the point is applied to very early childhood, still this is a corroborating statement that establishes value for creative play. The statement says, “The Department of Education publication provides guidance with recognition that the technology use should never displace the role of unstructured, unplugged, interactive, creative play and that these principles may evolve for families and educators in regards to the active use of technology with early learners over time” (p.13). My dissertation expresses this belief as well, and beyond. With the context of my study, a time of Covid-19, one wonders about technology applications of re-education moving forward, how that may help and hinder creative play in an educational context and in the realm of validity in the minds of parents and educators. I also wonder how every student will be served, that is unless technology access is made universally available. How many children may not be afforded the educations they deserve, if a way is not made for every child? Will this be another form of oppression and exclusion from liberties and opportunities that should be offered to all children?

There are many exciting ways to share story emerging in the technological world. Will forms be utilized due to the context of education? There is a need here too.

I saw a need first in Africa for the tribe to share content for social and ecological justice, while preserving play and childhood for youth. I am reminded that my creative play, storytelling and music plans need to remain flexible at this time. In encouraging creative play, within offering storytelling to advance social and ecological justice through empathy, I am preserving childhood sensibilities that naturally gravitate to that the research suggests. Venues to share content are changing quickly and those of us who are story-tellers may need to originate

platforms as well! The needs of our youth in technology are upon us. To discover ways to make sure universal access is realized is of paramount importance within these initiatives.

Traumatic Brain Injury (TBI) and Empathy

In this section I want to focus more specifically on this part of my story relating to my TBI issues—the challenges and the gifts—and how my dissertation will offer a unique way to understand TBI and its relationship to empathy beyond the existing literature. Bledow et al. (2013) assert that high creativity is said to exist after a person has experienced an episode of negative affect, when the negative affect has a significant decrease. Following that decrease is when there is a positive increase through a process called an “affective shift.” The behavioral activation happens when the increase in positive affect leads to behavior activation that had been delayed. Intentions, as a result, can be implemented. Positive opens a mind, while negative closes cognition. The positive and negative roles are a part of the complex cognitive function that helps contribute to creativity.

This resonates with me, as it relates to the negative impact of brain injuries present in my life. In fleshing them out in the dissertation, I think I can offer ways to understand this that are more realistic than the theoretical presentations of the aforementioned authors. The successes in my life have a direct correlation to the personalized teaching/learning possible in my graduate work; first with the highly customizable master’s degree in human development from St. Mary’s University and then at Fielding Graduate University. I studied its application in the education of K -12 in a class project, as well. In an article entitled, “An Operationalized Understanding of Personalized Learning,” Basham et al. (2016) state, “In the last 5 years, various innovations have taken place in the technology sector, triggering trends and shifts in the practice of education. Five years ago, during the early inceptions of the Center on Online Learning and Students with

Disabilities (Center), virtual school or fully online enrollment was skyrocketing (Watson et al., 2011). Now K-12 fully online education is still growing, but this has been outpaced by the expansion of blended learning environments and the emergence of “Personalized Learning” (Watson et al., 2008).

My dissertation demonstrates what Goldstein says about TBI, in ways that will help teachers understand connections between creative play, empathy teaching, creativity, and disability. Long ago, Goldstein (1952) refers to “catastrophic reaction” to describe the emotional challenges experienced by patients with brain injury, explaining that,

Catastrophic reaction was a reactive anxiety state that resulted when a brain-injured person attempted a task beyond his or her perceived capabilities. It was a reaction that was out of proportion to what the proportion of the precipitating stimuli was. It is not the failure per se that mattered to the patient, but rather what the failure meant to them. For the normal person, failure in the performance of a non-important task would be something merely disagreeable; for the brain-injured person it means the impossibility of self-realization and existence. (p. 256)

My dissertation, I believe, reveals that this process is what gave rise to the empathy that I have for others that is revealed in my publications. I believe my dissertation uniquely exemplifies the importance of such innovations in schools, especially for students with alternative abilities. In fact, I believe my dissertation reveals a connection between personalized learning, TBI (and other learning challenges), and the phenomenon we call “empathy.” Empathy can be defined as the act of understanding the emotional state of others and responding to it in a socially beneficial way (Kaya, 2016). Empathy is listed as a byproduct of the skill to engage in play with the necessary signals for it to transpire. Researchers have found that empathy can

foster cooperation and citizenship (Howe, 2012), strengthen pro-social behavior (Brophy et al., 2016), and reduce aggression and social prejudice (van Hazenbroek et al., 2017). My autoethnography about my creative play, online initiative with creative storytelling, and teaching empathy reveals in real time, so to speak, such conclusions.

Brophy refers to a school in South Korea looked at empathy-based teaching. The paper generated was “Effects of Empathy-Based Learning in Elementary Social Studies.” Students may develop empathy in any subject, but when shared in social studies it called upon students to “develop critical sensitivities such as empathy regarding attitudes, values, and behaviors of people in different historical contexts” (Brophy et al., 2016, p.112). Lee et al. (2018) also talks about empathy as part of multicultural citizenship and multicultural education. In social studies education, empathy work leads to understanding the emotions of others, minimizing social conflicts, focusing on citizenship and multiculturalism. Sara Salmon (2003) teaches empathy with peace through such vehicles as

P—Parent Empowerment

E—Empathy Training

A—Anger Management

C—Character Education

E—Essential Social Skills

My dissertation surely bumps into each of these, as I have described and reflected upon my creative storytelling.

Of course, teaching empathy cannot be separated from teaching with diversity and inclusion in mind. All children deserve to see themselves represented in all the media they consume—books, television, film, and other technology. Children Now produced a “Prime-Time

Diversity Report” for 2003-2004. The point made is that as our culture’s primary storytellers, television provides stories and images that help shape the worldviews of millions of people.

Therefore, it is essential to examine the television images that young people view and assess how those images change, or remain the same over time (Children Now, 2004).

In summary, I believe the existing literature offers ample support for the value of creative play to encourage empathy, and reinforce social and ecological justice. It reveals a lack of the valuation of creative play despite an array of researchers heralding its praises in the areas of cognitive, social, and emotional benefits. I offer real-life examples of how to use creative play, in conjunction with creative storytelling, songs, music for children that engages empathy on many levels. It includes the understanding of and respect for those of us who dare to see ourselves as actually gifted by challenges such as TBI. I am sensitive to my use of this idea that attributes the notion of a gift to pain and suffering and limitations, but feel this is a conclusion that emerges from my dissertation. In *Train Your Mind Change Your Brain*, Sharon Begley (2007) shares Davidson sharing his findings on brain plasticity: “I think the reason why we emphasize mental training is the realization that the outer conditions are important contributive factors to our well-being or suffering. But in the end the mind can override that. You can retain inner strength and well being, in very difficult situations, and you can be totally a wreck where apparently everything seems fine. Mind training is becoming a better human being for yourself and for others” (p. 241). The ideas of preserving childhood with creative play by legitimizing it, with real examples of implementing it in an online education initiative, goes beyond empathy alone to what might be a kind of love, that truly understands the ancient Indigenous wisdom that knows everything is related and sacred.

CHAPTER THREE: RESEARCH APPROACH

To answer my research question, “What reflective insights emerge from an autoethnographic study of my creative storytelling and play, in online teaching of elementary grade children?” I use a video documentary primarily to present an autoethnography, in which the goal of self-reflection is not to prove the work is successful in creating empathy, but rather to analyze my life’s work critically, in ways that help me explore how it is designed to do so. In accordance to this aim, the examples from creative play, I don’t seek to confirm if they have elicited empathy in an online series of classes for K-6 grade-level children. Still, this will be considered as data to contribute to the overarching autoethnographic analysis. Excerpts of these classes will be included of the delivery by me and class assistants. Throughout, I have utilized prose, poetry, and music. I will use the six classes described in the introduction, using video as a primary medium. The stories and songs are based on my previously published children’s books: *Jelly Beans the Cheetah and Hope* (SissyMarySue, 2014) and *Empathy Airlines: Jelly Beans the Cheetah and Hope, Book 2* (SissyMarySue, 2019).

I believe the video documentary aspect of my research presentation is important for several reasons. First, since a significant portion of my data is visual, it is the most meaningful way to share, as the examples for how teachers can use creative play in educational, meaningful ways. It also offers an up-close, intimate autoethnographic personal discovery that unfolded in the dissertation process. In addition, since creative storytelling, in a wide variety of multi-media venues, is a plan for my future, this helps me grow in this dimension of an educational and storytelling format. This is meaningful and aligned with my life and education career. It will be a filmmaker’s insight, in a more natural way.

Second, the narrative reflections I will provide in a variety of ways offer insight, personal growth, and discoveries that may be useful for helping others bring creative play into classrooms. The reason for an autoethnography is well described by Ellis et al. (2001) in their publication, *Autoethnography: An Overview*. The authors write, “Writing that seeks to describe and systematically analyze personal experience in order to understand cultural experience. This approach challenges canonical ways of doing research as a political, socially-just and socially conscious act. A researcher uses tenets of autobiography and ethnography to do and write autoethnography” (Ellis et al., 2011, p. 273). Thus, I choose this approach because it is explained as a combination of autobiography and ethnography with evocative elements to engage and interest the reader. It is about experiences that have already taken place and are shared in hindsight (Ellis et al., 2011). Interviews, journals, and recordings can be used to supplement and support the details for accurate recall (Bell et al., 2005). The impact of epiphanies are often shared in autobiography that altered the trajectory of one’s life (Bochner & Ellis, 1992).

I chose autoethnography to reflect on my experience relating to teaching creative play and empathy because I think it has the potential to help other teachers get in touch with their own passion for this goal. A part of my story and reflections will be about how my work, which has resulted in my personal and health resilience and recoveries that may take the implementation of creative play and teaching empathy to a new level. It also may help finally legitimize it and garner stronger partners like brain-based learning leaders and adopters, as well as the neuroscientists whose work in brain plasticity could offer validity to the wiring of us all, for playfulness to feel joy! As a woman who transcended disability through resilience and a sense of a service to mankind focus, my reflections will offer more learning for me and perhaps the reader in a myriad of ways concerning a wide array of interdisciplinary perspectives on encouraging

creative play, which encourages and allows for the teaching of empathy. The voices of us all as individuals offers a clearly, undeniably unique contribution to the research that already exists. For each person's life experience is uniquely theirs. "Education has always used the power of the 'I' to break open questions posed by social and cultural theory" (Gallagher, 2011, p.14). It carries details that can mirror many others which is valuable too but it will always contain some combination of details that offer another interpretation of a human life. In revealing my life, in this study, I am hopeful it may help others to recognize choices, struggles, values that give impetus to aspects of a professional and personal journey of discovery.

Elements of storytelling are implemented in an autoethnography that uses aesthetic and evocative measures to relay information. They are consistent in design to a straightforward autobiography using story, plot, and character development (Ellis & Ellingson, 2000). Techniques of "showing" allow a person to offer aesthetic and evocative examples to help the reader feel the emotions of the details or situation relayed (Adams, 2006; Lamont, 1994). Specifically, in this dissertation, I do this by showing how I taught several classes during the COVID-19 pandemic to K-6 children, using creative play and storytelling. My presentation format is video. I show portions of my work and then narrate explanations and interpretations. If a scholarly citation seemed important, I gave it orally when appropriate, for supporting a general conclusion or assertion about the value of a particular idea. Because I am not doing interviews and my goal is not to prove outcomes but rather to explore the theoretical and personally observable potentialities of my approach, I appreciate the limitations of my study. However, I believe the critical self-exploration of this work has special value for deep understandings, related to my research question. I refer to previous published reports and videos about outcomes of my work, but process is my emphasis.

Theoretical Framework

The theoretical framework refers to concepts or structures that guide and ground my approach to answering my research question. Identifying them can help the reader better understand where I am coming from and to make connections between existing knowledge and my interpretations. I include in my theoretical framework Carl Rogers' client-centered therapy that proposes that every child has an innate capacity for growth, fulfillment, and self-healing, and that play-centered education offers children an opportunity for these things (as described in Shlomo Ariel's book, *Children's Imaginative Play*, 2002). Gallagher's theory about storytelling correlates with counter-hegemonic education, eco-psychology, Indigenous worldview, and a social/relational framework for disabilities.

I also consider Kathleen Marie Gallagher's (2011) theory that asserts story-telling is a key component to education research. She laments about how absolutely undervalued story-telling is in the academic world, drawing attention to how "undertheorized" it is. She is concerned that there is not an extensive, respectful analysis of the complexities relating to methodology and ethics in regard to it. She sees story needing to be recognized, as method versus story as case. Kathleen Marie Gallagher (2011) is said to create an obstacle for storytelling in education. This is supported by Hanna Arendt who sees it as a way to train an imagination to "go visiting." She asserts that it is not "a vehicle for authentic critical voice, as some humanists may argue, nor a means by which one can postpone the authoritative moment necessary to criticism and action" (Gallagher, 2011, p. 15). This importance of storytelling is explained by Melissa A. Cain (2015) in the *Journal of Invitational Theory and Practice* when she describes how too many children's books are didactic or too preachy and not favored by children. This is relatable to this theoretical framework I chose to embark upon. Stories need to

be compelling no matter the format or venue. In my autoethnography, I attempted to be as compelling in my narration as I hope I was in the teaching of the children. I sought to make the story sound, be well organized, and respect the venue I use to deliver it (video).

Counter-hegemonic education also guided this dissertation. I believe my efforts to bring creative storytelling and play into children's education intends to challenge the assumptions of the ruling elite that are inherent in education with hierarchical structures, competition versus cooperation, consumerism, and so many other aspects of educational hegemony and colonization as described in *Teaching Truly: A Curriculum to Indigenize Mainstream Education* (England-Aytes et al., 2013). Acknowledging the importance of Indigenous worldview is an essential component of such counter-hegemonic work.

Four Arrows in *The Authentic Dissertation* describes the importance of re-embracing our original worldview, one that guided us for 99% of human history, in ways that honored interconnectedness and sought living in harmony with all relationships (Jacobs, 2009). He writes and relays this: "We come from ancestors who once lived according to the rhythms of a particular place. We have in our DNA the potential to recall the harmony and balance in life that we understood from living and observing from that space. . .the purpose of research to benefit the community; the spiritual awareness that everything is connected; and the knowledge must incorporate the mysterious" (Arrows, 2008, p. 5). He continues, "We can tap into this knowing to again bring about right relationships with all of creation" (p. 25).

I see my work, in bringing playful and creative storytelling into the classroom, as part of a counter-hegemonic revolution. It is imperative that we create a positive revolution, while retaining both the integrity of the organization or institution, being in alignment to the movement. I believe that play can help with a counter-hegemonic revolution to disrupt and alter,

the power within law and education systems for the good of our world. To strive for cooperative, critical inquiry is heralded as a means to democratize workplaces (Heaney, 1999) and my approach to storytelling has this in mind.

I chose ecopsychology as a foundational theoretical framework for this dissertation. I know my teaching and my analysis of it cannot demonstrate this, but I see the importance of a sustainable ecosystem for future generations. Ecopsychology is a means to explore the connection between humans and their natural environment. It is a form of communication through the dual lenses of psychology and ecology (Waxler, 2011). Ecopsychology “brings together the sensitivity of therapists, the expertise of ecologists and the ethical energy of environmental activists” (Roszak, 1992, p. xvi). Waxler explains that there is a conversation that is multiplying in the field of psychology. It is in regard to the relevance of the connection of the “physical environment in which we have developed and evolved” and the human psyche (Roszak, 1992; Mest, 2008; Winter, 2004). “Ecopsychology provides a new way to examine the human condition” (Roszak, 1992). It is intended to aid in the development of effective strategies to encourage behavior that is sustainable, being aligned to the well-being of our natural world.

Ecopsychology draws attention to the danger of a world where human beings see themselves as more important than other living beings and other things in one’s environment that are essential to one’s survival (Waxler, 2011). This has many names including humanocentrism, human supremacy, and anthropocentric. Identifying with the notion that we are all part of the natural environment is an important context from which to live and understand the relevance of our being. Similarly, humans also once thought of themselves from a “dominant” viewpoint in regard to the universe too. They saw themselves as the center of the universe or geo-centric. This had obvious limiting consequences on inquiry and acquiring new knowledge,

for a time. Waxler believes that all good theories need to evolve. He sees the field of psychology greatly benefitting from ecopsychology. He sees the two merging in an effective means to understand the nature, well-being, and function of mankind.

Finally, I incorporate a social-relational model of disability as a theoretical framework. Reindal (2008) describes this as an understanding of disability that identifies needs without contributing to the negative effects that often come about in the wake of classification, categorization, or labelling. As described in the introduction, I will use my own disability and how I have used it successfully, as a framework for my work.

Conclusion

As a historical point of respect for our times, I share the following:

Zoom recording was chosen for the documentary since it not only reflected the time, it was a necessity given Covid-19 to record and edit in that format. Zoom virtual meetings were typically used during this Coronavirus (Covid-19) paradigm as a form of education and communication. It was the most common format used in 2020 at the time of my work.

As a result of the challenges of this time, historically, I adapted my dissertation and documentary to reflect that. Relevance felt like an imperative since I regard an autoethnography as a shared humanity paradigm. That coupled with the ethnographic nature of it necessitates one to include, as best as one can in this form, that which is going on in one's state, country, and world, at the time of the creation of a dissertation with this methodology.

I recognize as a woman with White privilege, I have the privilege too, to be studying at a doctoral level. I must admit the completion of a doctorate seemed trivial at times, juxtaposed with the tragic, thought-provoking losses and struggles in our world family due to a world wide pandemic and world wide protests to stand up for racial equality and social justice.

I have been actively grieving with my friends, interns, mentees, family, as well as spiritually, with every person impacted, world wide. It has become clear in our country and world that minorities are disproportionately impacted by Covid-19. I am deeply troubled by this. I have people dear in my life who have lived this disparity, specifically. I have been saddened too that the Navaho Nation is so tragically impacted. I have dear friends who are impacted in a multitude of ways by this awful virus. I share, although not as much as I would have preferred, in the narrative of video portion. There are many stories, due to time constraint of the documentary length, I sadly could not include. Recently, my mother was diagnosed with Covid-19. I had been so careful to stay away and not hug her since March. We communicated by phone. I stood at her window to wave. I still have not hugged her. My mom lives in a senior building, where a friend she spends time with had tested positive. She contracted the virus that way. As of this writing my mom is feeling better but I am cautiously optimistic. I am doing all I can as a daughter to be supportive to her with many daily conversations, running items like an oximeter, thermometer, groceries, and so on to the senior building, where she lives! I am not permitted inside.

The backdrop then for this dissertation is ironic, in the way empathy and a respect for our shared humanity dimensions of my teaching are clearly needed in this time. I considered our global pandemic, racial brutality, and mostly non-violent, civil disobedience in the form of protests that happened worldwide, due to the killing of George Floyd by a police officer in my home state of Minnesota at the time I was doing this dissertation. As a result, I chose to offer the dissertation, since it is autoethnographic, as a humble platform of sorts in response to an unprecedented time, in regard to blatant, tragic examples of racial inequality due to policing. It felt to me a responsibility, as a person with the privilege I have as a White woman and as a doctoral student. The context section was important to me for that reason. I chose to weave

relevant meaning from the current world context I mentioned and some history that informs the time.

As a result of the time, an early artistic and intellectual choice was made to seek to reinforce the importance of a unified message through infusing the documentary with music from De'Arris Wayne Judkins' album "Defining R Selves," and it became more relevant than I could have imagined. His work is brilliant! His music is hopeful and has its own form of unity-infusing messages. It was aligned to what I was seeking to say in an uncanny way. I chose to honor his kind of music intended for peace, empowerment, and for its own brilliance artistically. The music adds so much to the dissertation documentary. It is my honor to share the lyrics, and sometimes just instrumentals of De'Arris Wayne Judkins—a former intern turned collaborator and a friend who has become family. He is a young man who I consider a second son. De'Arris Wayne Judkins did the audio recording for my first book, *Jelly Beans the Cheetah and Hope* and had helped produce some songs for the books as well, including doing the first ever vocal recording, of "One Child Cries." The orchestral arrangement of my melody, "One Child Cries" by Sarah Guhl, was meticulously recorded too, by De'Arris.

That orchestral arrangement of the song, "One Child Cries," was used in two areas in the documentary, as a mirror, of loss and to relay everyone has value, as the song relays. The mirror includes the areas of sad Alaska lead-in and the tribute to George Floyd and John Lewis, due to their passing. I hope this sends a message of me recognizing the value gap, Dr. Eddie Glaude Jr. introduced in his book, *Democracy in Black* (2016). I am sickened by Black males being killed indiscriminantly. Black women are killed and impacted in other ways too.

It has felt crucial to me to not only remain relevant in my online teaching of empathy, to the sensitivity surrounding loss during Covid-19, by changing the lyrics of "One Child Cries" in

our class from “when any being dies” to “the universe replies” but also including the death of George Floyd and passing of Congressman John Lewis in my documentary. Congressman Lewis fought valiantly his entire life to counter the hierarchical control relating to voting and other racial inequality issues. You see, the tragedy of George Floyd and subsequent protests to stand up against racial inequality happened in my home state. The protests were echoed around the world. The Minnesota epicenter further cemented the necessity for me to include that context and respect for that loss, with the subsequent civil outcry for social justice. It aligns with my work, concerns, and process, in teaching and life.

In remaining relevant, I thought it important to include the murals of Breonna Taylor, George Floyd, and Justice Ruth Bader Ginsburg in the narrative section of documentary, while using citation pertaining to introducing the concept of the role of creativity in society.

My lifelong friend of 21 years, who happens to be Muslim, and I had a recent, common realization. After we experienced the loss of both Congressman John Lewis and Justice Ruth Bader Ginsburg, we admitted to each other that we recognized we had grown to rely upon these leaders doing the work of social justice, so selflessly, for us. We had each awakened to the fact that neither of us had taken the full responsibility ourselves for our country and world at the level they had. As we grieved these losses and contemplated the lives they had lived, it felt a call to action to my dear friend and myself. It felt meaningful to own that with one other person, holding each other accountable. Through supporting and caring for each other, we can offer a combined, sustainable commitment to more fully serve our world family. We demonstrate the necessity for cooperation and collaboration, to impact things that matter.

The remainder of my dissertation is a supplemental video documentary that can be accessed at <https://youtu.be/7evfLBX9Pos>

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