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# Exploring Education Students' Reflexivity through the Arts and Sharing My "Bricolage" Dilemmas

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### Abstract

As part of course requirements, 16 education students in a master's cohort tutored groups of elementary children (the same groups throughout the semester) in an after - school writing program that emphasized an ethos of care. The education students had never taught children and consequently had difficulties reflecting about their lessons through weekly e - mail communication. As the course instructor I had a hunch innovative artistic processes might unleash and heighten the education students' abilities as reflective practitioners . Therefore, I asked them to explore their pedagogy through the arts. Concurrently, I engaged in arts - based educational research (ABER) to ascertain in what ways arts constructions might prompt the education students' motivation and abilities to thoughtfully consider their work. Using constant comparative methods and a "bricolage" approach, I discovered arts - based techniques, particularly poetry, fostered and illuminated their introspections. The education students also had distinct preferences among the three modes of reflective inquiry I requested they employ (e - mail communication, self - portraits with dialogue, and poetry). As suggested by respected ABER scholars, I monitored and documented my dilemmas throughout the inquiry process in an attempt to achieve verisimilitude and to inform new arts - based researchers. I share these dilemmas and oversights, and discuss puzzling, unanswered questions in this paper.

### Keywords

Arts - Based Educational Research (ABER), "Bricolage," Education Students, E - mail Reflections, Ethos of Care, Methodological Issues, Poetry, Self - Portraits

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*For the research to be arts-based the chosen art has to be an integral and informative part of the process, producing knowledge otherwise inaccessible.*

*(Suominen, 2003, p. 34)*

*Arts-based educational research is founded on the belief that the arts have the ability to contribute particular insights into, and enhance understandings of phenomena that are of interest to educational researchers.*

*(O'Donoghue, 2009, p. 352)*

*I am more confident than before  
But not as confident as I need to be  
I have made the correct decision for me  
But I am afraid of making the wrong one for them  
I am excited about my future  
But intimidated by my effect on theirs  
I am sad for this experience to end so quickly  
But thrilled to see the progress made by them  
At first I thought it was only me  
That I was on my own*

*No light  
 No one to help me  
 But now I'm not scared  
 I can now care for children – not worry about me so much  
 But who will help my children now?  
 Who will care for them?  
 When I will not be with them?  
 Now that I will leave them?*  
 (Education student's end-of-semester reflective poem about teaching)

Study participants' behavior and literal language historically have informed qualitative inquiries in education (Onwuegbuzie, Leech, & Collins, 2010). However, over the past two decades, although criticized by conservative scholars, arts-related studies have gained increasing attention from qualitative researchers as a means of revealing phenomena and allowing research participants and audiences to experience the data (O' Donoghue, 2009; Savin-Baden & Major, 2013). The arts have the potential to evoke and capture ideas, feelings, and perceptions that are difficult to describe in everyday language (Knowles & Cole, 2008). Thus, innovative arts research methodologies offer possibilities for increasing understanding of human experiences, beliefs, perceptions, and introspections.

In this paper I explain why and how I turned to the arts to foster education students' abilities to reflect about their writing tutoring experiences with children from multicultural background in grades K- 5. I also delineate an arts-based study I conducted to explore in what ways creating arts representations might stimulate the education students' motivation and ability to thoughtfully consider their pedagogy. Arts-based educational research (ABER) remains an emerging, expanding field surrounded by issues, challenges, and tensions (Eisner, 2008a; McNiff, 2008; Savin-Baden & Major, 2013). Therefore, I followed noted arts scholars' advisement; that is, in order to achieve verisimilitude, arts-based researchers need to practice full disclosure and tell the story of the research as it occurred (Eisner, 2008a; McNiff, 2008). Subsequently, in ABER, going beyond traditional data representation is essential (Janesick, 2004). In fact, "experimentation with the method and learning more about it can even be a primary outcome of the research and an aide to future professional applications (McNiff, 2008, p. 33). Accordingly, throughout the research process, I scrutinized my work to detect and document my dilemmas and oversights. In this paper I also call attention to puzzling unanswered questions. My intent is to inform qualitative researchers about the significant possibilities and possible tensions associated with ABER that includes relying on *bricolage* as a form of inquiry.

### **The Education Students in the Study**

The 16 elementary education master's students in the study (all women between the ages of 23-55; 15 Caucasian, one African-American) were from middle class milieus. Their undergraduate degrees were in diverse disciplines other than education and they had decided to become teachers for various reasons. Although the education students were nearing the completion of their two-year program of studies, none had planned and taught lessons to children in a school setting. Therefore, they did not yet have opportunities to cultivate identities as teachers, which is a crucial dimension of teacher development (Sparks-Langer & Colton, 1991). As the instructor of the program, I observed that the education students were motivated to teach. But, as pivotal studies indicate, like many neophyte teachers, they were preoccupied with survival and self rather than the children they tutored (see Fuller 1969; Fuller & Brown, 1975). Clearly, it was difficult for them in their first teaching situation to

simultaneously learn to reflect about their pedagogy, prepare and offer research-based group instruction and differentiated writing lessons, become adept at group management techniques, figure out time management problems, and develop competence analyzing children's writing strengths and instructional needs. Yet, these competencies are crucial to writing teachers' effectiveness.

### **The Context and Philosophy of the Writing Tutoring Program**

Tutoring in a school setting creates an environment where novice teachers have opportunities to develop their professional identities (Mosley, Hoffman, Roach, & Russell, 2010). Therefore, in an effort to inculcate the education students' teacher personas, I situated the after school writing tutoring program in a public elementary school located on my university campus. Because of my strong convictions about the importance of caring teachers, we discussed ethos of teacher care during seminar discussions and I established a climate of care at every class meeting. Characteristics of a caring teacher include engrossment in a commitment for students, and a motivational shift from a focus on the teacher self to a concentration on students (Noddings, 1984, 2000; Owens & Ennis, 2005; Rabin, 2010). Teachers who genuinely care for their students cultivate a mutual relationship and an environment of respect and understanding in which students flourish academically and personally (Pimentel, 2011).

The education students tutored two hours one afternoon a week for a semester and received three-semester hours credit for the course. Two education students worked together to plan and teach weekly research-based writing strategies and best practices to small groups of 5-6 children grouped according to grade level (the same children throughout the semester). There were eight tutoring groups (one group for grades K, 1, 4, and 5 and two groups for grades 2 and 3), and the education students chose the grade level they wished to teach.

Following the tutoring sessions, I elicited and responded to the education students' questions about instruction and group management concerns. I also spoke about the benefit of teacher care for all children, but especially for those from diverse cultures and ethnicities (Gay, 2000). Moreover, I stressed the importance and benefits of teachers reflecting about their work.

### **Attempting to Stimulate the Education Students' Reflexivity**

*Please note: A through discussion of the purposes and practices of teacher reflectivity is beyond the scope of this paper. For additional information on the benefits of teacher reflexivity see Danielson, 2009; Lai & Calandra, 2007; Zeichner & Liston, 1996. For the genealogy of reflection in general and also in teacher education see Descartes, 1596; Dewey, 1904; Schön, 1996.*

Reflection is a key component of teacher preparation (Smith, Yendol-Hoppey, & Milam, 2010). Therefore, from the beginning of the semester I attempted to motivate the education students to thoughtfully consider their lessons. I responded to all of their e-mail reflections by asking questions to encourage their reasoning (e.g., "What aspects of your lesson were effective and why?). I also suggested they look at specific dimensions of their teaching (e.g., "Do you think the kids needed to get up and move around? Maybe, a dramatic enactment might have settled them down. What do you think?"). In addition, I urged them to look carefully at individual children's writing efforts to formulate differentiated instructional plans (e.g., "What does Jade need to learn next about writing? Please write back to me and tell me your ideas about her writing instructional needs"). However, the education students

continued to display little understanding of the benefits and dimensions of reflection. In actuality, they did not know how to reflect about their work. Instead, although writing is known as an effective way to make sense of experiences (Boud, 1993), they composed innocuous, cheerful messages that Korthagen (2013), van Manen (1977), and Zeichner (1987) typify as non-reflective descriptive writing (e.g., “Everything is going good in our group. We are moving along”). As a long-time teacher educator, I recognized the education students’ non reflexivity ensued from lack of teaching experience, underdeveloped, amorphous views of teaching, and related insufficient professional schema that scholars recognize are not activated automatically, but are constructed through teaching experience (Sparks-Langer & Colton, 1991).

### **Nurturing the Education Students’ Reflective Dispositions through the Arts: Self-Portraits and Poetry**

In a practical sense, I believed helping the education students learn to engage in critical reflection was crucial because pedagogical introspection would help them identify and solve some of their immediate teaching needs and concerns. Equally important, I knew if they developed an aptitude and willingness to reflect about their work, their thoughtful dispositions would serve them well when they entered the teaching profession. Teachers who question their own practices are likely to enhance student learning (Smith, Yendol-Hoppey, & Milam, 2010). Since I had previously conducted inquiries in which participants created self-portraits to discover and reveal their perceptions, feelings, and behavior, it struck me that artistic processes might spark and facilitate the education students’ abilities as reflective practitioners. Many scholars view the “visual as a language or a way of knowing” (Thompson, 2006, p. 1). Furthermore, it is well recognized creating self-portraits has the potential to expand reflective expertise (Flick, 2002; Pink, 2007; Richards, 2006). Toward that end, “artisans have composed self-portraits since the 15th century as projections of self and as a way to study their own persona” (Richards, 2003, p. 39).

Along with self-portraits, I decided poetry might also help the education students develop their critical thinking about their lessons. Although largely ignored in social science research, poetry invites reflection and emotion (Leggo, 2008) and is one of a number of creative techniques that can help study participants experience the data (van Manen, 2002). Poetry is the dramatization of experiences in metrical language --a way of “examining lived experiences by attending to issues of identity, relationship, and community” (Leggo, 2008, p. 171). I purposely chose two diverse, semiotic systems (visual and imaginative rhythmic text) with the intention of inspiring the education students’ inquiry stance. Every artistic rendition to “some degree, has its own defining features and set of skills and techniques” (Eisner 2008b, p. 9), and “performs its own distinctive function” (Eisner, 2008b, p. 8). Thus, I hoped varied forms of reflection might provide multiple ways of knowing for the education students. In addition, I reasoned because of probable differences in talents and multiple intelligences (Gardner, 1993), the education students might demonstrate deeper understanding of the complexities of their own teaching through their preferred mode, or modes of communication. Each arts form presents its own unique constraints and affordances (Barone & Eisner, 2012). And, it is well known the arts “transcend what literal language provides” (Knowles & Cole, 2008, p. 8). In particular, the arts provide “a tangible product that evokes in many ways what [literal] text alone cannot” (Savin-Baden & Major, 2013, p. 301). Consequently, I believed the arts might provide a venue for the education students to express feelings and ideas they were unable to articulate and disclose through language that does not deviate from its defined meaning. I was also aware arts construction, as an aesthetic and emotional endeavor, has the capacity to heighten conscious inquiry into the self (Savin-

Baden & Major, 2013). Therefore, I believed turning to the arts might help the education students develop insights into their teaching practices, express their viewpoints, perceptions, and understandings, and through introspection, examine their pedagogy. In fact, I anticipated at some point in the semester, the education students might study their arts constructions as a way to contemplate their reflections while at the same time, I might explore their artistic renditions to gain understanding of their perceptions of their teaching experiences.

### **Problems of Time Constraints and My Own Lack of Reflection**

Yet, because of our many course responsibilities, I did not make time for the education students to analyze their reflexive efforts. Time constraints and required course content also precluded me from sharing readings and research with them that would illuminate the power of the arts as a viable option for introspection. Moreover, although at least some arts abilities and knowledge are needed to create art forms so they become trustworthy means of expression (Eisner, 2008a), I neither knew nor considered if the education students were able to employ the arts effectively. Additionally, I did not previously determine if they were familiar with self-portraits, or poetry that displayed reflective emotions. Truth be told, I offered no assistance to the education students about how to complete their arts representations. However, I should have known in all probability, the majority of the education students knew little about the arts because “schools of education,... do not provide courses, or even workshops for students to develop knowledge about the arts” (Eisner, 2008b, p. 9). Furthermore, individuals cannot choose their creative aptitudes. “The musician is not an architect; the painter is not a poet” (Kluger, 2013, p. 5). I now recognize, I asked my students to summon their creative talents in visual arts and poetry on my demand. In addition, I was trying “to do too many things” (McNiff, 2008, p. 13). Looking back, I also acknowledge I did not sufficiently reflect about my own thinking and pedagogy. Yet, as Ockerstrom (2007) informs teacher educators, “If you ask your students to become self-reflective you must also ask it of yourself” (p. 56).

### **The Inquiry**

With the addition of self-portraits and poetry to the reflective component of our curriculum, I decided to engage in ABER to discover in what ways the arts might stimulate and reveal the education students’ thoughtfulness about their lessons. I also wanted to augment the relatively small, but growing body of knowledge on arts-based methods in education. In addition, a review of the extant literature shows there is no published research that spotlights the ‘voices’ of alternative certification majors in education and explores their lived experiences. Furthermore, I hoped to enhance my understanding of ABER, and enrich my own practices and abilities as an arts-based researcher. I also sought to add to the literature on teacher education by exploring arts interventions that might help novice and experienced teachers enhance their expertise as reflective practitioners.

### **Situating Myself in the Inquiry and Disclosing Some of My Researcher Dilemmas**

Before proceeding further, I must disclose problematic issues that relate to two of the roles I assumed in this study. My talents lie in the arts. I am a musician and I value the aesthetic. I am also an author of a multiple literacy arts-based book (Richards & McKenna, 2003) and have employed the arts in other research. In addition, I have studied scholarly work on visual and poetic texts. However, these competencies, talents, and knowledge do not automatically make me a skilled arts-based researcher. In particular, one arts-based

researcher flaw I must confess is that I often neglect to monitor my incorrect, inherent belief that every individual is innately artistic and can easily create art forms at my request. For example, in the current inquiry I asked the education students to create two varied types of arts representations (self-portraits with dialogue, and poetry) that might prompt their reflections about teaching. Because of my deep-seated beliefs that everyone is naturally artistic, I did not offer them suggestions about how to draw a self-portrait, or display examples of self-portraits created by master artists, such as van Gogh, Rembrandt, de Vinci, and Kahlo. Moreover, because of time constraints, I did not take the time to model in what ways the education students might create poetry. Another reality is that although I have published chants that connect to children's literature, I have never created a poem to represent my reflections about teaching. Therefore, I asked my study participants to engage in an aesthetic process in which I had little experience.

### **Serving as a “Bricoleur”**

Another concern I must divulge is that I knew early in the research process I would need to connect and analyze three diverse types of data (e-mail prose, self-portraits with accompanying dialogue, and poetic reflections). Therefore, I determined I would have to serve as a “bricoleur.” Since literature is lacking that “provides clear examples of how “bricolage” has been implemented in research contexts” (Rogers, 2012, p. 1) and I had not previously assumed the role of a “bricoleur,” I felt uneasy connecting evidence from two diverse arts representations with e-mail communication. In a broad sense, “bricolage” in qualitative research is concerned with “multiple methods of inquiry and diverse theoretical and philosophical notions of the various elements encountered in the research act” (Kincheloe, 2001, pp. 679-692). In simpler terms, “bricolage” is an approach to qualitative inquiry in which researchers employ alternative methodologies to illuminate connections among different modes of communication (Kress, 2003). “Generally speaking, when the metaphor is used within the domain of qualitative research it denotes methodological practices explicitly based on notions of eclecticism, emergent design, flexibility, and plurality” (Rogers, 2012, p. 1). Serving as a fledgling “bricoleur,” I planned to determine in what ways the education students' self-portraits with accompanying dialogue, poetry, and e-mail reflections displayed similar, or different content. At that time early in the research process, I did not realize how difficult assuming the role of a “bricoleur” would be.

### **Literatures Informing the Inquiry**

As in all exemplary research, “in arts-based research, the researcher has to draw from various sources to ground the study and create a theoretical framework” (Suominen, 2008, p. 37). In this inquiry I turned to three diverse literatures to inform my research and undergird the exploration: (a) arts-based research in education, which is “predicated on a constructivist epistemology that posits there are multiple realities and ways of doing and understanding” (Butler-Kisber & Poldmer 2010, np); (b) scholars' views on teachers' reflexive dispositions that indicate beginning teachers usually need interventions to carefully consider the consequences of their work in order for them to learn the attitudes and skills required for the reflective process (Richert & Bove, 2010; Russell, 2005; Schön, 1996); and, (c) tenets of feminist and postmodern theory that consider the process of constructing and thinking about the process of art more important than the art itself (Suominen, 2008).



## **Conducting the Inquiry**

### Guiding Questions:

In this ABER I sought to answer three questions:

1. What themes (i.e., ideas, values, emotions, insights, concerns, and understandings about self, children, and teaching) are visible in the education students' e-mail reflections, self-portraits with dialogue, and poetry?
2. In what ways do the education students' self-portraits with dialogue, and their poetry offer integral and informative information to ABER?
3. What communication systems (e-mail reflections, self-portraits with dialogue, poetry) appear most conducive to promoting and illuminating the education students' reflections?

## **Research Methodology**

I secured Institutional Review Board permission through an expedited review to conduct the study and obtained signed study participation consent forms from the 16 education students. Then, in lieu of their weekly e-mail reflections, in the fifth and also in the final week of the semester I asked the education majors to draw a self-portrait that represented themselves reflecting about their teaching concerns and achievements. I also requested they include dialogue to help clarify the concepts expressed in their visual art (see examples of early semester self-portraits in the Appendix). Furthermore, in place of their weekly e-mail communication I asked them to write a poem in the sixth week of the course and again at the end of the semester that portrayed their thinking about their teaching experiences. I offered no additional guidelines, or suggestions to the education students because I did not want to influence their thinking. I chose to limit the number of portraits and poetic text I asked the education students to create because of their busy schedules, lack of time, and our substantial course requirements.

### **My Directions to the Education Majors, Problems with My Planning, and More Time Constraints**

Since I did not anticipate the education majors would have difficulty reflecting about their teaching experiences through e-mail I did not list "Reflecting through the Arts" as a requirement on our course syllabus. However, when I read the education majors' initial superficial e-mail messages I requested in class that they create self-portraits and poetry during the first part of the semester and also during the final week of class for two reasons. I explained that the arts generate emotions and arouse our senses and thus offer individuals access to expression and reflection that prose alone (i.e., e-mail messages) does not provide. I also said I believed the arts would serve as a vehicle to inspire, inform, and support the education students' reflective natures throughout the remainder of the tutoring program. Yet, I must acknowledge I did not consider how creating one self-portrait with dialogue and one poem early in the semester might serve to guide their e-mail reflections throughout the course. I also hoped the education students would be able to compare their initial and final arts constructions because I knew how profitable it would be for them to examine their own data to gain some conclusions about their growth as reflective practitioners. There is considerable value in teachers interpreting their work, especially when they can consider why they make pedagogical decisions and how those decisions affect what children learn (Sparks-Langer & Colton, 1991). Yet, time slipped away and this opportunity was lost. At this point

in the research I also did not consider how serving as a “bricoleur” I might reconcile 10 e-mail reflections with two self-portraits and two poems for each education student. I know now I should have encouraged the education majors to self-select their preferred mode, or modes of reflection that might include photo elicitation, drama, music, and the like, rather than require them to write weekly e-mail messages.

### Data Analysis

All researchers must decide what method of data analysis will best answer their research questions. In this study, I wanted to systematically glean meaning from three diverse data sets comprised of literal prose, visual representations with dialogue, and expressive rhythmic language. I regarded all three modes of communication as legitimate, connected text. Therefore, I perused the literature to determine what method of data analysis would prove most helpful in which I served as a “bricoleur.” After considerable research, I chose constant comparative analysis (Ryan & Bernard, 2000) as the most appropriate data analysis method for the three data sets. Arts-based researchers who choose constant comparative analysis as a tool for discovery search for, and document patterns in the data in order to determine encompassing themes. For instance, because of my previous research with self-portraits I assumed I would review facial expressions, body movements, facial gestures, and the like, in the education students’ drawings and connect these characteristics with the accompanying dialogue. I also planned to analyze the literal and rhythmic language in the education students’ e-mail prose and poetry.

At the end of the semester I chronologically collated the data sets for each education student (10 e-mail reflections, two self-portraits with dialogue, and two poems = 224 artifacts), so I might ascertain possible changes over time in their reflective stance and also determine encompassing themes. Then, I read and reread the data, discovering, comparing, and making notes about what I believed was pertinent information (e.g., *anxiety; frustration; survival; confusion; student centeredness; confidence; etc.*). In this process I also looked for examples of implied messages (e.g., facial grimaces, pulling hair, etc. in the self-portraits). However, I discovered all of the education students drew themselves as attractive, happy individuals (see examples of self-portraits in the Appendix). In this case, the visual did not offer “more than words can say” (Cahnmann-Taylor & Siegesmund, 2008, p. 98). As a result, I could not rely on the drawings to provide significant information other than to assume the education students wanted me to consider them as pleasant, cheerful, and agreeable. Instead, I had to depend on the discourse accompanying the portraits as valid data (e.g., *nervous; scared; anxious, excited*). I jotted down my assumptions, underlined possible patterns, and compared the emerging content for possible themes and connections (Strauss & Corbin, 1990). I also coded the messages implied in the education students’ poetic texts and in their e-mail reflections. For example, I categorized Anna’s final poetry excerpts, “*I am thinking of Sonya. Who will help her when I am gone? She is shy, quiet – anxious- She needs me*” as *Teacher Care*, and her end-of-semester e-mail comments, “*Dwayne is making progress with his writing. He knows when to place a period of a question mark and he answers questions I ask in his journal*” as *Aware of student’s writing achievements/descriptive reflection*.

Next, I engaged in axial coding (Bernard & Ryan, 2010) in which I looked for similarities and differences among the three data sets for each education student. For example, Martha wrote in her end-of-semester e-mail reflection: “*David’s writing has improved since we started tutoring*. In her end of semester self-portrait the accompanying dialogue states, “*still anxious*” and her end-of-semester poetry excerpt declares, “*Sarah, a child who needs help/I can help her.*” I categorized and connected these end-of-semester data as “*Student centered, Anxious, and Teacher care.*”

## Engaging in “Heuretics”

I also asked the education students their opinions about what mode or modes of reflective communication they preferred and compared their views with my own discoveries about what semiotic system appeared most helpful for prompting their introspections. I looked for candid portrayal of emotions, thoughts about individual children, or groups of children, and attempts to solve a teaching dilemma. Through this process I was engaged in what Ulmer (1994) calls, *heuretics*, a branch of logic that recognizes and appreciates the art of discovery especially in attempts to integrate visual and verbal discourse. That is, I blurred the borders between art and theory and became involved in the creative process of invention employed by arts-based researchers “who have consciously brought the methodologies of the arts to define new practices of human social inquiry” (Finley, 2005, p. 684).

## Making the Data Visible

### *The Education Students’ Preferred Modes of Reflection*

My discovery about what form of inquiry best facilitated the education students’ introspections about their teaching experiences (i.e., e-mail reflections, self-portraits with dialogue, or poetry) concurred with their opinions about their preferred mode of reflection. Only a few education students considered all three modes of contemplation equally beneficial.

*“I liked reflecting in all three ways. I found that, e-mail, self-portraits, and poetry encouraged me to express myself in different ways. Using three ways to reflect provides options and didn’t constrain us to only one method. I learned more about myself through these different methods of reflection. Like, I learned things about myself as a teacher I didn’t even think of until I had to draw a self-portrait, or write a poem. Then when I wrote my e-mail reflections I could include what I discovered about me through poetry and portraits.”*

The majority of the education students had a preference for one specific form of inquiry.

*“My preference is using e-mail to write my reflections. I’m an English major. I write well, and I love to write prose. It’s easy for me. I hated drawing. I was overly concerned about drawing myself and poetry was too hard.”*

*“I loved the poetry. I could just sip some wine and let the words flow. I discovered I am a new-found poet who never knew the power of poetry. I got stuck in the e-mail reflections because I felt like I had to write perfect sentences and use perfect punctuation.”*

On the other hand, a few education students emphatically disliked poetry, but enjoyed e-mail communication and drawing self-portraits with accompanying text.

*“I despised the two poems even if they did not have to rhyme. I much prefer drawing and writing to you each week. I don’t feel as if the poems helped me very much either. I liked writing one word responses on the portraits and writing more in depth to you.”*

Others had a strong preference for self-portraits and poetry.

*“I like self-portraits the most and then poetry. I am an artsy person. As I was drawing my portraits I had to stop and think how I would portray myself. That produced some strong reflections that surprised me because I would not think of these ideas through e-mail reflections. Then, when I created the poetry I found I had to think carefully to determine my problem areas in teaching.”*

### More Discoveries

#### *Self-Portraits with Dialogue Early in the Semester*

Dialogue accompanying the education students' early semester self-portraits revealed the education students' initial anxieties about teaching and their preoccupation with self. However, their cheerful self-portraits were at odds with their written comments. The statements spotlighted their feelings of vulnerability and also portrayed their apprehension, uncertainty, and concern that were not apparent during the tutoring sessions. (See examples of these self-portraits in the Appendix).

*“I hope I don't screw this up”; “I'm nervous about helping kids properly”; “How will everything work out?; “nervous”; “butterflies in my stomach”; “How will the group respond to my lessons?” “What will I include in my instruction?”; “I hope they like what we planned.”; “Can I do this?”; “When will this nervousness pass?”; “Will I get past my fears?”; “I need courage”; “I'm nervous about tutoring”; “I'm worried about making mistakes”; “Am I really prepared/qualified to do this?” How can I make sure I m helping them? – not making things worse?”; “Confused”; “Anxious”; “Taken aback”*

#### *Poetry Early in the Semester*

Although a few education students wrote trite poems during the first part of the semester (e.g., *“It is Thursday, Don't be scared, These kids are really not that bad”*), the majority crafted candid, passionate poems that expressed and exposed their self-doubts, fears, insecurities, and lack of confidence. Similar to the dialogue connected to their self-portraits, the poems were highly charged with emotion and despair, and also revealed their concerns for self.

*“Week One, all alone  
Week Two, chaos  
Week Three, scared  
Had to take a step back  
Week Four  
Off my game  
Taken aback  
Shocked!”*

*“Uncertainty  
Fear  
Anxiety  
Will I be good enough?”*

Worry  
It is so tough  
All alone”

“I don’t know how to teach  
Why did I think I could?  
I can’t turn back now  
I made a choice  
I am a teacher  
No I’m not  
I know nothing about teaching  
But I thought I did  
Help me someone, help”

“Palms are sweaty  
Heart is racing  
My biggest fear  
Is what I’m facing  
Voice is trembling  
Knees are weak  
Can’t find the words  
With which to speak  
Stomach in knots  
Mind goes blank  
Inch by inch  
I walk the plank  
Do I have what it takes?  
Or will this end in heartbreak?”

“I’m paralyzed  
But there’s no heading back  
Don’t know where I’m headed  
I’m shivering in the cold  
Can’t let on  
I don’t know how to teach”

“I’m afraid  
I’ll teach the wrong things  
Or in the wrong way  
Even though I’m scared  
I’m trying not to be  
So I make believe  
I’m OK”

*E-Mail Reflections throughout the Semester*

In opposition to the candidness of the education students’ early semester dialogue accompanying their self-portraits and their poetry, they did not reveal their apprehensions about teaching in their e-mail reflections. Throughout the semester their electronic messages displayed little emotion, or concern for children, and instead depicted self- confidence,

optimism, and self-satisfaction. Thus, for the most part, the education majors' e-mail reflections served to conceal phenomenon rather than elucidate them. In essence, their prose was disengaged from their experiences and demonstrated no evidence of reflexivity (see Merleau-Ponty, 1962).

*"I want to find a job where I can be challenged-a job that will make me feel like I am really helping people and making a difference in the world. I am passionate about teaching. I will be a great teacher because I care about kids."*

*"We are having an interesting experience. We will offer the kids a snack and give them a little time to unwind before we jump into writing. I am happy we have this teaching experience."*

*"It was great to see our kids again this week. Today we began our writing strategies immediately. I already see an improvement in our teaching. We are already getting used to teaching and it is only the second week!"*

*"We are doing good. We try to meet during the week to plan our lessons. This past week went pretty well."*

*"Our group is coming along. We plan to try out many writing strategies and we will be great. The minute I walked into this school I knew this would be a different type of class and I was right."*

Other researchers have also observed that many neophyte teachers engage in surface reflections where they concentrate mainly on themselves and are concerned with keeping students quiet. They are in survival mode and therefore, do not consider in what ways their pedagogy will affect students' learning and feelings of wellbeing (e.g., see Fuller, 1969, Fuller & Brown, 1975; Zeichner & Liston, 2007). It was at this point in the research process I recognized the liberating and robust power of the arts (i.e., the education students' engagements with self-portraits and poetry) to evoke strong honest feelings and emotions.

### **More Discoveries End of Semester**

#### *Self-Portraits with Dialogue End of Semester*

The education students' end of semester self-portraits also depicted happy, content women. However, in contrast to the beginning of the semester, the dialogue accompanying the education students' final self-portraits paralleled their cheerful drawings and expressed confident, positive, optimistic thoughts. In addition, in contrast to their self-centered dialogue at the beginning of the semester, the education students wrote about their care and concern for individual children, a philosophical principle of our tutoring program (Noddings, 1984; 2000). They also included some teaching tips we discussed in class. (See examples of these self-portraits in the Appendix).

*"happiness"; "uplifting"; "hope"; "fulfilled: "rewarding", "special, sweet children" "love my special little boy"; " "prepared"; "hopeful"; "enthusiastic"; "Time management is crucial"; Prior preparation promotes perfection (PPPP)"; "My little boy said to me, 'I love you girl!'"*

#### *Poetry End-of-Semester: A Puzzle*

Analogous to the dialogue accompanying their second set of self-portraits, the

education students' end-of-semester poems also demonstrated teacher care (Noddings, 1984; 2000). Yet, in opposition to the upbeat, cheerful messages connected to their end-of-semester self-portraits and in their e-mail messages, the majority of the education students' poetry abounded with pensive, sensitive, wistful introspections. Similar to the dialogue accompanying the self-portraits, the poems focused on individual children, or groups of children, but also provided access to the education students' emotional, melancholy feelings. As McNiff (2008) astutely observes, "in the creative process, the most meaningful insights often come by surprise, unexpectedly" (p. 40). My challenge in the research was to try to make sense of this surprising discovery.

*"Who is she-this little girl?  
 What is her favorite food?  
 What games does she enjoy?  
 She is unique with dreams and desires  
 I love her uniqueness  
 I want to learn more about her  
 It is my mission to undertake this discovery  
 Her dreams are mine  
 I love this child"*

*"Now that I've endured tutoring  
 I know nuthin 'bout teaching  
 Don't know 'bout kids either  
 But hey, I love 'em  
 Though they squirm and yell  
 Talk out of turn, don't pay attention  
 I tag along-It's my passion  
 No turning back  
 I found out they need me  
 They need love, these children  
 And I need them  
 But now I leave them-all alone like me"*

*"I have to cross the bridge  
 I'm still anxious and unsteady  
 Will I give up again? No!  
 I am learning to be assertive  
 And not to be too quiet  
 I am learning the children have needs  
 They have different learning styles  
 I am learning about myself  
 And to be a teacher  
 I am learning from the children  
 They are all precious  
 What will life offer to them?"*

*"Looking at the surface  
 You see little  
 You have to look into his eyes  
 Hold his hand"*

*Talk with him  
Learn who he is  
Only then  
You will know who he is”*

*“I wonder?  
What will become of her?  
Who will teach her next?  
Wish I could  
Who will care for her?  
Teach her to be a strong, well-educated woman?  
Wish I could”*

### *E-mail Reflections End of Semester*

Similar to the dialogue accompanying their final self-portraits and their second poems, as the semester drew to a close, the majority of the education students wrote e-mail reflections that focused on individual children and displayed a personal sense of accomplishment about teaching. Moreover, the education majors’ messages demonstrated care and concern for children that again reflected the overarching philosophy of the tutoring program (Noddings, 1984, 2000). The e-mail communication also showed some understanding of writing pedagogy but remained at what Korthagen (2010), van Manen (1977), and Zeichner (1987) describe as non-reflexive, descriptive writing. Thus, throughout the semester the content of the education students’ e-mail messages disclosed little about their teaching experiences, and concealed rather than illuminated phenomenon (see Merleau-Ponty, 1962).

*“Donaldo is outgoing and engages with the students and tutors during our writing sessions. He loves to be the center of attention and usually we can focus this need for attention into his work by helping him volunteer for activities and contribute to group discussions.”*

*“I have discovered Louise is a capable writer who simply needs confidence to succeed. Louise thrives on praise and needs to hear words of encouragement.”*

*“Pedro continues to struggle because he wants attention every second. We have learned it is better to ignore his bad behavior and reward good behavior. I even let him sit in my lap, which is probably not a good solution but it keeps him focused.”*

*“Our Sammi just moved from the Middle East a few months ago. He is so shy and his English is just developing. Sometimes his sadness breaks my heart. What will become of him when the tutoring is over? We have become so close to him over this semester.”*

*“Tony is doing so much better. He doesn’t pout anymore, or refuse to do his work like he did in the beginning. He offers opinions, and even writes in his journal. His creative book contribution was terrific.”*



Once again I found myself thinking that arts engagements provide a means through which individual's feelings can emerge from their sub-conscious and emotions can become clear (Langer, 1957).

*A Search for Order as a "Bricoleur:" Unanswered Puzzling Questions*

Arts-based research should produce new queries (Eisner, 2008a), and stimulate conversations rather than present final conclusions (Barone & Eisner, 2012). It is even considered advantageous for ABER to provoke multiple interpretations of the data (Smithbell, 2010). Moreover, some arts-based scholars go a step further and claim researchers should celebrate ambiguity as an intriguing characteristic of ABER that is desirable, inevitable, and even useful (Barone, 2008; Tormey & Sawdon, 2008). This inquiry fulfills these criteria because puzzling questions remain for which there are no definitive answers.

1. What might explain the discrepancy between the education majors' early semester cheerful self-portraits and their accompanying anxious dialogue?
2. What might be the reasons for the incongruity between the education students' end-of-semester emotional, sad poetry and their end-of-semester cheerful dialogue accompanying their happy self-portraits?
3. Why did the education students' e-mail reflections throughout the semester reveal little of their experiences, thoughts, and perceptions?
4. Why did the education students divulge such strong emotions in their early and end-of semester poetry?

These four questions emphasize the complexities of the human experience and the tensions associated with "an approach to research that employs new assumptions and methods and has a short history" (Eisner, 2008a, p. 17). Furthermore, the unanswered questions also confirm my concern that serving as a "bricoleur" would prove difficult. Yet, Eisner (2008a) offers further reassurance and validation for researchers whose arts-based questions remain unresolved. He maintains, "questions are the most significant form of intellectual achievement, not answers" (p. 22).

### **Limitations of the Inquiry**

Prior to presenting the Contributions of the Inquiry I must acknowledge several limitations that apply to this inquiry. One issue relates to school contextual conditions. As studies show, context is a key variable in teachers' work (Johnson, Kraft, & Papay, 2012). Thus, a possibility exists that school context unique to the writing tutoring program might have influenced the education students' perceptions. Data collected from a different group of education students working with different aged children in a different teaching environment might produce different information.

I also recognize all research is subjective and value-laden (Denzin & Lincoln, 2005). Hermeneutic principles explain how my professional background and personal experiences, beliefs, attitudes, and world-views influenced what data I deemed notable and my interpretations of the data. Others might interpret the data differently.

Another limitation connects to my dual role of course instructor and arts-based researcher. In my researcher position, I monitored my thinking in an attempt to ensure I bracketed (i.e., recognized, acknowledged, and set aside) my preconceptions, biases, values, and beliefs, as I collected and analyzed data (refer to Glaser & Strauss, 1967, for a thorough discussion of bracketing). However, studying one's students requires special attention to the

issues of undue influence, conflict of interest, and objectivity. There is no doubt as the supervising instructor of the writing course, I was highly involved with the education students' achievements and success.

In the inquiry I also relied on communication the sixteen education students wished to share with me through e-mail reflections, self-portraits with dialogue, and poetry. Since I was the course instructor, the education students may have withheld information from me, or submitted what they thought I wanted to hear so I might have a good view of them. Therefore, the research reported here is dependent on the education students' willingness to proffer honest thoughts and opinions. Furthermore, some of the education students may have had difficulties communicating through both prose and artistic representations, which might have hindered their abilities to convey their thoughts and perceptions. In addition, while use of e-mail has broadened researchers' lenses, it is often difficult to construct intentions, attitudes and the like through communication that is separated by time and space from the writer, including visual clues, such as facial and body language (Richards, Bennett, & Shay, 2007).

### **Contributions of the Inquiry**

Notwithstanding some methodological dilemmas and oversights, and the limitations of the study, the inquiry expands readers' understanding of ABER, including the possibilities, problems, and ambiguities associated with arts-based inquiries and the use of "bricolage" to find meaning.

Another contribution is that the research can be considered legitimate and trustworthy because it meets a critical principle of arts-based investigations; that is, "the chosen art is an integral and informative part of the process, producing knowledge otherwise inaccessible" (Suominen, 2008, p. 34). The dialogue accompanying the education majors' self-portraits and their poetry both early and end-of-semester revealed considerably more about their feelings and perceptions about teaching than their weekly e-mail communication. Clearly the arts framed, influenced, and informed this inquiry. Minus the arts, the study would have provided entirely different, incomplete, and largely inaccurate perspectives of the education students' perceptions about their teaching experiences.

The study also illuminates the education students' strong opinions about what mode of inquiry (or, a combination of modes) best facilitated their reflections about their teaching experiences. This discovery opens up emancipating, introspective possibilities for education students and teacher educators. After reading this report, teacher educators might feel comfortable offering their students a variety of reflexive venues beyond literal prose. Methods of reflective choice based upon students' individual talents and interests might include poetry; film documentaries; visual art, such as concept mapping, self-portraits, sculpture, painting; installations, collage, and quilting; music; artifact collections; fiction; storytelling; videos; photo-elicitation; and performance work that includes ethnodrama; monologues; dance; and readers theater (Saldaña, 2005).

I believe another contribution of the study is my willingness to candidly expose and draw attention to my researcher dilemmas and oversights. "Research involving the arts is an emerging, expanding research genre" (Knowles & Cole, 2010, p. XII). As such, Kerry-Moran (2010) asserts, "arts-related inquiry remains virgin territory: broad, largely undefined, and uncharted" (p. 495). Hence, arts-based scholars remind us there is a dearth of literature that provides authentic revelations about the challenges and complexities of arts-based investigations (Savin-Baden & Major, 2013). Therefore, "experimentation with the method and learning more about it can even be a primary outcome of the research and an aide to future professional applications" (McNiff, 2008, p. 33). Accordingly, I think my disclosure of

problematic issues will prove useful to beginning arts-based researchers who can contemplate this work, and learn how crucial it is to carefully plan and document their ABER. Emphasis on a clear method early on would have helped me avoid the confusion, tensions, and pitfalls that developed when my inquiry was not informed by distinct, purposeful, and consistent organization.

Finally, in keeping with ABER epistemology, the inquiry afforded more questions than answers. Thus, I believe this inquiry will alert beginning arts-based researchers to anticipate and embrace the unknown, including the reality of paradoxical uncertainty that may surround ABER data. Because ABER often involves experimentation and doing something new (McNiff, 2008), distinguishing characteristics of ABER not only include infinite possibilities for innovation, inspiration, and discovery, but also the possibility of ambiguity, inconsistencies, and unresolved questions that allow arts-based researchers to regard phenomena from new perspectives that in turn, raise fresh questions.

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### Appendix A. Examples of the Education Students' Reflective Self-Portraits with Accompanying Dialogue

#### Early in the Semester



early in the semester



early in the semester



End of Semester





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