

# **Kaleidoscopic Reflections: A Story of Self-Concept and Invitations**

Dawn C. Walker

*Sweet Briar College*

*Sweet Briar, Virginia*

*Witherell and Noddings (1991) contended that, "Stories invite us to come to know the world and our place in it . . . stories call us to consider what we know, how we know, and what and whom we care about" (p. 13). This article is a story about invitations. It is a personal reflective narrative that highlights how the acceptance and application of the theory of invitational education empowers both personal and professional change.*

Red, yellow, green, blue—colors and shapes becoming a myriad of patterns, intertwining, ever changing. With each turn of the kaleidoscope dial the light is filtered, the colors blend, the patterns change and endless possibilities are waiting to emerge. In our lives, both personally and professionally, the patterns of the past blend to shape the designs of the future. Even when we are not consciously turning the kaleidoscope dial, our experiences are constantly changing the patterns of our lives, defining our sense of self, shaping who we are and what we become.

Carl Rogers (1961) indicated that the process of becoming is a lifetime journey. For a teacher, the process involves becoming a reflective educator who understands how professional definitions of knowledge and perceptions of self-effect pedagogy. Hamachek (1971) noted that "we teach what we are, not just what we say. We teach our own self-concepts far more often than we teach our subject matter" (p.208). Our students' definitions of self are constructed from their actual opinions about self and their perceived appraisals from significant others (Trent, Cooney, Russell, &

Warton, 1996). Studies have indicated that there is a positive correlation between how teachers view themselves and how they view their students (Purkey & Smith, 1983). Realizing that they are significant others, successful teachers determine who they are and how their concepts of self effect the lives of all students. One way to make this determination is to search, to reconstruct one's past, to examine life's experiences, and to examine one's past self. Makler (1991) described the search as " a search for a story to tell" (p. 45). Witherell and Noddings (1991) contended that, "Stories invite us to come to know the world and our place in it . . . stories call us to consider what we know, how we know, and what and whom we care about" (p. 13).

This article is the story of my acceptance of an invitation to know the world and my place in it. It is also a journey back in time to help me more clearly define who I am and to illustrate how my self-concept effected my classroom teaching and my professional development.

## **The Journey Begins**

When I began my teaching career I had a passion for learning, for caring, for exploring, and for going beyond. I believed in myself and my ability to make a difference, or at least in retrospect I think I did. My first teaching assignment was in a small rural school in the mountains of North Carolina. As I look back, it is still easy to visualize the faces of the children who were in my classroom that first year. I remember the hours of planning and preparation. I remember the excitement and the optimism I felt as I worked to make learning "fun" for my students. But most of all, I remember Josh (pseudonym). The first time I saw Josh, he was standing outside my classroom door with his shoulders slumped and his head lowered. He was hesitating to enter the classroom. As I started toward the doorway, I heard my teacher aide comment, "Oh no! Not another one of those Carver children. If this one is like the rest, he won't be able to do anything." Josh had not even crossed the threshold of the schoolroom and already he had a label. An adult, a

significant other in this school setting, looked at Josh and labeled him a failure. As a new beginning teacher, I did not have any past experiences with the Carver children, therefore when I looked at Josh I saw a confused, anxious, and lonely six year old who needed help to grow and to become. I spent many hours that first year devoting energy and effort in helping Josh learn to read. The process was not an easy one, but I believed in Josh's potential and in my ability to make a difference. As the year progressed and Josh accomplished academic tasks successfully, he began to believe in his abilities as a student. At the end of the year with his head high and his shoulders straight, Josh stood in front of an audience of parents to read a story he had written. He had succeeded and, as a teacher, I had made a difference.

### **The Journey Falters**

I would like to say that I continued to be that kind of teacher, but I was not. Somewhere along the way, I became unable to look at the world from multiple vantage points. Over the years, the patterns of my teaching changed. The year I saw Michael's name on my class role it was not a teacher aide's voice I heard saying "Oh no, not Michael", it was my voice. As I looked at the list of names, I remembered every comment the previous teacher had uttered, and I saw a child who was a discipline problem and an unsuccessful student. I labeled Michael as a failure. During that school year, Michael saw my impatience and my attitude, and he added further verification to his belief that he was a person "who impressed disgust and weariness" (Shor & Freire, 1987, p. 24).

I know now that it was not Michael who failed during that school year, instead I am the one who faltered because I failed to make a difference. I had internalized a negative concept of myself as a teacher. At some point, I put the kaleidoscope down not realizing that the colors and shapes had a momentum of their own. Other forces turned the kaleidoscope dial, creating new patterns in my life.

I cannot look back and cite specific events that caused the changes to occur. The changes occurred when I began to play a role rather than be true to myself and to my students. It is difficult to determine when one begins to play a role. It happens slowly, almost imperceptibly. In order to validate myself and my teaching, I attempted to fit into the pattern of the dominant school discourse. A discourse is a way of belonging in the world, an "identity kit" that enables one to take on a particular social role in order to belong to a particular social group (Gee, 1990). How one defines self is basic to determining one's identity in a discourse. In order to belong to the dominant discourse of my school, I tried to assume and to learn the identity role that I felt was needed. Over a period of years, I allowed the existing system to define and to shape my teaching. In the process I became disconnected from myself and I began to psychologically distance myself from my students. I was experiencing feelings of failure and exhaustion often associated with burnout (Trent, 1997).

As a teacher, I alternately was unintentionally inviting or unintentionally disinviting (Purkey & Novak, 1984). An unintentionally inviting teacher can be effective, but is not consistent. I was not consistent in the relationships established in my classroom. As a result of this inconsistency, my classroom manner conveyed an attitude of disinterest and insensitivity. I did not believe in myself, so I did not attempt to create classroom dynamics that would encourage children to reach their maximum potential. I became enmeshed in "the 'cotton wool' of habit, of mere routine, of automatism" (Greene, 1988, p. 2).

Unable to see a way to change, I began to consider leaving the classroom and possibly leaving the teaching profession. Feeling the discontent, I began an outward journey, not realizing that ultimately I needed to begin to look inward. It was the outward search that encouraged me to enroll in a graduate program of studies and led to the first invitation.

## **The Journey Resumed**

Invitations and the concepts of invitational education play an important role in my story. "Invitational education is the process by which people are cordially summoned to realize their relatively boundless potential" (Purkey & Novak, 1984, p. 3). One of the tenants of invitational education states that one way this potential is realized is "by people who are personally and professionally inviting to themselves and others" (Purkey & Novak, 1984, p. 2). My graduate advisor was such a person. She painted a picture of a different future in education. She believed that educators can and do make a positive difference in the lives of students. She attempted to make such a difference by encouraging me to continue my education, to enter a doctoral program, and to prepare for a position in higher education. Even though I caught a different glimpse of myself through her eyes, the invitation went unaccepted. The risk, the fear of failure, or maybe even the fear of success, and the lack of my ability to envision the difference between the actual and the possible, created a "wall" (Greene, 1988, p. 5) blocking my ability to bring something new into existence. Yet, the seed was planted and it lay dormant, just waiting to grow.

Later that year at a professional meeting another invitation was issued. As the speaker discussed self-concept research and the theory of invitational education, I found myself wanting to know more. I felt a need to remain after the meeting to further discuss aspects of teaching and self-concept theory. The speaker was an educator who operates at the highest level of invitational functioning - intentionally inviting. Educators who function at the intentionally-inviting level believe people are "valuable, capable, and responsible and...intentionally invite them to share in these beliefs" (Purkey & Novak, 1984, 1984, p. 20). As we talked, he issued an invitation to participate in a project involving self-concept research. I accepted the invitation and the seed that had been lying dormant began to take root and to grow.

Over the next few months as I read and we dialogued, I began to see myself through the eyes of a caring educator who believed in my abilities and who encouraged me to reach my potential. I

also began to spend time in self-reflection and self-dialogue. I began to ask myself questions that Smyth (1989) posed in critical reflection. "Who am I? What do I do? What does this mean? How did I come to be this way? How can I do things differently?" (p. 2).

This self-reflection and dialogue with others helped me to reveal and to name the "wall" that interfered with my ability to change. The wall was my lack of a belief in myself and in my ability to make a difference in the dominant discourse of my school community. As I recognized the obstacle and I began to interact with professionals who viewed walls as challenges rather than obstacles, I was able to take action and to re-create a more positive image of myself as a person and as a teacher. I began to consciously turn the dial of the kaleidoscope in order to shape and form the patterns of my personal and professional life.

The development and changes in my self-concept did not occur quickly. The self-concept is consistent and difficult to change because it requires change in a whole system of beliefs about one's self. Some of these beliefs are close to the center of the self and difficult to change, but other more peripheral beliefs are more acquiescent to change. The self is unique and each belief also has its own positive or negative value, as well as, its own cognizance of success or failure. The uniquely organized self is our basic frame of reference, thus maintaining and enhancing self-concept is a prime motivator for our behavior (Purkey, 1970). John Dewey described the self as being "in continuous formation through choice of action" (cited in Greene, 1988, p. 22). I had started a process of change by accepting invitations to new courses of action. My choices of action formulated and are continuing to formulate a more positive image of self.

Our perceptions of self are established as we interact with significant others in our environment. Parents, teachers, and peers in the role of significant others can have both positive and negative influences on self-concept and development. Two caring educators had played a significant role in helping me to reformulate a more positive self-image. As a result of their invitations to

grow personally and professionally, I began to see myself in a different light. I also began to wonder if, as a teacher, I could invite my students to form more positive concepts of self, especially their concept of self as a learner.

## **New Directions**

Self-concept forms early in life, but when children enter school an academic part of self-concept, self-concept-as-learner is acquired (Purkey, 1970). Self-concept-as-learner is "that part of a person's 'global self' - all the attitudes, opinions and beliefs that a person holds to be true of his/her personal existence - that relates most directly to school achievement" (Purkey, Raheim, & Cage, 1983, p. 53). Educators and researchers have pointed out that a relationship exists between academic achievement and a student's self-concept (Beane, Lipka, & Ludewig, 1980; Hansford & Hattie, 1982; Walberg, 1984; Purkey, 1970; Silvernail, 1981; Wylie, 1974, 1979, 1989). Recent studies indicated that self-esteem is not a precondition for student success in academic, social, and moral areas, but is a product of this success (Bunker, 1991; Cohen & Westhues, 1995; Mone, Baker, Douglas, & Jefferies, 1995; Rosenberg, Schooler, Schoenbach, & Rosenbeerg, 1995). Investigations have shown that some students acquire a more negative self-image with each additional year in school and that negative attitudes increase as the end of the school year approaches (Edeburn & Landry, 1974; Harper, 1989; Silvernail, 1981). Some research has indicated a positive relationship between teacher self-concept and student self-concept (Curtis & Altman, 1977; Edeburn & Landry, 1974) and that a curriculum based on the tenets of invitational education positively impacts learning experiences (Maaka & Lipka, 1996).

As I began a new school year, I wanted to discover for myself if the difference in my self-concept would have a positive affect on my students' self-concepts. The first step became the creation of an inviting classroom atmosphere conducive to enhancing self-images. To create such an atmosphere, I started by making changes in the physical appearance of my classroom. I added plants, a large rug, and pillows to provide inviting nooks for reading and working. I created and maintained bulletin boards to highlight each student's interests and accomplishments. I also attempted to establish an atmosphere of warmth, respect, security, acceptance, and encouragement that is necessary for

children to build a positive sense of self. I wanted children to express their ideas and take risks that would enable them to experience the possibility for success. To provide such an atmosphere it was necessary for me to maintain an inviting stance and accept each student as a unique individual.

As a new group of second graders entered my classroom, I set about making sure that each one felt accepted. I greeted each child at the door every morning. I established procedures for daily, weekly, and monthly recognition of individual success and uniqueness. Activities, such as positive affirmations that illustrated each child's special contributions to the class, were used to enhance feelings of self-worth. In the fall, I used the Florida Key Self-Concept Scale (Purkey, Cage, & Fahey, 1986) to gain insights into my students' perceptions of themselves. The Florida Key Self-Concept Scale was designed to measure self-concept of the learner, as well as the perceived self-concept of the learner by the teacher. A student who has a high score on the Florida Key is assumed to possess a positive self-concept-as-learner and a low score indicates a negative self-concept-as-learner (High: 81-115; Moderate: 35-80; Low: 0-34).

Throughout the school year, I incorporated self-concept activities into my classroom curriculum. Through classroom sharing during activities such as "What's My Bag" (Canfield & Wells, 1976), in which students decorate and fill an ordinary paper bag with objects to describe themselves as unique persons, the students were more able to appreciate individual likenesses and differences. In collaboration with a colleague, a cross-grade reading program was established that enabled students to spend time each week reading to preschool handicapped children. The caring relationships that developed were invaluable in helping the students to develop a positive sense of self-worth.

Positive feelings of self are also enhanced through positive and safe touch (McCarty, 1990). Therefore, I gave my students many opportunities to experience legitimate touch in the form of handshakes, hugs, and high five's.

I encouraged my students to express their own ideas and opinions and to realize that it is all right to make mistakes. I provided many opportunities for cooperative learning, for exploring and for experiencing success. Since clearly defined limits add to a child's sense of security and esteem (Coopersmith, 1967), established classroom standards were reasonably and consistently enforced. As I incorporated ideas and activities to create an inviting classroom environment, I was cognizant that activities alone are not effective in enhancing self-worth. Although self-concept activities play a role in helping create situations that help children develop a positive self-image, it is the teacher's inviting stance, both verbally and non verbally, which plays a larger role in the process.

Through an inviting stance I portrayed my belief in the uniqueness and potential of my students. As they began to see themselves through my eyes, many of my students began to formulate more positive conceptions of self. In the spring semester, I again used the Florida Key to measure self-concept-as-learner. In the fall six students scored high, fourteen moderate, and two low. The mean of the fall test was 63.4 with a standard deviation of 28.13. In the spring administration thirteen students scored high, eight moderate, and one low. The spring mean was 81.81 with a standard deviation of 19.52. Although the results were not statistically significant, results indicated increases in total self-concept-as-learner scores for all but one student, indicating that, as a group, the students' positive self-images as learners had shown some growth during the school year.

The student's individual stories provided demonstrations of their growth. Their stories are unique—separate from mine, yet connected. There was Mark, a child who once said, "I can't" to every writing assignment, yet he began to enjoy writing his own stories and to envision himself as becoming an author. Ben, a child who cried over mistakes, started to accept his mistakes as a part of the learning process. Martha, whose perfectionism had already caused an ulcer at her young age, demonstrated that the

process of cooperative learning is fun and that acceptance within a group does not depend on perfection. Matthew, whose reading problems had caused him to develop a negative view of himself as a reader, developed a more positive self-image as he read each week to a preschool handicapped child. I saw so many changes in my students, but I also saw myself as I began to "teach from the heart" (Calkins & Harwayne, 1991; Purkey, 1990). In teaching from the heart, I was creating an inviting environment which enabled a transcendent relationship to occur (O'Hara & Radd, 1994). A transcendent teacher-learner relationship is one that goes beyond traditional roles of interaction and results in turning point encounters for one or both participants. As a teacher, I believed in myself and my students, I was making a difference and thus I was opening spaces for turning point encounters to occur in my classroom.

I was issuing invitations to my students and to myself. By inviting myself, I continued to turn the kaleidoscope dial to formulate my own patterns of development. After attending the first Virginia State Conference on Self-Esteem, I established my own professional self-concept workshop for classroom teachers. During the school year, I presented at local, regional, and state conferences. I became more involved in professional organizations and submitted a work for publication in a professional journal.

As I attempted to form the patterns of my professional growth, I was involved in taking risks. Any growth-producing situation involves taking risks. As I attempted to change life patterns, I was risking censure, disapproval, errors in judgment, failure, and my self-concept. As a person experiences repeated failure, self-concept is negatively affected, and there is a tendency to withdraw from risk-taking situations (Canfield & Wells, 1976). As I began to experience success, my sense of self-worth was positively enhanced, and I continued to take risks in order to bring about changes.

Others also began to notice the changes that were occurring in my classroom. My colleagues recognized the differences in my teaching and I was chosen to represent my school, my county, and my region as the 1992 Virginia Region VII Teacher of the Year. Each of these events added to my feelings of competence and success as a teacher.

## **A New Journey**

Changes had evolved in my classroom, but changes were also evolving within me. As I again reflected and dialogued, I began to realize that it was time to accept a previously rejected invitation. In order to bring something new into existence in terms of my own professional growth, I had to open up a space between what was and what could become. It was time to accept the invitation to return to the classroom not as a teacher, but as a student.

With the acceptance of that invitation, I began a new journey as a doctoral student. The journey led to this point of reflection, and the reflection led to the continuance of the journey. My self-reflections generated self-dialogue and caused me to formulate new questions. How do other teachers see themselves? How are teacher education programs helping young professionals to become reflective practitioners and teacher/researchers? How does a cooperating teacher's sense of self, as a teacher, affect a student teacher's self-concept? What happens when we, as teachers, "bring our real selves to school" (Calkins & Harwayne, 1991, p. 305)? The dissertation process began, and I sought answers to questions about the identities of pre-service teachers and young children.

## **The Journey Continues**

When the dissertation (Walker, 1994) and degree were completed, a space opened to bring a new career into existence, and I became an assistant professor of education. As I continue to engage in self-reflection and self-dialogue, I have learned that pos-

sibilities always exist. I can make a difference in the lives of my students by inviting them to establish classroom practices based on invitational theory. When these invitations are accepted future educators are empowered to bring something new into existence. I have also learned that in order to continue my own journey I must pick up the kaleidoscope, turn the dial, and watch the patterns merge and change as invitations are issued, rejected and accepted. Just as the past defined the present, the present will shape the possibilities of the future—red, yellow, green, blue—colors and shapes forming patterns, intertwining, ever changing.

## References

- Beane, J. A., Lipka, R. P., & Ludewig, J. W. (1980, October). Synthesis of research on self-concept. *Educational Leadership*, pp. 84-89.
- Bunker, L. K. (1991). The role of play and motor development in building children's self-confidence and self-esteem. *Elementary School Journal*, 91(5), 467-471.
- Calkins, L. M., & Harwayne, S. (1991). *Living between the lines*. Portsmouth, NH: Heinemann.
- Canfield, J., & Wells, H. C. (1976). *100 Ways to enhance self-concept in the classroom*. Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice Hall.
- Cohen, J. S., & Westhues, A. (1995). A comparison of self-esteem, school achievement, and friends between intercountry adoptees, and their siblings. *Early Child Development and Care*, 105, 205-224.
- Coopersmith, S. (1967). *The antecedents of self-esteem*. San Francisco: W. F. Freeman.
- Curtis, J., & Altman, H. (1977). The relationship between teacher's self-concept and the self-concept of students. *Child Study Journal*, 7(1), 17-27.
- Edeburn, C. E., & Landry, R. G. (1974). *Teacher self-concept and student self-concept*. Chicago, IL: American Educational Research Association. (Eric Document Reproduction Service No. 088 892).
- Gee, J. P. (1990). *Social linguistics and literacies: Ideology in discourses*. London: Falmer Press.
- Greene, M. (1988). *The dialectic of freedom*. New York: Teachers College Press.

- Hamachek, D. E. (1971). *Encounters with the self*. New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston.
- Hansford, B., & Hattie, J. (1982). The relationship between self-concept and achievement/performance measures. *Review of Educational Research*, 52, 123-142.
- Harper, K. L. (1989). *An investigation of inferred and professed self-concept-as-learner of gifted and average middle school students*. Unpublished doctoral dissertation, The University of North Carolina at Greensboro, Greensboro, NC.
- Maaka, M. J., & Lipka, P. A. (1996). Inviting success in the elementary classroom: First steps from theory to practice. *Journal of Invitational Theory and Practice*, 4(1), 51-62.
- Makler, A. (1991). Imagining history: "A good story and a well-formed argument". In C. Witherell & N. Noddings (Eds.) *Stories lives tell: Narrative and dialogue in education* (pp. 29-047). New York: Teachers College Press.
- McCarty, H. (1990). *Self-esteem: The bottom line in school success*. Galt, CA: McCarty & Associates.
- Mone, M. A., Baker, D. D., Douglas, D., & Jefferies, F. (1995). Predictive validity and time dependency of self-efficacy, self-esteem, personal goals, and academic performance. *Educational and Psychological Measurement*, 55(5), 716-727.
- O'Hara, H., & Radd, T. R. (April, 1994). A comparison view: The characteristics of the transcendent teacher-learner relationship and the invitational climate created via the grow with guidance system. Paper presented at the Annual Meeting of the American Educational Research Association. New Orleans: LA.
- Purkey, S. C., & Smith, M. S. (1983). Effective schools: A review. *Elementary School Journal*, 83, 442-452.
- Purkey, W. W. (1970). *Self-concept and school achievement*. Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice Hall.
- Purkey, W. W. (1990, February). *The heart of teaching is teaching from the heart*. Presentation at the annual meeting of the Association of Teacher Educators, Las Vegas, NV.
- Purkey, W. W., Cage, B. N., & Fahey, M. (1986). *The Florida key: An instrument to infer student self-concept-as-learner in grades one through six* (Manual). Greensboro, NC: Author.
- Purkey, W. W., & Novak, J. M. (1984). *Inviting school success: A self-*

INTERNATIONAL ALLIANCE  
FOR INVITATIONAL EDUCATION  
c/o SCHOOL OF EDUCATION  
UNC-GREENSBORO  
GREENSBORO, NC 27412

NON-PROFIT ORGANIZATION  
BULK RATE  
US POSTAGE  
PAID  
PERMIT # 1  
GREENVILLE, NC

- concept approach to teaching and learning*. Belmont, CA: Wadsworth.
- Purkey, W. W., Raheim, A., & Cage, B. N. (1983). Self-concept-as-learner: An overlooked part of self-concept theory. *The Journal of Humanistic Education and Development*, 22(2), 52-57.
- Rogers, C. R., (1961). *On becoming a person: A therapist's view of psychotherapy*. Boston: Houghton Mifflin.
- Rosenberg, M., Schooler, C., Schoenbach, C., & Rosenberg, F. (1995). Global self-esteem and specific self-esteem: Different concepts, different outcomes. *American Sociological Review*, 80(1), 141-156.
- Shor, I., & Freire, P. (1987). *A pedagogy for liberation*. South Hadley, MA: Bergin & Garvey.
- Silvernail, D. L. (1981). *Developing positive student self-concept*. Washington, DC: National Education Association.
- Smyth, J. (1989). Developing and sustaining critical reflection in teacher education. *Journal of Teacher Education*, 40(2), 2-9.
- Trent, L. M. Y. (1997). Enhancement of the school climate by reducing teacher burnout: Using an invitational approach. *Journal of Invitational Theory and Practice*, 4(2), 103-114.
- Trent, L. M. Y., Cooney, G., Russell, G., & Warton, P. M. (1996). Significant others' contribution to early adolescents' perceptions of their competence. *British Journal of Educational Psychology*, 66, 95-107.
- Walberg, H. (1984). Improving the productivity of America's schools. *Educational Leadership*, 41(8), 19-27.
- Walker, D. C. (1994). *Living together in the classroom: The coparticipatory construction of preservice teacher and novice student identities*. Unpublished doctoral dissertation, Virginia Tech, Blacksburg, VA.
- Witherell, C., C., & Noddings, N. (1991) *Stories lives tell: Narrative and dialogue in education*. New York: Teachers College Press.
- Wylie, R. C. (1974). *The self-concept*. Lincoln, NE: University of Nebraska.
- Wylie, R. C. (1979). *The self-concept, Vol. 2: Theory and research on selected topics*. Lincoln, NE: University of Nebraska.
- Wylie, R. C. (1989). *Measures of the self-concept*. Lincoln, NE: University of Nebraska.

*Dawn Walker is assistant professor of education at Sweet Briar College in Virginia.*