NARRATING A SELF-STUDY:
AN EMPATHETIC APPROACH TO TEACHING HUMAN BEINGS THE POWER OF LANGUAGE AND LITERACY

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The purpose of this study is to improve my own teaching practice that aims to build on the strengths of the diverse backgrounds of all students in my Grade 8 English Language Arts & Reading classroom at a middle school in Texas, focusing on empathetic approaches. As a secondary ELAR teacher, I am ethically navigating culturally-responsive and effective instructional practices, which are defined as:

- using students' individual cultural backgrounds to support their reading/writing instruction
- incorporating current sociopolitical events and/or issues to engage students and promote reading/writing growth/development
- hosting small-group democratic discussions initiated by required skills—including units of argument, (in)effective rhetorical techniques, and synthesizing information.

In post-COVID-19 America, the communities behind students—in particular, historically-oppressed minority students—continue to struggle with how to better support their students who have fallen into the learning "gap", having lost several grade levels worth of reading and writing comprehension. In the midst of this, sociopolitical issues continue to swell across the country—from mass shootings in K-12 public schools to protests stemming from

white-on-black atrocities. The reality is that the American education system has not changed since the early 1950s, specifically with regards to educational standards that underlie instructional methods.

Therefore, the plan is to be able to research my own teaching practices to answer the following question: How does the frame of critical literacy pedagogy equip teachers to facilitate learning with a more instructionally equitable approach to fostering diverse students' academic growth? Students' academic quality and successes/failures rely heavily on the systemic and sociopolitical influences (as aforementioned), as well as their classroom environment.

My research aims to draw on foundational and current research in critical and culturally responsive pedagogies to examine the relationship between the ethical duties English Language Arts & Reading (ELAR) teachers are bound to foster, as well as the culturally-sustaining pedagogical practices that have the ability to acknowledge and nurture these identities and accomplishments of ELAR students.

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CHAPTER 1 INTRODUCTION

Problem Statement

America is currently facing an international crisis with immigrants flooding the Mexico-America border near South Texas. In the last few years, with the end of the Afghanistan War and departure of troops from that region, families whose lives were in jeopardy were granted asylum in America. Additionally, with the ongoing Russo-Ukrainian War and recent Gaza-Israel combat, Americans have seen a drastic influx of individuals who are seeking refuge and peace. Many of these transnational students have recently populated American classrooms, requiring educators to be cognizant of students' backgrounds, while acknowledging their needs in entering an American classroom.

Reading texts that are multicultural in nature is in the best interest of all learners—as, according to Lev Vygotsky, over time, society is guiding us to make meaningful connections and help us to articulate empathy in life. In much the same way, I argue that recontextualizing historically-designed education systems is significant in order for American/global youth to thrive in a contemporary world. Furthermore, multi-perspective methodologies in education allow for the enactment of a national and global mission of unity and social justice across borders.

Statement of Purpose

The purpose of this self-study will be to interpret how, as a secondary English Language Arts & Reading (ELAR) I can ethically navigate culturally-sustaining and effective instructional

practices for minority students within a Grade 8 English Language Arts & Reading classroom at a middle school in Texas.

At this stage in the research, as a secondary ELAR teacher, I am ethically navigating culturally-sustaining and effective instructional practices, which are defined as:

- using students' individual cultural backgrounds to support their reading/writing instruction;
- incorporating current sociopolitical events and/or issues to engage students and promote reading/writing growth/development; and
- hosting Small-Group democratic discussions initiated by required skills—including units of argument, (in)effective rhetorical techniques, and synthesizing information.

Research Questions

Therefore, the following research questions aim to address how I can develop an empathetic and culturally-responsive pedagogy within a mandated literacy curriculum, specifically within a Grade 8 English Language Arts & Reading (ELAR) classroom:

What happens when I modify the required state and district-mandated 8TH Grade English Language Arts & Reading curriculum, using an empathy-forward and culturally-responsive approach?

- *In what ways do students utilize their personal ethnic identities and experiences as they engage with this curriculum?*
- *What are the implications of my teaching practices [on my students]?*

Local Contexts

These research questions will be addressed using a self-study approach, wherein I seek to reflect, study, and analyze how I become a creative agent in reimagining how Texas' Essential Knowledge and Skills standards (TEKS) are introduced, taught, and then applied by students. This analysis will be completed with the students I teach within my secondary English Language Arts & Reading (ELAR) classroom.

My district provides all educators access to a commercial curriculum, Lucy Calkins' Units of Study (UoS), which are guiding documents that include numerous resources, as well as options for "Performative Assessment(s)", in order to access, manage, and assess how educators might introduce and successfully facilitate learning of the TEKS. It shall be noted that while the units of study can be clearly followed, as they are thoroughly outlined and detailed, the district allows for some flexibility for teachers' professional discretion to facilitate the TEKS and student growth. To be clear: while literature is provided for reading and analysis (what is known as "Anchor Texts"), there is flexibility in texts chosen.

Moreover, each Summer, the UoS are re-evaluated by the district's Secondary ELAR Curriculum Specialists, as well as teachers across the district. At River Canyon Middle School (RCMS), one of many secondary campuses in P ISD, the Secondary ELAR Specialist that I collaborate with and inquire information from is Mr. Truman [AN1][1]. Additionally, the UoS the district follows is based on the direct scholarship and lesson planning of Lucy Calkins. According to Calkins: "Units of Study [have] grow[n] out of years of work in thousands of classrooms. This series also grows out of the greatest minds and most beautiful teaching that I've seen anywhere. To write the Units of Study, my colleagues at the Teachers College Reading and

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[1] [AN1] All names of individuals and local courses, schools, and districts are pseudonyms.

Writing Project and I have done what teachers throughout the world do all the time. We've taken all that we know—the processes, sequences, continua, books, levels, lessons, methods, principles, strategies…the works—and we've made a path for children, a path that draws all we know into a cohesive, organic progression. Our hope is that this path brings children along to the place where they can write clearly and skillfully and read flexibly and joyfully—and can live together as caring, thoughtful readers and writers" (Calkins, 2023, para. 1). For new and/or incoming teachers, Calkins' Units of Study include(s) scripted materials and student and/or teacher examples for more thorough assistance in better understanding how teaching can begin to be shaped.

From personal experience, as well as the comments heard from other professionals, including Mr. Truman, Calkins' UoS is primarily well-suited for new-to-profession educators. For seasoned educators, it is as with all professions: with time, dedication, and experimentation, best practices are *directly* shaped by student population(s) and individualized tweaking of skills. Overall, it is the expectation of the school district that educators are able to easily access the curriculum and reach out to ELAR Specialists when/if there is a concern for teaching the TEKS.

Theoretical Framework: Empathy-Forward Pedagogy

Educator and philosopher Paulo Freire stood firm in the belief that "dialogue cannot happen without hope, profound love, humility, faith in mankind, and critical thinking" (Freire, 1970/2000 as cited in Hayn et al., 2017, p. 139). The most pivotal content area to stimulate discussion and generate inquiry for cultural equity and social justice is in English Language Arts & Reading (ELAR) classrooms. Ward et al. argue that through collaborative discussions, "literature have the power to solidify, refine, and develop the next generation's perspectives and worldviews… [and while] it can be easy to forget the power of just listening", it is most critical

of all instructional methods: Allow students to have a safe environment to share critical discourse where they can both nurture and democratically debate their ideas, understandings, conceptions in order for them to self-regulate "questions that are bothering them and offering potential for understanding one another's often conflicting perspectives" (Ward et al. as cited in Hayn et al., 2017, pp. 139-140).

Freire's *conscientization*, the ability for one to gather an awareness of their reality based on social practices and self-reflection, is key in creating an equitable and empathetic classroom. Freire denotes empathy as a trait dominated by collectiveness over individualism: "Rather the principle of empathy is a form of recognizing different points of departure that make it harder for some to reach their goals. The principle of empathy recognizes inequalities and takes them as collective issues rather than a matter of individual effort or merit. Need, or being in need, is a sign of domination of some over others. Empathy is then required to trigger a change that will provide the dominated with what is necessary to break this cycle of oppression" (Suzina & Tufte, 2020, p.414).

We also look to Raul P. Lejano for an understanding of the depth and denotation of the term *empathy*. Lejano defines empathy as a "person's ability or inclination to care for the welfare of the other" (Lejano, 2023, p.8). It is based on the actions of an individual giver to transpire onto another, as "Empathy, in turn, encourages people to think, feel, and act relationally—that is, to care for the welfare of one's self as well as the other" (Lejano, 2023, p.2). To clarify himself, Lejano emphasizes, "When we speak of an 'other,' we don't mean an abstract being but an individual, flesh-and-blood human (or nonhuman) being" (Lejano, 2023, p.3).

Furthermore, Mirra pens empathy as defined by former President Barack Obama: “the ability to put yourself ‘into another person’s shoes’ or see the world from that person’s perspective” (Obama, 2006 as cited in Mirra, 2018, p. 3).

An empathetic approach to culturally-responsive teaching allows students the reading, writing, and thought-processing time in-class to develop inquiry towards establishing and formulating connections across various contexts, inclusive of peer analysis, collaboration, and democratic roundtable discussions. After all, part of the ELAR curriculum clearly articulates allowing students to synthesize information from various sources, most especially when using a readers/writers workshop model. An empathetic approach encourages students to self-reflect and tap into the power of storytelling—through *counternarratives*—as “[s]tories provide the necessary context for understanding, feeling, and interpreting” where they fall in the world and how they fit within society so that they can, in turn, develop their identity and fulfill, or *win*, the promise of an/their American education: *The American Dream* (Ladson-Billings, 2009, p. 23).

When students are granted time to illustrate their cultural background(s) on paper, to share their *counterstories*, they are using language not only to gain knowledge about themselves as readers/writers, but also to communicate among their peers and become interconnected—to build bridges with those who may not look like them but in being *among* them, become a part of them, *one with* each other, within their classroom communities.

Organization of the Study

As a self-study, I plan to focus on the following main research question through storytelling that recounts my own practices and the experiences of my students within a middle school classroom and a state-mandated curriculum: Texas Essential Knowledge and Skills (TEKS) for English Language Arts & Reading (ELAR), Grade 8. This study chronicles my story

and students' experiences in our classroom when I take an empathy-forward and social-equity approach to the district's established curriculum, Calkins' "Units of Study" (Grade 8).

What happens when I modify the required state and district-mandated 8TH Grade English Language Arts & Reading curriculum, using an empathy-forward and social-equity approach?

Secondly, in order to successfully articulate the following subquestions, I plan to use data collected from student essays (expository, argumentative, literary, informative, comparative, and/or correspondence) and recorded Small-Group conferences, as well as lesson plans and a teacher reflection journal:

In what ways do students utilize their personal ethnic identities and experiences as they engage with this curriculum?

What are the implications of my teaching practices [on my students]?

I will analyze the materials by utilizing the lens of empathy and culturally-responsive pedagogy. I wish to capture students' experiences of an empathy-forward approach to mandated curriculum, through storytelling based on the following data sources: documents, student essays, recorded Small-Group conferences, and my teacher reflection journal.

CHAPTER 2 LITERATURE REVIEW

In terms of what has been researched and investigated in secondary English Language Arts & Reading (ELAR) classrooms, there are few case studies to synthesize from, as the majority of the research conducted in the past 5-10 years has come from scholars who have *not* both taught and experienced the 'identify-and-cease' to teach sociopolitical issues alongside the said required knowledge and skills, along with teaching in a post-COVID-19 pandemic—where the integration and need for technologically-advanced educational platforms skyrocketed. Furthermore, since my research is set within Texas, there are few to no case studies conducted. Because social dissonance surrounding race, ethnicity, and culture, as well as post-pandemic struggles have forced academic struggles upon traditional versus technologically-advanced texts—all alongside the constant divisions stemming from political turmoil—there are limitations to synthesizing empirical case studies.

Thus, this Literature Review I have conducted possesses limitations, such as finding specific case studies. Therefore, there are articles from the National Council of Teachers of English (NCTE), inclusive of reflections and opinion pieces within. The Literature Review is organized by three themes:

1. Teacher National and State Requirements for English Language Arts and Reading
2. Culturally-Responsive Instructional Practices
3. Empathy-Forward Practices

Teacher National and State Requirements for English Language Arts and Reading

For teachers to teach, or facilitate, student growth, educational and learning standards are provided to these professionals. For ELAR teachers, specifically, the NCTE has collaboratively

built upon ELAR standards for professionals to refer to and ensure their lessons work alongside and radiate the ethical duties and responsibilities put forth by researched scholarship.

As such, nearly every decade, ELAR standards are reviewed and updates are required, most especially due to “an outflow of support for... standards [to be] both contemporary and forward thinking” (George et al., 2021, p. 56). In 2018, after NCTE was appointed to revise the 2012 learning standards that contribute to the learning of ELAR skills, research and collaboration began, and by September 2019, the revision process was underway.

The most intense area of need was noted by the NCTE Executive Committee requesting "that the standards utilize the term *antiracist* instead of *antibias* throughout the standards... [because] the use of the term *antiracist* only refer[red] to issues relating to race” (George et al., 2021, p. 57). However, in the end, the term adopted by all was “the modified term *antiracist/antibias*” (George et al., 2021, p. 57). While the language was synonymous in nature, it clearly exhibits the crucial need, acknowledgement, and understanding that documented terms are pivotal when relied upon by the success of students and educational growth for professionals.

By July 2021—in a post-pandemic world thriving with technology-infused lessons and an acquisition for the need for higher engagement in learning activities for students, all alongside the sociopolitical turmoil brewing with racial tensions and cultural (mis)understandings—the Council for the Accreditation of Education Preparation (CAEP), one of several organizations “recognized by the U.S. Department of Education as accreditors for institutions of higher education (IHEs)", adopted the most recent standards for English educators, inclusive of standards which cornerstone social justice and equity in ELAR education (George et al., 2021, p. 55).

However, while NCTE works alongside many educational institutions, my current research context is within the state of Texas, and as such, Texas possesses its own education system and learning standards. Nonetheless, many of the expectations and requirements are the same for professionals and fulfillment duties to be completed with/for students. There are words within the Texas policy itself that remain vastly ambiguous in nature:

> *"(J) Standard 1.10. The educator shall be of good moral character and be worthy to instruct or supervise the youth of this state.*
>
> > ***(9)*** *Good moral character—The virtues of a person as evidenced by patterns of personal, academic, and occupational behaviors that, in the judgment of the State Board for Educator Certification, indicate honesty, accountability, trustworthiness, reliability, and integrity. Lack of good moral character may be evidenced by the commission of crimes relating directly to the duties and responsibilities of the education profession as described in §249.16(b) of this title (relating to Eligibility of Persons with Criminal History for a Certificate under Texas Occupations Code, Chapter 53, and Texas Education Code, Chapter 21), or by the commission of acts involving moral turpitude, but conduct that evidences a lack of good moral character is not necessarily limited to such crimes or acts.*
>
> > ***(23)*** *Worthy to instruct or to supervise the youth of this state--Presence of those moral, mental, and psychological qualities that are required to enable an educator to render the service essential to the accomplishment of the goals and mission of the State Board for Educator Certification policy and this chapter"* (Texas Education Agency [TEA], 2018).

And while TEA intentionally tries to denote and specify the meaning of *morality* and *worthy*, in today's sociopolitical climate, where race is magnified, the need for clarity is critical and not only demands but requires reformation.

If history has taught those within the education field lessons, the majority are rooted in: (1) the subjectivity of terminology and differing opinions regarding not only *who* possesses the power to both strip *of* power but to also *initiate* empowerment, as well as (2) the ever-transforming acknowledgement that there will *always, constantly* be "curriculum questions about *whose* version of culture, history, and everyday life will count as official knowledge" to be discussed, argued, democratically debated, and choices needed to be affirmed for the greater good of the student body *within the contexts* befitting of the current national, state, and/or localized atmospheres (Luke, 2012, p. 5).

Empathy and Culturally Responsive Instructional Practices

Empathy-Forward Approaches to Literacy

Before we dive into practices of empathy, we must pause and ask ourselves: *What is literacy?* Rogers & Street solidify the most debatable issue in the realm of literacy: What, specifically and tangibly, is the denotation of *literacy*? Literacy is more than reading and writing. Beyond that, the term itself has multiplied over time, causing a once-monolingual definition to surpass complexities and variations that span across the globe, and all of which are pivotally and completely reliant on context. The most apparent and relevant theme that aligned across the texts written by Rogers & Street is that there has always been, and will always be, *power* in literacy (Rogers & Street, 2012, pp. 65-86). True, valid literacy demands "reading the word and the world" (Friere & Macedo, 1987).

Much of what is known about literacy stems from Friere's *conscientization*—the ability for one to gather an awareness of their reality based on social practices and self-reflection—is synonymous to the current open-ended Social Justice Standards of inquiry, in which students self-reflect on the following (Ehrenhalt, 2022, p.11-13):

- **Identity** - How do students recognize themselves in a text, even if only through relations?
- **Diversity** - How does the text include *others'* experiences?
- **Justice** - Who possesses the power within a text? What is unjust within a text, and how might it convey/perpetuate what is known today?
- **Action** - How would a student/a class choose to act upon a situation—such as being placed in a similar circumstance—as one within a text?

In the aggregate: What does literacy truly *look* like in secondary English classrooms? How do the laws transpire within four classroom walls? While for my own study, I focus on standards surrounding the ELAR curriculum at P ISD, the case studies I researched were limited in range. Therefore, I pull culturally-responsive practices from various humanities courses, rich with history, as there is a focus on contexts that emphasize minorities within the educational system.

Humanities courses, in particular, have been under scrutiny by both politicians and parents, many issues of which have been exacerbated by the brutal killings of African American men at the hands of white police officers and that have been further mainstreamed on social media and continues to be so widespread and, tragically, 'normalized'. Furthermore, I pull from other countries who are, too, facing an influx of "context[s] of immigration, globalisation, and colonisation, [inclusive of] students' identities [that are] transnational, fluid, and emerging" (Au, 2009 as cited in Lopez, 2011, p. 75). These societal dilemmas are intertwined with readings, writings, and verbal responses which students work through to/and understand to find their own identities.

Empathy-Forward Approaches to Teaching

Teachers as Creative Agents

Because educators are faced with a grim reality that the standards will remain the same until several other/outside factors are addressed and acted upon, many teachers have become creative agents in their field, taking the reins of their ethical obligations and pairing that alongside the academic content and standards that are required of them. From said creative agents, new practices that both emphasize *and* empathize culturally-sustaining practices have been born, and they are impacting student learner outcomes with more success than ever before.

A case study, arguably completed before its time, was conducted by June Jordan, an English professor at the University of California-Berkeley. Jordan taught *The Color Purple*, written by Alice Walker, to a group of young students—many of them African American. After completing the reading, when asked for their thoughts and reflection of the novel, a question was posed that generated much discussion, laughter, and self-reflection: Why did Alice Walker transcribe her characters' voices identical to their phonetic sounds in typed English (versus standard English)? And the outcome...? Per Jordan:

> "Here was a negative Black reaction to a prize-winning accomplishment of Black literature that White readers across the country had selected as a best seller. Black rejection was aimed at the one irreducibly Black element of Walker's work: the language—Celie's Black English" (Jordan, 1985, p. 162).

Jordan then spent the remainder of the semester with her class, formulating their own rules for Black English and writing accordingly alongside her students within the class. Near the end of the course, it became clear to Jordan and the learners within her classroom that "There are three qualities of Black English—the presence of life, voice, and clarity—that intensify to a

distinctive Black value system that we became excited about and self-consciously tried to maintain" (Jordan, 1985, p. 164). Having learned how to teach Black English from her own students' identities in the mid-1980's, it became clear to her that American educational systems, even postsecondary (such as Jordan's), are far from breaking the systemic holds placed upon traditionally oppressed individuals.

Teacher Vulnerability and Student Input

Jordan's willingness to remain vulnerable and allow for student input was critical in the students' learning and success. It allowed her students to better identify their roots with literacy and granted them the power to choose for themselves who they wished to become because of it. Instead of a traditional teach-sit-and-learn lecture, Jordan's classroom became a sharing environment where her students' input allowed her to better understand what specific content *they* felt they needed to comprehend in order to thrive within the classroom, as well as in society. From there, she was able to collaboratively learn and practice language and literacy with her students to build a course where they not only felt validated and celebrated, but it also allowed for reciprocity to feel acknowledged, appreciated, and able to transpire discussions beyond the traditional scope of literacy.

If we pair the rich contexts of Jordan's study—despite it having taken place in a postsecondary institution—the critical and culturally-responsive practices that were utilized and nurtured are still exceptionally relevant and parallel what other teachers in today's world act upon. Still—more importantly—it exemplifies and drastically reiterates the individualized, socioemotional, and academic needs of her student body.

Democratic Circles

A Canadian study conducted by educator Ann E. Lopez critically analyzes and studies how an English teacher, Meriah, enacts her pedagogical practices via "agency and activism in a secondary English classroom in Southern Ontario, Canada to critically re-conceptualise her grade 12 Writer's Craft class" (Lopez, 2011, p. 76). Meriah's professional discretion fully emphasized her understanding and pressures felt by education systems, specifically within her "large, sub-urban, multi-racial, multi-ethnic, multi-lingual, multi-faith secondary school"—that there remains a growing demand by politicized administrators, the bureaucrats of schools, to teach essential knowledge and skills via "canonical texts [that] still hold dominant positions in the curriculum", *despite* the needs of her diverse student population (Lopez, 2011, p. 77).

To do so, she grounded a lesson that focused solely on student input and "critically discursive spaces"—safe spaces where students discuss their differing opinions and reasoning(s)/(mis)conceptions with "no emotional wounding"—via poetry-specific "graphic pieces" that highlights some of the grim realities faced by historically-marginalized bodies (Lopez, 2011, p. 83).

As observed by Lopez, Meriah was able to establish three critical literacy strategies surrounding the culturally relevant texts: (1) the instructional assignments warranted students "to pose and solve higher-order problems"; (2) the necessity for students to "develop cultural competence" by empowering themselves via self-identity and gaining self-confidence with cultural awareness; and (3) the evolution of "sociopolitical and critical consciousness that allowed/s them to critique cultural norms, values, and institutions that produce and maintain social inequities" by posing empathetic based questions (Lopez, 2011, p. 78).

What was revealed by students was a global reality that has the ability to set a precedent for dichotomous educational systems across the globe: the utilization of critical literacy and culturally-responsive pedagogies has the ability to heal racial barriers and transform classrooms by building empathy via self-reflective inquiry and democratic circles.

While establishing explicit dialogue around race can be uncomfortable, humans can begin to feel safer—and possibly, more understanding—just as with Meriah's students: By allowing the process of natural dialogue and inquiry, students came to trust one another and were able to transform their classroom into a safe learning environment.

For many teachers, there are numerous pedagogical practices where students can engage in democratic circles, including Socratic seminars, various Kagan strategies, and most critically, Small-Group discussions. With Small-Group discussions, teachers pull only a handful of students at a time to really hone in and provide authentic feedback and support, including—and thoroughly understanding—that there are times where non-academic needs must be listened to, understood, acknowledged, and appropriately answered to.

During this time, it is critical for teachers to grow in their own literacy—by listening, comprehending, and responding to their students in a timely and empathetic manner—so that the students have the opportunity to then receive teacher feedback that is absolutely, genuinely individualized and nurturing to their growth in literacy.

Individualized Curriculum: Valuing Multiculturalism

A more recently published study that reinforces the desirable concept of breaking literacy barriers was conducted by Researcher Robert Burroughs. In attempting to research and redefine how culturally-responsive pedagogy is utilized within secondary English Language Arts & Reading (ELAR) classrooms, Burroughs spent two years observing and interviewing three

teachers in an upper-suburb of New Jersey. In seeking to discover and attain a variety of pedagogical practices, Burroughs gathered data from the following pseudonym educators: Claudia Callahan, teacher of British Literature; Tony Harrison, teacher of American Literature; and Emily French, teacher of World Literature.

According to Burroughs, "selected tradition[al texts] often become 'deadly traditions, as students are marched through a list of 'classic texts,' focusing on 'right' answers, with few explicit reasons for why the texts were chosen" (Burroughs, 1999, p. 139). Seeking to "draw upon [a] notion of curriculum as conversation as a framework for discussion of multicultural literature in secondary English curriculum", Burroughs shadowed the pedagogical practices of multicultural and critical literature incorporated into daily lessons throughout the school year (Burroughs, 1999, p. 139). The culturally-responsive literacy strategies utilized in the following study included Paulo Freire's critical literacy theory, as well as Derrick Bell et al.'s critical race theory.

In Claudia Callahan's British Literature classroom, she established her curriculum based on significant periods of Great Britain. Hoping to find an organized way of teaching significant texts, Callahan formulated her scope and sequence via chronological order.

By the end of the study, Burroughs found that only one teacher, Callahan, incorporated one multicultural text: The Family, written by Buchi Emecheta. According to Callahan, what she found clear (e.g. the significance of a diverse author that differed from her traditional novels), students found difficult to understand how/why Emecheta's novel was representative of British Literature. Callahan's teaching practices didn't allow for her students to visibly articulate "connections among the books", as there were "few conversational connections among them" (Burroughs, 1999, p. 143).

For this study, Burroughs found that the development of a student is dependent upon the learning of cultural context, knowledge, and awareness only which could have been provided via (1) personal students' backgrounds; (2) when purposely imbedded within the curriculum; and/or (3) by allowing students time to synthesize information and inquire about systemic power structures. Thus, the multicultural language and context learned is crucial to student development in their knowledge and growth of certain British literature/texts.

In the end, Callahan found it difficult to replace traditional texts with multicultural novels, as her mentality remained that if *she* liked the texts chosen, she believed it was enough to foster students' educational knowledge and growth.

Empathy-Forward Approaches in ELAR Classrooms

The second educator Burroughs examined was American Literature professor Tony Harrison, who "organized selections around a 'Clash Of Cultures' theme" (Burroughs, 1999, p. 146).

By formulating "three different 'strands' of literature running through the historical periods: Native American, African American, [and] European", Harrison then created "canons" of conversations for students that incorporated and centered around texts, such as "Columbus as exploiter, indentured servancy as precursor to slavery, and slaves as property" to provide a snippet; all discussions circulated around the following question: "What is American Literature?" (Burroughs, 1999, pp. 146-149). In summation, doing so allowed students to self-reflect on the connections they have personally experienced within society and build connections amongst the texts read in class.

The final observation concluded by Burroughs was of a World Literature teacher named Emily French. In her classroom, one culture per month was studied, followed by a charted

analysis of various types of texts (e.g., oral literature, mythology, speeches, short stories, novels, etcetera). The perspective and teaching approach adopted by French mirrors that of Bell (CRT) and Freire (Critical Literacy Theory), and their belief that individuals gain a better understanding of the relationship between words and power when situating texts around equity, power, and social justice issues.

Students were given a chart to analyze myths in order to recognize and identify patterns of their understanding and perception of each piece of text. French's organization of classroom materials was not done by way of thematic units or chronological order, but instead, it was organized by cultural perspectives. According to Burroughs, French's "multicultural classroom stressed differences inherent in literary interpretation and made that a topic of conversation as well" (Burroughs, 1999, p. 153).

Overall, Burroughs acknowledges that most secondary teachers are provided curriculum maps/scope and sequence for which they are to provide an extraordinary amount of historical literary knowledge to students within an unrealistic time frame. He argues that "In secondary schools… curriculum is more implied than enacted… [as] literature textbooks provide a skeleton of the historical" significance of literary movements, and as such "literary education presents teachers with an almost Herculean task of providing scope and sequence without the time and space" (Burroughs, 1999, p. 154-155).

As such, when teachers are able to formulate a diverse range of multicultural texts and critical literacy practices within a classroom, it has the potential to "reflect cultural and individual differences within the classroom as well as within the literature" (Burroughs, 1999, p. 155).

In attempting to review similar and multiple sources of pedagogical practices of literacy within K-12 classrooms, I began to reflect on my own experiences. The teaching position which initiated my interest in embarking on my Educational Doctorate journey was when I was granted the opportunity to teach Advanced Placement (AP) English Language & Composition courses. Like students whose eyes may never read a text they self-identify with, I, too, never would have discovered an entirely new realm of educational scholarship without having ever taught AP English courses.

I found that the beauty of teaching AP English courses is that they are taught by the curriculum approved by the College Board—not by the TEA. In acknowledging this, I purposely chose to search for educators who are like-minded in fostering empathy and highly stimulating and engaging content for the sake of researching and understanding how the gaining of literacy alongside culturally-responsive practices can be enacted, and I then came upon a fellow AP educator, History practitioner Rachel Klimke.

In *Counterpoints "*Big History, Little World: The Politics of Social Justice Curriculum in Advanced Placement World History", Klimke details her own personal and professional experience teaching an AP History course with the intent to grow students into more empathetic individuals, and hoping to purposely identify how "replicating colonial and imperialist traditions" are still factors that run not only American democracy but also her own multicultural high school and the AP program within it (Klimke, 2016, p. 124).

Klimke begins by noting that the majority of students enrolled in the AP program at her school were those who were most competitive among students, all of which include students who would also benefit from learning about social justice concepts within the AP History curriculum.

The year she chose to dissect and transform her AP History program, she had already been successfully managing the course and producing passing exam scores.

Klimke's goal was to specifically create lessons using the curriculum with a Colonialism lens that would "explore the ways human beings tend to develop identity in opposition to people perceived as different, as 'the other'" (Klimke, 2016, p. 125). All the while, students would find their voice within narrative reflections, documenting their responses, and continually making personal connections to the lessons with the goal of establishing themselves as a global citizen, concretely being able to convey their identity.

The following year after she reformed her teaching model, Klimke was laid off, and as any researcher would, Klimke self-reflected and recognized faults within her plan and implementation: She realized that her teaching style never changed, including the time frames she allotted for students to digest concepts and/or material, as well as the unwillingness to acknowledge that throughout the course, students still just wanted to maintain an acceptable grade, as well as to simply be provided the means necessary to pass the AP exam at the end of the course.

In conclusion, Klimke noted that through it all, while she tried to reinvent and combine humane components and social equity within the AP History curriculum, she and her students "were in a state of oppression imposed by the AP program: time and the need to pass the test kept [them] captive" (Klimke, 2016, p. 127). While Klimke was an AP History educator, her research study within her own classroom laid out a detailed foundation for the planning of how she proposed the implementation of social justice guidelines within a curriculum.

In seeking social justice, she recognized the need for a hardlined reminder that some students' goal is simply to 'play along', pass, and obtain credit. The difficult reality is the

willingness to acknowledge this, and still allow time and maintain hope that rewriting a curriculum set on producing test scores for worthiness potential growth could still be obtainable.

What is clear to teachers like Klimke—who are willing to be creative agents and serve their students in such a way that their learning transpires beyond the classroom walls and into society—is the following: Educators must provide flexible instruction to their students by allowing them the academic freedom and ability to choose creative acceptance *and* empathy. Teachers must be willing to release total academic control and risk tweaking how the standards are taught, in order to allow all learners to *feel* and *be* accepted by a white-transfixed educational system.

Empathy and Restorying

When students are granted time to pen their cultural background(s) on paper, to share their *counterstories*, they are using language not only to gain knowledge about themselves as readers/writers but also to communicate among their peers and become interconnected—to build bridges with those who may not look like them but in being *among* them, become a part of them, *one with* each other, within their classroom communities—empathizing with other human beings.

In ELAR classrooms, it *is* possible to begin mending issues of racism and white privilege by listening to *counterstories* and comprehending multiple perspectives as a vital first act in order to gain a reconciled mentality of 'we, our society' over 'me, an individualized approach' to the growth of our nation's principles and the mission towards true, genuine American unity and *justice for all*.

Furthermore, being critically aware in a secondary ELAR classroom requires the ability to mobilize self-reflection throughout the facilitation of a lesson, as well as remain cognizant of the language utilized when presenting content; the goal remains to break traditional barriers and

instill pride in the plethora of cultural identities of students within the classroom. Lewison et al.'s model of critical literacy consists of said "instructional practices[,] including *disrupting the commonplace, interrogating multiple viewpoints, considering the sociopolitical,* and *taking action for social justice*" (Lewison et al., 2002, p. 383).

Therefore, when students are asked to step outside the bubble of normative English curriculum practices (*disrupt[ing] the commonplace*), such as stiff hegemonic reading and writing basics, and into a course wherein social debates are discussed, questioned, and individual voices are allowed to speak, be heard, and thoroughly understood (*interrogating multiple viewpoints)*—such as intentionally pairing texts to consider *counterstories* alongside required texts in critical literacy discussion groups—the quality of education far exceeds that of any course that primarily focuses on standardized tests.

By changing the norm, students are now harnessing their cultural backgrounds in order to synthesize new connections and better understand not only *who* they are in the world but *where* they wish to see and grow themselves. Allowing students a mirror—others who look, talk, and act as they do both inside and outside academic walls—can provide them the opportunity they often yearn for, in order to push themselves to be more than a traditional statistic. This is known as one form of critical literacy: to "invite students to analyze and respond to literature through multiple critical perspectives, teachers can privilege students' diverse cultural identities" (Ervin, 2021, p. 321).

In order to facilitate opportunities for this, students are provided with choices of literature to read during class. Time is provided for both reading and roundtable discussions, utilizing various open-ended responses, including questions synonymous to the Social Justice Standards (Ehrenhalt, 2022, p.11-13). While the book options are chosen by what is approved by the state

and district, teachers have the ability to open/narrow the options based on their professional discretion; therefore, multicultural literacy options are likely, though not always, extensive.

Nonetheless, by allowing students to critically dissect literacy components and build connections/relevance to today's social issues, students are invited to and welcomed into noticing systemic flaws surrounding race and cultural contexts. According to Ervin, "By teaching students to notice and question the underlying ideologies in literature through critical theories, they can apply a new lens to interpret ideologies promoted in society, and how different cultures are positioned among those ideologies" (Ervin, 2021, p. 324). These bridges connect (1) from student self-reflection to (2) literary analysis and critique to (3) finding relationships amongst the real world, and (4) in turn, students understand how these traditional and contemporary relationships directly apply to their academic and/or personal lives. Additionally, students are then able to transform how they move forward with their own goals by "*counterstorytelling* as a method for rejecting the idea of neutrality in texts and allowing marginalized youth to 'speak back' to the dominant narratives (as cited in Johnson, 2018, p. 113)" (Ervin, 2021, p. 325).

CHAPTER 3 METHODOLOGY

Research Purpose and Research Questions

The purpose of this study is to improve my own teaching practice that aims to build on the strengths of the diverse backgrounds of all students in my classroom by focusing on empathetic approaches in order to uncover how the specific social contexts and dilemmas students are faced with in their personal lives influence literacy instruction directly and impact how an English Language Arts & Reading (ELAR) teacher responds to and nurtures their identities when sharing in-depth feedback in a Small-Group setting. The research goal is to allow students to academically and socioemotionally thrive in the ELAR content by analyzing the follow research question:

> *What happens when I modify the required state and district-mandated 8TH Grade English Language Arts & Reading curriculum, using an empathy-forward and social equity approach?*

My Roles, Background, and Positionality

In my teaching career, I have taught Grades 6-12, from Advanced Placement English Language/Literature & Composition courses to middle school English Language Arts & Reading. The majority of my years in education have been taught at Title I schools, which generally tend to have high minority student populations; large populations of socioeconomically disadvantaged students; and programs that offer social and health support to the students, as well as parents, in the direct communities surrounding the school.

I seek to be transparent in expressing that experiencing teaching in several Title I schools has opened my eyes to an educational system that I feel is broken and not suitable for all

learners, specifically for those who come from historically disadvantaged backgrounds and complex family situations.

Such challenges faced in this field directly contribute to my passion for exploring methods beyond traditionally white-streamed classroom practices, and instead, aim to find more equitable teaching strategies in order to implement both state-required TEKS, as well as germinate empathetic mannerisms in the classroom to then transpire beyond the classroom walls.

Taking my teaching experiences and acknowledging America's current sociopolitical climate, I define the role of an educator to be thus: one who facilitates knowledge, specific in a content area, but not limited to applying singular and/or content-specific strategies in order for student success and mastery of state and district-required knowledge and skills. An educator is one who harnesses a culmination of cultural experiences and self-identity of each individual student, nurturing each being by connecting content to real-life applications and fostering empathetic communication by listening, understanding, acknowledging, and answering to the ever-changing, always evolving human needs.

Reflecting on my own privileges, I realize how fortunate I have been to have first-generation, college-graduate parents who have worked extremely hard to give me opportunities so that my life was as successful as I chose to make it. Currently, I am a tricenarian, Hispanic female whose first and only language is English. In education, I have been mistaken for a Spanish speaker—though the Spanish language was purposely not taught to me, as my own parents' upbringing included punishment in school when Spanish was spoken. Not wanting the same for me, English became the sole language taught to me and my sisters. Nonetheless, without my parents, I would never have been able to accomplish and establish myself at/on the educational level I am at today; being able to share in an educational experience

with peers who are like-minded and as overly analytical as I am has been a blessing, to say the least.

After considering my own upbringing and personal experiences—physically and emotionally and financially—for my field site, this means taking time to take field notes according to my own perceptions and interpretations with my observations. After that, however, I fully acknowledge the necessary time required to sit down and process my own interpretations; I will have to consider the multi-layered background/history of my own students and be willing to ask myself questions that—while they may not be 100% a contribution to my own theories—would be deemed necessary for bettering my understanding of motivations by those human subjects that may directly correlate to my own research.

The value in documenting major events of an individual's life brings to light the *fixed positions* and *subjective positions* and *textual positions* that are so relevant in comprehending and analyzing research. For example, I have always considered education to be a *fixed position* in my life; it was something that my parents deeply valued and thoroughly explained to me that regardless of marriage, I was essentially required to complete and be responsible for obtaining my undergraduate degree. However, realizing that my Mom was virtually disowned and my father was often bullied as a young kid in Chicago without a father figure to assist him were reasons that led them to get their own degrees and push education so hard on me and my two older sisters. My interpretation of education is only such because it was of these *counterstories* that it was established to be an extremely valuable tool in our home.

In much the same way that I am understanding the role of education in my life, I would be required to consider the same contexts with the human subjects I observe. I acknowledge a

need to consider understanding student motivations for the role the Parent(s)/Guardian(s) have on the students' motivation and/or academic success(es).

As a practitioner, within my classroom walls, I self-regulate the Grade 8 English Language Arts & Reading (ELAR) curriculum. My curriculum design and implementation is a pluralistic mesh of the district's curriculum; the current sociopolitical climate—as social awareness to significant issues directly impacts students' academic well-being and success (which was delivered by district-approved subscriptions/resources); and an empathy-forward approach. Here, I, again, define an *empathy*-forward approach as aforementioned. Further clarification—in terms of how it is consistently utilized in my ELAR 8 classroom—can be defined by the Merriam-Webster dictionary as "the action of understanding, being aware of, being sensitive to, and vicariously experiencing the feelings, thoughts, and experience of another of either the past or present without having the feelings, thoughts, and experience fully communicated in an objectively explicit manner" (Merriam-Webster, 2023, para. 1).

Definition of Relevant Terms Needed to Understand the Problem

Empathy-Forward. To build a rapport with students who come from all walks of life and are meshed together in a classroom with diverse peers, all teachers must possess empathy. As aforementioned, empathy stems from the ability to be respectful and compassionate to another human being, placing all judgements and/or preconceived biases aside; it is to have the ability to "take on the perspective of another culture" (Goleman, 1998; Oliner & Oliner, 1995 as cited in McAllister & Irvine, 2002, p. 433). According to McAllister & Irvine, "This type of empathy has also been referred to as 'altruism,' which implies action on behalf or in service to others' needs" (Goodman, 2000 as cited in McAllister & Irvine, 2002, p. 434). Again, in more clarified terms, Merriam-Webster defines empathy as "the action of understanding, being aware of, being

sensitive to, and vicariously experiencing the feelings, thoughts, and experience of another" (Merriam-Webster, 2023, para. 1).

For the context of this study, students are expected to read a historical fiction book of their choice and continuously collaborate with their peers, attempting to empathize with and understand the character's point-of-view, as well as their peers' perspectives on any/all internal and/or external conflicts the character(s) face—with the end goal being to formulate a theme and explain the author's purpose and explanation of craft(ing) in order to allow students to gain insight into the significance of learning about both rhetorical techniques and historical fiction, which—with hope—transpires into society.

GenEd. All of the students whose *counternarratives* are shared are not students who are in any way part of Special Populations—which, in the education system, refers to students who may be labeled as having an Individualized Education Plan (IEP) via Special Education (SPED); 504 Plan for a medical and/or physical disability that may impact their learning; as well as English Language Learners (ELL) and/or English as a Second Language (ESL). So often, there are counternarratives that include students who are directly a part of Special Populations, and while I fully support the mission of all aforementioned programs' awareness, my self-study inquiry argues the need for such emphasis on General Education (GenEd) students.

Counternarratives/Counterstories. Because the education system is inundated with students who very often do not qualify for legally binding accommodations and/or modifications; instead, the GenEd population includes students who are, and very often remain, part of a "'master narrative'... [which] is within the context of racism that 'monovocal' stories about the low educational achievement and attainment of students of color are told" (Solorzano, 2002, p. 27). Therefore, here a *counternarrative*, or a *counterstory*, is the retelling of an individual

students' exchange between me, as their ELAR teacher, and them, as the student learner. In having taken dialogical notes and voice recordings, I strived to reconstruct vignettes of (a) moment(s) in time during Small-Group conferencing. Such *counternarratives/counterstories* possess the sole purpose of fulfilling justice for my students by attempting to document my listening for understanding of their human experiences and acknowledging the need to answer, and possibly initiate, mending issues of racism, white privilege, and/or other complex sociopolitical issues.

Culturally-Responsive Pedagogy. What is culturally-responsive pedagogy in an ELAR classroom? Culturally-responsive pedagogy depends upon the context and content in which it is being applied. For this narrative inquiry, I look at understanding the abstract definition and function of literacy, as teaching in a culturally-responsive manner means meeting the needs of each of my students dependent upon their grade-level and socioemotional needs.

To begin with culturally-responsive pedagogy, educators must acknowledge that literacy is *more* than reading and writing. Beyond that, the term *literacy*, itself, has multiplied over time, causing a once-monolingual definition to transform into a plethora of denotative and nuanced understandings that mingle and intertwine across the globe, and which are pivotally and completely reliant on context.

According to James Paul Gee, New Literacy Studies (NLS) researcher, *literacy* is viewed as an *action* completed *within* and amongst society; it is "not just inside their heads, and should be studied as such… in an integrated way in its full range of contexts and practices, not just cognitive, but social, cultural, historical, and institutional, as well" (Gee, 2015, p. 2). Gee's research coincides, too, with scholarship surrounding critical literacy foundation: "Critical literacy is an overtly political orientation to teaching and learning and to the cultural, ideological,

and sociolinguistic content of the curriculum. It is focused on the uses of literacy for social justice in marginalized and disenfranchised communities" (Luke, 2012, p. 5).

Similarly, Rogers & Street argue there has always been, and will always be, *power* in literacy (Rogers & Street, 2012, pp. 65-86). Indeed, "literacy is not a neutral technology" (Larson & Marsh, 2005; Hagood, 2002 as cited in Chapman & Jones, 2017, p. 87). Truth: Valid literacy demands "reading the word and the world" (Friere & Macedo, 1987).

For this inquiry study, literacy is the written, verbal, and reading comprehension skills brought into the classroom that allowed the students to engage and/or interact with the ELAR content, specifically with skills that historical fiction emphasizes and coincides with in today's sociopolitically-charged society. Because literacy is fluid and subjective in nature, the students' understanding and input/output of literacy varied widely. Unlike the vast curriculums across the globe that "essentialises subject English as definable content and measurable skills, [educators] argue that a critical literacy approach is [necessary and] based on dynamic engagement" (Chapman & Jones, 2017, p. 88).

Narrative Self-Study and Counternarratives

The research above informs my work toward critical and empathetic literacy teaching, examined through the methodology of a narrative self-study approach. This approach chronicles my story and students' experiences in our classroom as I took an empathy-forward and social equity approach to the district's established curriculum, Calkins' Units of Study for Grade 8 English Language Arts & Reading (ELAR)..

Contextual Understanding and Location

When I first moved to Austin from San Antonio, TX, one of the first drive-bys I made was by Canyon River Middle School (CRMS) of P Independent School District (ISD), my new school, where I would be teaching Grade 8 English Language Arts & Reading (ELAR). It

was—quite literally—one's ideal image of an upper-class middle school with greenery, plenty of clean parking lots, and lush football fields.

CRMS lies across the street from one of P ISD's most prestigious high schools, home to diverse students. It is undoubtedly ranked one of the most prominent high schools in Austin, TX, and since CRMS feeds into this high school, the students are fortunate and willing to push themselves to be the best. While extracurricular activities typically drive students to perform well academically, the majority of the student population here at CRMS is self-motivated and competitive; their desire to succeed leads to collaboration and asking questions in order to better understand content material, which leads to high achievement.

In any school, however, there remains a percentage of students who do not have the same home lives and Parental/Guardian support as that of the majority. Surrounding CRMS there are patches of low-income/government housing. To emphasize this, one of the first challenges that the CRMS Administration was determined to conquer was that of bus routes that have consistently brought students to school excessively late for the last few years. Unfortunately, several of the students who rode on those particular buses were students who typically come from economically-disadvantaged backgrounds and/or households.

This portrait of CRMS emphasizes the stark dichotomy in student populations, yet despite their backgrounds, there still remains a familial sense of community. It could be argued that while the grounds appear rather large, the reality is that the student population is below 700 and continuously fluctuating. The Grade 8 population is roughly 220+/-, and I teach just over half of these students in my English Language Arts & Reading (ELAR) course.

It is beneficial to also note that the administration aims to be more inclusive of the student body and learning spectrum. While most schools contain coursework that separates

Advanced (Pre-AP) and General Education (GenEd) curricula, CRMS does not abide by these traditional classroom sections. To be clear, Pre-AP coursework is typically only available for students who are labeled Gifted & Talented (GT), or what is known as "SOAR", or Students Of Articulate Rating, here in P ISD. Instead, this school year was the first in which CRMS chose to combine Pre-AP coursework and the GenEd curriculum, which means student populations can be challenging, especially when faced with a vast spectrum of students that can be labeled Modified (MOD) curriculum—serviced with Individual Education Plans (IEPs) via the Special Education (SPED) department—through students who are a part of the Advanced/SOAR program.

Despite this, in order to allow students to grow in their academics and 'survive' as an educator, I've come to find that best practice remains focusing on the individual needs of the student and where they are coming from—culturally, socioemotionally, and academically—by utilizing an empathetic approach in how I choose to facilitate instructional lessons, as well as allowing our learning area to be a safe space where students' feelings are heard, understood as an empath, acknowledged, and answered to by way of incorporating their experiences alongside and/or within assignments that appropriately allow for it.

Responding to Students' Counternarratives/Counterstories

Research conducted by Solorzano and Yosso (2009) suggests that cultural prejudices, including "racism[,] is often well disguised in the rhetoric of shared "normative" values and "neutral" social scientific and educational principles and practices (Matsuda et al., 1993, p. 134). Furthermore, Solorzano and Yosso's research emphasizes a need for counternarratives, as well, because the need for "The counter-story is also a tool for exposing, analyzing, and challenging the majoritarian stories of racial privilege" (Solorzano & Yosso, 2009, p.138). By conducting this

self-study, I propose that I might discover how issues pertaining to student identity, racism, and socioemotional hardships can be reshaped and/or re-examined and understood in the perspective of students by employing culturally-responsive practices, such as practicing Small-Groups.

Facilitation of such complex contentions in Small-Group discussions—including students with first-hand experience of heritage and how their cultural upbringing has allowed them to face social challenges—alongside secondary ELAR pedagogical practices can invite students to share and co-construct knowledge and skills alongside fostering individualized needs for both academic and socioemotional health.

Current educational system lobbyists must consider what first-hand experience from educators and years of research understand: For numerous socioeconomically disadvantaged and culturally/linguistically diverse students who may struggle with literacy and rhetoric, majority of their knowledge of the world comes from personal experiences outside of the classroom, thereby meaning that their acquired literacy and intelligence is further stimulated by texts they can identify with, as well as democratically discuss with peers within their ELAR classrooms and/or school.

Collecting Student Counterstories

Data was collected by video recordings, which were later reviewed, as well as via practitioner reflection journal, which was also reviewed after school. Additional data included student work samples, normal educational practices, and classroom discussions.

All students completed the regular assignments in all sections of ELAR 8 students, but this study is limited to those whose Parent(s)/Guardian(s) signed handwritten/electronic permission of the Indiana University Study Information Sheet For Research.

The counternarratives I crafted from daily teaching interactions with students sought to reflect the identity of the student. The restorying also allowed me to distinguish and re-evaluate my personal teaching philosophies through self-reflection and how that may coincide with the nurturing of social justice enactment, specifically through the use of literature and pedagogical strategies within my own classroom experience(s).

Additionally, I was able to articulate how weekly Small-Group discussions impact my students' learning, as well as my own growth in teaching practices. The recorded discussions with students were not formal in nature, though they were professionally informal in nature.

Analyzing Counternarratives

In order to successfully articulate the following subquestions, I used data collected from student essays (expository, argumentative, literary, informative, comparative, and/or correspondence) and recorded Small-Group conferences, as well as lesson plans and a teacher reflection journal:

- *In what ways do students utilize their personal ethnic identities and experiences as they engage with this curriculum?*
- *What are the implications of my teaching practices [on my students]?*

I analyzed the materials by utilizing the lens of empathy and culturally responsive pedagogy. I wish to capture students' experiences of an empathy-forward approach to mandated curriculum, through storytelling based on the following data sources: documents, student essays, recorded Small-Group conferences, and my teacher reflection journal.

Teacher Reflection Journal for Self-Study

Prior to starting this self-study, I had one goal in mind: teach. Not just teach, but teach in a way that I allowed my past experiences, past students' voices, past failures and/or successes,

and the abundance of research knowledge I have gained over the course of the last six years to inform and guide my instructional practices. I wanted to share my knowledge about the power of writing and Small-Group instruction not only with the students in my classroom but also with my colleagues, especially those NTP.

This required extensive lesson planning and preparation, especially for days where individual student conferences were occurring. In reviewing my instructional practices and strategies, I was able to reread my *teacher journal* and was able to gather the following common themes that all revolve around the irreplaceable act of being *heard*:

Identity and Confidence

> *When I write, I struggle. It's almost as if I start writing and starting over and over and over again. Then, I don't like it. So, instead of erasing, which I tell them [my students] never to do—I have to practice what I preach, too!—I just skip a few lines and start over. Sometimes, I get frustrated, and I close my eyes. Sometimes, I put on music that inspires me, something usually melancholic—because out of the sadness, there are beautiful moments awaiting to sprout. As for the counternarratives I shared about my students, this was true for all of them: Robyn's mind often tricked her into self-doubt; Camila didn't believe in herself and lacked confidence; Lulu Rhett was tired of feeling as if she had to succumb to the inflexible, traditionalist expectations of other teachers; Amaru, though not outwardly looking for anything, was unknowingly strapped by a broken educational system; and Kris' home life weighed heavily on her mind and schooling wishes.*
>
> *Sometimes, when I write alongside my students, they see this; sometimes, they let me talk it out, mimicking how I do the same with them. If I'm at home, my husband hears*

my agitated sighs (and whines), comes over, and asks me what's wrong. And it just comes out…

Empathy for Human Beings with Needs

I wrote and rewrote and rewrote and read and read and reread over and over again. In the end, it was extremely challenging to write because each individual student is unique and sole in their identity.

In understanding what I have learned, it is this: Students want to be seen and heard. Not just listened to but heard, in a caring and meaningful way. They want you to sit with them and work alongside them; they want you to look at them and see that in their eyes, they have a story to tell; and they want to be heard and not judged. Though it may seem so simplistic, it is an extremely vulnerable feat to ask of ourselves and our students. I wonder if they are, or feel, heard at home? Do they have the opportunity to do that, like Bobby and I do with our girls?

Everyone needs that at some point in their lives. To sit down with them, to hear their words and understand where they are struggling, and why and how… These kiddos are sharing their identity and confidence—or lack thereof—with me and other teachers. Does every teacher realize and reflect on this? If students lack confidence, it is the teachers' obligation to look upon them as a human being with needs, and it is our job to grant them the empathy and understanding they deserve as a young person in a world so messy.

Flexibility

And if/when they fall down, fail, are struggling to be "normal" for one instructional class, the empathetic professional must be *flexible* and cater to their in-that-moment, individual

need(s). If that means showing grace, leniency, and/or pushing them to think more critically because you know that student can, then that is your duty.

Advocacy

There is also no "if" for advocacy; it's a requirement, a norm. When their personal needs are not being met and/or their academic life is falling apart and/or requires pushing them onward to excel, it is the job of educators to *advocate* for their students.

> *And, yes, because requiring all of these interpersonal skills of educators isn't enough in the world of teaching, you must remain cognizant of their cultural, ethnic, racial identity and nurture their being by adjusting and conveying that the skills being taught in the classroom are relevant to their daily lives, most especially as they continue with their academic journeys. Why is this a difficult concept for some of my peers to grasp? Why do I feel as if I'm fighting a brick wall?*

Applicability, Transferability, and Home

The written word and verbal language we speak must parallel the reality of applicability, transferability, and merge it with their lives at home.

It's all interconnected. Next year, I wonder where some of them will be, the high school, of course, but where will they be academically? Am I helping them enough? Should I be doing more? How could I even do more? I know I'm confident in my ability to teach and be successful, but are they going to be heard the same way as they are here in middle school? Will they see the relevance and why it's important to learn how to read, write, and speak with their entire voice?

But I can't worry about 'what-ifs'; I can only do what I can do, and that's going to be seeing them, hearing them, nurturing them, and hoping that the skills I have taught them here transfer over and become normative in practice as they get older.

By reflecting on my teacher journal through self-study, I recognized that what I have learned over the course of my teaching career and many, many districts I have been to, is that I am, ultimately, the one who has the immediate and direct honor of supporting diverse students and their individual learning needs when it comes to language and literacy. This is the focus of the following chapter. Perhaps this is why, as I wrote their stories in chapter five, it was painstakingly bittersweet—because I was hard on myself in wanting to craft their counterstories in such a way that it precisely and thoughtfully and beautifully captured the essence of their being.

CHAPTER 4 STORYING MY LITERACY HISTORIES & PRACTICES

Something about hearing my own then-2-year-youngin' say, 'Book!' and watching my then-6-year-youngin' teaching her own sister how to read books brings about nostalgia—it's the memory of my own Mom, with her homemade-by-me macaroni necklace dangling around her neck with an Archie Comic from Comics Plus, my Dad's comic book shop. This is the sole mental picture I have from my childhood years, the *only* memory I hold from when I was 3-4 years old. I remember her smelling like vanilla, the perfume she always wore, and I can recall looking up at her—her neck full of brown moles and my tiny fingers twisting away at them—questioning something and smiling as she continued reading and showing me pictures, rocking slowly on that brown recliner that lasted years beyond my birth home.

My Mom, always so patient and willing to read to my two older sisters and me, is The Rock, the seed, wherein my love and passion for reading and writing began. The way she read books to me, with excitement and always pushing me to think about the characters, the morality… there was definitely a love for literacy, more like a candle that burned in our home, making it feel cozy and welcoming.

I grew up around books; my Mom had stacks of novels on the bookshelves and lined, piled up on her nightstand—always romance, mystery, and suspense; my Dad fostered his own collection, a love for comics and graphic novels, thereby paving the road for our family-owned and operated business, Comics Plus (which recently closed in 2022, after 25+ years in Corpus Christi, Texas); my sisters followed suit, and we cherished most Goosebumps, Sweet Valley High, and Wayside School Is Falling Down adolescent novels. On the weekends, me and my two older sisters—Jess(ica) and (Bri)Seida—spent countless mornings at the small town library,

choosing 5-10 books—whether audio, picture, or chapter—each, and my Mom never said no. Not once.

There's just something about the smell of cardboard-flipped pages; black printed words on a tan-colored page; the licking of my finger touching the mildly grainy page; and the world I could walk into, all from the beautiful words crafted together on an ancient, museum-like-smelling page.

And 'tis somewhere along this journey I was (pre)destined to obtain my MA in English Studies where I have realized that I don't *escape* into new worlds; I'm *invited* in to new worlds, invited to learn, laugh, cry, tense, scream, and smile—always smile at the end of every adventure, just as my Mom would smile next to me when the last turning of a page would turn into a 'Goodbye for now', until the next morning, when I would wake to the wafting smell scent of fresh donuts from Aires Bakery, one of the only bakeries in the small hometown of the King Ranch.

Reminiscing about those aromatic donut holes and $0.10 cinnamon rolls melting in my mouth brings me to cherished moments of my childhood with my Dad. Not only do I remember the ticklish-itchiness of his mustache kissing my cheek as he whispered, 'Shhh! Don't tell your sisters!', but I remember the roll of emotions every morning prior to my daily donut, when the side-screen door slammed shut, and I cried, 'Mommy!' because I, too, yearned for her to drive me to school with my backpack on, just like Jess and Seida. How unfair it was!

My Dad would characterize me as "precocious"—and while 'tis true that I've heard my fair share of older friends call me a wise owl—the past years of studying for my MA has allowed me to realize that it was these moments of a cultivated love for literacy wherein my heart and soul's roots lie. And while it may be cliché to believe that everyone's destiny lies in their

stars—those vivid memories that shine so bright no amount of belittling or foulness can bury what lies within each of us, despite what ancient years of trauma and young love's abusive mistakes stain on us—it *is* true: our destinies are inevitable. *Home is where the heart is*. And my home, my heart remains the letters on pages of a myriad of texts that resonate timelessness, hope, love and war, hatred, bigotry, innocence and compassion—and at the end of it all: Human existence. My soul remains glued to the language of humanity.

And So I Leapt: *The Blossoming Of Teaching Rhetoric*

Never could I have been more of a peridotite stuck on the petrified highway of Death Valley than when I finally catapulted myself into fulfilling my application to graduate school with Arizona State University (Online). My research had given me an inescapable truth, which meant that rolling the cursor over and clicking 'Submit Application' to graduate school came with one dauntingly heavy and nerve-wracking factor: In order to fulfill my promise to myself and to my first-born daughter, I would be required to write a Personal Statement. And so it was thus:

> Humanity is not meant to be a combustible society triggered by hatred and ignorance. It *can* be, however, and in this historic period of time, it appears to be headed in that direction. The one and *only* misunderstanding that is at fault is the lack of comprehension and knowledge given to and gained by our young American citizens *because* of the opposing views stemming from the definition of **humanity**.
>
> Prior to 2014, I believed I was only teaching because that's where my schooling led me. I grew up in a literate home—my Mom had piles of suspense, mystery, and romance novels, and from the time I was in diapers, my Dad read, collected, and owned a comic book store. Being a Secondary English Education major with a minor in Reading

Specialization appears to have been inevitable, yet it isn't precisely in literacy education where I felt to have connected to a bigger purpose in life; it is in the art of teaching students to become compassionate human beings via literacy where I have fallen in love with my studies, and in particular, with English.

A simple bubble map that originated with the word ***humanity*** was how I discovered, *delved* into my teaching philosophy and bonded with my students. From that point, I began explaining that the onward branches should be filled with words directly associated with that term—such as respect, love, compassion. This was quite an easy task for my Juniors and Seniors; it was the following and continuous bubble requirements that challenged all:

- *What news articles/stories have, and will, you read about/view that can be linked to humanity?*
- *What new worlds can we escape to that parallels with life? With society?*
- *Will we choose to fulfill our passions of a better world?*
- *Will we choose to be better human beings? How?*

We spent the year inquiring and exploring and debating and sharing our differing opinions, each respecting one another's viewpoints—even through the Presidential Primaries and Caucuses of Spring 2016 (and we all know how demoralizing that was).

The goal, however, that I am confident my students revealed was my yearning and desire for them to be successful and contributing citizens to society. To be caring citizens to one another. To live in such a way that they better not only America but also our World.

Thus, it wasn't until my years of teaching ELAR where I have truly found the power of the written word, and, in particular, the complexities and brilliance of the English language. It is through learning and teaching English courses where I have discovered the crux of what ***humanity*** means. And what I am most confident about for my students, my kids is that they will—and already have begun—accomplishing this dream, this true and valid definition of ***humanity***. It is through my teaching of humanities and English where a path is lit for them, ready for them to find the kind of person they *choose* to be, ready for them to choose righteousness and compassion. It is through the exploration of English Studies wherein my passion lies and where I know I will find success.

I've learned more than I ever expected to. I've cared more about the world, politics, and argumentation than I ever suspected I would. I've spoken passionately and deliberately about the division of race and the ignorance of skin pigmentation due to the lack of understanding to high school Juniors and Seniors—and what a priceless accomplishment and honor it has been.

My AP English classes became my safe haven for finding my own voice and identity. I am an educator who validates the harshness *and* beauty of reality! Being an English educator allowed me to discuss and have my students debate about life—politics, religion, sex, drugs, poverty—and above all, tracing those roots back to a lack of understanding originating from *the word*: *humanity*.

Humanity has an obligation to one another—but where do we begin? Words; it all begins with diction. Words initiate reactions; emblazoned rhetoric ignites movements. Thus, rhetoric is the root that has triggered such a zealous desire to understand humanity,

and tis' rhetoric that will carry me through successfully grasping my MA (followed by my Ed. D.) in English.

Wanting to remain truthful to myself, while it initially intimidated me, my Personal Statement has come to be one of the most idealized texts I have ever penned. Somewhere along the way, I grew fond of it, grew fond of the diction *I* chose—that's *me*; ***I did that***. Wow.

"When childhood stars shine,
Always stay humble and kind...
When those dreams you're dreamin' come to you,
When the work you put in is realized,
Let yourself feel the pride, but
Always stay humble and kind."
–Humble And Kind, Tim McGraw

And while we all deserve little moments of reflection and self-gratification, my successes would have never been possible without a man who has raised my first-born as his own and blessed me with another beautiful angel, my husband Bobby.

I recall the feeling of desire to "*Just. Do. It.*", and I told myself over and over again in previous years that I would: I would obtain my Masters in English. When I first introduced the idea to Bobby, we were sitting on the couch after our usual nighttime routine—coming-home-from-work exhaustion, cooking, kid-triggered exhaustion, bath time, Mommy-and-Daddy-just-want-to-sit-down exhaustion, bedtime, and—being truly lucky to not have fallen asleep with the kids—finally, Mommy and Daddy watch 90's movies on Netflix and Amazon Prime time. My frantic mind being what it usually is when I get a brilliant idea in my head, I began looking up 100% online English graduate programs on my laptop. When I

expressed interest in wanting to go back and hesitatingly brought up the reality that it would place me in about $20,000 worth of debt, Bobby didn't panic; in fact, the only inquiry I recall him having was, "What do you want to do?"

"I want to be a tenured English Professor one day. It's what I've always wanted to do," I said, my eyes diverting back-and-forth between the ASU website and him, massaging and twisting his fingers through his lush, curly hair with one hand, the other resting on his feet.

"Do. It."

"But, babe," I countered, "this means we'll have to pay—"

He stopped what he was doing, looked at me with his serious eyes—which always keeps my glaze locked in place because everything about my husband reeks of kindheartedness—and said, "Do it."

That was the end of our conversation. And through it all, Bobby has shown me love and support in such a way that no other person has. He's the exceptional rarity: the kind of man who takes ownership of responsibilities because every bone in his body is a giving bone. He took my "go-Go-GO" mentality down about 10 notches, helping me hone in on only the most significant components of our world together: our girls and our own, individual dreams. We raise our children with our shared principles and morals, both valuing this very democratic, environmental-friendly, and humanitarian view, and our conversations about topics discussed on National Public Radio, books, and society bind us into better understanding not only one another but other human beings, as well.

Work Hard: *Rise*

One critical aspect of the world we live in that could assist everyone in finding a common ground of shared humanity would be the one area of interest my husband is most fond of: music.

Bobby has introduced me to a variety of music, and while he may often feel that I don't appreciate all the music he recognizes, I am grateful that he shows me an assortment of genres. One musician, in particular, that he introduced me to—Christina Perri—helped me through some of the gravest times of my life. So much so, in fact, that it moved me to get my first ever tattoo on my lower back that's inscribed, '*This is not the end of me; this is the beginning...*' These lyrics align directly to my personal aspirations: I will one day become a tenured English professor. And, if I'm truly lucky, it will be at my alma mater, Texas A&M University-Kingsville, my small hometown where running into Wal-Mart for a gallon of milk means bumping into at least three members from your graduating high school class.

More than this ultimate ambition, however, lies in what I call the "SO WHAT?!", or the *why*? Every English major would agree it is less of the dream than it is the *meaning* of the dream. My "SO WHAT?!" lies in my desire to teach others a sense of humanity, what it *means* to be human. It's always been more than about stories; it's always been more than about words. Humanity is about teaching love and acceptance, even if it means, as readers, we, too, are suffering through the most terrorizing experience of another's life—be it fictional or real. As a society, we cannot begin to comprehend universality and live up to the fulfillment of unity unless we are willing to become leaders ourselves, to read letters from culturally diverse and worldwide ancestors and remember the most pivotal—be it positive or negative—moments we have historically experienced. Only then—through the power of language and literacy—can I thrive and fulfill my obligation to humanity as the leader, the tenured English Professor, I know I am destined to be.

CHAPTER 5 STORYING STUDENT LITERACY HISTORIES & PRACTICES

What motivates an individual to be an Educator? What is the *sole reason* one seeks out becoming a teacher? What was my motivation? My life's goal is to imprint, much like with Jake in Stephanie Meyer's Twilight Saga; to live for others—not aiming to seek some religious connection or political mission, but merely to be empathetic towards them, instill a sense of *humanness* upon them, and do so with the power of literacy and language. To allow growing human beings to know that *it's okay* to be "different", to be weird or unusual (… whatever ambiguous definition that is). To know that no, they're not the *only* ones who have "weird" thoughts in their head; being self-conscious about whether others are judging them; looking at them; gaping at them from a distance. These are very much "normal" thoughts. While the levels differ, as far as how often one has these thoughts—well, of course. Because we're all different and yet all achingly the same. We're human.

My motivation is to facilitate and understand the knowledge that we're all human, and we're all here to learn about life and other human beings. As an ELAR teacher, I do that with diverse texts. If I can do that with non-fiction literature, by sharing real-life articles, well, that is pretty dang terrific. However, the beauty in ELAR is having a world where one can escape to, to be invited into a book that smells as old as a dusty library or as inky fresh as paint on glossy paper; that's the treasure! Fact or fiction, it's all relevant because we're simply stories in time repeating over and over and over again, because humans may learn from history, but time has shown us we have yet to learn *enough*.

How? There's no magic formula to teaching new knowledge and skills to young minds. While there are many scripted texts that can assist teachers, the best method is simply jumping right in–cold turkey, so to speak. Many teachers–seasoned and new-to-profession (NTP)–start

the school year with “Ice Breakers”, otherwise known as “Get-To-Know-You” (GTKY) activities. The point, though, for many of these black-and-white handouts are simply to allow students to get to know one another, which is great with building a classroom community. The reality, however, is that by the end of a full week of GTKY worksheets, teachers rarely have time to return to every single student’s worksheets to get an accurate picture of the human being that will be sitting in their classroom for nearly a full hour, Monday-Friday, for 10 months out of the year.

I will acknowledge that a plentiful amount of teachers (especially those NTP) do take the time to sit down to do so, but if polled, I can almost guarantee the majority of teachers aren’t granted the *time* required to do so. So… how might teachers truly get to *know* the human being that they’re to greet and educate on a daily basis?

My classroom story may be one option; it focuses on a Small-Group setting where feedback is provided for a variety of specific assignments, yet within each, the learner is able to *show* who they are, describe it for you, and make it visible to you and their peers through the power of their *voice*. And that’s where my students’ *counterstories* begin.

Student Counternarratives

“When the war has took its part,

When the world has dealt its cards,

If the hand is hard,

Together we’ll mend your heart.

Because, when the sun shines, we shine together…”

—*Umbrella*, By: Rihanna (2007)

Identity and Confidence: *"Are you sure…?"*

Robyn Yen

She looked tense, worried. I swear I could see beads of sweat line her forehead. I patted her back and asked, "What's up, Robyn? You okay?" She didn't chuckle or bulge her lower-jaw out and smile nervously, like usual.

This time, her response differed. She still gave off a low, anxious laugh, but she pinched her fingers together on each hand and pressed them firmly to her temples. "Yeahhh…" she trailed off. "Yeah, yeah," she repeated, clearly trying to make herself believe it but failing miserably.

"*Uh-huh*. No, you're not. What's wrong, Robyn?"

"I have so much to do. So, so much homework for Math and Science and a Social Studies packet… And your essay is due tomorrow!"

"Uh-huh… But, you're a smart girl, and I know you can do it. Y'all always have Math and Social Studies homework. I *never* give homework, and you do have class time today to work on it. I can help you. We can see what you already have and work with it. Don't worry!" I tried to reassure her, but the glimmer in her eyes gave her away.

Once I was done instructing the class to continue working on editing and revising their argumentative essays, I called her over to the Small-Group table. "Show me what you got," I said.

"I don't have much…" her voice expressing her low confidence. Her face downward and her eyes looking up at me, it was as if she wished her long lashes would shield her eyes from mine.

"Robyn, *BE CONFIDENT!* Tell me, *'Mrs. Salinas, here's what I have, and I know what I want to say!'* And then, even if you don't have it written down, that's okay, because you can tell me, and I'll write it down for you, and that's that! Then, all you have to do is type it out. Okay?" Her eyes were on the verge of glaring at me, but still, instead of rolling them, she sighed and joined me at Small-Group.

"I know what I want to say, but like, I don't know how to say or word it, or whatever…"

"Okay, so tell me what you want to say."

"Well, I believe women face more societal pressure than men," which was her chosen topic for an argumentative essay, "because of the double-standards society holds, such as clothing and dress codes and sportsmanship. Like, why is it okay for women to dress bare minimum when they play sports or dance, like with Elegants, but it's seen as slutty—sorry, but you know what I'm trying to say—when we're just dressing that way because we're going to school or because we want to?"

She continued, and the brainstorming and initial drafting flew by within a matter of minutes, and I believed her to be on her way to composing her final draft. It was always about the *power* in Robyn's voice. The way she spoke with such fierceness and poise, a perfect balance. Despite this certainty, however, her eyes also gave away self-doubt, and once that crept in, I could see her spirit fade.

As the bell rang to signal the end of the period, she came to me and said she'd finish it for homework.

"No, Robyn, don't worry about it. You seem overwhelmed, and I know you. I know you're a great writer, but I don't want you to rush this."

"No, I can do it—Hey, Iris, can you tell Coach that I'm still in ELAR?" she asked her peer who was leaving to 8TH Period. Iris nodded.

"Yes, I know you can do it, but don't worry about it. You seem like you're really overwhelmed with Math and your other classes, so focus on those. You can hand in your essay on Mon—nope, no one likes homework due on a Monday. Let's say on Tuesday, and that way, you have the weekend, if you need it. I'll be okay; it's not like I need your essay exactly tomorrow. It's fine. You got this. I believe in you. I trust you," I explained.

"Okay… Are you sure?" she questioned.

"Yes. I'm positive! But—I also need you to work on something…" I continued. She looked at me nervously, her eyebrows scrunching together, wondering what else she needed to add to her homework load. "I need you to work on your *confidence*, Robyn. You doubt yourself, and you're *so* beyond that by now. You know what you want to say, so say it. Stand firm. *Believe in yourself!* I can believe in you all day, but you need to, too. Okay?"

"I'm trying, but like…" she paused. "Have you ever heard of 'Imposter Syndrome'? I was talking to Counselor Knight the other day, and like, she's told me before, but like, it's basically where you don't feel like you really know what you're doing. Like, I know, obviously, what I'm doing, but I just feel like I'm not in my body sometimes, like it's not me. Or, like, it's not me able to do the work and things I do. Does that make sense? I don't even know. Am I even making sense?" she questioned, rambling and repeating herself.

"Yes," I replied, "I know what Imposter Syndrome is, and I know exactly how you feel. It's like, *'How could I possibly know what I'm doing? Do I know that?'*, but you do! We all have those feelings sometimes, but maybe you just feel it a little bit more than everyone else. It's

going to be okay. Like I said: I believe in you. And I'll be here to help you whenever, okay?" my eyebrows lifting and waiting for some kind of affirmation from her.

"Yeah," she looked down, heaving a big sigh. "I just…"

"Don't like to ask for help…?" I remarked, attempting to finish her train of thought.

"No, I mean—it's not that. I'm just tired." She gave in, *WHOOSHING* breath out, her shoulders releasing some of her tension.

"Yeah, I get that. I totally get it." I sighed alongside her, and scooted her along, "Okay, well, you better go because class is already 10 minutes in, and I don't want you missing Dance!"

"Okay, thank you. Have a good day," Robyn waved, walking out the classroom door with her overloaded backpack, school dance bag, another reusable bag in tow, and a book in her hand.

I felt better. I think to myself—quite often—that we all need breaks in life. Deadlines are important, sure, but in middle school, they're not going to make-or-break a student. At the end of the day, they're all going through mental hardships that—in both my personal and professional opinion—significantly outweigh, and directly impact, their ability to perform academically. Robyn just needed someone to cut her a break; on this day, it was my turn.

As the school year went on, I was able to continue to support Robyn in Small-Group and reassurance. She brought up Imposter Syndrome only a couple of more times, but after our initial conversation about it, I made sure to read her body language. On days she held tension, it appeared more obvious than others. Some days she came in totally exhausted with darker bags under her eyes, saying she couldn't sleep; other times she'd avoid eye contact and asked to visit with Counselor Knight during ELAR; but, fortunately for me, most of the time, she sat down and shared with me how she was doing. While the conversations may have started with me checking-in with her to see how progression on ELAR work was occurring, it

inconspicuously—and intentionally, of course—led to me asking her how she was doing, whether it was about that specific day or just in general.

I began to feel as if Robyn's self-confidence had grown enough that she didn't need reassurance as often; this was because she began coming to Small-Group conferences at the back table with her work either partially or fully completed, and instead of allowing me to take dialogical notes for her, she just wanted to show me what she had; to this, I was pleased (though rather bittersweet).

Then one February morning, the school announcements came on the intercom, and because we were celebrating African American History Month, Principal Scott introduced three students that so happened to be mine; Robyn was one of them. On this particular week, the announcements would introduce a well-known individual who represented and significantly impacted positive change for African Americans. The first-half of the week, I recall Harriet Tubman and Jackie Robinson being highlighted, two historical leaders who enacted change in America. Today, however, was different, and I felt a sense of immense joy emerging from my chest, as a smile began to spread across my face, my ears perking, as I began *SHHHushing* students to pay attention.

"TUPAC Shakur was an American rapper who…" Robyn introduced his background information. The day prior, I had taught a review lesson over poetry and figurative language using TUPAC—choosing it only because I felt that it resonated with many of my *invisible* students who often don't get the opportunity to see themselves in the literature typically chosen by teachers. As I beamed with pride, it dawned on me that during yesterday's lesson, Robyn had an intense, genuine interest in learning more about TUPAC. I recalled her posture appearing taller, and her eyes focused and narrowed in on the projector screen when I played the music

video titled “Changes”. Some students’ heads bobbed with the beat; others seemed entranced, and I wondered if we, at that moment, all shared the same question: *This was written in 1992, and it’s 2023… Why haven’t things* ***changed****? Why are things ‘just the way [they are]’?*

After background information had been provided and the ‘hook’ shared with them, students were asked about certain lines of figurative language that TUPAC utilized and were pressed to answer—either with the class, their shoulder-partner, and/or through written journal response: *‘Why do you feel this was/is still…? How has society—if at all—‘changed’ over the last two decades?’* Robyn took a thoughtfully, lengthier time to construct a verbal response that piqued the interest of all her peers, including pulling in current sociopolitical issues that African American students have faced, such as the #BlackLivesMatter Movement. As I thought back, she even shared a time where she felt judged because of her race instead of being treated respectfully and worthy, as a young female student should. As the lesson continued, students were asked to read another of TUPAC’s works, *The Rose That Grew From Concrete*, and when she was finished with the open-ended comprehension question, there was no hesitation or request for me to review her work. Instead, she simply said, “Do you want this, or can I just turn it into the tray?”

Robyn ended by announcing school-wide that *Change* is what TUPAC Shakur was trying to do and that it’s up to individuals within society to overcome adversity and make his dreams a reality. And as she signed off, I gleamed…

Robyn had always been vocal in her desire to read multicultural texts, so in the remaining month of school, as I began to order thousands of dollars’ worth of reading material for the ELAR Department, I desperately tried to avoid traditionalist, historically-white-dominant-male authors in the pieces we read in ELAR—because I stand firm in my belief that while some

classic literature does highlight pivotal moral dilemmas, our youth no longer face the same moral/ethical challenges as the pre-technology eras. Students gave their input on a Google Form that was distributed, via teacher Google Classrooms, to the student body in ELAR 6-8 classes, which is how I obtained book titles for ordering, and further reiterated this notion. Students seek validation not only from their peers and authority figures in their lives but also in the characters they meet between the pages of a book spine or the ink on a handout; the lyrics sung in an image-filled music video; the propaganda floating around social media, yet my ethical duties bind me wholeheartedly to my students.

My professional obligation will remain intact: to provide my students a rainbow of literacy genres and trust them to utilize the philosophies ingrained within their being by their Parent(s)/Guardian(s) and their individual moral compass to synthesize and reshape the world into one where they feel acknowledged, respected, and loved.

Hearing Robyn's voice on the announcements that day reaffirmed my aspirations, what drives me to push myself so, so hard: Because in more ways than one, I seek to continue to work towards a society that creates Robyn's and TUPAC's vision of an equitable future—one that truly delivers *Justice for ALL*.

Reflection & Analysis

At first, I believed Robyn to be part of a group that I often label as *invisible*. The color of her beautifully long, marvelous braids shined a spotlight on her as she strode down the hallways of the school. Since Robyn was involved in several after-school activities, most notably the dance team, her ability in such physical activities allowed onlookers—at the time, I believed teachers were included with said onlookers—to believe that she was well put-together and perfectly capable of balancing extracurriculars alongside academics. She did not like to ask for

extensions, and she took due dates to heart, which, for me, translated to Robyn holding herself to a high work ethic.

The reality I gathered from her one day, however, diminished this facade. She shared a vivid, personal connection to an article that seemed to suck the air out of my classroom one day—something to the effect that as an African-American female student, she's been pre-assigned the stereotype of a student who was likely going to emit behavioral concerns (thereby leading to academic declination), instead of allowing her to prove herself, her studious personality, and dedication. She felt—and rightfully so—judged.

At this point in time, however, it's important to include that Robyn and I had already built a sturdy student-teacher rapport. Realistically, I don't believe she'd be comfortable enough to share that experience without having had an established relationship with not only me but the atmosphere of our classroom—a safe space for students to be themselves and be open and vulnerable to often complex discussions, especially when it came to students having to make connections and justify their reasoning using current social events.

If you're asking yourself '*How'* I did this or '*What'* did I *do* to build this bridge and create a space for them to be… I told them the truth about me.

I believe that when our class' 'Honeymoon Period' was over, which was likely around October—when there's absolutely *no* Student Holidays and teachers are pinching pennies to get ready for the holiday's festivities and still be able to purchase even a box of cookies for each class prior to students leaving for Thanksgiving and Christmas Break—that I chose to try a tangible lesson I had saved from a Coach at another school within our district over "Empathy" (See Figure 1 below).

Empathy-Sharing Lesson/Warm-Up

***Who goes first…?**

**Whomever has the longest socks!*

Level 1 - What is your dream ___?

- ☐ job
- ☐ city you wish to live in
- ☐ location for a home to settle down in
- ☐ vehicle

LOOK your group in the EYEBALLS and say, 'Thank you for sharing that with me.'

**Whomever flew a kite most recently.*

Level 2 - When you're faced with socially awkward situations, what is the best way to handle them? (Honesty/Avoidance)

LOOK your group in the EYEBALLS and say, 'Thank you for sharing that with me.'

**Whomever has the largest-sized palm.*

Level 3 - Explain about a time you felt disappointed with yourself.

LOOK your group in the EYEBALLS and say, 'Thank you for sharing that with me.'

**Whomever loves dancing like no one's watching (at home).*

Level 4 - Please share a time where you felt you struggled to KNOW yourself. (Feeling "stuck".)

LOOK your group in the EYEBALLS and say, 'Thank you for sharing that with me.'

Figure 1. *Empathy Lesson*

The "Leveled" questions are placed upon the board one at a time. Directions are clearly given that everyone in the group is to share-out a memory regarding this, but they are not required to share whatever they are not comfortable sharing; they only have to share what they feel safe sharing amongst the peers in their group. After listening to everyone's responses, I instruct them to look at their peers—directly into their eyeballs—and say, *'Thank you for sharing that with me.'*

This direct, eye-to-eye interaction and exchange allows each student to be *seen*. Prior to each Leveled question, I model it by sharing something personal about myself. At the beginning of the school year, I only went up to a "Level 3" question; however, being that we were already

halfway through the first semester, I proceeded to move up to a "Level 4" question, and I was brutally honest.

In Robyn's class, I shared a very personal story, my experience as a single Mom and not knowing who I was when I was pregnant with my oldest daughter and going through a separation, followed by a divorce. I didn't miss the opportunity to point out that today's world is full of single Parents/Guardians and how acceptable it is to come from a home or apartment with only one adult. My voice wavered, but I had to take a couple of minutes to explain that it wasn't the failure of my marriage that I was teary-eyed, but it was my pride at this massive obstacle I was confronted with and so, *so* thankfully was given in order to allow me to blossom into who I am today. I opened the door to failure and how it can be reshaped and transformed into success.

I remember the compassion that followed. Stories about the loss of a family member or beloved pet; disappointment from a sports game where they felt pressured, and had sincerely expected to win; having to move after not having anywhere to live. But the empathy in their eyes that they looked upon their peers with… It shined bright, like they were *seeing* another human that was just like them. They were vulnerable with each other and trusted one another because they realized that no matter how alone they may feel/felt, they now knew—in that moment—that they truly are not alone in their chaotic, often crushing, awkward middle school life.

While I cannot totally credit this "Empathy Lesson" as the sole reason Robyn was willing to share-out her experiences to the entire class, I do believe it played a pivotal role in her inclination to do so. So often I self-reflect on how much I continue to wish for Robyn to soak up her identity and own it, yet the reality is that she already has, and like a sponge, it may be slow coming at times, but still, when she is vocal and standing tall, her light shines bright. In many

ways, she's like the rotating beacon within a lighthouse; it glows and goes, but no matter what, she always returns full-circle, and what I have as a forever memory is how receptive she was to share with not only me, but the respect she had to do it so openly with her peers.

Dear One Who Looks Like Me,

They're not all victories, you know. Some come in looking lost. Others… they look like they're going to be okay. And then there's those who you so desperately want to reach, to help, to support, and the reality is, no matter how much you try, try, try, and you keep trying, they *may*—someday—realize that they *do* possess the power of making their own decision. It could be because there are shadows that loom over them; they've fallen into a category of a relative-of or a friend-of someone—usually, it's another student whose reputation wasn't the greatest, and because of it, they're pre-labeled, judged, or, perhaps, just lost.

Yet, while I recognize that while I wish to be a light to all, there are some students that I, personally, feel like I've let down. I failed them because I didn't give enough time and attention to them, and that's just how I'll forever feel. In sharing my emotions and her counterstory, I hope she knows how much of an impact she had on me.

I'll <u>always</u> be here if you ever need me!

Mrs. Salinas

"I was a stick of dynamite and it was just a matter of time, yeah.

Oh, dang, oh, my; now, I can't hide.

Said I knew myself, but I guess I lied.

It's okay, it's okay, it's okay, it's okay…

If you're lost, we're all a little lost, and it's alright.

It's okay, it's okay, it's okay, it's okay…

If you're lost, we're all a little lost, and it's alright."

—*It's OK,* By: Nightbirde

Empathy for Human Beings with Needs: *"Oh, my gosh! Let me teach you something! 'ALL About SnapChat!'"*

Camila Quintanilla

Camila wasn't always her happy, *'Hi, Mrs. Salinas!'* self. When her friendships (with other peers in my ELAR class) were rocky, she'd sit quietly, alone. One vivid memory was calling her to the back table for Small-Group and her not wanting to talk. She sat with me. Didn't complain. I asked her if she was okay, but I could tell the tears in her pinkish-red eyes told another story. She was sad, and it was like she was telling me a story with her eyes… like a pleading to just let it go and allow her to just sit for the remainder of the class without having to work.

But if Camila was anything like me, she was tough. So, I pushed. I turned the conversation around and focused on the task, the assignment. And she wrote. For *once* all semester long, she wrote. I may have had to talk to her about what to write, but she did it.

The poem was about the unknowns in life… Humans never knowing. Maybe that's what it was, because just last week, I found out she's not about typical girly things; Camila is about art. Photography, and it tells a story. About a girl who's consumed in family dilemmas or forgotten about. She's there, but she's invisible at home… I think. Because every time I ask her what she does at home, she says, 'Nothing.' All year.

"So… What's the story with Camila?" I asked my colleague—the Science teacher named Ms. Young.

"Camilaaa…? Who?"

"Camila Quintanilla. Short, Hispanic girl, very sweet, but she's loud when she's with Raegan Smith."

"Oh! *That* Camila," I waited for her to keep explaining, but noted that my colleague might already have a prejudice against her. However, I'd give her the benefit of the doubt. Ms. Young explained that Camila's brother came here two or three years ago, and that he was a less-than-pleasant student who wasn't the best kid because of the poor decisions he made. She continued to explain that he was sent to the district's Fresh Continuum Education Center (FCEC) because of something he did. So, she believed that Camila's reputation at school lived in his shadow. In the end, both of us concluded that it was likely that Camila felt as if she was already pre-judged by teachers.

"Oh. Interesting…" I commented, thoughts already formulating in my mind as to how I might go about meeting with—and attempting to hype-up—Camila about her being her own person.

Ms. Young added that Camila was a sweet girl in Science, despite her often hanging out with another student who was often absent. Camila, however, continued to come to school, so we both believed that it spoke volumes about her wanting to be in school and do good.

"Yeah, I can tell that she knows more than what she's giving me, but when I talk to her, she doesn't always answer me, though, and she never wants to talk when I pull her for Small-Group. I'm concerned. Are you…? What are you seeing from her as far as reading and writing go?"

As we continued our conversation, it became clear that maybe my rapport with this student wasn't quite as significant as the one she had with Ms. Young. It stung a little, to be

honest, because I had hoped that I might be able to identify more with her, from a cultural standpoint. In this way, I noticed my own implicit bias towards building student rapport and relationships, and I was determined to change that. If I couldn't relate to her from a similar heritage, then how could I get to know her?

As the semester progressed, Camila's bittersweet personality grew on me. She reminded me so much of my last school—Title I, high population of low socioeconomic backgrounds, rough and often quite difficult students (and Parents/Guardians)—especially for new teachers, but ones who just needed love, support, and a smile to welcome them into school daily, someone who cares for them. In reflecting, Camila did complete some work for me; often, it was the assignments that didn't require higher-level, critical-thinking skills but were either multiple-choice and/or creative in nature. Since peer and/or group collaboration was essential for weekly material, she was able to satisfy passing, albeit borderline.

Despite our student-teaching relationship being overall positive and friendly the entirety of the school year, it seemed that every attempt that I had made to sit *individually* with Camila, bi-weekly in Small-Group, was unsuccessful. Ultimately, each conference ended with zero results. No reviewing what was in her ELAR Journal—because there was nothing there for me to assess her or assist her in growth of the TEK(S); no helping to support her in editing/revising her written work—because she, inevitably, hadn't started and/or didn't have much for me to work with; no verbal communication to bounce ideas off of—because, while simultaneously avoiding eye contact with me, even waiting for two to three minutes for her to respond ended in silence and awkward nods to "pick back up on this tomorrow" and/or "try again, tomorrow/next week". Each time, I felt miserable, hopeless, shut-down, and frustrated. I wasn't reaching her, and I didn't know how. I am not the type of teacher to yell at a student, and even my

stern-loving, five-minute lectures at the Small-Group table and outside in the hallway about 'You've got to meet me halfway, Camila. Just give me *something—anything!*' didn't seem to be the motivation required.

Several times throughout the first semester and beginning of the second semester, the Reading Specialist inside of me ignited, and I started going through the motions of red-flagging her on our 8TH Grade Team-Level Meetings, trying to listen and understand what other teachers were observing from her, as far as her literacy and writing skills habits, but nothing was significant. I felt as if: (1) Either Camila truly hated reading and writing, or (2) She was awfully terrific at faking her grades, and I didn't believe that because—despite the upsets she dished out during Small-Group, I knew Camila was genuine at heart. I had no basis to stand on, I felt, for her low-performing work ethic to be based on any type of undiagnosed reading/writing challenge because her grades in her other core classes were satisfactory. So… I was at a loss.

Then one day, I was tired of feeling like I kept letting her down. We were nearing the end of the school year, and final grades were due in a few weeks. She owed me a couple of assignments that I knew would bring her to passing, so I called her back, yet again, to Small-Group.

Camila sat across the Small-Group table from me, avoiding eye contact and smacking her gum between her perfectly lip-glossed lips. Her long, gorgeous black hair draped over her shoulders, hiding her tiny body and making her white Nike Jordans look bulkier than they really were. She was always so good at hiding, but it was different today. She didn't come in laughing with her friend, Raegan Smith, and while Raegan was all laughter and smiling—her typical boisterous self—Camila's presence radiated an out-of-place aura, like, suddenly, this classroom full of athletes clearly wasn't where she belonged.

The middle school dynamics are odd like that: A student suddenly stops talking to one peer in the classroom, and the whole atmosphere shifts from once-jolly to *'Oh, snap! What the heck is going on?!'*

"Okay, so, what's up?" was all I could muster up—which was totally a failed attempt at not pointing out how awkward it had been since she walked in and she and Raegan sat separate from one another.

Her long lashes gave way to her trying to avoid eye contact. The shaking of her leg and blank paper told me that it was going to be a long rest-of-class time. "Camila… You've *got* to give me something… Did you read the poem?"

"..." she shook her head 'No'.

"Okay, well, that's alright. Here, I'll read it with you now." She looked off of her computer, as I read off of the magazine in front of us.

"So… What are your thoughts? What do you think it's about…?" I questioned, waiting patiently. Three minutes later, still nothing. "Look, the great thing about poetry is that everyone interprets it differently. And, it's like I always say—you can't get the open-ended questions wrong, as long as you justify your answer, right?"

She still looked distant. Her gum-chewing turned from active to just slow grinding of it, her cheekbones twitching on her jawline.

"Okay, so do you think it's possible that it's about society? About people and that we never know what's going to happen or come about?" As I prodded her brain and added in some of my own thoughts, I wrote down these ideas on her sheet of notebook paper, giving her choices for possible responses.

Then she began. She began writing her ACE response—making me smile, happy that I got at least a *few* written words out of her!

Until—it wasn't working anymore. One short-lived ACE response. But, hey—I'd take it.

It was as if one moment, I gave her time to think, and the next thing I knew, I was looking at her, and her eyes were teary. She looked like she wanted to cry, her glimpse at me conveying, *'Please, Mrs. Salinas. I don't want to talk about it.'* And, me, thinking to myself, *'Did I say something? Did something happen, and I didn't notice? No—she was sitting right in front of me the whole time.'* My mind went on panic-mode, feeling guilty for… pushing her too hard? Making her lose confidence in herself?

"Camila?" I prompted, "What's wrong? Do you want to go to the restroom?" I asked, giving her the courtesy of an out, as I do in these complex student situations.

She blinked her tears back and shook her head 'No'. Camila, always the super tough chic, and for what…? She didn't have to be. I wish she knew that she didn't *need* to be.

"Okay, look," I took a deep breath, pushing aside the poem. "Let's focus on your Scholarship Essay, shall we? Have you chosen a scholarship to respond to?"

"..." Again, she shook her head 'No.'

"Look. Let me tell you something—something I think I've mentioned before, but I'm just going to share this with you: You know I was a single Mom before. I remember feeling like I had *no clue* what I was going to do as a single Mom, raising a baby by myself, but you know what my Mom told me?"

Camila sat up, blew a gum bubble and snapped it. She pulled at her looped earring and pulled her shoulders up, as if to say, 'What?' Her eyes were locked on mine.

"She told me that as long as I went to school, got a degree in *something—anything*, that I would be okay. And here I am. I'm okay. I remember being five months pregnant and separated, sitting alone at a Panera Bread, and reading a book on my belly, and I was scared and sad—terrified, but I'm so thankful. Because I had a job; I was teaching. Because I went to school and got my education. There are so, so many young girls—especially Hispanic girls like you and me—who do *not* have the same opportunities we have. Do *not* be a statistic. Do you know what that means?"

She shook her head, another 'No.'

"It means not to fall into the traditional category of being a young girl, a young woman, who just stays home to take care of family life or one who just finds work right after high school. You're so, so smart, Camila. You can do *anything* you want! What do you want to do? Do you like make-up? Cosmetology? There are high schools here that offer introductory classes for that."

She shook her head, 'No,' and then, "Art. I want to do something with photography."

"Oh, yeah?!" my voice hiking up a pitch. "Art! Wow! I didn't know that. With all the lip gloss you put on and curling your eyelashes everyday, you know!" I laughed, happy that she was laughing with me. "There are scholarships for that. Let's look here. Some of them don't even require you to write an essay. All you'd have to do is submit your artwork or photograph. Did you know that?"

"Really?"

"Yes, Camila!"

And it was as if, with the blink of her beautifully long eyelashes, the school year was over. Not before, however, she came into my classroom and said, "Mrs. Salinas?"

"Oh, hey, Camila! What's up?"

"Today is the last day you're going to see us, right? Cause you're not going to be on our field trip, right?"

"Yes," I replied, frowning.

"Before you leave, I wanted to give you this," she said, reaching her arm out to hand me a folded up piece of paper. "But don't read it in front of me. Don't read it right now."

"Okay, I won't," I laughed, setting it down on my desk. And then I gave her an enormous hug, took a step back, grabbed her cheeks, and said, "*Never* let anyone tell you what you can or cannot do. Okay? You're beautiful and smart! BE CONFIDENT! Remember that, okay?"

"Okay, okay… okay. Okay!" she said, laughing and giggling on the way out.

I turned and smiled, taking a seat and a deep breath, and when she went, I opened it up.

She wrote.

She wrote a letter to me… for me.

And in it, she described how she had never had another teacher who looked like her. Who was Hispanic like her.

And that was powerful.

Reflection and Analysis

Of all the counterstories that captured me, I struggled with Camila's the most. Perhaps it is because I felt as if I failed her by not obtaining more written work from her, in order for me to push her further, academically, in my ELAR class—but that's it right there, is it not…?

The American education system is so ingrained with the concept that learning equals more tangible work; when in fact, it does not.

As an educator, I pride myself in placing academics *second* to the socioemotional well-being of my students. Fact: If a student's basic needs are not met, they will not work. Camila… needed a space to *Be.*

Thus, in attempting to both accept and respect Camila's choices and actions, my thoughts led to my own self-reflection about my teaching beliefs: I have found that an empathetic and humanistic approach to balancing teaching of ELAR—in simple terms—means nurturing a give-and-take relationship with my students, whether as a whole class and/or on a case-by-case basis. Specifically, for Camila, getting rid of "fluff" and extending deadlines inevitably turned into higher quality, albeit less, but more depth-filled work. For Camila, and other students who can relate to her, I strip away the unrealistic expectations of state politicians and often hyperbolic standardized STAAR results, and, instead, incorporate my students' stories, which "offers [an auto]biographical analysis of the experiences of a person of color, again in relation to U.S. institutions and in a sociohistorical context" (Solorzano & Yosso, 2002, p. 33). Like Camila, once I can see a student for who they *are* and/or *are becoming*, I then take that understanding to partner with them to weave together the required TEKS that can make applicable—and, moreover, *real*—the essentiality of the knowledge. Educators must acknowledge that by students learning the ELAR content, the individual student, as a human being, cannot be separated from the power that language and literacy possess; they are asked and required to *identify* themselves within/alongside the power of words.

Solorzano and Yosso argue that "a critical race methodology offers space to conduct and present research grounded in the experiences and knowledge of people of color" (Solorzano & Yosso, 2002, p. 23). Furthermore, since the COVID-19 pandemic, it is my view that additional social strains, specifically racial (in)justice challenges, further amplified by political divisions

across America—and for this research study, particularly in Texas—have limited the ability for teachers to unobtrusively identify with students from all cultural backgrounds.

In Small-Group teaching, I have been better able to empathize with students who have been open to sharing their views of rarely having read multicultural literature with individuals who look like them. This is not without the acknowledgement that "A singular focus on the affective dimension of teachers' relationships with their students of color may obscure the need to address broader, far-reaching institutional issues", and "empathy is a necessary, but not a sufficient, requirement for becoming a culturally responsive teacher or even an effective teacher with diverse populations" (McAllister & Irvine, 2002, p. 434). However, as a practitioner, empathy has provided me with a space where I can wholeheartedly address the student in front of me.

It allows me to both nurture their cultural identity and harness it in such a way that students can begin to understand that the TEKS are not merely a state-initiated and mandated requirement, but instead, are life skills necessary to help them comprehend how human responses function among written, spoken, and words that are read. That the texts I actively and purposefully choose—and how the author's craft together their masterpieces—are distinctively hand-picked for the power they possess, in order to allow students to ponder and question.

For Camila, I would argue that she felt the full emotional struggle of *the unknown* (that the poem expressed), and instead of seeing the poem as a "'natura[l]' par[t] of everyday life", she grasped it with the knowledge that she was different, struggling, trying to find herself, and coming-of-age, not "A majoritarian story [that] distorts and silences the experiences [she has had,] of people of color" (Solorzano & Yosso, 2002, p. 29).

The fact that Camila then took the first step of the *unknown* and chose to feel empowered enough to *act* upon it by sharing her interest in photography justifies the reality that as a language and literacy teacher, I am often one doorway of opportunity; I facilitate the knowledge, and the only choice necessary to make is *how* I am incorporating an empathetic approach to teaching literature in such a way that it emboldens students' individuality and welcomes them to celebrate and critically inquire: (1) *Why* the skills taught and learned are connected to who they are/are becoming in connection to the real-world, and (2) *How* they can transfer said skills to the choices they make as young, contributing citizens.

My methodology goals are to lead to a greater ability to achieve social justice for students similar to Camila; this takes time and patience. Therefore, I must be content knowing and willing to accept that, perhaps, on an academic level, the verbal discussions, alone, were what Camila needed. She needed another female role model—someone who looked like her—to allow her to be herself. And in looking back, recalling my years of teaching AP English Language & Composition, what is wrong with spending full class periods on discussion and/or debate, alone? Many of the discussions I recall having are some of the most intense, moving, and powerful that I can recall—that some of my previous students have remembered and, every now and then, write to me about.

Perhaps, Camila's story is the one that proved other educational-and-empathy-oriented theorists true: "that the amount of caring, understanding, and respect shown by peer teachers to students in class is more important than the amounts of instructor self-disclosure [and] type of instruction" (Coffman, 1981, p. 115).

If there is something I am certain about, it is this: Camila imprinted on me as a teacher, but more significantly, as a human being. She left middle school with the affirmation that she

has the power to be successful, and she was given the knowledge that scholarships are essentially free money, and not all free money requires written expression.

For Camila, I have to accept that just like the depth of her eyes, the photography she chooses to capture will allow others to see who she is and where she aspires to climb.

"Victory is in your veins;

You know it, you know it.

And you will not negotiate;

Just fight it, just fight it.

And be transformed…"

—*Rise*, By: Katy Perry

Flexibility: *"Wait! I know what I want to do! Can I show you?"*

Lulu Rhett

Her nose always in a book, she sat cross-legged, leaned back cozily in the disc chair in the back of my classroom. Lulu Rhett's perfectly-parted, dark brown hair frizzed at her shoulders, and knowing her eyes were glued to the page, I still began talking, reviewing the various genres of writing we'd covered throughout the school year. Only certain students, I've come to find, can juggle multi-tasking of reading for pleasure and listening by choice, like audibly skimming for information; Lulu is one of only a handful I have had in my career.

After 10 minutes, I began, "So, yesterday we talked about how correspondence writing is different from other essays we've written this school year. It's short and sweet and to the point. Think of your traditional essays but without elaboration. You get straight to the point. It also is

called a *correspondence letter* because it's written directly to a specific individual, and you're seeking some objective goal.

Taking all the essay types we've written–personal narrative, literary, argumentative, informational, and now, correspondence–you're going to research a scholarship of your choice and fulfill the essay requirement(s) it asks of you." My spoken words were jotted down with a squeaky Expo marker across the board.

Lulu sat up and placed her bookmark inside of her novel, as her eyes shifted from her book to the notes I had just written on the board, and she grabbed her notebook. She immediately began note-taking. I could see her perk up at the word 'scholarship'; she was hooked. Her pencil sounded like soft sandpaper etching back-and-forth, from left-to-right across her ELAR Journal, and she opened her laptop to begin researching.

The thing about Lulu is that she's impassioned. Start a conversation with her, and you're going to receive a response that you may or may not like because she gives her whole heart. The phrase goes, "[She] wears her heart on her sleeve." In many ways, her personality reminds me of a younger version of myself. I first noticed this in Fall 2022, when Lulu trudged into my classroom, tossing down her backpack and cheer gym bag on the floor. "Oh. My. God, Mrs. Salinas! Have you read *Heart Bones* by Colleen Hoover?"

My eyes darted to her, and as they grew wide, my mouth hung open as I took a breath and immediately felt of the pressure of walking on pins and needles—because I am more than an avid reader of Colleen Hoover, and knowing the content within her books is not necessarily something that Parent(s)/Guardian(s) are okay with discussing in a middle school classroom. I took another breath as my mouth shifted from agape to pinched duck-lips, "Mmm… Yesss…?" I squeaked, prolonging the 's' as more of a question than fact.

Her eyes grew wide, suddenly squealing, “Ah! What!? Mrs. Salinas, I didn’t know you read Colleen Hoover? What have you read from her? Oh, have you read *Reminders Of Him*? *Ugly Love*? I’m going to read *Verity* next! Have you read *Layla*?” Her questions came flying out at me, and I saw her eyes go from happy to exhilarated in less than a second. The creases of her eyelids crinkled, and I couldn’t help but read her smile. Her words and questions were stuck in time, but watching her face shine as bright as gold specks that surround the sun… *That* is priceless. I found Lulu’s magic!

“Of course I’ve read *Reminders Of Him*. I began reading Colleen Hoover *before* Colleen Hoover was even *Colleen Hoover* all over BookTok! You should read *Hopeless*, that’s one of her first books, and I think you’d like it; the main character is based on a girl around your age.”

“Oh, yeah? I don’t think I’ve heard of that one, but I’ll write it down. I have so many of her books on my nightstand; it’s in my TBR pile.”

A look of puzzlement crossed my face. “TBR?”

“To Be Read,” Lulu explained.

“Ah, yes. Well, I’m glad to know that you read Colleen Hoover, but…” my stance waivers with nerves, and I thoughtfully pick my next words, “Does your Mom know you read books like *that*?”

Lulu laughs wholeheartedly, “Yes, Mrs. Salinas! My Mom always says she would rather me read about it than catch me going out and figuring it out on my own. I mean, when I read a part that maybe”—her voice lowers, and she gets within my personal-space bubble—“is a bit you-know-*know*, I have to walk away or set it down. Like if I’m reading on the couch and my Mom or Dad walk in, I set it down and wait for later because I get so invested in the moment…” she trails off.

I couldn't help it, so I threw my head back and laughed as wholeheartedly as she, "Ah, Lulu! I get what you're saying!"

"Okay, okay, class!" I interject our conversation, and she returns to walk to the disc chair, nose midway through her Colleen Hoover book that I knew she'd devour by the end of the day.

"But, Lulu," she turns around, eyes smiling, "If you haven't read Hoover's *November 9*, you should. It's a heartbreaker. Total plot twist! And, yes—I ugly-cried with *Ugly Love*!"

I cut back to speaking to all of my students. "Alright, guys, today you're expected to complete your writing option for your scholarship." I trailed off into the day's lesson and expectations, as my heart smiled at the girl whose soul thrives in realistic fantasies.

Lulu's academic brain and work ethic returned once she settled on a scholarship–the *I Have A Dream* Scholarship. Reflecting on that moment, I see her. She is a determined and fierce young lady, and her work ethic is outstanding. She does not struggle with ELAR skills or even new concepts, but I attribute this to her continuous reading habits and ability to find pleasure and fulfillment in creative words that paint new worlds. Her optimism and the vibrancy she emits is what has allowed her to thrive in such a competitive atmosphere where the peers in her ELAR class all seek high ranks, like "Top 10", in school.

My individual goal for Lulu is to support her along the way. I recognize some hard realities she may face as her educational journey continues, but I refuse to allow those concerns to become realities, and furthermore, to prevent her from making her dreams a reality, so I did what I do when any student is ready for my support; for Lulu: I wait patiently at the back U-shaped table, referred to as "Small-Group", where a smaller atmosphere is offered with individualized verbal and/or written (typed) feedback is provided to my students.

"Okay, Mrs. Salinas. Can you read my essay? I need help getting it down to 250 words."

As usual, I respond with, "Show me what you got," as my palms open and await her laptop.

She hops from her disc chair to a seat at Small-Group, and my eyes are blessed with skillfully crafted aspirations of a young and thriving tweenager:

> *"Everyone in this world has something that keeps their eyes open at night. For some, it may be regret or unsaid words; for me, it's the possibility of how much merit I emit in this world…"*

As I continue reading, I'm taken aback to my own writing, a college-entrance exam piece about my desires to help young children in Third-World countries. "This is amazing, Lulu," I say with pride. I look at her, waiting for her eyes to meet mine, and then I say, "This is really, *really* beautiful."

"Thanks!" she says, confident in her writing abilities.

"Okay, so we need to cut this down to 250 words, and you're sitting close to 400, so you need to cut-out…" I continue to provide her recommendations for maintaining the power in her rhetoric while slimming down the unnecessary: "(1) Watch your repetition. If you've already mentioned something once in a previous phrase, you don't need to mention it again; be specific. (2) Utilize synonyms by condensing your phrases. For example, instead of using 5-10 words to describe something, find 1-3 powerful terms that drive your point home. And (3), if you're still struggling with being over the word limit, instead of spelling out terms that could be contractions, combine them and use contractions, such as "I am"; make it "I'm". Got it?"

"Oh! I didn't think about that with contractions. That's a good one! Okay, let me try that." And away she went, working on condensing her work and polishing it to perfection.

Minutes later, Lulu returned, and her radiant smirk expressed it all, "I'm done! I'm going to submit it; is that okay?"

I glanced at her, some hesitancy biting at me because it felt just a tad rushed for her, but in that moment, I realized that there has to be a point where I let go and learn to do for her and my other students what they do for me… *Trust*. "Yeah, Lulu—go ahead and submit it." I smile, not showing my sad eyes because it's bittersweet; she doesn't need me anymore. But this Eagle…? She's *so* ready to soar!

Then Lulu opens her Hoover, again, fixing to glue her eyeballs to the ink, but she doesn't, and instead, she asks, "Mrs. Salinas? Are you going to be here next year?"

I look at her, perplexed as to why she's asking, but always open with my students, I reply, "Yes, I think so. Unless I get offered something at the college-level. I'll be here!" I chuckle.

"Is that your goal, your *dream job*?" she inquires.

"My goal has always been to work at the university-level. I've always wanted to be an English Professor. When I found out we were moving to Austin, I tried and applied to every university, but I didn't get my foot in the door. So, I think I'm just going to stay here until I finish out my degree, hopefully next May."

"Why do you like teaching?"

"Honestly…?" I take a moment to collect my thoughts, to provide answers that aren't lengthy but are just as deep as they feel in my heart. "I appreciate that I can see my students years after graduation and see them taking action on things in life that matter. You know, I follow some of my old students on Facebook—because, like, I'm not on other social media—and it's so amazing to me, so empowering, to see them advocate for themselves and others, like on

sociopolitical issues. It's like they found their voice, and I like to think that I helped contribute to that." I respond, smiling and invigorated.

We continued talking, and I shared some anecdotes about past students I've taught and some social media posts revolving around human rights and empathy—a cornerstone of my teaching philosophy and a meaningful term I try to utilize in every lesson—and she listened. She stopped for a second, and I could see her pondering, as she said, "I think you're *overqualified* for this job. You're the only teacher who cares. Most teachers here don't care."

"Lulu, you say that, but, like, why? There are other teachers who are here who are good teachers—I know *you* know that; I'm not saying that you're saying that they're bad teachers, but why do you feel like that?" I counter.

"Because, for example, I see other classes. Or, like, my friends, they ask me, '*What are y'all doing in ELA right now?'* and I'm like, *'Oh, I'm doing an essay'*, and [their teachers are] not. They're just giving them work. Or, like, in other classes, they're giving us work just to make us do work, if that makes sense…?"

In trying to decipher why Lulu feels as if there were many teachers at RCMS who don't care [as much as she feels I do], I probed, "Like, *relevancy*? Like, things that'll help…"

She interjects, "Yeah, like, because when you give us work, it's to actually get us ready and help us, but I feel with other teachers, they just give it to us because it's part of a lesson plan or something. I feel like it's not because they come to class and *want* us to have some kind of response."

I pause a second and counter as I nod my head, "Do you think *joy* has something to do with it? Like, how they put [the lesson] out?"

"Yeah, yeah. Like, for example, my Social Studies teacher, Ms. Lee, doesn't even like to give us too much work. She just likes teaching. You can just tell—"

"Yeah, like Coach Smith—" Lulu's peer, who is sitting nearby, chimes into our conversation, "he cares. You can tell Coach Smith really cares about what he's teaching."

"Didn't he used to be a realtor or something?" Lulu asks.

"Yeah. You can just tell he really cares about what he's teaching," her peer reiterates.

Lulu continues, "You can definitely tell the difference between, like, a teacher who wants to be here and a teacher who is just teaching because that's their job. I mean… You can actually tell between someone who's doing their job because they want to do their job and doing a job because they, like, need money. I mean, you can just sit there and tell, and I mean, like, the teaching quality is there, too. Like, you can definitely be, like, a high school teacher at Grand Viking High School (GVHS)."

"I was a high school teacher for a while. I actually taught AP classes, and that's what got me into all this studying."

Another peer of Lulu's joins our conversation, and she comments about hearing that there are so many "mean" English teachers at GVHS and that I should consider moving up to teach AP English. She adds that, "nobody ends up learning" when teachers are mean or don't care and "just give work".

To that, Lulu replies with, "Yeah, and I think, like, for me… English shouldn't be so straightforward. Like, I feel like you let us pick out [topics] with writing. With writing, everyone strives because everyone writes about different things. You let us try new things, and that's what English should be about. You know, you let us explore what we actually want to

write about. Like, no one wants to write an entire paper on… like, birds or something. Everyone wants to write about different things."

"So, like… *choices*?" I ask, as I'm trying to keep up with jotting notes about these teacher traits she and her peers wish they saw in all of their teachers. I looked at my Teacher Reflection Journal and saw: relevancy, passion, student-choice.

"Yeah, you're, like, very flexible with our writing." I quickly added 'flexibility' to my bullet list. "Like, if I ask, *'Can I write about this, instead?'* You're like, *'Yeah, sure!'* because like you know that the quality of writing—"

"I feel like teachers just want to focus on one topic rather than the quality of writing," one of Lulu's peers chimed in, again.

"Yeah."

"You know," I interject, "what you just said—I hope you catch yourself there because so often, y'all ask me, *'How long does it have to be?'*, and I say, *'I don't care how long, as long as you have all the components required.'* Because I found out early on in my teaching career that I'll get *fluff*, and I don't want fluff. I want *quality*. Quality over quantity, always."

More peers began to chime in, and Lulu and others began talking about AI and how technology has impacted the writing and quality of essays, but they share with one another that despite the ability to use tools, such as Chat GPT, they don't because it's easier to have been taught with 'bubbles'—a graphic organizer, which was introduced during our first essay at the beginning of the school year—than having to rely on poor craftsmanship pieced together by a computer.

As I shook my right leg up-and-down because of the excitement in the air, I began marveling at the ongoing dialogue and student input being shared with me. I know that every

school year, I have similar discussions with students, but most are older high schoolers. I truly appreciated the reflection and insightful thoughts that Lulu and her peers were openly sharing. I paused to contemplate adding 'safe environment' to my ongoing list, but to be totally transparent: Isn't that a given in any professional classroom…? I added it anyway.

Lulu returns to face me, and she mentions that many teachers get angry when students ask questions about *why* they're required to do something, it often upsets the teacher(s), and then—according to Lulu and her peers—they feel as if the teacher winds up holding a grudge against them for the remainder of the school year. My understanding of this was that Lulu and her peers didn't feel comfortable asking 'Why?' or even in bartering (for lack of a better term) with assignments. Lulu ends with, "And if we get them upset, then they hold it against us."

In not wanting to step on my own colleagues' toes, I shift to a more open response, "I think it's about *listening* to students. I think it's about *hearing* y'all… and knowing that everybody has bad days and good days. And, I think that that's maybe something that takes… It takes a while for new teachers to the profession to realize, like, that just because you have a kid that may be rough… Tomorrow's a new day. You can't hold a grudge..."

"Yeah, and I feel like there's so many times where teachers get mad and say, *'You don't want to do your work, then fine. Put your head down'*, instead of making them live up to their potential."

"Yeah," I think and speak at the same time, "and I feel like that's something that *I* need to do better. In reflecting on my own teaching practices, that's what I've tried to do. That's what I think Small-Group did—was help me reach some of those students better who otherwise wouldn't work. But I need to do better," I admit to Lulu and her peers, giving them eye contact and a full-body-language-facing acknowledgement towards them that, "I need to figure out how

to better help some of those students get out of their shell…" I think aloud, slightly trailing off to see if they'd offer me some suggestions for how I might do that.

Suddenly, one of Lulu's peers came over to ask about an assignment she and another submitted last week but I hadn't updated in the Gradebook. "Yes, I know, let me do that right now—" I cut-off Lulu before she could speak again. "And, Lulu, you're done, but your peers are not because y'all keep talking to me!" We all chuckle. "So, I'm going to stop talking to y'all because now y'all are behind on your work."

The classroom grows silent again, as students return to working on their scholarships. But, it's not that awkward, mean-teacher silence; it's the silence that embraces everyone like a warm breeze, an envelope that bursts: *I see you. I hear you. I appreciate you. I respect you. Thank y'all for sharing your voices with me.*

Reflection and Analysis

Education today is… a mirror. I so desperately want outsiders—beyond that, *newcomers* to this beautifully chaotic realm—to know and truly, wholeheartedly be willing to step-up to the battle: Students give you what you give them. It's reciprocal.

Truth: Technology has drastically changed how students react, decipher, engage, and understand academic material, but beyond that, how they genuinely comprehend the ever-shifting abstract and tangible world. No, it's not hopeless, as so many politicians and outsiders believe it to be; however, it may be agreeably broken as a whole, yet there are nuts and bolts that are still strong and power through the weight placed upon them.

No matter what, education is, and always has been, a cyclical struggle—majority of the time, it's daily; at times, only weekly; but mostly, the day is often measured on a class-by-class basis.

Since the COVID-19 lockdown of 2020, however, students are lost. Academically, they're behind. And while a state-mandated assessment that is a one-size-fits-all measurement of their *supposed* grade-level ability is required at the end of the year, scores released either late-Summer, if not after the start of the following school year—which means *not* providing timely feedback, as research has proven to be effective—there is *meaning* beyond this one-time-per-year end-of-course exam: Citizenship and/in social responsibility. My job extends beyond the State Assessment of Academic Readiness (STAAR); my goal remains the same: *How am I going to help shape my students into productive, empathetic, and kind human beings, ones who will contribute to society?*

Lulu's counterstory reminded me of my reasoning for certain teaching practices. I start with the *'Why?'*, explaining the applicability of what I am trying to teach for the day. Naturally, it progresses to providing *contextual information*, which includes any and all relevant information they must understand prior to jumping into a lesson.

From there, I do what appears to be foreign to many new educators, especially those who are often enrolled in Alternative Certification Programs (ACP)—as noble as it appears that we have warm bodies willing to accept the challenge of stepping into a classroom, many are unaware that teaching does not, in fact, come with a script nor a work packet as a daily assignment—I *teach*.

Lulu didn't struggle in my ELAR class; she is a prime example of a model student. I suppose… perhaps I chose to include her counterstory as a reminder to myself, on hard days, why I choose to drive myself batty, hand-grading a stack of essays with written feedback—because it feels empowering to know that by simply approaching my students as

human beings and granting them the yo-yoing flexibility of daily life, in turn, their successes become my successes. They make me smile… and that is enough for Us.

"We gotta make a change.

It's time for us as a people to start makin' some changes:

Let's change the way we eat;

Let's change the way we live;

And, let's change the way we treat each other.

You see, the old way wasn't working, so it's on us to do,

What we gotta do, to survive…"

—*Changes*, By: TUPAC Shakur

Advocacy: *"Yes, Ma'am."*

Amaru Clinton

"Open up your ELAR Journal. Show me what you got!" Amaru complied, and I began to read over his work, immediately aware of how talented he was as a writer. His vocabulary was higher-level than what I had been seeing from his peers, and the sole fact that he was using Oxford commas blew my mind. I mean—I can model it on the board, provide notes and examples, and repeatedly verbalize their significance, but the reality is that I knew I wouldn't receive too many written responses with varying punctuation marks throughout. But Amaru could.

"So… This is an awesome response! Can I ask you something, though? Why do you repeat yourself here," I pointed at where I highlighted two of the same terms, "instead of elaborating and extending on what you were trying to convey?"

"Ugh…" he sheepishly smiled with his mouth open, looking back-and-forth between me and his work.

"Amaru! Stop being lazy!" I chortled.

"Yes, ma'am," he acknowledged, both firmly but with a softness of respect and eyes that said, *'Okay, you caught me.'* Amaru sat a little crouched over at the Small-Group table, his elbows on his knees, both hands cupped together, but always looking me straight in the eyes. It was the eye-to-eye level of respect instilled by his Coach Father and Mom, who I always knew played a pivotal role in his overall work ethic and spruce appearance. Everything about Amaru hollered: *Basketball player! Football player! Confidence!*

"I'm not telling you this because your work is awful or anything like that; I want you to know that. I'm telling you this because I *know* you can push yourself. You know what you're doing, so now go do it. Push yourself because you're an exceptional writer."

"Yes, ma'am," he repeated. After pushing his chair back, he stood tall with his athletic, square shoulders, and turned back to his group. "Haha! What'd you get?" he asked his peers. "She said I'm a good writer!" he beamed, as his friends began shoving shoulders with him, asking to see what he had written down.

From the first day of school, Amaru was surrounded by friends. One might consider him a jock, but while that aligns with a decent percentage of his identity, that is not everything he is. Amaru had some physical features that often placed him at the center of generalizations, and it became clear that in some ways, it held him back from being identified as more than an athlete.

As his 8TH-Grade year progressed, so did Amaru's behavior, which was influenced by a fellow athlete whose reputation was tolerable, at best. And in the back of my mind, I mentally

fought myself, battling wanting to caution him while allowing him to make his own mistakes and decisions. His once on-time entrance during the entire first semester shifted to a few minutes late "because of Spanish Tutorials", led to multiple tardies where I witnessed him breezing down the hallway with a friend, and ultimately, oozed into lateness with his work. While I initially had some leniency with tardies (since Amaru's class was the first period of the school day), as soon as it crossed paths with his work ethic, my brakes were applied.

As he entered class late one day, about two minutes past the tardy bell, my voice trailed off with a hint of saltiness, "Amaru…".

His ears perked up, and his friends started on with, "Awww, Amaruuu!" I could see his gaze shift, his head not turning, but his eyes glanced in my direction, peering out of their corners. His back stiffened, and he turned abruptly, "Did you call me?" his knees bouncing up and down, nervously.

"Can you step out for a moment?"

"Oh! You're in trouble, bro'!" his peers continued.

"Boys," I said sternly, "I don't need you to chime in. Focus on your Warm-Up," I pointed to the board, as Amaru opened the door to go into the hallway.

I met him in the hallway, and I could feel my heart squeeze a little, pained because I never want a high-achieving student to feel embarrassed by me calling them out. "Why are you late?"

He looked up from the tile and smiled, nervously. "I don't know," he admitted. If there was one personality flaw and impressionable strength Amaru possessed, it was his genuine honesty. His heart was sewn together with integrity and a sense of chivalry; I heard it often in Small-Group, when he attempted to help his peers who may not have understood a skill and/or a

question. I heard it when he would re-group his tablemates to get them back and focused on the tasks at-hand in class. I heard it in the crowded hallways, when he'd accidentally bump someone's shoulder and would turn around to shout, "Aw, man, sorry 'bout that."

"Amaru, look," I began, firm but with compassion, "You're a good student. You know your stuff, and you know what you're doing. I'm not going to call or e-mail Mom *or* tell Coach that you've been late a lot—"

"Aw, Mrs., *please*, don't—"

"BUT…" I cut him off, "You have no excuse to be late to my class. I see you walking around every morning before the bell with your friend, wandering the halls. You need to stop being influenced by your *friend,*" I said, with a directional hint in my voice, knowing that he *knew* which friend I was referring to. His eyes acknowledged, along with the bobbing of his head. "I'm not saying to stop being friends with him. Keep being his friend because you're a good influence, but what's happening is that you're being easily influenced by him, and lately, you've come in tardy nearly every single day. It needs to stop. You are not him. You are a smart, young man."

"Yes, ma'am," he replied.

"It's disappointing, Amaru, because I know you. This semester, you're making some poor choices." It was as if there was a visible slump from his shoulders the minute I said 'disappointing'. "Now, tomorrow is a new day!" my voice began to shift to a peppier tone. "Don't be late," I tapped his shoulder with the wad of papers in my hand, as I turned to walk back into the classroom, but before I could, Amaru said, "I'm sorry, ma'am, and I promise I won't be late again." He wasn't.

There was still something that I couldn't quite pinpoint about Amaru, however. It wasn't brought to my attention until the school year was three-quarters of the way completed, and it became time to refer students for Gifted & Talented (GT) testing, which would allow them to take Advanced Placement (AP) or SOAR courses at GVHS their following freshmen year. Because Amaru's writing was so well established, I was certain that he was already labeled GT, but after reviewing my rosters, I found that he was not, in fact, already determined to be a GT student, and in an obvious way, it was maddening. "Wait—" I said aloud, as the class was in the midst of working, all looking up at me, waiting for me to ask something. I looked up to see their eyes and halted pencils, "Oh! Sorry. Amaru, come here," I called him over, as I waved them back to work.

"Yes, ma'am?"

"You're not in GT…?" I prompted.

"Huh? What's that? What's GT?"

"Gifted & Talented? Like SOAR?" I questioned, wanting to make sure they didn't just forget to label him on my class roster in the database.

"No, ma'am," he answered.

"Oh… Okay. How would you feel about being in GT/SOAR? It's basically a school program that allows you to take more advanced and/or challenging courses. It's *not "more"* work, but it requires you to think more critically about the world around you. And, it might open up more opportunities for you when you're in high school. What do you think?"

"Uhhh…," he was thinking. "Yeah, sure."

"Okay, well, I'm going to call your Mom and ask her, let her know. Then y'all can talk about it, and make a decision. Sound good?"

"Yes, ma'am," he nodded, as he turned to finish collaborating.

I was dumbfounded. That nagging feeling in my stomach began to stir again. I struggled with an ugly reality that others might say is an "easy argument" or cop-out, but in this broken public education system, it's too often a reality: Could Amaru have been overlooked because of his ethnic/cultural identity? Why is it that out of nearly 30 students on my first period roster, the only ones labeled GT were white/Caucasian? How is it possible that his previous ELAR teachers did not notice how talented of a writer he is, and moreover, why didn't they *do* anything about it? *This* was the feeling that I felt when it came to Amaru, and I was fixing to break the barrier for him and other diverse students.

In following the GT referral process, I contacted Amaru's Parents. And—Because what educational system allows for easy-to-understand processes/requests?—there were several questions from his Mom, who sought-out the Counselor for more information about my request to have her son GT/SOAR tested. The Counselor, in turn, reached out to me because—despite her being the go-to Testing Coordinator for GT services—she was unaware of the process herself and wanted to know what I was specifically asking for regarding Amaru. (All dilemmas further indicate failures with communication, or lack thereof, within the district.) Once I precisely clarified the process for getting students tested (and into) the GT/SOAR program, I reached out to Amaru's Mom to let her know, as well. His Mom approved and was glad that this might open other opportunities for Amaru throughout high school. Now, however, it was a waiting game to see whether the district would approve him to be GT/SOAR tested and/or deny him entrance.

Weeks after the initial e-mail—which was excessively late and of inopportune timing—regarding GT referrals for testing went out, I received a response back from district that stated that Amaru's GT referral required me, and his other core teachers, to gather more

information and provide detailed, written feedback. What was working against Amaru was the fact that unless I specifically went to each of his teachers, I highly doubted they would respond with in-depth, written examples that justified him *being* GT tested. The task being asked of teachers was simply meant to answer 'Yes. The student qualifies for testing because of X, Y, and Z.' or 'No. The student does not qualify for GT testing because of X.' However, to further complicate what *appears* rather simple, teachers were required to respond in-depth via a Google Form. Despite my visitation to other teachers, only one of his other three teachers did respond to the District personnel; this was, again, due to the bad timing of the e-mail—which was in the midst of state testing, as well as the end of a grading cycle, all chaos for core-content teachers.

Still I trudged forth with justifying my response, pleading with the best terms as I could to paint a vivid picture of intelligence that Amaru's work expressed:

Please give additional feedback, comments, or additional things the committee needs to considered for further evaluation. *

Amaru's work ethic is high-quality, and he possesses an ability to thoroughly connect ideas in written form and creatively express solutions. He utilizes his background knowledge about global issues and appropriately and effectively applies it to build upon his ELAR knowledge/skills. Amaru strives for answers and reasoning behind complex issues. I firmly believe testing this student for GT would allow him more opportunities throughout his HS career and beyond.

I felt as if this system that is meant to assist all students to reach their highest potential was the very system that also prevented traditionally oppressed students from reaching their academic strengths, and I didn't like it.

At my next ELAR Department Meeting, I took a solid 15 (of our 30) minutes to explain my expectations when it came to all ELAR teachers' responsibilities to *all* students, specifically those who come from cultural backgrounds. I shared Amaru's case and the various hurdles I was experiencing. Principal Scott was present and visibly acknowledged failures of the GT referral process and failures within the elementary setting—even taking time to step in and promote careful awareness of linguistically and culturally diverse students.

Upon reflection, I believe that my frustration lies with the continuous *inaction* of Amaru's numerous teachers, specifically those who taught ELAR. In reading various texts and assigning writing assignments, *how could* one *not* notice his penmanship and work ethic *and* take the time to push his case forward?

As the school year was ending, however, there began the bright opening of a door for Amaru. Though I was never told, myself, about whether he was able to enter the GT/SOAR program—despite asking multiple times—I sought out the Counselor. A few weeks went by without her knowing, and it wasn't until another student whom I referred told me that she had received a letter from the district stating that her GT test scores were considered distinguished and had been offered entrance into the GT/SOAR program that I looked for Amaru.

"Hey, Amaru!" I yelled over the rowdiness in the hallway. "Did you get a letter from the District about GT?"

"Oh, yeah. My Mom said I got in!" he smiled.

"Oh, that's so great! I knew you would," I beamed, returning a huge smile of gratification.

"Thank you," he said.

"I'm proud of you. You're smart, and you deserve it."

Reflection and Analysis

There were several barriers that got in the way of Amaru moving immediately forward to SOAR testing. The following e-mail describes the obstacles I had to jump through to get Amaru and several of his peers into the SOAR program.

Note: While this e-mail was about another student who did *not* get into the SOAR program, it is identical to the process I followed through with Amaru.

> Yes, I was disappointed by a handful that didn't make it. I'm frustrated by the system, in particular.
>
> Here are some things that might help with you explaining to Blank [why they did not get admitted into the District's SOAR program]:
>
> The only information I received was that this was the first year the district decided to formulate a committee and review teacher input (which I provided), as well as evaluate the iSIP data from January and his Math MAPS scores.
>
> I spoke to NoName (SOAR Teacher), and they said that last year and prior, they were the one who would evaluate the students, teacher input, and materials. I was not here last year, so I have no knowledge to explain why that changed. I do feel like teacher input is such an integral part of making a decision like this that could do nothing but open educational opportunities for students in the future. Additionally, NoName also did not know why that shifted to district this school year.
>
> Additionally, Blank's other teachers were allowed to provide input, but the district only sent out an e-mail about that on Monday, and it was due that same Wednesday. Speaking for teachers, this is NOT a decent turn-around time; I was upset by this because I know that his other core teachers likely couldn't get around to do so with such a limited timeframe.

Additionally, I did call the district and explained how extremely disheartening I felt that they would base so much of their decision on an iSIP score from January, especially because the program itself has faults. For example, this decision-making process did not allow for the committee to view Blank's analytical writing skills nor creativity. To me, that is an enormous part of being in GT/SOAR—the creativity and outside-of-the-box thinking. So, yes, I did speak to that; however, I do not feel it impacted any part of that process, unfortunately.

I will continue to vocalize my opinion about this to the district because it is something I am absolutely passionate about, and standardized assessments do not do justice when it comes to opening doors for students in education. On a personal note, I shared with you that I am in a graduate program right now, and to be honest, I did not pass the GRE exam because I failed the math portion miserably. However, it was my analytical writing skills that, luckily, IU-B was looking at. Because of my writing, I was granted an opportunity I, otherwise, likely would not have received by any other university. So, yes, I feel that frustration as both a student and parent. These systems in place within the field of education are not always in the favor of the majority of the students, and I'm sorry that Blank and you are feeling those outcomes.

I know this was a lot, but please know that I am here to continue to support Blank as best I can. Next school year, when they are a Freshman (and beyond), if there's anything I can do for them that may provide them more opportunities, please let me know. Right now, my recommendation is to place Blank in Advanced (AP) English courses—if y'all agree to make this decision, of course—and have them get into the IB program. The IB program is a place where I feel they may thrive.

Thank you for reaching out to me, and I appreciate all of your support.

Mrs. Salinas

In sharing Amaru's counternarrative, he was only one of a handful of students who *looked* different from the majoritarian norm found not only in this district but throughout the

many that I have experienced across the state of Texas, and while I also wish to emphasize that this district is moving towards a more progressive and inclusive framework, there is still a massive amount of *action* that must be confronted and successfully reformed in order to truly radiate change and inclusivity.

Amaru's story became a long-fought challenge for me… What I believe should have been a rather simple process where a true committee could view tangible work samples of Amaru's became this unreachable, almost rather unattainable goal. Instead of raw, handwritten and/or typed work, his initial screener for eligibility relied solely on a computer-generated program that measured reading comprehension components. Instead of analyzing an authentic portfolio of his out-of-the-box creativity—exactly what SOAR is supposed to emphasize—Amaru's acceptance relied on scores that can be, arguably, detrimental (often due to inaccurate variables) to all learners for assessment purposes. Instead, their "giftedness" and "high general-intellectual ability" appear to be measured without genuine individual creativity wherein the learner's thought-processes are visible via written form, as was the case with Amaru.

Advocating for Amaru and others like him was without question. Honestly, anger for the system drove me. And I let my frustration turn into action—for doing what is right for students, and Parents/Guardians, who don't know the web of complexities… because Education should *never* possess barriers, only opportunities.

"And I told about equality, and it's true.

Either you're wrong, or you're right, oooh!

But, if you're thinking about my baby—

It don't matter if you're Black or White, oooh!"

—*Black Or White*, By: Michael Jackson

Applicability, Transferability, and Home: *"Tell me why and how I'm going to use this…?"*

Kris Webster

By the time the District Common Assessment (DCA) comes and goes, she gloats, "Man, Mrs. Salinas, you should've seen what I wrote for the test! I did so *good*!"

"Well, we're about to see," I respond, as I go around the class, handing back micro-tiny slips of paper with their DCA results.

Kris raises her hand not long after she gets hers and while I'm still passing out slips, and with her cheeks bright pink, she pulls at her earlobe and says with a tone of resentment, "Mrs. Salinas, why does this slip have my race on it? Why do they need to know if I'm a white student? I don't see how that matters."

I shrug my shoulders, continuing to walk around the classroom, and give my best answer, "I don't know, Kris, it just does. I don't know why the district—or state, for that matter—needs to know your race and/or ethnicity, but they do. This is the only way I know how to print your test results. I asked everyone if there was another way, but no one could help me. But I totally agree with you."

"How is that relevant?" she presses, her cheeks flushing an even darker shade approaching red. A part of me could tell that her heart must have been thumping so hard in her chest and her hands likely shaking because her voice almost waivered.

Wanting to and partially not wanting to make eye contact, I shrugged again, and said, "I don't know, Kris. Trust me, I don't believe that has any reason to be there either. To me, it doesn't matter if you're white, black, brown, yellow, green, blue, or all the colors of the rainbow.

What matters is whether or not you're understanding the material I'm trying to teach you and if you take that knowledge and allow it to transpire in the future," I preach.

She leans back with a bit of force, slouching in her chair and crossing her arms. I hear her continue to make comments to her shoulder-partner, and knowing that there's no answer that would satisfy her, I move forth with addressing the whole-class regarding the test results.

"Well, I did pretty good on the District Common Assessment, so what else do I need?" Kris would ask all the time… Literally, *ALL*. The. Time.

"It's not about what you *need*, Kris, it's about *quality*. Do you *feel* like you've expressed yourself *clearly*? Am I going to understand the *context* of the situation—Who? What? Where? When? Why? How? Your opinions, thoughts, beliefs…? Did you answer everything *thoroughly*?" I responded, knowing that I was projecting a borderline-agitated tone toward her.

"YESss…?" she looked at me, her eyes questioning me, silently asking, *'Do you believe me? Am I really done? Maybe I do need to add something…?'*

"Are you asking me or telling me?"

"I'm tellinggg you…?" her tone inflicting inquiry.

"Okay. You're not done. Come back to Small-Group when you're confident and ready," I responded.

"UGHHH! Mrs. Salinas! I don't know what else you want!" she whines.

"Well, if you *felt* like you were done, then you'd be confident and say, *'I'm done!'*, but you didn't, so that tells me that you don't feel like you're finished. What do *you think* you need? This is for a scholarship, so it's free money for college, after high school. Wouldn't you want to add more of your voice?"

"Well, I've already said…" Kris begins and continues to list off the requirements towards a completed written response, but she fails to engage with her answer, so I prompt her to consider other aspects, seeking more depth from her usually dry sentences.

"Okay, yes. You have everything you're *required* to have, but it just feels… BLEH. Like, you're telling me, but you're not *really* telling me. Where's the *oomph*, your spirit? Your *voice*?" I quizzically push her, seeking more critical thought.

She doesn't answer right away. Instead, she looks at me, looks away, and then turns around, gets up, and goes to her desk. She begins to revise her written work, adding on to her initial assignment.

When she returned to Small-Group the day after starting her scholarship essay, it's much, much better. She appeared more confident about what she showed me, enough to submit her work, and knowing that was the last major grade of the school year, sighed, expressing her relief.

"You know, Mrs. Salinas…" she started to reflect, "I know I complain all the time about all the work you give us, but I'm thankful. You know, after taking the STAAR test, it was so easy, like, super easy, and I think it's because of how you prepared us."

"Ah!" I exclaimed, fixing to relish this moment, and pointing a finger at her, "Are you telling me that you now appreciate all the work I've given you because it's prepared you for not only the STAAR but for next school year? Do you feel ready?"

Her cheeks beginning to pink again, she smirked and rolled her eyes, "Yes," she nodded, with a smirk on her face. "I know I would always give you a hard time and ask if we could have "Free Days", and you always said 'No,' but it was worth it. And I think everything you've taught us is relevant. Many teachers here just let the students do whatever or no work, but you're actually trying to prepare us for the future." Kris, as crazy as she would drive me, is a wise

tween; she's totally aware of the issues teenagers are facing, and she's even more attuned to "grown-up" life. She knows the complexities of daily life, even more so when those complexities involve multiple individuals with various perspectives that don't always mesh well.

I look at her and say, "Yes. That's my goal. At the end of the day, I could care less about STAAR. I just want y'all to feel prepared, and I am confident that you're ready for high school. And thank you… Finally!" I teasingly chuckle.

Kris is looking for another philosophical conversation—I can tell—as she seats herself next to me on one of the back tables with paperwork on either side of it. We had gotten into a conversation about STAAR and her feelings about teachers [in general], and she began to veer into the teaching levels of some of my colleagues. "Well, like, you're teaching above the test and what's expected of our grade, but I'm saying not all teachers can do it as well as you have, and not all teachers *want* to do it high enough, so they just do it the bare minimum so that the students can pass, not like completely "Master" or "Above Master" of the grade level."

"You know, I know I brought up STAAR a lot these past few weeks, but throughout the school year, I never wanted to bring up STAAR because I wanted y'all to know that it's a life skill." I try to steer the conversation away from the dangerous territory of talking about other professionals. "You know, that's why I tried—and maybe I wasn't the best at always saying it, but that's why I would always try saying, *'You're going to need it for a job'* or *'You're going to need it for college'* or, you know what I mean?"

"Yeah, and it's hard for a lot of teachers to do that. You know, Coach Smith does that a lot because he's like, *'You need to know basic history'*, and he's like, *'Some things we know [about History], and some things we don't, but you need to know the basic history of our*

country's past and the foundation of it.' But, like, in Math—When are we ever going to need to know when to solve for X?" she pushes.

Quick to try to push back and defend Math, despite my dislike and failures in the subject, I take a minute to think, and then force out, "Well, my husband's job does. He will tell me." I chuckle.

"Well, yeah, but they don't ever say *this* job is going to do *that*. They don't actually tell us how we need to know it's that. Like, other teachers don't actually give us examples of how we know we're going to need to use it."

"So, like, you would maybe like to see more word problems where it shows, like, *'Oh, hey, you're going to need this when you're a teacher because…'* You want scenarios?" I ask.

"Yeah, and, like, in ELA it's easier because in every single job field, you're going to have to learn how to write. And, like, the majority of people don't just write because they enjoy writing, and the majority of people don't enjoy reading just because they want to read," she says, as I laugh at her comment. "But, like all the practice writing and reading *does* pay off." She continues elaborating about the STAAR tests she took for Math and Social Studies, and then she makes a comment that is just so obvious to me, yet one I never considered a factor for low test scores. "For me, it's either, like, I know it, and so I do it and finish answering it. But, like, how is staring at a test going to help me figure it out? Either I know it, or I don't. Sitting there, staring at a test, isn't going to help me figure it out. And I don't understand how people take so, so long. Like the essay—I just knew what to write. I understood how to write the essay, so I did it."

As I'm listening to her, I'm trying to gather what her main point is—in part, for the sake of my own wondering and research, but moreover, to better understand what she wants from *all*

teachers, so I return to her initial "scenario" response. "So, like, see, I think you're right about the relevancy thing, especially in Math. I think I only had one teacher who ever taught me how to really solve basic Algebra problems. It was my college Algebra teacher, and I was taking remedial Algebra I for the third time. He wouldn't move onto a new problem until everyone understood what they were doing. And, I did pass, but still, I never had that relevancy. Like, *'Show me why? Why do I need to know this?'* Right? And I feel like you're right. Maybe sharing stories like this would be a good idea, you know? Especially in Math. You know?"

"Yeah," she nods her head. "I mean, like, sometimes it's easy to figure some. Like, let's say I have a gym membership, and it's $10 a month…" Kris continues, giving a well-said word problem that shows relevancy to her argument about solving for X. "Like, when are we going to use this? And make it so that we understand and can see that we need it. Like, instead of making it for a gym membership, make it for teachers, so we can see, 'Oh, yeah, my teacher needs this when she…' You know? So, like, teachers using *personal experiences* to help us understand [the content] is what's going to help us—or maybe even, not a teacher, but like 'As a *person*, I use this because'—that's what's going to help us better understand. Like, which gas station is cheaper? Or, like, which ink for printers is cheaper? Did you know, I told Ms. Young this—did you know that printer ink is the most expensive ink on the planet?"

"What? Oh, wow! I didn't know that, I exclaimed with raised eyebrows.

"So, like if we're going to figure out which printer ink is better?" she continues, with such excitement in her voice. I see she's really on the go with this conversation.

I smile, looking at her, "Hmmm! This is a very insightful conversation, Kris. I think those personal examples are important, too."

"Yeah, but I mean, I feel like you—even though Mrs. Adams' class doesn't do a lot of work or as much as us—it's okay. We get a lot of work, but we also have so much more time to have you, like, show us how to do it. Like, we have so many examples that you give us, and then you give us time to get to practice it. Even though it takes so much work!" she chuckles.

"I know," I chide with a smirk, "but I do it for a reason. I want you to know how to do it once you get to high school, to not have to struggle."

"Yes. I know. I know I'll be ready for high school."

"And now that you know how to set up an essay, you have that for *life*, and you're good. Any essay that's tossed at you. You might get an essay that says it has to be five paragraphs, instead of the four, so what are you going to do then? How would you write that?" I quiz her.

"You give three reasons in your thesis, instead of only two," she replies.

"Yes!" I beam. "See, you got this!" And Kris does. She's ready for high school… I just wish she wasn't so burdened with her family's unwillingness to make a decision for her to attend a specific high school. "Okay, the bell's going to ring!" I announce to her and the rest of the class. She gathers her belongings, and I return to a warm place of sadness in my heart. This beautiful and bright young lady has grown before my eyes this school year, but behind her pink cheeks and shiny eyes lies so much anxiety…

During the last week of school, I am only to see Kris one last time, but she left me with many beautiful memories and noteworthy conversations about life and school.

"You know, I don't know where I'm going to high school next school year," she shares.

"What do you mean? You're not going to GVHS?" I question, hoping she's willing to share with me what I've overheard her share with her shoulder partner over the last few weeks.

"Nope," she says with a tone of defeat. "My Mom lives near Hill Park, and my Dad wants to move to a new house, so he doesn't want to have to travel all the way over here to drop me off. My Mom, though, supports whatever decision I make." Kris continues sharing about the complicated relationship she has with her Father due to her Step-Mom, and I sympathize with her. She's forthcoming in acknowledging that since middle school, there have been a lot of changes in her life because of her parents' divorce.

In fact, at the beginning of the school year, I recall her crying towards the end of class. She wound up staying after the bell rang to go to lunch because she was so overwhelmed by the constant Math and Social Studies homework. At the time, I recall having assigned an essay—that while working on it in-class was assigned and Small-Group check-ins were required, it was not necessarily the only ELAR material due for the week. It was obvious to me that an essay extension was an automatic grant, as Kris was the type of student who worked meticulously to submit quality work in a timely manner. Seeing her cry because she said she'd "been living in Air BNBs, hotels, and friends' houses", waiting for her home to be built, and completing homework was difficult because of this was a significant factor in both her mental health and completing academic deadlines.

By the close of the school year, Kris' home life was more balanced; she lived in two homes—one her Mom's and the other her Dad's. She had missed a week of school, but, again, it being the end of May meant that it did not impact her grades. Upon her return, she filled me in on her adventures of her family vacation to Cancun, Mexico, and she shared with me many of the other places she was destined to venture to this Summer. To say I was thrilled for her would be an understatement.

"You're going to have so, so much fun, Kris! You get to travel all over the world and experience life and other cultures first-hand!"

"Yeah, I know. I'm excited. "I just wish I knew where I was going to be for high school." She returned to the same worries she had been sharing for the past two months. "My parents still haven't told me. I mean, my Mom says she'll support my decision no matter what, and I want to go to GVHS, but, my Dad doesn't want me to go there because he doesn't want to drive me. He keeps saying we're moving," she continued reiterating what I have heard repeatedly from her, but this time around, it saddened me, as she shared that she felt as if her Dad is only regurgitating what his wife (her Step-Mom) is telling him to say. Kris fully opened up to me, explaining that she felt she knew her Dad would never say some of the things he has been, and in an effort to help her, I told her that she might consider talking to a Family Therapist who can mediate between her Mom and Dad. She informed me that she had done that already; her Mom set-up an appointment with someone, but she felt as if her Dad was going to refuse to attend because her high school debacle was something to be settled amongst them.

"Look, Mrs. Salinas, I even have this PowerPoint that I'm going to present to my Dad," placing her laptop on my desk to show me. "Can you check it for me? What else do you think I should include?"

Imagine that—a 12-year-old student who created a 40+ Google Slide to present to her Dad about the pros-and-cons of attending one high school versus another. I honestly didn't believe that any child would be willing to take the time to research all of that information, but it made one thing crystal clear to me: *Kris is truly hurting. She worried… wholeheartedly worried.* Again, I felt disheartened for her, and to be completely honest with myself, perhaps it's because I know that as an adult, parents have the ultimate say in where their child will attend school. And

that's the truth. The wedge that makes Kris' situation stand out from the norm, however, is—from my perspective—that she appears to have taken on the adult's role: researching, finding a mediator, constant anxiety from the fear of the unknown.

So I did what I do… I grammar-checked her work and offered her the insight of an adult *and* parent. "Okay, so you have this—and it's amazing. I didn't even know all of this about GVHS! But, okay. So—what are you proposing? What are you going to offer? Because if it was my child and you're asking me to let you attend the high school of your choice with your friends, what are you going to promise me? You have to be willing to compromise. What is your compromise?" I challenge.

She looks at me, trying to both process and formulate a thought.

"Remember: Think about your Dad and what you think he'd appreciate from you. For example, are you wanting to work once you're old enough? If so, you can offer to help pay for gas for him commuting to drive you to school."

"No," she shakes her head. "My Dad has four vehicles, one with terrible gas mileage. He doesn't care about how much gas costs. But—," she starts listing off some of what I expect, such as good grades, like nothing below an A.

"Okay, so add that in here, towards the end."

As the bell rang, she scooped up her laptop and gave her final, "Thank you, Mrs. Salinas. Have a good day!" that I'd hear this school year. I sat back in my chair and just stared at nothing. My heart hurts for her.

Reflection and Analysis

In language arts and reading comes power, and the absolute *best* power is seeing when students, especially Kris, are able to utilize the various writing strategies to fit their individual needs.

The most beautiful, albeit bittersweet, part of Kris' story, is how it came full circle. She may have always, always asked me, *"Mrs. Salinas, do we get a 'Free Day'?!"*, but in the end, while viewing the Persuasive Google Slide that she made for her Dad, I found snippets of ELAR skills that she embraced—from her powerful diction to her organizational patterns. She did that. Kris may have hated the critical analysis and writing expectations at first (and throughout most of the school year), but in the end, even she acknowledged how valuable her hard work had been. She moved onto 9TH Grade, leaving me with Zero doubt about how successful she has grown—and will continue to thrive—in ELAR, no matter where her Parents choose for her to go. She's going to be a force.

CHAPTER 6: TEACHING WITH EMPATHY AND HUMANITY

In many ways, I have uncovered that my students' *counterstories* relate to Frierian and Marxist critical literacy theories, notions of critical race theory by Delgado because my work revolves around their cultural, racial, and/or ethnic identities. In understanding critical race theory, Solorzano argues, "It is within the context of racism that 'monovocal' stories about the low educational achievement and attainment of students of color are told" (Solorzano, 2002, p.27). As such, I seek to get rid of hasty generalizations that "justif[y] the use of a 'master narrative' in storytelling" and instead, my goal was to allow readers, passionate teachers like myself, a more insightful understanding of a day in the life of an average middle school student (Solorzano, 2002, p. 27). However, each individual student is simply *one* human, who they are in that *one, specific* moment—as the lives of teenagers are ever-changing, revolving, growing, hurting, experiencing, living, *being*.

In searching and reflecting upon how I might continue to grow as a practitioner, I came upon Anzaldua, who penned the following constant, infinite reality: "Necesitamos teories [we need theories] that will rewrite history using race, class, gender, and ethnicity as categories of analysis, theories that cross borders, that blur boundaries—new kinds of theories with new theorizing methods… In our mestizaje theories we create new categories for those of us left out or pushed out of existing ones" (Anzaldua 1990, pp.xxv-xxvi). And, as being humans who are "mestizas—biologically and/or culturally mixed—we have different surfaces for each aspect of identity, each inscribed by a particular subculture. We are 'written' all over… carved and tattooed with the sharp needles of experience" (Anzaldua 1990, xv). Therefore, with the hundreds of faces that I have had the honor of teaching, of learning from—and, in turn, teaching them about the power of English Language Arts & Reading (ELAR)—I am "tattooed" with the

lives of my students; they become a part of me, and in turn, I allow their identities to constantly reform my teaching practice.

Somehow, however, built-up pressure since pre-COVID-19 led to an eruption of resignations from teachers—post-COVID-19—who were forcingly placed in the unknown, which culminated in unrealistic teaching expectations. Since then, educators are yearning to figure out what, *tangibly*, that equates to in the year 2024 and within the walls of a classroom for students who are behind academically, exhibiting large gaps in their literacy and language learning. And here I am, 13 years into my teaching career, trying to find some balance between the socioemotional well-being of my students and the academic realities that they will be faced with in order to transfer essential knowledge and skills to their future livelihoods. The *best* I can do, and owe to each individual student that walks through my classroom door, is treat them with empathy and kindness.

Teaching Responsively through Empathy and Humanity

Empathize with Human Needs and Identity

Understanding that before any student will even attempt to produce academic work for you, as their educator, if their individual needs of survival are not met—emotionally, mentally, physically—expect nothing, and accept it willingly and wholly.

Do they feel welcome? Safe? Or, do they appear uncomfortable? When you look at the human being in front of you, do their eyes convey struggle? I've learned to rephrase the automatic yes-or-no question, *'Are you okay?'*, with: *'How can I help you? What do you need from me?'* If I still get no response, then I'm left with: *'Is there one thing I can do for you today?'*

I hate sounding cliché, but it is absolutely essential to break the ice; ask about their day, their weekend, the *best* part of their day/weekend. Trust yourself as an educator; if you know you're not going to hear something positive, that is *your* signal that their needs are not being met outside of the classroom, and therefore, you *do* have an obligation—ethically, professionally, humanely—to respond accordingly, in the most genuine, significant way possible.

Set aside academics for the moment, until you talk it out with them. And—eventually—*trust yourself* to find a way to loop it back to the skill, even if it is not necessarily the same assignment and/or expectations that other students are being held to. At the end of the day and at the end of the school year, the equitable approach will remain the most cherished. Students are primary beings who understand, first-hand, the power of Maya Angelou's words: "I've learned that people will forget what you said, people will forget what you did, but people will never forget how you made them *feel"* (Angelou, 1928-2014).

Build Confidence by Weaving In Academics

Whether it takes one day, a few weeks, and/or months to get the student to open up to you—enough to where they realize that you are trying to help them—understand, yourself, that it takes time. In this time, attempt to reflect on how you can honestly, open-heartedly support them—always attempt to build them up in confidence, ability, and hope. Bring in real-life exemplars; acknowledging their struggle, but emphasizing their strengths and abilities. Think critically about what matters *most* in this *individual* students' *life*, and ask yourself what you want that student walking away with: What are the *most pivotal* skills/TEKS you can harness their identity with to bridge and build upon? Always, have a Plan A, B, and C… and do your best to have an Emergency/Back-Up Plan F for when all else fails. But don't stress, because if

you have met their human needs, you will, possibly, never have to reach into your back pocket for Plan F.

Once that feat is in motion, academic work begins. Be forthcoming, kind, and honestly open with them, asking: *'Do you understand what you're doing? It's okay if you don't. Can you explain what you think the assignment is?'* Reassure and remind them that there are no "dumb" and/or "wrong" questions in education/ELAR, specifically, because—as I always tell my students—*'The beautiful, amazing thing about ELAR/[this subject] is that you are always able to justify your answer! And, that's why I'm here—to help you.'* Laugh with them. Talk with them. Make it relevant to them. Be kind and patient with them.

I enjoy showing my students that I *am* truly listening to them by handwriting their words on a sheet of paper, next to them, so that they see that not only do I hear them but I most definitely value their ideas. These dialogical notes also allow for post-discussion tangibles, so that when the pre-conference is nearly complete, you can *visibly show* them how much they *do,* in fact, know and understand. One of my favorite moments in teaching boils down to these moments, when I can look a student in their eyes and with a smile on my face, say: *'See! You know what you're doing! You're smart! Be confident in yourself!'*

Start with Flexibility and Choice

Choice is not a method that I use only once trust has been established; it is something that I very clearly express with my students from the very beginning. Especially for those who have low self-esteem in themselves, it's critical to always provide them a plethora of opportunities to show—and prove—that they understand the skill at work. Since I start the beginning of the school year utilizing Learning Stations, students expect to visit with me, at least bi-weekly, in Small-Group.

When not in Small-Group, the students have to be actively collaborating and engaged with skills that need constant reinforcement. For my students, that may have been reading fluently; responding to literature by writing open-ended sentences—some may use sentence stems as an additional support, while others were experimenting with new grammar marks; grammar skills practice; using textual evidence to build upon their inference skills; etcetera. These skills would be practiced in these Learning Stations; however, students are given a set amount of time—typically two class sessions—and are allowed to choose which practice they wanted to begin and end with. Students are also allowed—urged and encouraged—to complete the assignments with their table group, allowing them to collaborate and hear one another's thought processes. While most teachers might argue that 'students will just end up cheating', that outcome is subjective, quite highly subjective, to only a small number of students in all class periods. Additionally, there are other variables, specifically classroom management, which could lead to such preconceived conclusions. Furthermore, the skills that are being practiced will be reviewed in Small-Group, so there will always be accountability and answering to completed and/or *in*completed expectations.

It is my belief that while experiential learning is seen as a major factor in truly possessing a highly effective and functioning classroom, the notion of *choice* holds just as powerful with learners. *Let go* of the control, and *trust* your students to astonish you. Give them choices in *how* they prefer to be assessed—independent and/or peer/group project, a written essay, a video, a traditional multiple-choice exam, or (my least favorite of all) a Google Slide/PowerPoint. Ask them for some insight; be vulnerable and transparent with them: *'Hey, guys! In the past, I've done this…, but this school year, what would y'all be interested in working on? How would you like me to assess/grade you? One of your Learning Studios today is to make a list of "Project*

Ideas" for our next UoS, okay? Be sure that it includes X, Y, Z…'. Some of my best lessons have come from student ideas, and there is absolutely nothing wrong with that. Just as my students learn from me, I learn just as much—if not more (Shhh!) from them. *Let* them awe you.

Fight For Them

Students—*All* human beings—deserve second chances. There is nothing more empowering in a teacher-student relationship than advocating for students when they need someone behind them, supporting them. I hope this is never taken out-of-context, yet I state it nonetheless: White lies don't hurt every once in awhile, especially when you're talking about why a student might be a few seconds tardy to Ms. Doubtfire's class—whom they swear hates them. *'Yeah, I'm sorry! I was talking to him/her about something important real quick. Sorry he's/she's late; that's my bad!'* Or, *'I'm going to write you a note this one time—and I hope this one minute is enough time for you to finish up your Math assignment that I know is due this next period'* as you glare at them with eyeballs that have the 'Mom' look.

Moreover, one of my favorite tricks—or I should say *treats*—is sending home a positive Remind 101 text message and/or e-mail to a student's Parent(s)/Guardian(s), explaining how terrifically amazing their student has been with their work ethic in ELAR. So often, I do this with students who are often viewed as nuisances in other classes, and I do it *purposely* and, just sometimes, make it overly gushy! What is the inevitable outcome…? Said student returns to my class the next day, being an absolute angel, following directions, listening intently, and giving me his/her all. This one, *tiny* act of kindness has led to so many positive and strong relationships with students who are frequently viewed as a behavioral problem in other classes. And while it is true that maybe, once or twice, this quick trick has not worked as I had hoped—what is the

harm in sending home a positive message? Spreading happiness never goes unnoticed; it still makes me feel fulfilled!

All joking aside, however, when a student is truly struggling—academically, mentally, emotionally—go to bat for them. There is absolutely nothing wrong in e-mailing all of a student's teachers, asking the other educators to show him/her some grace by granting the student an extension of time and/or for some relief in the amount of work required. The student doesn't need to know that you are doing this, but, perhaps sometimes, they may need to know so as to alleviate the stress and pressure of that moment in time. If there should be a consistent pattern of this, however, that is a red flag shouting that a student is struggling with something more than they are capable of handling by themselves.

On the other hand, when a student has been blossoming and thriving in your class, go to bat for them. Work the systems in order to push them forward academically. Work the systems that are contrary to what the educational goals are for students: Growth and opportunities—like Amaru. Keep pushing and pushing and pushing. And do *not* stop pushing.

Do something. Talk to the student. Talk to the Parent(s)/Guardian(s). Talk to the Counselor. Talk to his/her other teachers. *Take action* to fight for the student who encounters you each day, and be there when and/or if they ever need you. Remind them of this. I like to write them a sticky note and leave it in their ELAR Journal so that they know that I'm there for them, should they ever need my help. And there will be days where that love and flexibility is returned. It is a cyclical relationship, a give-and-take, and it is the rollercoaster of this beautiful life of a teacher and her students.

Focus on Real Life

These relationships—where advocating for my students is something that I will turn blue and purple in the face for; where freedom of choice in the work my students produce makes them happy; where their awkwardness and coming-of-age is being explored by self-doubt and requires positive praise and confidence-boosters; and where sometimes my classroom and my teacher-to-student relationship with one is solely a space for them to *be*—this is all a symptom of being human. I have to know my students, just as they need to know that I am human, too. So… an open book I am.

Before each lesson, I tell them the *'Why!?'* An argumentative essay? Everything's an argument, and proof is necessary for justification—lawyers, doctors, teachers, salesman/women, customer service, etcetera. A correspondence letter? This is the beginning of your young adult life; let's learn how to write a(n) formal/informal letter for a job, for a scholarship, for college, for now—about a societal issue *you* want to resolve. Grammar marks? When the inevitable black-out happens and Grammarly.com is no longer there to save you, or—better yet—you want to correct an adult about their atrocious writing on social media! Independent reading? One day, you're going to get old, and technology will no longer appease you. Synonyms? Higher-level vocabulary breaks stereotypes, you know. There is a powerful *'Why!?'* in every single language and literacy skill, and every single ELAR skill can transfer among and apply to real-world situations.

And *I* am ever so lucky! Because *I* am the educator who was/is granted the opportunity to teach these beautiful human beings. *I* am the one who was/is chosen to *understand, see* who the human being who sits in my classroom is *and empathize* with them. No two are alike. *I* am unlike any other ELAR educator. I *see* who they are in Small-Group—the precious time I am

given to meet with them to understand their thought processes and understand how I can challenge them further.

Because when the "Independent Practice" or "Peer Assignment" or "Group Work" starts, my Small-Group table in the back of the room is open for brilliance. And what began as silence, hearing crickets, and reluctance to sit with me in the back of the room at my Small-Group table on Day #1 of the school year has turned into: 'Mrs. Salinas, can I go first?' 'Oh! Me too!' 'Can I go next?' 'I don't care when I go, but I *have* to meet with you *before* the end of class!' 'Can I leave my [ELAR] Journal here for you to look at, and can I be the first one you call back tomorrow?'

And I can reminisce, reflect, and *feel* assured that I am living my dream. I have *seen, understood* who these human beings are, and I will *forever* do everything in my power to continue to advocate for them and honor them, doing so by using the lessons *they have taught me* to continue to grow and educate other learners about the power in and of language and literacy.

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APPENDIX

Appendix A: Curriculum Planning and Procedures ,

When approaching the curriculum's expectations, I allow my teaching philosophy of an empathetic, humanistic approach and my past/present students' *counterstories* to guide my instruction. Taking this into consideration, my weekly lessons—while flexible, dependent upon student learning and the district calendar—are structured using the following format:

- **Monday - Whole-Group Lesson:** *What is/are the TEK(S) required for students to master?*
- **Tuesday - STAAR Preparation:** *How will the TEK(S) be presented for students in an [online] assessment at the end of the school year, and how can I prepare them for it, alongside nurturing their individual well-being?*
- **Wednesday & Thursday - Learning Studios:** *How can I assess and evaluate student growth to ensure I am meeting the individual needs and fostering the identity of my students?*
- **Friday - Book Club/Collaborative Discussions:** *How are students collaborating and/or making and building upon connections within the literature I am selecting and/or they are choosing for themselves? How are the literacy practices I am fostering applicable to the identity of the student, as well as allowing them to transpire skills for growth beyond the classroom?*

For this particular study and analysis, I am not only positioning myself as an empathetic human being who views her students as the next generation to shape America, but I am also positioning myself as the Lead/Department Chair for ELAR in my middle school. I am aware that I possess power as the educator within my classroom, and my goal is to position myself

more as a leader and guide for how my students can facilitate their own growth and development of ELAR TEKS by using weekly conferencing via Small-Group discussions. I have found these Small-Group discussions to be the most pivotal location where I can fulfill my role as a true educator. Small-Group discussions allow me to listen, understand, acknowledge, and answer to the individual needs of my students. For transparency, the individual needs of my students often means juggling between two discussions: *'Show me what you got [in your ELAR Journal]'* and *'What's wrong? Did you do your work, or is it something else [non-academic], and how can I help?'*

These Small-Group discussions are held in the back of my classroom, at a separated U-shaped table with 4-6 students. Academically, this setting allows for a more direct and intimate approach to their learning and/or understanding of the ELAR content that has previously and/or is currently being taught. Additionally, it allows for face-to-face accountability, as well as a quieter environment where I can boost student engagement via positive feedback and praise for confidence. It is an environment filled with a few loose ends of spiral notebook paper and aromas of Takis, Glade plug-ins, and a tad too much Bath & Body Works body spray trying to overpower the AXE (which is also aiming to override the post-gym body odor of the nearly half-filled classroom of Athletic boys) looming in the air, singing whatever the football coach was blaring out on the field that morning. It is a space where students are allowed to speak their minds in a respectful manner, a place where vulnerability is happily accepted, and a place where, as their teacher, I can show them that I, too, am human.

While the goal of Small-Group is to identify and/or target content skills that students either need additional support for mastery and/or are ready to challenge themselves by moving up in ELAR grade-level TEKS, it is understood and expected that there will be at least one

student, daily, where non-academic communication is necessary. This gift requires me to position myself as an empathetic being, listening to their concerns; understanding where their headspace is; acknowledging the need for an empathetic adult who is willing to set aside curriculum in order to answer how they might continue the remaining hours of school that day. If their basic human needs are unmet, I cannot properly serve the content that my job requires—and ethically, as a professional and morally, as a human being who works with these students daily—so education is transformative in this way. There will be a tomorrow that, after my own processing and self-reflection, I can approach the content in such a way that it is applicable to the socioemotional needs aforementioned by such students, as well as being "able to modify pedagogy and curricula to fit [my] students' needs" (McAllister & Irvin, 2002, p. 434)

Lastly, I wish to acknowledge the claim that empathy is the omnipresent answer and justification to learning gaps in education, specifically amongst minority and economically disadvantaged students; it is not. As McAllister and Irvin argue, "A singular focus on the affective dimension of teachers' relationships with their students of color may obscure the need to address broader, far-reaching institutional issues such as racism, unequal school resources, and discriminatory policies and procedures like tracking and discipline" (McAlister & Irvin, 2002, p. 434). Therefore, for the sake of our diverse student population(s) and for education continuity, the most beneficial and immediate implementations in the field of education would be to find commonalities wherein education can be emboldened by melding the most pivotal and representative instructional practices regarding reading and writing curriculum and apply said characteristics to that of self-governing responsibilities—instructional practices that respond to the immediate socioemotional health of students, as well as providing innovative and relevant life-long, technologically-advanced skills—in order to tangibly nurture student growth that is

more durable and time-sustainable than that of our current time-and-politically-deteriorated education system.

Content & Contextual Position. Prior to the end of each school year, Mr. Truman updates the current school year's curriculum documents—called the Units of Study (UoS)— to reflect an updated, agreed upon version from a committee of district personnel, inclusive of educators from elementary and secondary levels.

The *counterstories/counternarratives* in this study are centered around one particular UoS, where students are focused on analyzing thematic elements. Within this unit, they are required to integrate numerous TEKS via literary essay-writing, which they are expected to have completed all of the following seven main components. These skills require completion, as well as continuation, within a 19-day period, wherein they will have received 45 minutes of instruction each day, totaling 855 minutes of instruction—or 14 hours, which would equate to students having a mere and approximate two weeks to *"successfully master"* the following:

"In this unit of study, students are expected to:

- ★ Revisit a fiction book of choice they have previously read.
- ★ Write a literary analysis essay based on the theme of a text.
- Respond to literary texts in oral and written formats.
- Craft thoughtful responses to their reading using evidence from the text to support their conclusions, properly cited with text evidence.
- Understand that writing about the themes in texts can help them to clarify, support, and complicate their thinking.
- Have choice and share in the decision making with the teacher to allow for differentiation.

- Continue to utilize their reader's/writer's notebooks and will collaborate with writing partners daily, throughout the unit" (P ISD, 2023, p.1).

These bulleted skills and two priority skills, noted with a ★, are district-guided statements composed from the state's required TEKS, which also include a total of five main components, each with various subcategories, as listed below:

"***(6) Response skills: listening, speaking, reading, writing, and thinking using multiple texts.*** *The student responds to an increasingly challenging variety of sources that are read, heard, or viewed. The student is expected to:*

(B) write responses that demonstrate understanding of texts, including comparing sources within and across genres;

(7) Multiple genres: listening, speaking, reading, writing, and thinking using multiple texts--literary elements. *The student recognizes and analyzes literary elements within and across increasingly complex traditional, contemporary, classical, and diverse literary texts. The student is expected to:*

(A) analyze how themes are developed through the interaction of characters and events;

(B) analyze how characters' motivations and behaviors influence events and resolution of the conflict;

(C) analyze non-linear plot development such as flashbacks, foreshadowing, subplots, and parallel plot structures and compare it to linear plot development; and

(8) Multiple genres: listening, speaking, reading, writing, and thinking using multiple texts--genres. *The student recognizes and analyzes genre-specific characteristics, structures, and purposes within and across increasingly complex traditional, contemporary, classical, and diverse texts. The student is expected to:*

(A) demonstrate knowledge of literary genres such as realistic fiction, adventure stories, historical fiction, mysteries, humor, fantasy, science fiction, and short stories;

(E) analyze characteristics and structures of argumentative text by:

(ii) identifying and explaining the counter argument;

(9) Author's purpose and craft: listening, speaking, reading, writing, and thinking using multiple texts. *The student uses critical inquiry to analyze the authors' choices and how they influence and communicate meaning within a variety of texts. The student analyzes and applies author's craft purposefully in order to develop his or her own products and performances. The student is expected to:*

(D) describe how the author's use of figurative language such as extended metaphor achieves specific purposes;

(E) identify and analyze the use of literary devices, including multiple points of view and irony;

(F) analyze how the author's use of language contributes to the mood, voice, and tone; and

(11) Composition: listening, speaking, reading, writing, and thinking using multiple texts--genres. *The student uses genre characteristics and craft to compose multiple texts that are meaningful. The student is expected to:*

(C) compose multi paragraph argumentative texts using genre characteristics and craft;" (TEA, 2017)

All things considered, my approach to teaching any required ELAR skill is not complex. There is no magic formula. Instead, I read and reread the TEKS necessary, alongside the required statements. Is there a pattern? A term/skill that is repetitive? Then, I take a step back.

I synthesize the expectations versus the reality, and I pair that with the expectations of the students' next grade level, as well as how I might configure the TEKS to align with college standards. I do not dwell on the current grade-level expectations; no, instead, I create a

macro-goal to configure how I can teach the TEKS in such a relative way so that the skills can transpire to university expectations, pragmatic knowledge for each individual student.

Next, I choose how I might capture the essence of the skill with a particular text. If what is available for teaching on the UoS is not multicultural in nature and/or will be knowingly misunderstood by my student population, I search my bank of previously-taught materials—whether used earlier in the school year or one which I used in prior years—and/or asking former/current colleagues for ideas that might pair well with the skillset.

Araceli C. Salinas

EDUCATION

Ed.D. in Language, Culture, & Literacy Education **October 2024**
Indiana University–Blomington Bloomington, IN
Major Field of Study: *Empathy-Based, Critical Literacy Practices in Secondary English Language Arts*
Dissertation: *Narrating A Self-Study: An Empathetic Approach To Teaching Human Beings The Power Of Language & Literacy*

Master Of Arts in English Studies **May 2020**
Arizona State University Tempe, AZ

Bachelor of Arts in English **May 2011**
Texas A&M University–Kingsville Kingsville, TX

RESEARCH & TEACHING INTERESTS

- Critical Literacy Instructional Practices, Secondary English Language Arts & Reading (ELAR)
- Social Justice Pedagogy & Fostering Culturally-Sustaining Teaching Methods, Secondary ELAR

PROFESSIONAL CERTIFICATIONS

- CITI Program Certificate: Human Research—Social/Behavioral Researcher (Stage 1)
- College Board Endorsed Advanced Placement English Language & Composition Course Certified
- College Board Endorsed Advanced Placement English Literature & Composition Course Certified
- Texas Educator Certificate: English Language Arts & Reading (Grades 8-12 & Grades 4-8)
- English as a Second Language Supplemental (Grades 4-12)

RESEARCH EXPERIENCE

Self-Study Researcher **April–May 2023**
Indiana University–Bloomington, Graduate Student

- Conducted a self-study inquiry dissertation by self-reflecting and improving my teaching practice, aiming to build on the strengths of the diverse backgrounds of all students by focusing on empathetic, culturally-responsive, and critical literacy approaches.
- Nurtured students' individual cultural backgrounds to support their reading/writing instruction.
- Redesigned and implemented critical literacy pedagogy, in order to facilitate learning with more instructionally equitable approaches to fostering diverse students' academic growth

- Re-evaluated how foundational and current research in critical and culturally responsive pedagogies examine the relationship between the ethical duties English Language Arts & Reading (ELAR) teachers are bound to foster, as well as the culturally-sustaining pedagogical practices that have the ability to acknowledge and nurture student identities.

PROFESSIONAL & LEADERSHIP EXPERIENCE

Adjunct Professor, Dual-Credit (ENGL 1301/1302–Composition)

Austin Community College **August 2024–Present**

- Craft and facilitate ENGL 1301/1302 Composition courses in the College of Literacy Studies and the field of Education to a culturally diverse student population
- Utilize various instructional strategies, including critical literacy practices appropriate to the individual needs of college students
- Self-reflect on data-driven, pedagogical practices and align them to the researched methods best suited for the assigned student population
- Conduct informal/formal student conferences to ensure the academic success and support of student
- Gain self-awareness and remain updated on current collegiate publications, including attending professional development opportunities

English Language Arts & Reading (ELAR) Interventionist & Instructional Content Specialist (Grades 6-8) / ELAR Department Chair / ELAR & Social Studies Student Success Facilitator / ELAR Teacher (Grade 8)

Leander ISD, Four Points Middle School **August 2022–Present**

- Oversee the collaboration of instructional practices to continue to build upon professional growth amongst ELAR & SS Teams, targeting the area of evidence-based writing
- Execute leadership opportunities by facilitating professional development based on practitioner-effective methods, including research-based, Small-Group support
- Manage accountability for ELAR Department, as well as instructional support via curriculum documents, state-mandated knowledge and skills (TEKS), and adopted campus-wide instructional reading/writing methods
- Supervise New-To-Profession (NTP) teachers in grade-placed placements by utilizing the district curriculum to scaffold content knowledge, understanding, student applicability, and growth in writing/literacy
- Communicate technical information using a respectful, student-focused approach with the ability to engage with decorum
- Coordinate communication between the District and Parent(s)/Guardian(s) regarding student intervention and writing/literacy supports driven by data
- Analyze and demonstrate evidence of culturally-responsive pedagogy utilizing student data for ELAR strengths and weaknesses, in order to identify intervention strategies appropriate to the individual learner, including an emphasis on written expression and literacy skills
- Create and implement grammar-and-structure intensive and scaffolded writing strategies and reading comprehension activities to increase student awareness with universal themes connected

to humanity, self-responsibility, and community with an emphasis on consistent feedback in a small-group setting and/or via 1:1 conference
- Manage Reader's/Writer's Workshop & Blended Learning and multimodal classroom models while executing a well-managed classroom, inclusive of multi-dimensional literacy theories and innovative pedagogy
- Spearhead professional development where the facilitation of critically-constructive student conferences occur in order to identify instructional opportunities/challenges that directly correlate to student improvement and success, including the influence of non-academic impacts on student learning

ELAR Teacher (Grades 6-7) & ELAR Team Lead (Grade 7)

Judson ISD, Metzger Middle School **August 2020–June 2022**

- Demonstrated evidence of an ability to teach in a range of simultaneous modalities, including face-to-face alongside asynchronous online/hybrid ELAR coursework
- Demonstrated accountability for Grade 7 ELAR Team, as well as instructional support via curriculum documents, state-mandated knowledge and skills (TEKS), and adopted campus-wide instructional reading/writing methods
- Utilized student data for ELAR strengths and weaknesses, in order to identify intervention strategies appropriate to the individual learner, including an emphasis on scaffolded, written expression and literacy skills using high-quality, teacher-crafted exemplars
- Managed differentiated lessons that reflect SPED/504/ESL accommodations for various student learning styles utilizing online Reading comprehension programs, inclusive of Reading Plus, IXL, and Amplify
- Coordinated student needs dependent upon individual educational plans and accommodations in the least restrictive environment
- Implemented instructional lessons on accessing databases within the library in order to utilize and facilitate English knowledge, skills, and self-inquiry projects

Pre-AP English I & English II Teacher (Grades 9-10)

Edgewood ISD, Memorial High School **August 2019–June 2020**

Grades 6-8 ELAR Facilitator

Braination, Inc., Anne Frank Inspire Academy **August 2018–May 2019**

English II (Grade 10) & English As A Second Language (ESL) Teacher (Grades 9-10)

Judson ISD, Veterans Memorial High School **August 2017–June 2018**

English III & IV Teacher (Grades 11-12)

Marion ISD, Marion High School **August 2016–May 2017**

AP English Language & Composition / AP English Literature & Composition / English III & IV Teacher (Grades 11-12)

Santa Gertrudis ISD, Santa Gertrudis High School **August 2014—June 2016**

- Spearheaded the obtainment and recognition of the College Board's Advanced Placement (AP) Honor Roll Award (2016)
- Delved into argumentative, rhetorical analysis, and synthesis essays to incorporate and analyze rhetorical techniques and non-fictional elements in order to connect to larger themes within society
- Analyzed poetry and prose literature and guide in-depth questioning and inquiry for emphasis on recurring historical elements and themes that are worked through both fictional and non-fiction texts
- Managed working in-depth with grammar and composition skills to achieve college-level rhetoric via extensive handwritten teacher feedback and student conferencing
- Created multimodal resources, specifically targeted on qualitative rhetorical techniques and advanced technologies
- Executed the assessment and evaluation of students' skills in order to thoroughly plan student-centered instructional activities to gain a better understanding of College Board Pre-AP English material, knowledge, and skills

ELAR Teacher (Grade 7)

Gregory-Portland ISD, Gregory-Portland Junior High School **August 2013–May 2014**

Pre-AP ELAR Teacher (Grade 7)

Katy ISD, WoodCreek Junior High School **August 2012–April 2013**

Pre-AP English I Teacher (Grade 9)

Tuloso-Midway ISD, Tuloso-Midway High School **January–June 2012**

ELAR Teacher (Grade 6)

Hampton City Schools, Phenix PreK-8 School **August–December 2011**

COLLABORATIVE SKILLS

- **Educational Leadership —** Accountability, Critical Analysis/Inquiry, Cultural Competency, Patience
- **Management —** Communication, Time Management, Teamwork, Conflict Resolution
- **Technical Innovation —** Canvas Learning Management (LMS), Google Suite & Applications (Classroom Included), Microsoft Office Applications (TEAMS Included), Gale Research Database, Instructional Creativity & Content Expert

PROFESSIONAL MEMBERSHIPS

- National Council Of Teachers Of English (2016–Present)
- Texas Council Teachers Of English Language Arts (2023–Present)

ACCOMPLISHMENTS

- **March 2023 Educational Doctoral Candidacy —** Indiana University–Bloomington
- **2022–Present ELAR Department Chair (Grades 6-8) —** Four Points MS, Leander ISD
- **Spring 2022 ELAR Team Lead (Grade 7) —** Metzger MS, Judson ISD
- **2017–2018 Marion HS Teacher Of The Year Nominee —** Marion ISD
- **2015–2016 College Board AP District Honor Roll —** Santa Gertrudis ISD
- **2012–2013 WoodCreek Junior HS Teacher Of The Year Nominee —** Katy ISD