

Inclusive Education for All...Except the Educators?: An Autoethnography

by

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PROJECT REVIEW INFORMATION

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The Project was approved on April 17, 2025 by the following review committee:

Review Committee:

Research Supervisor

Dr. Allyson Eamer

Second Reader

Dr. Robyn Ruttenberg-Rozen

The above review committee determined that the Project is acceptable in form and content and that a satisfactory knowledge of the field was covered by the work submitted. A copy of the Certificate of Approval is available from the School of Graduate and Postdoctoral Studies.

ABSTRACT

This autoethnographic project examines the dissonance between Canadian school boards' commitments to equity and the lived experiences of marginalized educators. Through a personal narrative, the author explores how their intersecting identities—neurodiversity, physical and invisible disability, and queer identity—shaped and ultimately ended their K-12 teaching career. Using reflective storytelling and academic research, they explore systemic shortcomings in inclusive practices. The author advocates for accessible, identity-affirming educational environments for all, including the educators.

Keywords: autoethnography; inclusive education; neurodiversity; disability; K-12 education

AUTHOR'S DECLARATION

I hereby declare that this project consists of original work of which I have authored. This is a true copy of the work, including any required final revisions, as accepted by my committee.

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A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'Rebecca Deutschmann', written over a horizontal line.

Rebecca Deutschmann

DEDICATION

I dedicate this project to every educator who has left the K-12 system, has considered it, and/or is marginalized in their practice. May you know that your worth goes beyond a career title, and choosing to make a change does not make you any less of an educator.

I also dedicate this work to G, my “daughter” as they refer to our relationship. You inspire me to continue advocating for disability rights every day. I thank you for the gift you are to my life and that of our family, and I hope to see justice for you.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I am so grateful to the many faculty members at Ontario Tech University who encouraged me along my journey to my Master of Education. Each instructor has shaped who I am as an educator and a person. Without this program, I do not know where I would be today. Thank you for, likely unknowingly, helping me find purpose and joy in this field despite the challenges I regularly face.

To Dr. Allyson Eamer: Thank you for being the best match of a supervisor I could have asked for. You embody what it means to be an inclusive educator. You kept me on track but also allowed me to approach this work in my own way, including the ADHD-laden writing frenzies that challenged deadlines. I am so grateful for your compassion and willingness to connect, solidifying for me even more how much relationships mean within education.

Dr. Robyn Ruttenberg-Rozen: Thank you for agreeing to be my second reader and taking the time to give your thoughts and “pokes.” You have been a part of my journey through the M.Ed from my first semester until the end, and I will never be able to adequately describe what your classes and camaraderie have meant to me.

I am so privileged to have a diverse community of friends, family, and chosen family across Turtle Island. Whether you knew it or not, each of you played a pivotal role in helping me through this program. From texts to phone calls, to dinners, and so much more, that connection means the world to me. I hope that reading this project will only deepen our relationship with each other.

Lastly, and absolutely not least, to Paul, my partner in this life: I literally could not have undertaken this feat without your support. You have sacrificed so much for our family to allow me to pursue this dream. Thank you for your support through all the joys and tears. This project is just as much yours as it is mine. I love you.

STATEMENT OF CONTRIBUTIONS

I hereby certify that I am the sole author of this work and that no part of this work has been published or submitted for publication. I have used standard referencing practices to acknowledge ideas, research techniques, or other materials that belong to others. Furthermore, I hereby certify that I am the sole source of the creative works and/or inventive knowledge described in this document.

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LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS AND SYMBOLS

2SLGBTQIA+	Two-Spirit, Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender, Queer or Questioning, Intersex, Asexual, plus others
ABA	Applied Behaviour Analysis
ADHD	Attention-Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder
BACB	Behaviour Analyst Certification Board
EDPY	Education – Psychology
K-12	Kindergarten through Grade 12
S-STEP	Self-Study of Teacher Education Practices
UCP	United Conservative Party
UDL	Universal Design for Learning

Prologue

“I’m not your hero, but that doesn’t mean we’re not one and the same.” (Tegan and Sara, 2012)

In Grade Three, I remember going to school after seeing the Twin Towers fall on the news that morning. The mood was eerie. I was old enough to have a baseline understanding of what happened but young enough not to understand the scope. In the weeks that followed, we learned an age-appropriate amount of information. We even mailed doves to students in New York and were featured in the local newspaper. Our teachers stayed strong for us.

In Grade Ten, I experienced that eerie feeling again. This time, we came into school and were quickly ushered into our homerooms. Each teacher had to simultaneously deliver the news that a classmate of ours had died by suicide. Despite not being close with this student (in fact, having had some social issues with them), I was struck by grief profoundly. A lot of us accessed counselling. We signed our deceased classmate’s locker door with our condolences

(with the school removing it not long after). We grew up too fast.

Our teachers stayed strong for us.

I do not have that strength.

I would never have predicted that I would have left the K-12 system six years into my career. In January 2025, I resigned from the two school divisions where I was employed as a substitute teacher. The profession changed from the joy of my life to the most stressful component. I no longer had a classroom that felt like my second home. My identity and capacities had changed so much since the beginning of my career, exacerbated by a move to a new province and educational system that did not seem to want me. I could not weather the storm the way my former teachers did when faced with tragedy, but I now know that does not make me any less of an educator.

This research will address the following question through an autoethnographic approach: Despite Canadian school boards' stated commitment to equity, how are the specific needs of

marginalized educators not always supported by inclusive practices? I will first address the choice of autoethnography, then illustrate my positionality and the role that experiencing intersectional marginalization plays in my life. I will then highlight how these experiences have impacted me as an educator, including various career shifts.

Research Accessibility

“I want a house with a crowded table and a place by the fire for everyone.” (The Highwomen, 2019)

Before I get into the meat of this project, I felt it was important to share the intentionality behind the accessibility efforts I am making in presenting my story and related research. I chose this font, Lexend, because of its accessibility features, such as being sans serif and having increased character spacing (Lexend, n.d.). From my own vision impairment and experience with dyslexic students, these features are a small but impactful way to make reading fluency more accessible and efficient.

Additionally, after looking more into font accessibility, I decided to increase the font size by two points throughout my project, with the main text being a size 14. Dyslexic readers prefer larger font sizes (Rello & Baeza-Yates, 2017; Wimmer et al., 2024). I have also changed the font colour to grey, as high contrast can be challenging for reading accessibility (Rello & Baeza-Yates, 2017). Black font on a white background, although the typical choice for most typed text, is a very high contrast (Rello & Baeza-Yates, 2017). It is nearly impossible to make this writing completely accessible to every need, but I hope this may help some readers from needing to reformat it themselves. Since switching to the larger font size and softer colour, I have noticed how I also benefit due to concussion-related vision impairments; I will explain this further later in this paper. If I eventually seek publishing for this research, it will be interesting to see if accessibility features such as this can be incorporated into standardized publications.

I am also making an effort in this work to segment text as much as possible, keeping paragraphs short and incorporating

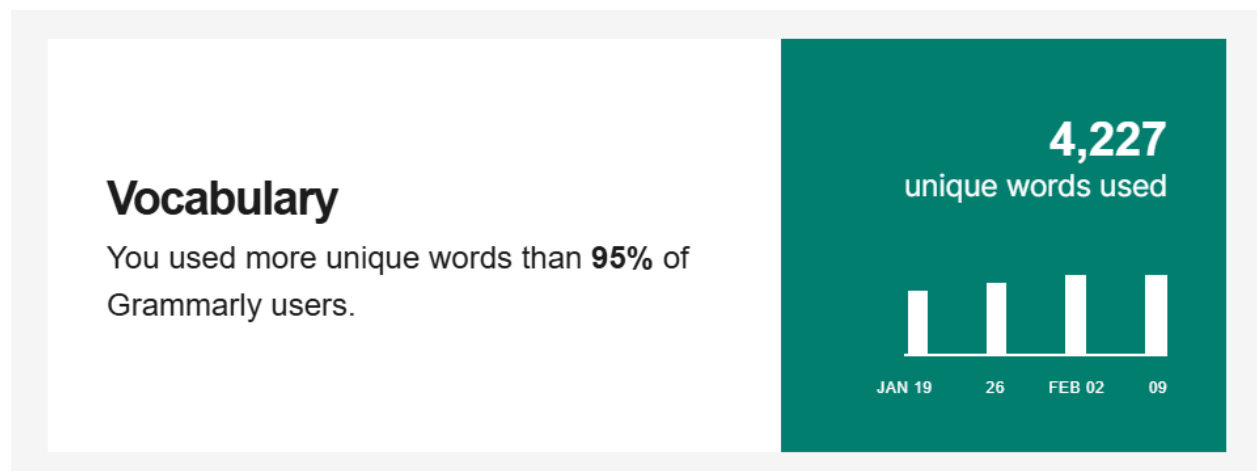
headings more frequently than may appear in many research papers. Evidence suggests that shorter text segments correlate with emotional reaction and enjoyment of the reading material (Pham & Sanchez, 2019). Segmenting text also improves the reading performance of disabled students (Abedi et al., 2010). Although it was not shown to significantly improve the reading performance of non-disabled students, segmentation does not negatively affect them (Abedi et al., 2010), indicating that increasing accessibility is either positive or uninfluential to the majority of readers of all abilities. In an effort to further encourage positive emotional reactions in the process of reading this work, I have divided the segments of my writing with song lyrics that resonate with me for a variety of reasons.

As with many efforts made to promote accessibility, the benefits are generally universal and not just for those who require additional support or accommodations corresponding to a diagnosis. Wimmer et al. (2024) found that adding accessibility features to writing not only increased universal readability; it also

reduced the likelihood of acquiring false information, a phenomenon which can occur when reading both fiction and non-fiction texts. They noted that accessibility features such as keeping content at a lower reading level (e.g., Grade 6 versus Grade 12), shorter sentences, and less complex words are helpful in achieving less inaccurate information acquisition (Wimmer et al., 2024). Although my vocabulary is substantial, at least according to my Grammarly reports (see Figure 1 below), I am making an effort to use simpler words to promote inclusivity.

Figure 1

My Grammarly Report from February 10, 2025



Rationale

“All of these lines across my face tell you the story of who I am. So many stories of where I’ve been and how I got to where I am; but these stories don’t mean anything when you’ve got no one to tell them to.” (Carlile, 2007)

Why autoethnography? Before beginning my Master of Education program at Ontario Tech University, I had no concept of the various research outputs used by academic researchers. In a research methodologies course, I presented on Self-Study of Teacher Education Practices (S-STEP), wherein educators use their experiences of being a teacher to improve their practices and make those improvements publicly accessible (Vanassche & Keltermans, 2015). I read through many examples of S-STEP and was amazed to see people conducting nontraditional research through narrative, poetry, photo journals, and original artwork (e.g., Garbett & Ovens, 2016; Taylor & Coia, 2014). Despite there being an ongoing struggle in critiques of such types of research lacking relevance or methodological rigour when the data presented is based on one person’s experience (Vanassche & Keltermans, 2015), I was instantly

drawn to S-STEP and other forms of qualitative research that allow opportunities to infuse one's positionality into their research organically.

As I journeyed further into my Master of Education program, I was given opportunities in various classes to engage in reflective writing and “un-essays,” where I was able to try my hand at some of the less conventional forms of research methodology that I, at that time, had only heard about in concept. I engaged in narrative methodology and incorporated poetry to illustrate my feelings and experiences in the coursework (see Figure 2). Figure 3 shows an example of an “un-essay” in which I simulated a group chat conversation among the key authors of that class's readings by writing in their voices.

Figure 2

Example of Poetry Methodology

(Deutschmann, 2023)

Equity in a Bigoted World

Flags other than the maple leaf offend me greatly.

Mentioning differences in school is grooming.

You let my child keep secrets from me.

You are pushing the transgender agenda.

I won't let my child be one of you.

Adam and Eve, not Adam and Steve.

Drag queens are pedophiles.

These spaces are not safe; we will not let them be.

Say no to SOGI 123.

Figure 3

Excerpt from My “Un-essay”

(Deutschmann, 2024)



“Changes are taking the pace I’m goin’ through” (Bowie, 1972).

Numerous professors recommended that I consider doing a project or thesis, ultimately derailing my plans to finish my courses quickly. I coveted those M.Ed. initials and wanted to have university credentials to back up the experience, ideas, and overall passion I yearned to share beyond the four walls of a classroom. In hindsight, I should have realized I would derail my own plans. I am the same person who took extra time in their Bachelor of Arts because, although I had completed the requirements for my History major, I figured out that an additional few courses would allow me to pick up a second major in Psychology. My parents and my spouse likely did not feel any surprise when I decided to take on the Project option in my Master of Education; the people who are close to me are used to my added turns, U-turns, and full-stops on a five-lane freeway going ten kilometres over the speed limit.

When I decided to work on autoethnographic research for my project, Dr. Allyson Eamer was undoubtedly my first choice of supervisor. As a student in her Foundations of Equity, Diversity, and

Inclusion course, I was able to find common ground with our shared passion for equity; her personal connections with, and vulnerability in addressing, disability immediately provided comfort to me and numerous other classmates to share about their own experiences with inequity. When Dr. Eamer shared her social class-focused autoethnography (2021), I knew this was the type of research that I wanted to undertake.

Like those who deem personal stories as inadequate research data sources, I worried that my life experiences might be too specific to me to have any meaning in the larger social context. I found myself questioning if my work would be valuable to others, or at least relatable. Ellis (2009) argues that the fact that there are critiques of autoethnography, and a wide variety of them at that, points to the notion of merit in autoethnography; if it were not a valid form of research, no attention would be paid to it by academics. Critiques of narrative methodologies can also help researchers maintain a focus, such as the desire for autoethnography to engage more in discussing social problems and

to point toward change (Ellis, 2009). I ultimately want my research to be accessible in order to reach a wider audience, and it is challenging to encourage change when your arguments are jargon-laden. Therefore, I will use these critiques from the academic world to produce inspiring research that serves a broader audience than a traditional research paper could. The vulnerability it takes to expose these aspects of your identity, knowing that praise or scrutiny from your audience can emerge (Lapadat, 2017), is an aspect that many researchers do not need to engage with. I have been in graduate classes with several students who struggled with reflection and would openly admit that they preferred the formulaic nature of literature reviews and statistics to the wild, wild west of being their research's primary source.

“People talking without speaking, people hearing without listening...hear my words that I might teach you. Take my arms that I might reach you” (Simon & Garfunkel, 1964).

Reading other autoethnographies emboldened me to dismiss this notion as I found myself relating to others' stories in many ways

through similar personal experiences and my innate curiosity to listen to and learn from experiences that differ from mine. While absorbing Eamer's (2021) experiences with class mobility, I found that although I did not have that specific life experience, I highly related to the notion of balancing having a "rebel identity...[alongside a] predisposition to people-pleasing and conformity" (p. 65). Hoben and Hesson (2021) showed me that I do belong in academia; even though having attention-deficit hyperactivity disorder (ADHD) can make it challenging, I am not alone in this struggle and was motivated by that autoethnography to keep persisting through my current and future research. Being an openly queer and gender-diverse educator is also an area with limited research, but reading Cutler's (2023) autoethnography demonstrated the power of research-backed narrative, especially when facing adversity; this may inspire future research from me to have more of these perspectives present within academia. This project has inspired me to make a concerted effort to read more autoethnographies, further expanding my understanding of the

various forms that research can take and hearing from voices that are often otherwise missed in more traditional forms of research.

Sources of Personal Adversity and Marginalization

Neurodiversity

“Blame it on my AD(H)D, baby” (Awolnation, 2010).

After several years of speculation, I was finally diagnosed with attention deficit hyperactivity disorder (ADHD) almost a year ago. While I initially put off trying medication due to being on a fertility journey and those medications not being researched for safety during pregnancy, I recently decided to try them. Although we want children, my partner and I decided to ease up on our efforts to focus on our individual wellness and collective growth. Since I also have a diagnosed anxiety disorder along with depression, I was finding that leaving the ADHD untreated was increasing symptoms of my other conditions.

Beginning medication for ADHD has drastically changed my capacities. In specific relation to this project, I spent months having

loads of ideas in my head without the capacity to record them. Any time a life complication arose, the struggle with motivation increased exponentially. Coping with anxiety in a state of overwhelm has always proven to be challenging, and my threshold for overwhelm has shrunk significantly in the past several years, likely due to suffering from multiple concussions that seem to have forever changed my energy levels. While ADHD medication has not made functioning effortless, it has given me the ability to have at least a chunk of the day where my brain can focus on a given task rather than be swept into the loudness of ongoing, spiralling worry.

This project has taken me a long time to start. I initially attributed this to my ADHD, which often paralyzes me from working on tasks unless it is right before the deadline. I regularly experience “deficits in motivation often includ[ing] problems in engaging with tasks that are not immediately rewarding” (Holthe & Langvik, 2017, Functional Impairment and Longterm Outcomes section, para. 2). I have experienced this throughout my educational life, pushing every assignment to the deadline as I could not find the motivation to use

my time earlier when I knew I could produce quality work in relatively little time at the last minute. In elementary and high school, I regularly used light sources other than the main light in my bedroom to hide from my parents, (with varying success rates) that I was up late completing the assignment I easily could have done days prior. During my undergraduate degree, I often had marathon writing sessions into the wee hours of the morning while my comfort movies played in the background, usually a loop of Pitch Perfect (Moore, 2012) and Pitch Perfect 2 (Banks, 2015). I did not have an ADHD diagnosis at the time. However, the roots in disorganization, anxiety, and overall time management (Holthe & Langvik, 2017) that I struggled with throughout my childhood indeed point to neurodiversity. I wonder if this would have been discovered earlier if I could not present, or mask, as a “high-achieving” student despite the struggles I endured to maintain this image.

“Everybody hurts...take comfort in your friends. Everybody hurts sometimes” (R.E.M., 1993).

I found comfort in reading through other academics' experiences and found that the struggle-success cycle is not unique to me. I, too, have benefited from the hyperfocus that can be experienced with ADHD (Hoben & Hesson, 2021). When I can harness that necessary motivation, I can be in that work zone for hours on end; this can also lead to its downsides, such as forgetting to eat or take breaks to prevent headaches and overall burnout. Discovering the negative commonalities I share with other graduate students, such as ADHD treatments not being able to address the many effects of the disorder on well-being (e.g. sleep quality and increased stress (Rosenau et al., 2019)), simultaneously saddened me that so many of my colleagues are likely experiencing the same struggles, *and* reassured me that the obstacles I face are not unique to me. This implies that I can find comradery with other neurodiverse graduate students and academics. Finally, as someone who has frequently needed deadline extensions in both my academic life and my career, I did find reassurance that many ADHDers take longer to complete coursework in post-secondary

education compared to their non-ADHD classmates (Henning et al., 2022).

Physical Disability

“You’ll have to excuse me, I’m not at my best.” (Spirit of the West, 1990)

Although ADHD likely plays a part in my challenges to consistently work on this project, I have realized that there is also grief holding me back. I have been actively grieving what was, when my capacities were different, when disability did not have the role in my life it now does. The last time I remember identifying as “able-bodied” was in 2015 (see Figure 4). That year, I fell down the stairs twice in the same week. At the time, it resulted in the blackest bruise I have ever had and some surface-level pain, but nothing too alarming. It was not until months later that I started having lower back pain that gradually increased in severity over the weeks and months that followed. I remember being sent for an X-ray, and my family doctor at the time asked me if I had been in a severe car

accident. The falls were likely the contributing cause, but I have also learned that having a higher pelvic tilt can mean a predisposition to degenerative spondylolisthesis (Nunes et al., 2016), which refers to a vertebra slipping over another.

Additionally, there is a history in my family of being affected by degenerative disc disease, which I have since been diagnosed with as well. In 2016, at the age of 24, I underwent a discectomy of my L4/L5 disk, located in the lower back. It was an emergency surgery due to the necessity of narcotic painkillers to keep my pain managed slightly; my family doctor was highly concerned with addiction, and I am forever grateful that she advocated so fiercely to get me that surgery. Despite my pain levels vastly improving since the surgery, I am among the significant number of people who experience chronic pain post-surgery; developing osteoarthritis in the facet joints, the joints found between the bones in the spine, is also prevalent (Fu et al., 2022), a diagnosis I received mere months ago.

Figure 4

Photo of me from 2015, the last time I felt I was “able-bodied”



“My body tells me no, but I won’t quit, ‘cause I want more”

(Young the Giant, 2010)

Currently, I go through phases where my pain fluctuates and, therefore, the rate at which disability impacts me in daily activities can be unpredictable. Being able to manage the pain can look different depending on many factors, including employment status and access to health benefits; the expense of supplements and

treatments such as therapy puts a lot of fellow young people in the same boat as I: having to choose between treatments and having more financial stability (Kassam et al., 2024). I also find myself feeling shame when I need to use a cane to assist my walking. I negotiate with myself, saying things like, “I don’t really need it,” or, “You can push yourself,” even though bringing my cane is not usually a significant inconvenience, except for the social stigma that can accompany it. Like other young people needing mobility aids, such as Alaina Leary (2019), I do not always need my cane, which invites more unwelcome questions about why I am using it. On a lighter note, though, the work of Broun and Heshiusis (2004) resonates with me. They comment on the significance of the appearance of the cane. Although mine is not as elegant as what is referenced in the article (Broun & Heshiusis, 2004), its being colourful and covered in butterflies is undoubtedly a conversation starter (see Figure 5). I do wonder sometimes if people are assuming that I am faking a disability. Many people, including those closest to me, do not realize that I experience pain constantly; it is

just that a lot of the time, I do have the ability to push through it, or I have invisible strategies to manage it.

Figure 5

Photo of me with my cane



Invisible Disability: Concussions

“Hold on to me ‘cause I’m a little unsteady.” (X Ambassadors, 2015)

In 2020, I suffered my first of now five concussions. According to Statistics Canada (2024), nearly a quarter of Canadians who

experience concussions are due to sports-related injuries. Another almost 25% become concussed from slips and falls (Statistics Canada, 2024). Alberta even has its own provincial report on concussion causes, which expands on the two aforementioned, including motor vehicle accidents, violence, and animal riding accidents (Drul, 2017); I guess the Calgary Stampede may need its own subcategory. I fall into the category of statistics that have had concussions from various other causes. Table 1 (below) illustrates the rough dates and suspected causes of my concussions.

Table 1

My Concussion History

Approximate Date	Cause
February 26, 2020	Slammed into a gym wall by an RCMP officer*
March 2021	Hit my head on the dryer door while doing laundry
August 2021	Bumped my head on a car trunk door
December 2022	Hit my head on a headboard when I sat up in bed
April 2024	Walked into a low-hanging light fixture

*This occurred during a basketball game, with Richmond RCMP playing some of my students. I was a teacher sponsor of the basketball team that year.

The severity of the concussions varied tremendously. Had the first one not taken place just a couple of weeks before the initial COVID-19 lockdown, I likely would have been off work for a more extended period. Once school started after spring break and we transitioned to online learning, I could perform full duties because I could work much more flexibly than Monday to Friday, 8:45 am to 2:45 pm, in a small classroom with fluorescent lights and 28 prepubescent Energizer bunnies. In my time working from home, I took frequent breaks and modified my off-work time to be less screen-oriented since all of my teaching time was spent at my computer. Photosensitivity and screen sensitivity are common effects during concussion recovery, with frequent screen time exacerbating concussion symptoms and, at times, delaying recovery (Mansur et al., 2018).

It is estimated that, although most concussion patients recover in a matter of weeks, approximately 10-15% of patients struggle

with post-concussion syndrome (PCS) for months or even years following their head injury (Mansur et al., 2018). I learned from medical professionals, including the incredible team at GF Strong Rehabilitation Centre in Vancouver, British Columbia, that, contrary to what seems to be believed by many, the amount of impact experienced in a head injury is not the only factor in predicting concussion recovery time. When people hear that my most severe concussion effects occurred after lightly bumping my head on a headboard, I am often met with disbelief, even from hospital nurses who treated me after the injury. The research presents a more extensive list of risk factors, including experiencing non-concussive head impacts, concussion history, biological sex, history of migraines, and having ADHD (Aggarwal et al., 2020; Broglio et al., 2017; Race et al., 2021). If it was not already obvious, I possess all of these predictors and do fall into that small category of concussion patients who have PCS.

Impacts of Acquired Disabilities

“Even if I’m black and blue, I put myself back together ‘cause I am bruised but I’m not broken, damaged, but I’m copin’, holding on and hopin’ I’ll find where I’m going. Bruised but I’m not broken, took some time to own it, and though I may hurt sometimes, I know I will be alright.” (Matoma et al., 2019)

Acquiring disability, such as chronic pain, later in life can have various adverse effects, including restrictions in social relationships, limitations in daily activities, and feelings of “not liv[ing] up to [a] role” (Molin et al., 2021, Results section) or, rather, societal expectations of said role. I find myself regularly fluctuating between the stages of Gullacksen and Lidbeck’s (2004) life adjustment model (see Table 2). Although it refers specifically to chronic pain, I believe it can be effectively applied to the adjustment to various acquired disabilities. I find that, most often, I find myself cycling between “struggling to restore life” (Gullacksen & Lidbeck, 2004, p.147) and “finding solutions” (Gullacksen & Lidbeck, 2004, p. 149). Similar phenomena are described in qualitative research of chronic pain

patients, in which they describe mourning their past abilities before disability or sickness, not liking the person they are now, while still trying to push forward with life (e.g., Kassam et al., 2024; Molin et al., 2021). I relate to these sentiments in both my chronic pain and brain injury. I miss easily standing up after sitting on the floor and being unable to sit in the same position for long periods. I find myself resentful when I need to use a cane, and then I am resentful towards myself and my disability. Part of me misses being able to work full-time in over-stimulating environments.

Table 2

The Life Adjustment Model in Women Diagnosed with Chronic Pain

(Gullacksen & Lidbeck, 2004, p. 147)

The life adjustment model in women diagnosed with chronic pain (fibromyalgia or myofascial pain syndrome). The model describes the transition from Stage I to maintenance in a biographical perspective

	Past	Present	Future
Stage I	When I was feeling well	Feeling ill, struggle to restore daily life, chaos	Picture of future still intact
Stage II	Picture of the past fades	Distress, understanding pain, learning new coping skills, must manage	Picture of future fades, threatening future
Stage III	New store of experiences	Competence and control of self and pain, increases	New picture of future feels natural
Maintenance and living with pain	Before and after the pain	New 'normal life'	Managing

“Feeling like your life’s an illusion and lately, you’re secluded. Thinking you’ll never get your chance. Feeling like you got no solution” (Marshmello & Lovato, 2020).

Having mental health disorders and neurodiversity, both diagnosed and highly suspected, likely has contributed to my chronic pain, and I find their prevalence can be predictors of when I am more likely to experience increased pain or flare-ups. By the same token, times of unmanageable pain typically decrease my mental health capacities. Upwards of 61% of people with chronic pain also have major depressive disorder; anxiety disorders are also present for over 50% of people with chronic pain (Hooten, 2016). I have also suffered from migraines for many years, which are also comorbidly associated with generalized anxiety disorder and panic disorders (Hooten, 2016), of which I am diagnosed with both. There is also a breadth of research that correlates ADHD and autism diagnoses with experiencing chronic pain (e.g., Asztély et al., 2019; Brown et al., 2025; Grant et al., 2022; Kornblau et al., 2020; Udal et al., 2024). Research from You et al. (2019) also indicates that trauma

experienced in childhood, especially cumulative and multiple forms of trauma, can be a reliable predictor of suffering from chronic pain in adulthood. The researchers named the death of a friend and being ridiculed often as examples of childhood trauma associated with chronic pain (You et al., 2019); I did experience both prevalently in my childhood, especially my teenage years.

My Origin Story: Becoming a Teacher

The Early Signs

“It’s gotta be a strange twist of fate...telling me to get it right this time.” (Newton-John, 1983)

I actively avoided becoming a teacher for most of my life. I repeatedly heard “you should be a teacher” from a young age. It is obvious to me why this was. Beyond being bullied, learning and being a “good student” defined my childhood. I now realize that clinging to studies likely came from comfort. Unlike social interactions, schoolwork is predictable. If you complete your work

on time, participate in class, and put in some effort, you are more likely to get praise from your teachers. I lived for that praise.

Falling into the role of the good student or, dare I say, “teacher’s pet,” indeed was a comfort, but I now see it as a form of masking. Leong and Graichen (2024) define masking as “a social-relational adaptation where an individual camouflages their neurodivergence by conforming to dominant neurotypical expectations” (p. 96). Since I struggled with social interactions with peers, I filled that void with conversing with teachers and finding opportunities to be the helpful student. I recall being in Grade One and always finishing my journal quickly; I then had a “job” to assist another student with writing their journal; perhaps this was my first teaching job. This persona definitely did not help me socially, but at least it was one area where I found comfort. Masking as a teacher’s pet likely also led to other impacts of masking, including increased anxiety and striving for perfectionism (Leong & Graichen, 2024). This is also likely why a diagnosis was never even brought up by medical professionals until my late twenties, especially because

neurodiversity did not seem to affect my academic performance, and the stimming and anxious behaviours I exhibited were not investigated (Kosaka et al., 2019).

Although I have alluded to my experiences in high school and the trauma I experienced at that time, I want to quickly note that I am purposely choosing not to explore that period of life in this research. I have had years of therapy to try to heal from that time, and I firmly believe there is an inner child within me that will always be hurting. While researchers such as McMillan and Ramirez (2016) argue that using autoethnography has therapeutic benefits such as centralizing inner dialogue and focusing on personal emotion, I do not have the capacity to unlock that type of vulnerability currently; perhaps in future research, I will be better equipped. Therefore, I intentionally leave a gap in this loose timeline of my pathway to becoming an educator.

Undergrad & Educational Assistant

“This could be the start of something new” (Efron et al., 2006).

After graduating high school, I immediately began my Bachelor of Arts degree at Kwantlen Polytechnic University. As many undergraduate students need to, I got a job at that golden arches fast food restaurant to help fund my education and gain some financial independence. Despite doing well at that job and receiving a promotion not long after I began working there, it caused me a lot of stress disproportionate to the pay.

When I heard of an opportunity at my former elementary school to work as an uncertified educational assistant, I jumped at it despite still not wanting to become a teacher. Working first in Grade One and then with the whole school as a teaching assistant for the school's French teacher, I did start to see that working in education could be a natural fit. When I worked with the French teacher, I could try my hand at various types of teaching, including one-to-one, small group, and even the whole class, on numerous occasions. Starting in a paraprofessional role such as this can be a familiar origin story for many future teachers, with the skills relating to the diverse learning needs of students, exposure to different teaching

styles, and the ability to connect with students highly benefiting that step into becoming a certified teacher (Fortner et al., 2015).

ABA Therapist

“So don’t yield to the fortunes you sometimes see as fate. It may have a new perspective on a different day” (Mike + The Mechanics, 1988).

After several years working as an educational assistant, and despite mainly positive experiences, I was still unconvinced that teaching was the path I wanted to take. As my Bachelor of Arts continued to drag on, picking up a second major, I forayed into a different avenue of education: I became an applied behaviour analysis (ABA) therapist. ABA therapy is defined by the Behavior Analyst Certification Board (BACB) as “based on behaviour and its consequences, techniques generally involve teaching individuals more effective ways of behaving through positive reinforcement and working to change the social consequences of existing behaviour” (n.d.). The intentionality behind its initial design was to

help children, specifically autistic children, to be indistinguishable from their non-autistic peers by engaging in practices and therapies that actively target and aim to “fix” their behaviour (Anderson, 2023).

I only remained in this position for a few months as I became increasingly uncomfortable with the work. Beyond the controversies surrounding the therapy, which I will discuss momentarily, I was providing in-home support for families that frequently left me in uncomfortable and, frankly, unsafe situations. I was often alone with a child. I was frequently hit and pinched. Despite them being young kids, some of them were very strong, and I risked injuring myself several times in trying to either protect myself or them from injuring themselves. In hindsight, I am glad that I felt this lack of safety, as I do believe that I was facilitating a potentially harmful type of therapy.

ABA, once the go-to form of therapy for autistic children, is now met with controversy. Many autistic people are pro-neurodiversity and view ABA and other such therapies that attempt

to “correct” behaviours to be done in the attempt to cure people of their autism, or at least to make them appear to be neurotypical (Anderson, 2023). ABA has also been historically associated with the use of physical aversives, such as shock therapy and other painful stimuli, to discourage behaviours (Kirkham, 2017). Although this is not a common practice today, it still can occur. An extreme example of this was an autistic child dying of a stomach ulcer after their expressions of pain were misinterpreted as undesired behaviour, and they were consequently subjected to physical aversives (Kirkham, 2017). Teaching children to correct neurodiverse behaviours also teaches them to hide sensory pain (Kraemer, n.d.), explaining how the previous scenario could easily occur. I detested the repetitive reinforcement of behaviour corrections I invigilated with my young clients. Despite some autistic adults, such as Eileen Lamb (2019), who take a positive or balanced view of ABA for its ability to encourage independence when the therapy is delivered by a BCBA concerned for the child’s wellbeing, I will never again purposely participate in therapies that have such documented potential for harm and even abuse.

Applying to the Bachelor of Education Program

After deciding to cease my role as an ABA therapist, I was met with an overwhelming feeling of, “What do I do now?” While I do not recall exactly how this happened, I found myself looking at the University of British Columbia’s Bachelor of Education program. I saw that the deadline for the main admission period had passed, but specific specializations were still accepting applications, including elementary French teachers. Having had the experience of working with an elementary school French teacher for several years and with my background of being in the Honours French program in high school, I felt that, at least on paper, I would be able to meet the requirements. I was accepted to begin the program in the fall of 2018. There were still several months to go until I began, so I took on a fun role and was a DJ, karaoke host, and trivia master for a stint. I continue to work for Almost Famous Entertainment currently as the company’s social media manager and booking coordinator, as seen on their website (Almost Famous Entertainment, n.d.). Although I am

no longer DJ Becca Dee, it is fun to use my brain differently and have a non-teaching income stream.

Bachelor of Education Experiences

When I began my Bachelor of Education program, I expected to be in a Core French cohort, a.k.a. French as a Second Language, as this is what I applied for. I was, therefore, surprised to learn on my first day that I was actually in the elementary French Immersion cohort. This was an issue for two reasons: one, I had no desire to teach in French Immersion programs, and two, about 80% of the courses in this stream were taught in French, and I had not used French at that level for about eight years. This was incredibly challenging for someone with my learning profile, who thrives on class participation and being viewed as high achieving by their professors. While I could understand most of what others would say, responding in French would often take me significantly longer than my peers, and my responses would often sound broken and very simplistic compared to theirs. I can attribute this partly to anxiety but mainly that any effort I had made to keep up my French

proficiency was based mainly on reading or listening to the language and not speaking it. Unsurprisingly, language instruction and engagement based on production rather than listening are more effective for increasing speaking abilities (Hopman & MacDonald, 2018).

Despite the personal challenges I felt with essentially relearning a language while trying to obtain teaching certification, I do not regret this experience at all. It offered me a unique perspective similar to the many English Language Learners I would teach in my career. Knowing how long it took me to produce ideas in a second language, I could only imagine how my young students would feel, especially since most of them would also be new to the country. I remember starting to do research at this time on how I could ease any anxiety these students had and employing wait time continued to come up. Although it benefits all students, wait time especially helps with language development, giving students more opportunities to speak (Wasik & Hindman, 2018). Teachers can also linger with that student instead of rushing to the next, encouraging

them to add to their response if they choose and reinforcing that what they have to say has value (Wasik & Hindman, 2018).

Educators often rush so much to get through the content that we do not take the time for those special moments that can build immeasurable confidence for language learners.

“Teacher, teacher, can you teach me? Can you tell me all I need to know?” (38 Special, 1984)

I felt a wave of realization as I journeyed through the various courses of my Bachelor of Education that this is where I wanted to be one day professionally. While some of the instructors I had were great, far too many had either no classroom experience or had been out of the classroom for an extended time, with it seeming evident that they had not kept up with the ever-evolving conditions of present-day teaching. I set my aspirations on one day teaching emerging educators, vowing to myself to keep my knowledge base current if I did leave the classroom environment. I was expecting this to happen much later in my teaching career, but, as it always seems, life had other plans for me.

The Decision to Leave Teaching

**“Your sword’s grown old and rusty, burnt beneath the rising sun.
It’s locked up like a trophy, forgetting all the things it’s done.”
(Vampire Weekend, 2010)**

Now that I have set the stage with my identity positionality, namely my experiences with disability and neurodiversity, as well as my journey to becoming a teacher, I am ready to talk about why I have ultimately left the K-12 system. It may seem jarring not to get into my experiences in the system before exploring my decision to leave and the ramifications of that. I cannot adequately express how much I loved this career when it fit my life and capacities well. I could easily write another autoethnography highlighting my entire pedagogical journey and the beautiful experiences I had with both students and colleagues in my five years of classroom teaching. I will reference the positives as I deconstruct the reasoning in my career shift; however, I want to clarify that the many positives I have experienced were not enough to keep me teaching. In order to address the inequity I have experienced, as well as the mental and

physical struggles in maintaining this career path, I cannot romanticize.

Post-Concussion Effects

I first began to question my longevity as a classroom teacher after the first of my concussions. There are many ways in which I am not the same person I was before my first concussion. My energy levels have continuously been low, with some days even minimal activity or running a couple of errands making me feel weak and exhausted. Fatigue and, often, sleep disturbance are common long-term symptoms of post-concussion syndrome (Hsu et al., 2021). Teaching post-concussion was the most exhausting work I have ever done. I found myself needing my evenings and weekends to be unscheduled in order to recover and be able to get to work the next day. Tricia Hersey of “The Nap Ministry,” lamenting at the onset of the first COVID-19 lockdown, asked, “Now that we are being forced to slow down, will we answer the call to collectively stop to dream, daydream, cultivate silence and rest?” (Hersey, 2020). Hersey’s work calls for rest, but not the kind I had been practicing: the collapse on

the couch at the end of the day or the Netflix-filled weekends while feeling guilty about not getting outside or the dishes piling in the sink. That is not rest; that was survival at best and usually felt insufficient.

Brain Injury Canada (n.d.) lays out numerous cognitive effects of concussions. Of their list, I continue to regularly experience issues with attention and concentration, language (especially finding words), and memory (particularly short-term) (Brain Injury Canada, n.d.). I have been asked how I can distinguish these symptoms as a result of post-concussion syndrome and not any of my other diagnoses, namely ADHD. The short answer is that I cannot. However, any symptoms that are coincidental have certainly been amplified post-concussion.

Concussion patients can also struggle with mobility, chronic pain, and vision loss (Brain Injury Canada, n.d.). The mobility and chronic pain, in my case, can most likely be attributed to my back injury discussed earlier. Vision loss is likely the only “new” impact, but even then, I had an ophthalmologist tell me that based on my

eye health, I probably would have acquired the vision loss and disturbances I now have; it just would have likely been in my forties rather than my late twenties.

Mental Health

**“Everyone opening up ‘bout their dark side. What about mine?”
(Grae, 2024)**

My mental health was certainly impacted as well. Although I had been diagnosed with depression and anxiety disorders pre-injury, there were many times, especially early on in the recovery phases, when I would feel my depression spike, corresponding with evidence that concussions affect mood (Fralick et al., 2016). I was not at all surprised to learn that suicide rates among concussion patients occur for every three in one hundred thousand; this is approximately three times higher than the average norm (Fralick et al., 2016). Although I have never seriously contemplated or attempted suicide post-concussion, there have been several incidences where I felt that it would be easier on everyone, including

myself, if I were no longer around. I felt, and sometimes still feel, like a burden due to my disability impacting my ability to be “productive” in several ways, including household finances. I already felt internal inadequacy in many areas, and feeling inadequate in my profession was too much. Injury, pain, and mental illness kept me away from too much of my work.

The Precariousness of Substitute Teaching

It has saddened me greatly to realize that a significant source of this stress that has led me to leave the K-12 system is the nature of my most recent position as a substitute teacher. Two factors stand out as stress contributors: unpredictability and political climate. Before moving to Edmonton in July 2023, I lived in the Lower Mainland of British Columbia, as I had for my entire life. I was hired to a permanent teaching position before graduating from my Bachelor of Education program. I was privileged to remain at the same school for four years, where I was lucky to be under the guidance of supportive administrators and coworkers who became some of my best friends. There was great comfort in the

predictability of this work. Going to the same place to work with the same people each day was a privilege I took for granted at the time.

I did think that I would be thrilled to substitute teach for a while and not have to worry about the planning, marking, and all of the extra hours that contract teaching entails. I have realized, though, that the comfort of predictability outweighs a lessened workload. Unless I took a job at a school I had been to before and was comfortable with, I was filled with anxiety about the unknown. I needed to arrive especially early so I knew where to park, how to find the classroom, and to read the day plan far too many times to ease my anxiety.

Substitute teacher stress was not unique to me. Vorell (2011) notes numerous sources of stress for substitute teachers, including my observation about the negative impact of the uncertainty of their day. Substitute teachers also often feel that they do not belong or are not valued within the school; they typically do not feel they are a vital part of the education system overall (Vorell, 2011). Butler

(2025) wrote an autoethnography describing their experience of holding a doctoral degree but feeling undervalued in a substitute teaching position: “Despite my background, I was restricted to maintaining classroom order rather than offering tailored instructional support” (Personal Reflections and Discussion section, para. 1).

Furthermore, relief teachers are put in uncomfortable situations daily; their lack of knowledge of class and school routines can make reacting to student behaviour exceedingly difficult (Reupert et al., 2023). A considerable perk to supply teaching, at least on the surface level, is the freedom and flexibility to set your own schedule; this is farcical, however, as there is not necessarily going to be available work when you want to work (Reupert et al., 2023), or the available jobs do not align with your training.

There is also the unpredictability of when long-term contracts will come along. Although this is not the goal of every substitute teacher, many want the consistency, the higher pay, and the other benefits (including the literal health benefits) that come with

contract work. After an especially difficult day, I called the teachers' union to discuss my options, as the unpredictability was intensely distressing to me, and I was told there were no predictors of when I could expect to find a sense of permanency. Even if I successfully gained temporary contracts, for which I was at the mercy of the staffing department to put my name forward for positions, there is no concrete process for pivoting from temporary to probationary or permanent contracts. I was told that connecting with administrators and staff could help me gain temporary contracts; this was challenging, though, when I needed to stay in the assigned classroom during breaks to give myself a break from the stimulus. I can only assume that staff members thought I was standoffish or perhaps a stereotype of a substitute teacher who only wants to get in and out and not put in extra effort. The irony, of course, is that it took all of my willpower to go to the unfamiliar school that morning, and I was just trying to survive a day without panic attacks. It did not help that the political climate of teaching in Alberta consistently added to my stress levels.

My Queer Identity

“I was born this way. Don’t hide yourself in regret: just love yourself and you’re set” (Lady Gaga, 2011).

I was prepared for a shift from teaching in Richmond, British Columbia, to Edmonton, Alberta. Although Richmond is a relatively conservative city, it shares a border with Vancouver, which is “home to the largest Two-Spirit, lesbian, gay, bisexual, trans, gender diverse, and queer (2SLGBTQIA+) community in Western Canada” (City of Vancouver, n.d.). When I came out as queer and nonbinary at my school, it was overwhelmingly positive. Any questioning parents received affirming messaging from the administration and my colleagues. I was so pleased to engage in polite discourse with community members who were seeking education on queer inclusion. A mere four months after I moved to Edmonton, it was confirmed to me that such discourse would be challenging to come by in this setting.

In November 2023, Alberta's United Conservative Party (UCP), the current seated government, held their annual general meeting (AGM) (Wearmouth, 2023). Among the various resolutions passed that concerned me, my stress increased the most of a resolution that was framed as being a "parental rights" issue, in which educators would need to inform parents of any student under the age of 16 wanting to be addressed by a name or pronouns that differed from their school documentation (Wearmouth, 2023). At the time, New Brunswick and Saskatchewan already had similar policies in place (Markusoff, 2023), with New Brunswick reversing this decision in December 2024 when political power shifted from the Progressive Conservative party to the Liberal party (McMackon, 2024). 2024's resolutions threatened queer rights further: "Resolutions around transgender policies were also among those passed, including restricting female spaces/categories (sports, awards, bathrooms) to only biologically-born women, categorizing sex alteration practices as elective cosmetic procedures that are not to be publicly funded, and allowing only male or female markers on government-issued identification" (Black, 2024). Additionally, a resolution passed for sex

education to be opt-in only, and another was passed for removing diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI) training and departments from Alberta public service (Black, 2024). It hopefully is not surprising that my already high anxiety was pushed over its limit.

Each day, when I entered a new classroom, I had a choice of how I wanted students to address me. I have gone through many iterations since my career began, starting as Ms. D, then moving to the gender-neutral Mx. D, and finally landing on just being called Rebecca. Some colleagues told me that students would not respect me if they addressed me just by my first name; I found the opposite to be true. I found that it was easier to build relationships when that inherent power imbalance was removed. Research also points to students viewing their instructors as more caring when they ask to be addressed by their first names (Farris et al., 2022). There is also a notion that instructors are less accessible when they go by an honorific, particularly when that instructor is female-presenting (Takiff et al., 2001). All this being said, my most stressful experiences

as a substitute teacher did not come from how I asked students to address me but rather from sharing my pronouns.

“Your body is yours at the end of the day. Don’t let the hateful take it away. We want to be free and we go our own way”

(Furman, 2015).

As I previously mentioned, I identify as nonbinary. Although I ultimately am not offended if people use a variety of pronouns when referring to me, I typically share that my pronouns are they/them, as this is what feels the best to me. I always have the option not to share my pronouns, but this bothers me on many levels. The practice of sharing your pronouns can be incredibly impactful as it shows others that you care to know theirs and implicitly says that you do not wish to misgender anyone (Kratz, 2024). This is especially important if your gender expression aligns with your gender identity (for example, if you enjoy wearing dresses and “feminine” colours and use she/her pronouns). I have encountered many people who do not share their pronouns as they believe them to be obvious. The reality is that there is a lot of diversity in this world and assumptions

based on what looks “obvious” could result in misgendering and, therefore, offending others. As an educator, I feel that it is important to model this sharing of identity for my students so that they hopefully feel comfortable in the class and that those who are not in the practice of sharing their own pronouns or using the pronouns others request may have an opportunity to practice respect. Of course, this is not how it always works.

I had a reality check as a substitute teacher where I realized I was unsafe being my authentic self in the current state of politics and educational policy in Alberta. I was teaching in a secondary school science class, and in the middle of my teaching from the prepared slides the teacher had left, a student raised their hand and hurled offensive comments at me. They asked why I used they/them pronouns, to which I simply answered that is what is comfortable for me. The student then went on a rant about how there are only two genders and the typical argument of they and them not being grammatically correct and should only be used for plural language. There has been much discourse on the grammar side of this with

multiple trusted sources for writing (e.g., American Psychological Association, 2019; Merriam-Webster, n.d.; Purdue OWL, n.d.) upholding that they/them are grammatically correct in singular contexts, with allusions to how the pronouns have been used historically.

Although I was conflicted, I did choose to report this student to the administration. I considered brushing it off, but if this student had directed those comments at another student, there is no doubt in my mind that I would have reported it. Why, then, should I have to endure that treatment without consequence for the one who caused me harm? I called the office and requested that someone from the administrative team come to the classroom. When they arrived, I stepped into the hall and disclosed the situation. I was relieved when the assistant principal immediately pulled the student from class. Later in the day, I walked by the assistant principal, who debriefed me on their conversation. He told the student that everyone has different beliefs that need to be respected.

“Different beliefs.”

My identity...is a belief?

I was too shocked to respond, so I rushed back to the classroom and cried until the lunch break ended. Perhaps I should have taken this as an opportunity to educate the administrator on why this response was inappropriate and offensive. I, ultimately, was too distraught to do this. Additionally, it is not the responsibility of the marginalized to educate others on their marginalization, a sentiment that is shared in multiple communities I find membership in.

After this incident, every night before I had a teaching job, my anxiety was far too high for me to sleep. I would become physically ill at night or the morning of a job from worry. I was distraught, and I ended up cancelling jobs at the last minute when I either felt too ill or emotionally paralyzed to enter a school building. I was traumatized.

Alternatives to Leaving?

I do realize that leaving the profession was not the only option. I could have sought accommodations for my physical and mental

health. Accommodations ultimately place burdens on the disabled people who access them as they are inherently based on exclusion (Guest Pryal, 2024). Rather than redesigning systems to be inclusive, accommodations are put in as legally mandated changes that can typically only be accessed when you have supporting documentation. It is not the greatest feeling to have to prove a disability. Additionally, seeking accommodations carries with it a fear of judgement or incorrect assumptions of being lazy or less capable than those who do not require accommodations (Corcoran, 2017).

In reference to my experiences of being misgendered and feeling unsafe living authentically, I could have filed a complaint about how I was treated. I likely could have accessed workers' compensation. However, in the tumultuous political climate in which we live, and in a reality where the United States is under an executive order that there are only two sexes (Wendling & Epstein, 2025), my identity is potentially dangerous if Canada adopts similar policies. There may be a time when I need to be closeted for my

safety. I may need to ask to amend this project or have it removed from Ontario Tech's public database. I feel that leaving the K-12 system was the best decision for both my health and safety. I have also learned that approximately a third of queer-identifying people have left a job due to discrimination or harassment (Sears et al., 2024), which feels affirming that perhaps sometimes it is the best decision just to remove oneself.

Writing about leaving public education was emotionally much more manageable than I expected. I found it far more challenging to write the earlier sections of my paper, in which I had to exercise a lot of vulnerability about other aspects of my story, such as disability and neurodiversity. I did not experience the same grief in quitting that I did when I had to take a medical leave due to a severe concussion. Perhaps this was because resigning was my choice, and the injury was not. However, I believe that if I had not had the experience of soul-searching and finding my identity beyond teaching when I was on medical leave, I would have been in a much more fragile state now. I had already discovered my self-

worth beyond my career. It also helps to be in a stable, supportive relationship with a partner who has allowed me the time and space to finish this step in my education and mindfully consider healthier employment options.

“It just takes some time, little girl you’re in the middle of the ride. Everything, everything will be just fine. Everything, everything will be alright, alright.” (Jimmy Eat World, 2001)


Moving Forward

“So don’t be blue; there’s another future waiting for you.” (Tame Impala, 2015)

So, what am I up to now that my Master of Education program is drawing to a close? Earlier in this paper, I mentioned that I dreamed of being an instructor in a Bachelor of Education program one day and that I hopefully could be a support and a resource to emerging educators. I am now living the dream (see Figure 6)!

Figure 6

University of Alberta faculty listing, naming me as an Assistant Lecturer



Rebecca Deutschmann
Assistant Lecturer, Faculty of Education - International Initiatives

Contact Courses

Contact
Assistant Lecturer, Faculty of Education - International Initiatives
Email redeutsch@ualberta.ca

Courses
<u>EDPY 301 - Introduction to Inclusive Education: Adapting Classroom Instruction for Students with Special Needs</u>
<small>This course provides an introduction to teaching students with diverse learning support needs within the inclusive education context. Course content focuses on adapting classroom instruction and classroom environments to enhance learning for all students. May contain alternative delivery sections; refer to the Tuition and Fees page in the University Regulations section of the Calendar.</small>

I cannot adequately describe the shift in my mental health and my view on education by teaching in the post-secondary system. Even at my peak as a classroom teacher, I would come home drained and often dreading at least some aspects of the next day. Now, when I leave after lecturing, I am recharged and excited for the next time I will teach. This is undoubtedly due, at least in part, to a much shorter time teaching in a day; however, I have never felt so well-suited to a job in my life.

Imposter syndrome is common among educators (e.g., Brems et al., 1994; LaPalme et al., 2022; Martinez & Forrey, 2019; Wilkinson, 2020), and I was not immune to this working in the K-12 system. I

constantly wondered how I had been given so much responsibility and if I was the right person to be having so much influence on children. Why, then, have I never once felt this phenomenon as an Assistant Lecturer, even though I am technically underqualified, at least on paper? When I applied, the posting was for a minimum Master's-level candidate, Ph.D. or Ed.D. preferred. As a Master of Education student, I figured it would be a long shot. However, I wrote a compelling cover letter highlighting my experience and included a course paper that reflected my positionality on inclusive education, the very topic of the course I now teach. I am grateful that the University of Alberta has taken a chance on me. Although I am somewhat stressed by precariousness once again due to the availability of sessional instructor gigs being unpredictable, I love this work so much that I am willing to take lower-paid jobs in the times when instructor roles are unavailable in order to be ready to take one when it does arise.

I have never felt more affirmed as an educator than in this role. Despite lecturing to a large class of 90 students, I have

connected with many of them and expressed as much as possible that I care about their learning and, more importantly, their well-being. I am very lenient with extensions to avoid adding to their stress. I am also open with them about the realities of the K-12 system, sharing strategies to help them manage their workload while creating inclusivity and belonging for all their future students. I have also presented this current research and encouraged them to actively reflect and establish a clear identity for themselves outside of teaching. Life is unpredictable, and some of their paths may follow mine with acquiring a disability or other life stressors that cause them to reconsider their career path. I have tried to destigmatize this as much as possible for them. At least for some of them, my approaches seem to be working (see Figure 7).

Figure 7

Excerpts from the anonymous mid-term feedback for my section of EDPY 301

This is my favourite class this semester. I really appreciate that the instructor and TAs practice what they preach re: inclusivity and make the class approachable and engaging, as opposed to some classes I've taken where although we were learning about differentiation and UDL, the requirements of students were rigid and unsupported. I really enjoy the class discussions, how Rebecca keeps it real, cares about students learning practical skills, and shares about their experiences for us to learn from. I'm excited to learn more in the rest of the term!

love love love this course

The course is going very well! Rebecca is a phenomenon instructor who provides a lot of information and care into their teaching. I can tell they are extremely passionate about inclusive education through their teaching and the knowledge they have about the subject. Rebecca knows how to keep the class engaged in multiple different ways, making it more enjoyable. I genuinely believe that this class would be dry if it was not taught by Rebecca.

Wonderful, one of the nicest classes I've taken in a while. Extremely considerate prof and TAs that go out of their way to make sure you succeed. Really appreciate this as someone with a full course load with a lot of unforgiving classes

I think the course is going great! I love the mix of lecture and discussion during our class. The slides are excellent, and there is not too little or too much text. I also feel like the readings and assignments are very reasonable. This is one of my favourite classes this semester; keep up the great work!

Recommendations

Recommendations for Future Research

Although the research laid out here is obviously personal, I hope it may inspire both new researchers and career academics to tell their own research-fuelled story in a manner that works for them. I would love to see more examples of accessible research such as this on various topics. Additionally, I hope all educators realize that they are inherently researchers already, whether they have completed graduate courses, had research published, or just looked into new teaching methods. Through methodologies such as S-STEP

and autoethnography, there are established avenues for K-12 educators to share their experiences and insights. Those stories could inform future policy and pedagogy.

Additionally, an edited book containing the stories of educators, particularly those who have had career shifts, would be invaluable to the field. This current work could be modified to that format well. For various reasons, I would particularly like to see stories from marginalized educators who did not feel a sense of belonging within teaching. Compiling these stories could amplify the need for change in teaching conditions.

Recommendations for Educators Facing Adversity and Their Allies¹

“Trust your inner vision. Don’t let others change your mind.”

(Bucks Fizz, 1981)

¹ In this section, I am purposely “breaking the fourth wall” and speaking directly to the reader. I am hopeful that this will catch the reader’s attention and help them to feel a sense of belonging, as well as a personal call to action.

I presented this research to all of the sections of Education - Psychology (EDPY) 301: Introduction to Inclusive Education: Adapting Classroom Instruction for Students with Special Needs this semester and concluded by offering recommendations to both educators facing adversity and their allies (see Figures 8 & 9).

Figure 8

Slide from my presentation on this topic to all sections EDPY 301, Winter 2025

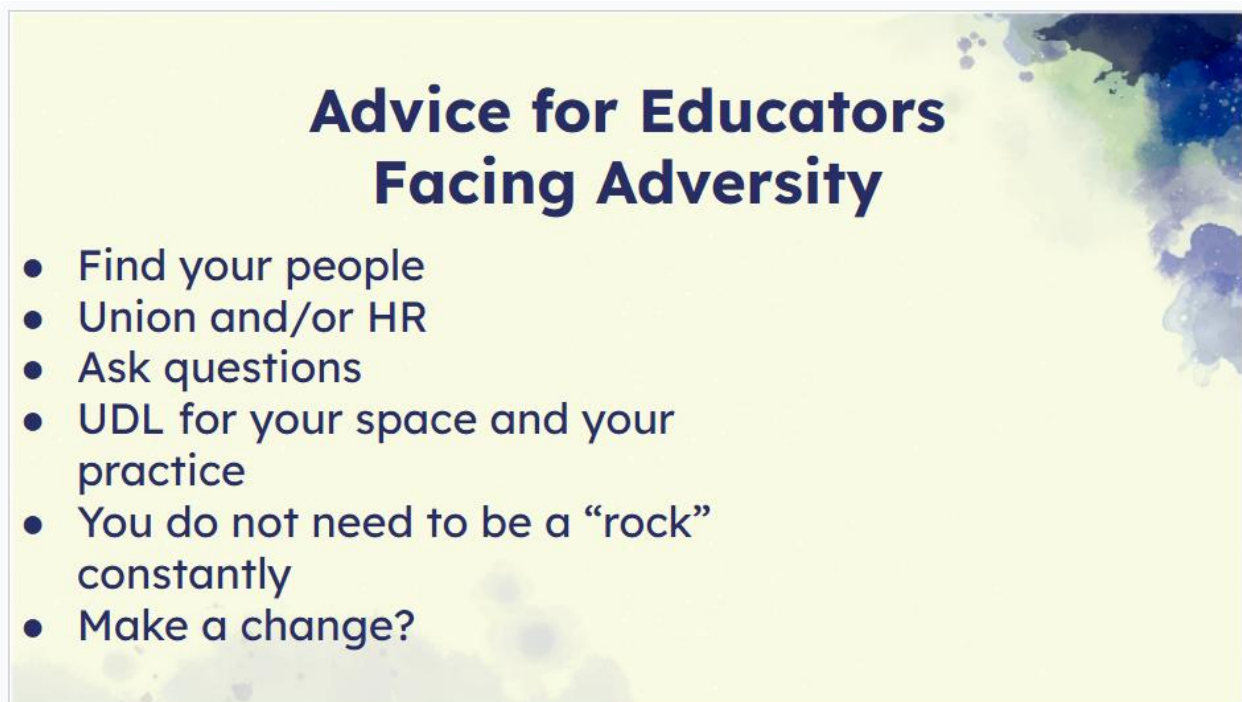


Figure 9

Slide from my presentation on this topic to all sections EDPY 301, Winter 2025



“No matter where we’ve come from, we’ve all been kicked around some. But don’t let them divide us, ‘cause we’ve got love inside us” (Indian City et al., 2024).

For those of you reading this who are current educators who experience struggles similar to mine or other forms of adversity, I want to emphasize that you are not alone. Wherever possible, find colleagues who can empathize with you. I lasted as long as I did in the K-12 system because I had people I could check in with, vent to,

and seek advice from. They would also back me up at meetings when I expressed concern with practices impacting the inclusion of myself, my colleagues, or our students. Despite no longer working in the same system or even living in the same province, former colleagues have remained some of my closest friends because of the allyship we practiced for each other.

Becoming well-versed in your union's collective agreement, if you are a part of a union, and knowing who your contacts are in both the union and human resources are essential. Even if you are someone who does not expect to face adversity, ask around. You never know when you may need to access resources. As previously mentioned in this paper, there were accommodation requests I could have made if I had the desire to do so. There are supports available, although limited, but know the rights that you have to utilize them.

As educators, many of us utilize the Universal Design for Learning (UDL) in our planning, teaching, and assessment of students. CAST, the go-to resource for most educators utilizing UDL,

defines the goal of UDL as the aim “to change the design of the environment rather than to situate the problem as a perceived deficit within the learner” (CAST, n.d.). Educators spend countless hours exercising this principle for the benefit of learners but often not for themselves. While there are a finite number of changes we can make in our environment, we can make at least some of our practices more beneficial to our well-being. In the physical environment, accessing a standing desk or dimming lights could be helpful. Establishing quiet periods during the day for both student focus and lowering stimulus could be helpful for you as well.

The expectation of teachers to be a “rock” seems to be inherent and universal. Many teachers report feeling pressure to be perfect (Emmerton & Malouff, 2020) and sometimes have an overwhelming feeling of unrealistic expectations put on them (Engelbrecht-Aldworth, 2025). While this is a difficult feeling to shake, particularly when there is anti-teacher rhetoric in the media, or you get a dreaded email from a parent blasting your work, there are some practical things you can do to ease the pressure to be

constantly steady. I feel that there is nothing wrong with sharing with students when you are having a difficult day; in fact, this allows them permission to share when they struggle as well, building more trust and connection. There is no need to share details, but I have found that sharing this and asking for some extra grace from my students is usually effective. You can also give yourself permission to change lesson plans for the day if you cannot initiate certain activities. Finally, take the sick days. Take a leave of absence if you need to. Being good to yourself makes you good for your students.

If, like me, you feel you are at the edge and cannot handle the K-12 system any longer, please know there is no shame in making a change. As you have read, I always intended to be a career teacher and life has had other plans for me. Although leaving that part of me behind has been difficult in many ways, I have gotten my life back. I am happier now; acquiring disability may make some things more challenging, but it has given me the permission I needed to make changes in my life. I hope you find that happiness and fulfillment in your life, too.

Conclusion

“It’s not weak to be vulnerable. What you’ve been carrying, let it go. Tell that inner voice that you gotta choice. Only you can make you happy” (Alexis Lynn, 2022).²

I began this paper with the following question: Despite Canadian school boards’ stated commitment to equity, how are the specific needs of marginalized educators not always supported by inclusive practices? I used my personal stories to respond to this question in the form of a narrative autoethnography, backing my experiences predominantly with peer-reviewed research and peppering in news articles, blogs, and other forms of media. I experience marginalization in several forms, including neurodiversity, visible and invisible disabilities, and queer identity. All of these aspects of my identity have left me feeling a lack of belonging in teaching and ultimately were at the forefront of why I left the K-12 system. In their 2024 qualitative research report, The

² Alexis Lynn is a phenomenal Indigenous singer who I am privileged to have worked with at Almost Famous Entertainment. I make this footnote to hopefully boost her visibility and keep sharing her talent! You can find her at @alexislynnmusic on Instagram.

Alberta Teachers' Association surveyed teachers who had either left or considered leaving the profession (The Alberta Teachers' Association, 2024). Among the common reasons for leaving teaching sound very similar to mine: "conditions of professional practice[,]...political environment[,]....[and] health concerns" (The Alberta Teachers' Association, 2024, p. 32). All of the teachers I personally know in Canada are experiencing at least some degree of distress in their jobs, and many of them have brought up leaving the profession in personal conversations. I fear that if more is not done on a large scale, many more will tell stories similar to mine. Until systematic change is brought about to where I can accessibly re-enter the K-12 system, I will continue to tell my story and amplify the voices of all educators who do not feel included.

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