The (r) evolution of a miserable teacher

- an autoethnography

by

Chantelle de Wet

Submitted in partial fulfilment of the requirements for the degree

PHILOSOPHIAE DOCTOR

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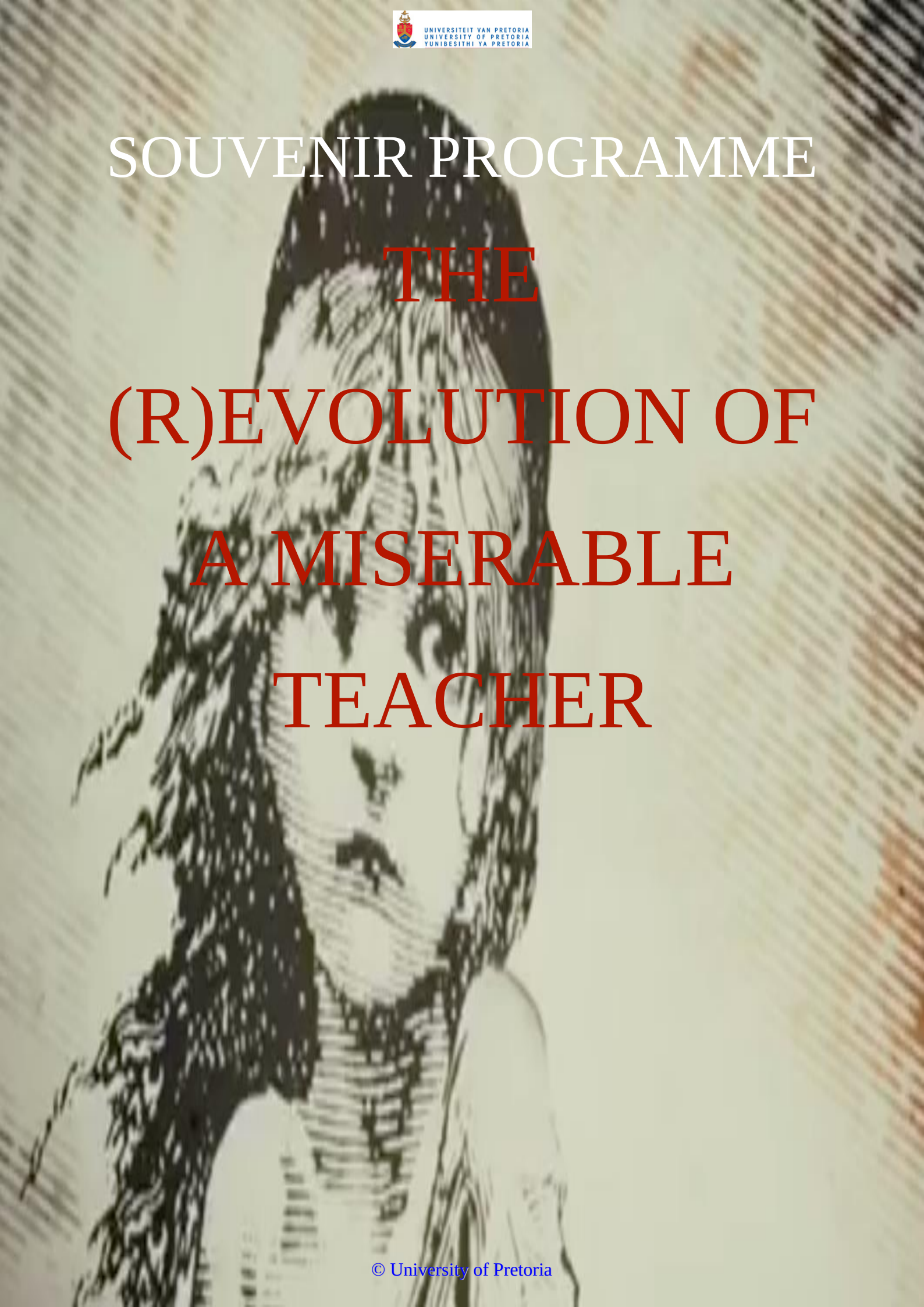
UNIVERSITEIT VAN PRETORIA
UNIVERSITY OF PRETORIA
YUNIBESITHI YA PRETORIA

SOUVENIR PROGRAMME

THE (R)EVOLUTION OF A MISERABLE TEACHER



CHANTELLE DE WET

presents

A NEW PRODUCTION IN PARTIAL FULFILMENT OF

THE REQUIREMENTS FOR THE DEGREE: PHD

THE (R)EVOLUTION OF A TEACHER

an autoethnography

Based on the original novel of *Les Misérables*, written by VICTOR HUGO

Lyrics by HERBERT KRETZMER

Original text by CHANTELLE DE WET

Additional material supplied by FRIENDS & FAMILY

Data collected and constructed from DOCUMENTATION & MEMORY

Sources and Relativity provided by EXISTING LITERATURE

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Produced by

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Made possible by the academic excellence provided by

THE FACULTY OF EDUCATION

at the

THE UNIVERSITY OF PRETORIA

Premiere: 2021

Welcome message

The epic historical novel, *Les Misérables*, by the French author Victor Hugo, was first published by Pagnerre (Paris) in 1862. It was only 136 years later, at the age of 15, that I was first introduced to Jean Valjean and his eternal struggle to transform from convict to honest man. It was love at first, musical sight. Over the next 20 years, I watched all the movies with the same stars in my eyes and then, finally, I read the translated version of the novel that Hugo had so lovingly created. Suddenly, the story was elevated to a multidimensional, magical masterpiece.

Jean Valjean, the protagonist in *Les Misérables*, manages his life experience to a self-actualisation level that would make Maslow proud. From the beginning, the odds were stacked up against Valjean. Everyone (and in an ironic, melancholic way, no one) expected him to fail. He was alone and left to his own devices. Although characters like the Bishop, Cosette and even Fantine stood up for and rooted for him, there was an internal drive to change for the better that I am mesmerised by. *Les Misérables* is more than just a conceptual metaphorical framework for my doctoral thesis; I have always considered it to be a part of my personal journey, almost intrinsically a part of who I am. In this thesis, I set out to find the parallels and perpendiculars of my memories, to answer the question of why and how I was (r)evolutionised. I wanted to prove to myself that I am more than just a tangent to the education sphere, and in the process contribute to the teacher collective that currently exists in the literature. My personal story has relevance, as the realisation of my resilience kept me motivated and eager to participate in the dynamic changes brought about by Covid-19. At the time, I often found myself reciting lines from the musical, finding a strange solace in the notion that this is not the first time someone felt uncertain, scared, forlorn and desolated. This made the surreal experience of teaching amidst a global pandemic seem more verisimilar. *Les Misérables* is a metaphor I use as the structure for this thesis. Theories, literature reviews, frameworks, paradigms, methodologies, data strategies, social constructs and my own subjective perspectives are metaphorically personified through Hugo's original characters and intertwined with the storyline. The traditional chapters are replaced by scenes, their titles borrowed from song titles throughout the musical and I hope that you, the audience, will be left wanting more. All I can ask for is an open mind and some patience, as in the end, *Insha'Allah**, all will make sense.

*Arabic for "God willing"

Chantelle de Wet
Producer

DEDICATION

I dedicate this thesis to the person who taught me how to read. Without my grandma, Ouma Poppie, I would have never discovered the world that exists between the letters of the alphabet. She passed away before I finished this thesis, but her resilience and moral compass will be immortalised in the generation/s to come. She *dreamed a dream* and I was given the grace to embrace it.

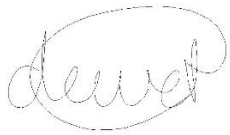
Ouma Poppie

Anna Elizabeth Meyring

9 April 1933 – 12 August 2019

DECLARATION

I, Chantelle de Wet, declare that this thesis, which I hereby submit for the degree PhD at the University of Pretoria, is my own work and has not been previously submitted by me for a degree at this or any other tertiary institution.

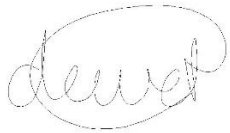


Chantelle de Wet

April 2021

ETHICS STATEMENT

I, Chantelle de Wet, student number 04266072, declare that the thesis, which I hereby submit for the degree PhD at the University of Pretoria, is ethically compliant with regard to all aspects of this research.



Chantelle de Wet
April 2021

UNIVERSITEIT VAN PRETORIA
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RESEARCH ETHICS COMMITTEE

CLEARANCE CERTIFICATE	CLEARANCE NUMBER: EDU087/20
DEGREE AND PROJECT	PhD The (r) evolution of a miserable teacher – an autoethnography
INVESTIGATOR	Mrs Chantelle de Wet
DEPARTMENT	Humanities
APPROVAL TO COMMENCE STUDY	07 August 2020
DATE OF CLEARANCE CERTIFICATE	07 May 2021

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This Ethics Clearance Certificate should be read in conjunction with the Integrated Declaration Form (D08) which specifies details regarding:

- Compliance with approved research protocol,
- No significant changes,
- Informed consent/assent,
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- Registered title, and
- Data storage requirements.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I would like to acknowledge the following people who contributed to this thesis in varying degrees of effort, prayer, guidance, humour, food and relentless support.

- Dr Alta Engelbrecht, my friend, supervisor, mentor, soundboard and motivator, and the only person who understands the rainbow lens that I see the world through. From long Zoom sessions to late night WhatsApp voice notes, your insight and consistent motivation made it possible for me to break through personal barriers. You gave me more than two proverbial candlesticks and saved me from a life as a parolee. I will be grateful, *until tomorrow comes*.
- Pieter de Wet, the unconditional energy that kept me charged without being asked. Thank you for always making me feel loved and cherished, even when you played second fiddle to academic articles and writing hours. Thank you for dealing with many hours of musicals, lyrics, poetry and readings. Thank you for keeping me grounded when my head was in the stratosphere. I feel the truth: *to love another person is to see the face of God.*
- Lehja and Petrus, two children who understood when mom was *not to be disturbed*. Thank you for early morning cuddles, an endless supply of coffee, and beautiful messages on Post It notes that I found in surprising places. You are my guides in a dark world, *the light of my sun.*
- Family and friends from all over the world: you *heard the distant drums.* You understood the missed phone calls and coffee dates; you never got angry when I did not show up; you had food delivered and you continuously sent messages of encouragement and support. You prayed, sent positive vibes and your enthusiasm sustained my own. Willem, Linda, PP, Joan, Dewald, Jacquie, Zelda, Linda P., ever-optimistic Ben, Lara, and all my other people … thank you.
- Victor Hugo, painter of words, for bringing Jean Valjean into my life and changing it for the better. *Jean Valjean is nothing now. Another story must begin.*

ABSTRACT

When our family relocated from South Africa to Abu Dhabi in the United Arab Emirates (UAE) in 2015, I was not prepared for the inception of my personal evolution. Stepping into a classroom as a mathematics teacher, after nearly a decade of being a self-sustainable entrepreneur, forced me to evaluate my motives for becoming a teacher, and shifted my focus to progress and the development of my own pedagogy. Just as I was finding my feet in the British international schooling system in the UAE, the coronavirus disease of 2019 (Covid-19) resulted in a global pandemic and forced all schools to close and roll out distance learning education systems. In turn, this led to a revolution in the teaching profession as I knew it. Both of these contexts paved the way of the title of the thesis:

The (r) evolution of a miserable teacher – an autoethnography

Autoethnography challenges the canonical manner in which research is conducted, allowing the researcher to use her personal experience (auto) to understand the cultural experience (ethno) better and describe (graphy) the results in narrative form. This might be an oversimplified definition of a complex journey of self-discovery and contextual understanding, but holistically even a definition can evolve. The use of a postmodern perspective throughout the thesis ensured that the data were not limited to a singular paradigm but were rather a culmination of what was relevant at the time of the research. Through reflective and reflexive data collection and construction techniques, a progressive and innovative data graph was developed to visually enhance the (r)evolution of the data description, analysis and evaluation. Conceptual metaphor theory allowed *Les Misérables* to be the framework and foundation for the data to be constructed. This study contributes to the teachers' collective by combining traditional paradigms in a new, brave, evolutionary way. A personal evolution through resilience and agility became evident through reflective and reflexive data and literature. Evolution is never-ending, but by becoming aware of the effects of personal growth, the process is elevated to a sustainable focus in everyday life. The evolution did not falter when Covid-19 forced the education sphere to momentarily pause at a possible revolutionary turning point. Distance education allowed politicians, school developers and owners, curriculum writers, principals, school boards and managers, teachers and parents to re-evaluate methodologies, curriculum content and inclusion policies, as well as the everyday implementation of policies and procedures. Literature proves that a revolution was necessary and Covid-19 made this possible by funnelling our expectations into experience. The revolution is far from complete but, similar to evolution, awareness leads to improved practice.

Keywords: Covid-19; education; autoethnography; postmodernism; (r)evolution

Message from the language editor

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26 April 2021

To whom it may concern

This is to certify that I, Alexa Kirsten Barnby, an English editor accredited by the South African Translators' Institute, have edited the doctoral thesis titled "The (r)evolution of a miserable teacher: An autoethnography" by Chantelle de Wet.

The onus is on the author, however, to make the changes and address the comments made.

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ACT I

REVIEWS

From vision to thesis

As soon as I finished my master's dissertation, I knew that I wanted to continue my academic journey. I wanted to contribute, no matter in how small of a way, to the realm of educational research, or at least attempt an endowment. While I completed my master's dissertation with momentary and immediate reward in sight in the form of a higher pay scale, the psychological effects of research remained: something changed inside my being; I wanted more. I started reading through a variety of methodologies and wrote down several proposed concepts, adamant that I would focus on something that I was truly passionate about. I was not chasing a superficial goal with these words, but rather accepting my status as an ever-inquisitive, lifelong learner. A friend of mine casually noted my personal evolution. I was curious about the word "evolution" and wanted to explore it in more detail. I wanted to understand the conceptual meaning of truly evolving. I read, discussed, thought, wrote, argued, listened and debated with myself, family, friends, and even strangers, and eventually I was introduced to the developing world of autoethnographies. Without thinking about the consequences for the neighbours' ears, I belted out a few chorus lines from *Les Misérables*:

Do you hear the people sing? Singing the song of angry men

It is the music of the people, who will not be slaves again

My husband frowned from across the room, but in that ridiculous moment I knew that I wanted to use the story of Jean Valjean, in order to tell my own.

> *So long as there shall exist, by reason of law and custom, a social condemnation, which, in the face of civilization, artificially creates hells on earth, and complicates a destiny that is divine with human fatality; so long as the three problems of the age – the degradation of man by poverty, the ruin of women by starvation, and the dwarfing of childhood by physical and spiritual night – are not solved; so long as, in certain regions, social asphyxia shall be possible; in other words, and from a yet more extended point of view, so long as ignorance and misery remain on earth, books like this cannot be useless.*
>
> Victor Hugo, Preface from *Les Misérables* (1863)

In his preface, Hugo captured not only the value of a novel but also that of research. I am but one teacher in the world. My story of evolution might never be enough to change the world of education, but it can certainly make a fractional contribution to the collective fund.

Autoethnographical additions to the teachers' collective will remain useful for as long as the education system has flaws and in which teachers and learners are either proverbially impoverished, starved or ignored in varying degrees of relevance and significance. While we may all strive for perfection, the evolutionary and progressive nature of education ensures that perfection remains an unobtainable goal, albeit one we should never stop seeking. As I set the stage for a dramatic thesis, with the coronavirus disease of 2019 (Covid-19) as revolutionary décor, and my personal story of evolution as the backdrop to a proverbial script, I saw similarities between the lyrics of *Les Mis* and teachers all over the world. They are the people singing the songs of angry men, the ones that do not want to be slaves again. I consequently had the urge to grab a soap box and yell on my own and on their behalf. Instead, I opted for a narrative. I set out to find existing literature on the topic of teacher happiness and satisfaction. I desperately wanted to believe that Covid-19 started a revolution in education, and while I am wary of sweeping statements and melodramatic outbursts, I honestly felt hopeful about the impending changes. I argued that the world needs to hear about teachers' frustrations, anguish, wretchedness and even hopelessness, now more than ever. Amid the global pandemic, I realised the importance of resilience, reflection and the invaluable contribution that the teacher collective can make to sustainable education reform.

> *The book which the reader has before him at this moment is, from one end to the other, in its entirety and details ... a progress from evil to good, from injustice to justice, from falsehood to truth, from night to day, from appetite to conscience, from corruption to life; from bestiality to duty, from hell to heaven, from nothingness to God. The starting point: matter, destination: the soul. The hydra at the beginning, the angel at the end.*
>
> Victor Hugo, Preface from *Les Misérables* (1863)

I was once a wretched, miserable teacher. While I still feel hopeless and angry at times, anguish is no longer my likely emotion, but I am continuously evolving with a newfound awareness. While Covid-19 has not provided the answer to decades of questions and problems, it has sparked conversation about the dynamic nature of existence. This thesis is not only a slice of my life, but a small glimpse into the life of a teacher amidst a global pandemic. I bear witness to my own, personal evolution and a global pandemic that might just spark a revolution for education.

Synopsis

The following serves as a guide to understanding the layout, structure, development and academic requirements of this thesis.

A synopsis of *Les Misérables* will be given throughout the thesis, aligned to the left and printed in

COPPERPLATE GOTHIC BOLD.

The purpose of this is simple: to familiarise the reader with the story of *Les Misérables*. It will highlight the similarities and differences between the original storyline and the applications to the thesis. This thesis is not a modified version of *Les Misérables*; it is a way of implementing conceptual metaphor theory as a writing genre in an autoethnographical thesis. The postmodern paradigm allows one not to classify the autoethnography in a singular way, but rather to anticipate the thesis as it flows naturally into a classification later. This will be substantiated by the literature in Act I. Lyrics from the musical enhance the aesthetics of this thesis and have been aligned to the left and printed in

Papyrus.

The lyrics serve to elevate the parallels drawn between the story and the thesis content. They also embed the story in the thesis, showcasing the universal emotions experienced in both realms. The souvenir programme, which you are now reading, aims to ensure the structural integrity of a canonical thesis, while the thesis itself will venture in a postmodern, innovative presentation of existing literature, data construction, and analytical and critical discussion. I will challenge traditional academic conventions by intertwining the literature review with the narrative. When (almost) all is said and done, reviews will offer some reflective insight into the journey past and what is yet to come.

ACT I

Act I will serve the purpose of the traditional Chapters 1 to 3 of a thesis, where the background and context, purpose of the study, literature reviews, methodology, theories, design, paradigm, epistemology and ontology, and possible limitations, will be intertwined with the structure of *Les Misérables.* In parallel with the story of Jean Valjean runs the experience of a teacher who felt constricted in her newfound freedom. The freedom of both characters is bound by social expectations, preconceived ideas, restrictive possibilities and personal acceptance. Resilience proves to be invaluable when these characters are given a chance, and their agility leads them to deal with difficult situations more effectively than they have done before. Constantly being

reminded of trustworthiness and the validity of their moral code, the scenes are filled with challenges, questions and possibilities. Just as things seem to settle down, sudden events bring on the possibility of a revolution. For Jean Valjean this happens when a group of politically minded students start an uprising in the streets of Montfermeil; for the teacher it is the global pandemic brought on by Covid-19. For both, it predicts change.

ACT II

Act II will reinvent the traditional Chapters 4 to 6, where the constructed and collected data are described, analysed and evaluated. In the novel, the students in France attempt to build a barricade for protection. In 2020, teachers attempt to do the same, even if the context is vastly different. While some fall in love, others die. While some pray, others steal. It is an act filled with confessions, personal truths, opinions, observations, grief and acceptance. Although the act ends with a death, it sparks the hope of a new beginning.

This thesis was never meant to be read once. The events do not unfold chronologically and the narrative constructed from the data is intertwined with existing literature, musings, anecdotes and the metaphor of *Les Misérables*. Barthes (1915–1980) encourage the reader to interact with the text instead of simply reading the work. In this postmodern thesis, the reader is incentivised to do the same.

Les Mis is born again

As one of the most popular and successful musicals of all time, *Les Misérables* has been seen by more than 70 million people worldwide. The original novel has been described as one of the greatest and most influential novels of the 19th century. The story of Jean Valjean and his journey has inspired thousands of other novels, musicals, poems and musical compositions, and now also my research thesis. The danger of using an existing storyline is that one can force the symbolism and parallels to such an extent that they do not feel authentic or truthful in the new context. During the proposal defence, someone commented: "Be careful that you write the story and the story does not write you." I took this advice to heart. I wanted to stay true to the storyline of *Les Mis* and use the lyrics from the musical to add to the aesthetics of the thesis, without letting it rule the relevant and (r)evolutionary content. This led to rewriting the thesis several times, each time with a stricter, more critical eye than before. At times, the structure might seem forced and I accept this as part of the postmodern thought process, but as Tivel (2012) notes, sometimes acknowledgment, without perfecting the outcome, is enough.

A writer is born

My parents were married for little more than 18 months when I was born into a stereotypical, white, Afrikaans household in Vanderbijlpark, South Africa, on 10 April 1983. My dad worked for the South African Iron and Steel Industrial Corporation (Iscor) and even though he did not have any academic background, he quickly worked himself into a management position. We were considered a middle-class, average family.

Figure 1: A studio photograph of me at seven months

In 1984 our little family moved to an adjacent town, Vereeniging, where my mother decided to return to work as a bank teller. Her mother moved in with us, so that I could be taken care of at home. Ouma Poppie, a deeply religious widow, wore her blue uniform every day, to prove her immense dedication to the Latter Rain Mission Saints. She got up every morning at 5:30 a.m. to pray. Her black stockings were always immaculate and her hair was fixed into a bun with bobby pins. Ouma Poppie not only changed nappies, cooked meals and cleaned the house on a daily basis, but also spent hours teaching me how to sound out words, how to count the fruit on the kitchen counter and how to build puzzles. While knitting in the sun and humming hymns, she allowed me to bake mud pies in the garden, replant flowers and indulged in my fantasy stories of fairies and angels living under the mushrooms. Before Dad came home every day at 4 p.m., Ouma Poppie would make sure that no evidence of my mess remained.

Figure 2: One of the few photographs of me as a baby in the arms of Ouma Poppie

When I was about three years old, Ouma Poppie would put on her formal dress and blue hat every Friday and we would take the bus into town. Even though I was very young, I vividly remember walking through the OK Bazaars in the heart of town, where I would be allowed to choose a book

or a puzzle and Ouma Poppie would buy hanks of yarn and skeins of wool. She would put a silver coin in my hand so that I could buy a fresh piece of fruit from the very large black woman sitting at the bus stop. In South Africa at the time, apartheid was part of our daily lives and racial segregation was the law. Ouma Poppie was very strict with manners and respect and I had to say thank you and please every time I bought my apple or banana or mandarin. There was an incident one Friday when a white woman with pearls around her neck yelled at Ouma Poppie for allowing me to buy fruit from the black woman. I do not remember the exact exchange, but later my grandma told me that the white woman with pearls felt like the fruit was dirty, as it had touched the hands of a black person.

"Then why did you continue to buy the fruit, Ouma?" I asked.

"Because I prayed every time before I gave you money. God showed me that it was not only safe, but also in His will. He was caring for the black woman and her family." Ouma Poppie's answer was consistent with her unfaltering faith. When the police took the black woman away because she did not have the right paperwork, Ouma Poppie continued to include her in our morning and nightly prayers, even if we did not even know her name.

On Tuesdays, the mobile library, an old school bus filled with children's books, would stop in front of our house. Ouma Poppie let me choose the books I wanted to read, even if she knew they were too difficult for me to read on my own. With immense patience, she read to me first and then I had to reread the page back to her. I was wildly excited when the mobile library included a puzzle section. As soon as I had finished building a puzzle, I would turn it around and rebuild it upside down, unconsciously challenging myself. When I wanted to peek, Ouma Poppie would remind me that we did not give up simply because something seemed difficult or because we could not see the whole picture, yet.

Figure 3: Me as a four year old, waiting for the mobile library to arrive

Ouma Poppie left when my brother was born in 1988. I cried myself to sleep for hours on end, making my dad angry and my mom sad. I hated kindergarten, playgroups and even my brother. When I started primary school, I soon learnt that I could read faster than any of the children in my class. I became bored when the class had to practise the letters of the alphabet, so I made up stories in my head and started writing them down. I got into trouble for not focusing in class, but nobody ever listened when I explained that I was simply bored. In my room, I read my stories to the "children" in my own class: a big brown bear, a doll with an enormous head and a plush dog with a missing eye. Ouma Poppie visited us once a month and she was excited to listen and give advice on my use of language, and the plot development of my stories. Not once did she ever say that my silly stories were melodramatic, impossible, ridiculous or far-fetched. My dad wanted more realistic stories and my mom always simply smiled, saying that the words were beautiful.

Somewhere in secondary school, I learnt that it had been Ouma Poppie's dream to become a teacher, but that God called her for His work. She grew up in an extremely poor home alongside four siblings. She never got the chance to complete her schooling and she wanted me to make sure that I never stopped learning, no matter how the odds seem stacked against me.

I did well academically in school. I was always at the top of my class and I was always excited to let Ouma Poppie know about the awards and certificates. The inside of her cupboard in the retirement home was filled with pictures of me and my awards. I would sit and stare at the inside of that cupboard for hours when visiting her. It was as if I could feel her pride when looking at those pictures. After a business my dad started failed, my parents moved to Witbank and I stayed behind in Vereeniging on a school scholarship. Even when I joined them later, it was Ouma Poppie's motivation that kept me positive.

I dreamt about becoming an author, a playwright, an actress or a cabaret star. Ouma Poppie smiled when I told her about the scripts I had planned. In the late 1990s, I feverishly applied to every imaginable institution to study drama. I volunteered at the local youth theatre and spent as much time as possible behind the stage, cleaning the green rooms, making coffee and washing dishes. In 2000, when I was in Grade 11, I was awarded a full scholarship to go and study drama at the University of California, Los Angeles (UCLA). Unfortunately, weeks before my departure, on 11 September 2001, a terrorist attack on the United States of America (USA) led to all scholarships being cancelled. I was devastated. While accompanying my husband (boyfriend at the time) to the University of Pretoria to pay his registration fees, I impulsively inquired about possible options for

myself. The only faculty that was still accepting registration, was the Faculty of Education. In less than 90 minutes, I was enrolled as a student and had a room in one of the hostels on Groenkloof Campus, Pretoria. I had no idea how I was going to pay for this education, but I felt Ouma Poppie's words reverberate through my body: "Just follow the open doors."

I paid my way through university by writing speeches for children, assignments for students and school plays and entering every possibly writing competition. I gave swimming lessons to toddlers, distributed flyers, helped primary school children with homework, and did all sorts of odd jobs to keep on paying for the education I knew Ouma Poppie prayed for.

Figure 4: Me and Ouma Poppie on the day I graduated with a bachelor's degree in education

I loved the idea of being a teacher, but in 2006 I started my own business, desperately wanting to escape the confines of a structured curriculum. "Stay on your chosen career path," my dad warned, but my heart was wilder. Over the next few years, I got married to my high school sweetheart, gave birth to two healthy babies, and I was only brough back into a classroom in 2016 when my husband accepted a teaching position in the United Arab Emirates and I started working as a mathematics teacher. The last six years have been nothing short of exhilarating. I have learnt so much, grown more than I could ever have imagined, and I am more excited than ever for the next chapter to begin.

List of abbreviations

ACP	Advanced Cognitive Performance
ADEC	Abu Dhabi Education Council
ADEK	Abu Dhabi Department of Education and Knowledge
AED	Arab Emirate Dirham
A-levels	Advanced Levels
AS-levels	Advanced Subsidiary Levels
BBS	Belvedere British International School
CIA	Gems Cambridge International School
CMT	Conceptual metaphor theory
Covid-19	Coronavirus disease of 2019
CPO	Child protection officer
ERT	Emergency remote learning
FFFS	Fight-Flight-Freeze System
FIT	Factors influencing teaching
HoD	Head of department
HPL	High performance learning
HR	Human resources
IGCSE	International General Certificate of Secondary Education
Iscor	South African Iron and Steel Industrial Corporation
MKO	More knowledgeable other
MoE	Ministry of Education
PLC	Peer learning communities
PPP	Purchasing power parity

SEN	Special education needs
SLT	Senior leadership team
TLD	Teaching and learning development
UAE	United Arab Emirates
UCLA	University of California, Los Angeles
UK	United Kingdom
USA	United States of America
VAA	Values, attitudes and attributes
WHO	World Health Organization
WS	Workbook scrutiny
ZPD	Zone of proximal development

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ACT I

Scene 1. *Look down*. Background and context

Les Misérables opening scene depicts Jean Valjean working hard among the prisoners in France, 1815

In February 2002, I walked into my dorm room on Groenkloof Campus as a first-year student. The four years I spent at university were life changing. I fell in love with the teaching profession. I disliked attending school myself, but only a few months into the first semester, I saw possibilities that had never existed for me before. I suddenly dreamt about becoming a teacher who made a real difference. I wanted to be the teacher that I had desperately longed for when I was a learner myself. I read books on education and how learners learn from the person at the front of the classroom. Gradually, a picture of my future self started to form in my mind's eye and I became increasingly excited about the prospect of becoming an educator. In 2005, I started my teaching career as a mathematics teacher at a relatively well-known, reputable at the time, school in Pretoria, South Africa, Pro Arte Alphen Park. I was excited to create a wonderful, creative educational setting. I designed my own posters, spent hours on creating worksheets that had real-life applications and humorous, motivational quotes. In the first few months, I compiled folders, files and portfolios and I was eager not only to teach algebra and geometry, but also cultivate a love of learning. As I noted in my journal in 2005, I had "stars in my eyes and hope in my heart".

Unfortunately, the school soon turned into my own proverbial prison. The learners seemed uninterested in learning, the classrooms were dull, and I was not allowed to paint the walls or even put up posters. The head of department (HoD) refused to allow me to use any of my worksheets or posters. In February 2005, she wrote that stories and creativity belonged "in a language class, not in a mathematics lesson". I felt as if management did not really want to evolve or be dynamic, but found a kind of solace and security in doing things the same way, year after year. I had to hand out worksheets that were created in 1997 and the learners wrote class tests that were typed up in 1999. I know this because the dates were printed on the papers I received. I had to use corrector to erase this "dated evidence" before I made copies which were handed out to the learners. I was so discouraged by this comfort zone that the older teachers had created, that my enthusiasm and motivation went into hibernation. I started showing up to school, doing as I was told, and in between lessons I prayed for the last bell. I found resonance in Valjean's and the prisoners' song:

Look down, look down, don't look 'em in the eye

Look down, look down, you're here until you die

I felt like this was what was required of me. The head of mathematics, the principal, even my fellow teachers all expected me to just *look down* and not question anything. Just do my job and go home. I rebelled against the thought. I never became a teacher for it to just be a *job*. I was young, inexperienced, and within my first year as a teacher, I was already tired. After a mere 14 months spent as a teacher, I decided to leave the profession and start my own business. Die Radikale Redenaar (PTY) Ltd *(The Radical Orator)* was born in 2006. I organised public speaking competitions, wrote speeches and trained learners on how to speak in front of an audience. The business allowed me not only to be my own boss and determine my own hours, but I could still engage in the education sector. I had the freedom to create the content I believed in, while working with learners from a variety of contexts and diverse demographics. I loved my newfound career, but often reminisced about my dream to become an amazing teacher in a classroom. I could not escape the sense that I was always *just* doing my work. I had to look down, not question any authority, earn a wage, stay out of trouble and not think about the possibilities of change. I spent a lot of time away from home, traveling from school to school throughout South Africa, building a business that could sustain a growing family. I worked extremely long hours, chasing the goal of early retirement. In 2008, I married my long-time partner and we welcomed a baby girl in 2010. In 2012 I gave birth to our son. With two young children now left to stay home with a nanny and a domestic helper, I felt more guilty about the time spent away from home. My journals and diaries from that time prove that I was emotionally drained. The political situation in South Africa made me feel physically unsafe and unsure of our future in South Africa. The crime rate was ever-rising, newspapers were filled with statistics on corruption, murder, rape and theft. The business opportunities became fewer, as the government urged all companies to have at least 50% black ownership. As a sole owner and white female, my business was automatically excluded from all possible work in government schools, unless the schools paid for it themselves. The financial burden got heavier as we had to move into a safer community, where the apartment cost exponentially more than our previous one. I felt stuck in a beautiful country, with so much potential, yet nowhere for me to go or to grow.

AFTER SERVING A 19-YEAR SENTENCE, VALJEAN IS ELIGIBLE FOR PAROLE. HE IS ISSUED WITH A YELLOW TICKET, IDENTIFYING HIM AS A CRIMINAL. UPON VALJEAN'S RELEASE, JAVERT, THE PRISON GUARD, WARNS HIM:

"Follow the law... prisoner 24601... Do not forget my name".

Then, in 2015, my husband signed a two-year contract to teach science at a government school in the United Arab Emirates (UAE). He was one of thousands of teachers who left South Africa in search of better opportunities in other countries (De Wet, 2018). When I fastened my three-year-old son's seatbelt on the aircraft, I remember thinking that we were now out on *parole*. We were not emigrating, so we were not deserting our birth country, but at least we were moving forward. I wiped the tear from my cheek and smiled. I felt hope flicker in my heart and took a deep breath when the plane descended into the small but wealthy Middle Eastern country.

As we tried to settle in the UAE obvious challenges emerged. The government provides housing for teachers and we moved into a two-bedroom apartment in Abu Dhabi, the capital city of the UAE. I had to learn how to live in an apartment with no fresh air and no garden. With two children under the age of five, the sudden loss of grandparent support and no domestic help, I had to learn how to wear several different "uniforms" to maintain a certain level of control. Living in a Muslim country, with strict and conservative rules, we were immersed in a new world where we were not quite sure about how we would ever belong. Originally, my husband and I planned for me to stay home and care for our children, but after only a few weeks of our arrival in the UAE, I felt frustrated. I applied for a few teaching positions and within a few days I had two interviews and two letters offering me a teaching position. There was no scarcity of teaching positions in Abu Dhabi and I was excited to go back to a classroom. Both the children would attend the primary school, while I taught in the same building, but on the secondary school level. I started teaching mathematics at Belvedere British International School (BBS) in January 2016. For various reasons I felt anxious on my first day of teaching in the UAE. I had not taught mathematics for almost ten years. In all that time I had not had an employer, nor did I have to report to anyone. I felt uneasy and yet I was excited to rekindle my romance with education in a classroom setting. Unfortunately, my idealistic dream was shattered once again as I had to face challenges inside and outside the classroom. I never felt as if I were worthy or good enough. I tried applying a reflexive attitude, changing and adapting in every situation to make the best out of every moment, but my resilience faltered and I found myself merely surviving on a selfish mantra: "another day another dirham" (dirham is the currency of the UAE). Mentally I was singing yet again:

Look down, look down, don't look 'em in the eye

The teaching and student cohorts at BBS were diverse and multicultural. Forty-two different nationalities were represented at the school, while most of the teachers were from the United Kingdom (UK) and Ireland. In a matter of weeks, I had to learn how they taught, what

methodologies they preferred, and how the assessment scales differed from the South African curriculum. The learners brought a new set of challenges - 95% of the learners in my classes spoke English as an additional language, most with very low literacy levels, often making basic communication seem like an impossible task. I felt overwhelmed with the variety of contexts I had to deal with and I frequently doubted our decision to leave South Africa. Yet, I felt that I could not go back. Our salaries were significantly higher in the UAE than what we ever would earn in South Africa. Rational factors like safety, medical care, education and general quality of life in the UAE made us stay, even though I was wretched at times. When reflecting on my reflexivity during those times, I do not understand how I kept going when I felt so utterly miserable. I was branded an "unacceptable" and "poor" teacher by the senior management of the school. I was labelled as someone with "no classroom management skills" and a “great lack of pedagogy". When reading through my 2015/ 2016 diaries and emails, I am overwhelmed with recurring negative emotions.

However, somewhere between January 2016 and January 2018 something changed. The physical changes were easy to pinpoint: I changed schools, we moved into a larger apartment, we travelled more, and as a family we found our feet in a new culture where we made friends. The emotional and spiritual axiomatic events are, however, elusive. I am trying to understand *how* and *why* I went from being so extremely miserable to waking up with a song in my heart. Was it merely the physical changes that translated into emotional wellbeing? Was it simply a question of adapting and being comfortable? Was I simply lucky? Blessed? I do not know, but I was determined to find out. And so, the quest for this thesis was born.

In this qualitative thesis, I reflect on my journey from miserable teacher to an excited, enthusiastic pedagogue. This is a personalised account of taking ownership of reflection as a method for self-improvement, which inevitably led to professional and personal growth. There is no end destination in this journey; it is an ever-changing landscape of challenges and how I overcame those challenges. While I would never claim to have been reborn, I do see the evolutionary process of my inner self. I am no longer a consistently miserable teacher. Neither am I consistently in a state of perpetual bliss. There was no magical moment of rebirth or divine clarity. Throughout Act I, I will explore the moments and incidents that made me write down in my 2017 journal:

I no longer look down. I look forward.

Scene 2. *The Bishop.* Purpose of the study

AFTER SEEKING WORK BUT CONSISTENTLY BEING TURNED DOWN, VALJEAN FEELS MISERABLE AND DEJECTED, BUT THE BISHOP OF DIGNE OFFERS HIM FOOD AND REFUGE. FEELING DESPERATE AND BITTER, VALJEAN STEALS THE BISHOP'S SILVER, BUT HE IS CAPTURED BY THE POLICE. RATHER THAN TURN HIM IN, THE BISHOP LIES AND TELLS THE POLICE THAT THE SILVER WAS A GIFT AND ADDS A PAIR OF SILVER CANDLESTICKS TO VALJEAN'S LOOT.

While the Bishop does not have a lot of stage or screen time in any of the musicals or movies, Hugo dedicated the first three books of Volume 1 to the Bishop of Digne. This digression is validated when the reader comes to understand that the Bishop instigates the pivotal moment of the entire exposition (Grossman & Grossman, 1994). The inciting incident of the story can be accounted for by the Bishop when he lies to save Valjean from being imprisoned again. Without the Bishop lying to protect him, Valjean would possibly never have been forced to reflect on his life. Without this reflection, most characters would probably not have had the life-altering experiences set in motion by Valjean. This might be pure speculation and personal interpretation, but the idea that one singular event or person can have a pivotal effect on the chain of events to follow is where my parallel lies. As a starting point of the thesis, I aim to find the "Bishop" in my own story of resilience. The Bishop gives Valjean hope when he sings:

By the witness of the martyrs
By the passion and the blood
God has raised you out of darkness:
I have saved your soul for God.

Reflectively (and a little melodramatically) speaking, I feel that I have been raised out of darkness. I was once miserable and depressed. I felt hopeless and dejected. And while I have not been miraculously saved or redeemed in any way, I have walked a much lighter path since 2015. There were metaphorical Bishops in *my* life and *my* story, who set in motion many changes, and finding and exploring these moments, people and events is the reason why this chapter is dedicated to the purpose of my study. Like Valjean, I was saved. As a little girl, my grandma taught me how to read, saving me from a life without questions. In 2009, I married a man who saved me from a world less travelled. The UAE was a different kind of saviour, forcing me to reflect on *why* I teach and in turn leading to this thesis. Even Covid-19 is a saviour of sorts because it forced me to pause and ask w*ho am I?* My life has had many personified Bishops who have ensured pivotal changes in my life, both

professionally and personally. I focused on these axiomatic points during my transition from a wretched teacher to a less miserable one and how they influenced my life. If just one teacher can find some value in my story, can relate in any way to a mutual feeling, then the autoethnography will not be in vain (Ellis, 2004). Adding to the global teacher collective will not only be therapeutic for me; it is also imperative for research to continue to be dynamic in order to improve and progress (Wyatt, 2008).

I thought I was alone in my misery. Kilpatrick et al. (2001) and Romberg (2003) maintain that research on improving individual teaching practice will, and should, never be concluded. Alsup (2006) adds that teachers should be at the centre of all educational practice research. Unfortunately, teachers' collective stories are often overlooked as research material and their worth dismissed as merely complaints and irritations (Artzt & Armour-Thomas, 2002; Burisek, 2006; Dewey, 1933). Stinson (2009) argues that lawyers have case studies and doctors have patient files, but teachers are often left to their own devices when dealing with difficult situations in classrooms and even beyond. The autoethnographical writings of teachers are in the developing phases of research and there is still a great stillness in the literature (Burisek, 2006; Stinson, 2009). Adams et al. (2015) note that that the autoethnographical educational landscape is indeed expanding and, over time, teachers will be able to learn more from other teachers on an academic platform.

The purpose of this study is to reflectively and reflexively explore the climactic points in my personal-professional story and to focus on how they invoked change for the better. As an autoethnographical researcher I will be the only official participant in this study (Ellis, 2004), but while seeking validation by means of conversations with key role players, unofficial participants will enhance the perspective of the data to be constructed. Conversations with key role players will either prove my memories to be correct or offer insight, but they will enhance the validity and trustworthiness of the data regardless of the outcome. Objects will range between recorded documents, remembered conversations and definitive memories. Data will both be collected and constructed, parallel to the tendency throughout many autoethnographies (Adams et al., 2015). Roy and Uekusa (2020) argue that the global pandemic has not only altered our conventional teaching experience, but also our research methodologies. They suggest using self-reflective narrative as "a rich source of qualitative data" (Ray & Uekusa, 2020, p. 1), thus supporting my personal quest as valid. The Bishop sings directly to my purpose when he challenges Valjean:

But remember this, my brother. See in this some higher plan

You must use this precious silver to become an honest man.

The Bishop did not give Valjean any easy answers or outcomes. He merely challenged him to change. I hope to become a story of relevance for the teachers who have not recognised, identified or even met their Bishops yet and maybe even inspire them to go searching for their own evolution. Maybe it is part of a higher plan. Or maybe simply a personal goal to *become an honest (wo)man.*

Scene 3. *Soliloquy.* Research Question

VALJEAN FEELS ASHAMED BY THE UNEXPECTED KINDNESS OF THE BISHOP AND COMMITS TO REDEEMING HIS SINS. HE TEARS UP HIS YELLOW TICKET THAT STATES HIS IDENTITY AS PAROLEE, BREAKING HIS PAROLE, BUT ALLOWING HIMSELF THE OPPORTUNITY TO BECOME A MAN FREE OF THE STIGMA OF A CRIMINAL.

I distinctly remember the internal conflict I experienced when I started teaching in the UAE. When I felt extremely unmotivated to go to school in the morning, we would chant "another day another dirham", referring to the fact that we were only in the UAE to make money. Ghamri (2012) explains that this is one of the challenges that the fairly new education authorities of the UAE face. I will explore this phenomenon in more detail in my literature review, but I think it is important to understand that this is a common way of thinking in the UAE.

My husband would often say: "We are not here to change *their* lives, but we are here to change *ours*." While these selfish sayings motivated me temporarily, I often felt guilty and would sing along with Valjean:

What have I done? Sweet Jesus, what have I done?

Become a thief in the night, become a dog on the run.

Have I fallen so far and is the hour so late?

That nothing remains but the cry of my hate?

The cries in the dark that nobody hears, here where I stand at the turning of the years?

I mean this literally. I would blast the soundtrack of *Les Misérables*, as sung by Hugh Jackman, on high volume through my earphones and then shove the guilt deeper into my subconscious, not wanting to deal with any of the uncomfortable feelings. I felt guilty about leaving South Africa. I hated myself for letting my children grow up without family. I felt guilty when my daughter cried herself to sleep because she was missing her grandma. Friends often "joked" that we were cowards, running away from our responsibilities to South Africa. I had many sleepless nights about these perceptions that existed. I truly wanted to believe that we were simply taking an opportunity, but regardless of how we tried to focus on the positives, I felt like a "dog on the run". When I think back to 2016 and 2017, I feel ashamed of the way I engaged with the teaching profession. I was

dismissive, lacked enthusiasm, and when reading through my diaries of the time, I now realise how many missed opportunities there were for more effective teaching. I do not know exactly what changed or when the changes took place. I only know that I am no longer a miserable teacher. I wanted to venture guesses, explore possibilities, theorise and ask questions in order to understand the evolution within me better. This makes my research question a personal goal and well suited for autoethnographical research.

How and why was a miserable teacher (r)evolutionised?

In order to comprehend the full meaning of my research question, a few concepts need to be clarified.

The conceptual understanding of the word **miserable** extends beyond the adjective describing a person who feels unhappy, sorrowful, dejected, depressed and wretchedly sad. Originally from the Latin, *miserabilis*, and Old French, *miserables*, the word miserable refers to feelings of pity and sorrow and was popularised by Victor Hugo in his title of the novel *Les Misérables* (Online Etymology Dictionary, 2021). It is a word I used often between 2015 and 2017, not only in my diaries, but also in social media status updates, text messages, conversations and emails. I felt pitiably small and inadequate, despondent, distressed and melancholic, all emotions relating to the choice of the word **miserable**.

I am not hiding any special meaning behind the definition of **teacher**, simply because I personally believe the word is magical in itself. Teaching is more than just conveying information in a formal classroom (Stinson, 2009); it is a term with a vague, yet complex, job description. On 12 April 2016, I wrote a blog entry titled "Just a teacher", expressing my frustration with the expectation set by the school that I should be able to fulfil a variety of roles just to be considered an acceptable teacher.

> Like a psychiatrist, I have to be aware of emotional issues. I have to act as a nurse, a bookkeeper, lawyer, and have the technical skills of a computer engineer. I have to be a speech therapist, occupational therapist, and optometrist. I have to complete administrative duties and take notes, like a secretary. I need to keep my lessons interesting, like an actress. I have to be a writer, artist, and digital designer. I need to fulfil a pastoral role and fix a tap like a plumber. I need to be a courier and politician, while planning events, and acting like an interior designer. I wear the hat of a policeman, assessor, parent, friend, and critic, all while occasionally imparting knowledge.

Excerpt from blog entry, 12 April 2016, *Slaai Sonder Blare*, translated from Afrikaans

Dictionaries find a synonym in educator, instructor, pedagogue and governess (Jensen, 2009). Researchers prefer *teacher*, simply because teachers are not only involved with the content being taught, but also with the learners (Sackstein, 2016; Wainer, 2011). The definition might be simply worded: "A teacher is someone who teaches or instructs, especially as a profession" (www.dictionary.com), but the meaning extends far beyond these words. Personally, I struggled with the concept of being a teacher, both in the South African and in the UAE cultural settings. My conceptual understanding of being a teacher started with me simply trying to teach mathematics. The more I became aware of the full extent of being a teacher, the less wretched I became. My focus shifted from being a facilitator of content in a classroom, to truly forming a relationship with learners and finding the best way to impart knowledge to each individual. This is an idealistic premise, far removed from everyday practice in my class, but the idea of being more than "just a teacher" definitely played a part in my (ongoing) evolution, as many diary and journal entries prove. I will elaborate on this topic in an upcoming scene.

The term **revolution** has a variety of meanings and implications in different fields of expertise (Brinton, 1938; Moaz, 1996). Politically and historically speaking, an overthrow or repudiation of an established government is described as a revolution (Goodwin, 2001; Tilly, 1995). In sociology, a revolution can be defined as a radical or pervasive change in social structure, often started with a rebellion or violence, as a result of to a perceived oppression (Brinton, 1938; Bullock & Trombley, 1999; Moaz, 1996). In art, music, architecture and literature, revolutions were often the result of social transformation and habitually led to thought-provoking, controversial acts of rebellion against the authorities (Arendt, 1963; Goodwin, 2001). Astronomy, geology, mechanics and geometry have to find a cycle or full rotation to be classified as a revolution, whether it be a planet, a bearing, or a coordinate point (Bullock & Trombley, 1999; www.dictionary.com). Pluckrose and Lindsay (2020, p. 21) state that postmodernism is a “revolution in knowledge and power”, relating my epistemology to the chosen term in the title of this thesis, extending the interpretation conceptually.

While *Les Misérables* did not deal with the well-known French Revolution of 1789, Victor Hugo did draw inspiration for his novel from the uprising of this period in France. Since I use *Les Misérables* as a conceptual and metaphorical framework, the concept of a revolution seemed relevant and coherent in the context of my research. I was rebelling internally, the desire for a radical change evident, but there was no violent outburst. I find resonance in the Quiet Revolution that took place in Quebec, Canada in the 1960s (Pigeon, 2008); the revolution took place without fanfare or any dramatic episodes. During the Quiet Revolution, no uprisings, riots, or even protests

could be seen; it was rather a revolution that happened almost undetected and could only be realised at the end (Pigeon, 2008). Similarly, the Carnation Revolution of 1974 in Lisbon, Portugal ended without a single shot being fired, but rather with soldiers handing out carnations to the revolutionaries (Barker, 2002). Covid-19 started a revolution for *my* teaching profession, but also hinted that a change in the global education system might be possible. We moved from teaching in classrooms to online teaching to hybrid teaching in a matter of months. Although the blended and hybrid models of teaching are not novel ideas (Justi & Gilbert, 1999), the worldwide, simultaneous implementation thereof was never a likely possibility (Gil-Arias et al., 2020). The teaching profession did not naturally progress to the development of remote learning plans, so it cannot be seen as an evolution (Darwin, 1859), but since the changes in distance, hybrid, and blended learning had such a dramatic impact on the education system, the definition of a revolution is relevant (Nishida, 2020; Skulmowski & Rey, 2020). Nishida (2020, p. 1) also mentions that the education sphere is "at the dawn of a revolution", all set in motion by the effects of the global pandemic.

I also found meaning in the word **evolution**, which draws from Darwinism's explanation that one organism can grow and develop from past organisms (Darwin, 1859), but is applicable in the social sciences as a gradual development of something specific (Tivel, 2012). Most societies experience a natural evolution, a progression from good to better, in order to eradicate the negatives in a context (Elwell, 2013; Gossett, 1997). Evolution is always positive, focusing on progress and advancement, and regressions and digressions are seen as a part of the natural, evolutionary process (Elwell, 2013; Tivel, 2012). I accept that I have no control over my biological evolution (Elwell, 2013), but when reflecting on my teaching style since 2006, I can vaguely see indicators of progress and development. Exploring these changes will potentially help me to understand how and why certain psychological changes took place. Was it simply a case of ageing and maturing emotionally? Or was there more to the positive changes I can identify? I will delve into certain pivotal points of my life and explore *what* things have changed, *how* these changes took place and, in the end, hopefully find some meaningful theories on and/or explanations of *why* they changed. This will pertain to the auto of my autoethnography. Since these changes were mostly evident in a foreign country, namely the UAE, the *ethno* of the thesis will be embraced. Finally, the literature will be intertwined with the narrative of both the evolution and the revolution, thus addressing the *graphy* of the autoethnography.

Within the conceptual framework of an evolution, it would be ignorant to dismiss the natural instinct to either fight, flee or freeze in any given situation (Cannon, 1932; Plaford, 2013). I will

address the details and analysis of this instinctive, universal human nature (Corr & Perkins, 2006; Gray, 1990) when dealing with the data. I acknowledge that evolution is never-ending, meaning that the focus of this thesis is only on a fractional part of my life. I reject the notion that I have arrived at a transformed destination of my evolution and accept that the evolution might be a combination of natural maturity, forced challenges and conscious effort.

The research question during an autoethnography is one that might constantly change throughout the research process, as it forms part of the reflective and reflexive nature of an autoethnography (Artzt & Armour-Thomas, 2002; Burisek, 2006; Van Maanen, 1988). A good starting point for an autoethnographical research question will always be honesty (Burisek, 2006). As I reach the end of Scene 3, I am reminded of the truthful nature of this thesis and the awareness of the dynamic process that is about to ensue. With this acknowledgement, I know that at the end of one evolutionary tale,

another story must begin.

Scene 4. ***At the end of the day.*** **A global literature review**

EIGHT YEARS HAS PASSED AND VALJEAN HAS ASSUMED THE IDENTITY OF MONSIEUR MADELEINE, MAYOR OF MONTREUIL-SUR-MER AND WEALTHY OWNER OF A FACTORY. FANTINE IS A SINGLE MOTHER IN HIS EMPLOYMENT, TRYING TO SUPPORT HER DAUGHTER, COSETTE, WHO IS UNDER THE GUARDIANSHIP OF AN INNKEEPER AND HIS WIFE. WHILE WORKING IN VALJEAN'S FACTORY, THE WOMEN, INCLUDING FANTINE, SING:

At the end of the day you're another day older

And that's all you can say for the life of the poor

It's a struggle, it's a war

And there's nothing that anyone's giving

One more day standing about, what is it for?

I noted down a conversation between four members of staff in June 2016. It was the Islamic Holy month of Ramadan and we were on reduced hours at school. While this was supposed to be a form of relief, most teachers felt more stressed than ever. One teacher commented that she felt like a slave, nothing more than a factory worker just praying for the hours to pass quickly. Another teacher added that she was tired – not physically, but mentally. When I questioned her reasoning, her answer made logical sense at the time, and her words resonated with my own feelings. She felt that we were just expected to work, work, work, and then work some more. Feeling no more than wage-slaves, we were not allowed to think outside of the box, yet our lessons needed to be creative. We needed to be enthusiastic, but we were bombarded with emails that constantly reminded us that we were dependent on the school for a salary. The other teachers chimed in with examples of how we needed to all tick the management's expectation boxes, yet we were handed no disciplinary support structure, very few resources and no freedom to move outside the curriculum. In addition there was a lack of understanding from management that the learners had below average literacy levels. The women in the factory sang

it's a struggle, it's a war

and, in my mind, their words echoed my feelings. The level of teacher burnout at the school meant many absences, which in turn meant more cover lessons for those of us who still showed up. Life as a teacher felt like a never-ending cycle of complaints and irritations. As one teacher noted "you either learn to live with the hate, or you get out" I cringed. I did not want to hate being a teacher.

While this might all seem purely anecdotal at the moment, my early, initial literature review indicated that my circumstantial evidence might have some universal relevance.

Feelings of stress, dismay, dissatisfaction, irritability and negativity tend to be a common trait of the teaching profession. Jacobson (2016) explains that teachers are pressured from a variety of systems, both personally and professionally. Professionally, teachers are challenged by the conformations of legislation in terms of curriculum design, development and implementation (Kamenetz, 2015), district mandates where the demographic of the relevant schooling environment plays a part in delivering lessons (Martinetz, 2012), and even managerial systems in individual schools (Ingersoll, 2012). According to Kamenetz (2015), the professional challenges teachers face are a global issue and while the degree of pressure may vary between country, area and demographic (Avalos, 2011; De Wet, 2018; Jacobson, 2016), teachers are experiencing more pressure ever year (Kerkhoff & Cloud, 2020). Personally, teachers are faced with learner misbehaviour, parental expectations and a lack of autonomy, which often leads to feelings of isolation and a heavy burden of not meeting the set standard (Avalos, 2011; Kamenetz, 2015; Skaalvik & Skaalvik, 2011). Avalos (2011), Ingersoll (2012), Kamenetz (2015), Kerkhoff and Cloud (2020), and Morales (2011) are among the many educational researchers expressing their concerns about the number of teachers leaving the field of education on a yearly basis, blaming stress, burnout, lack of funding and unrealistic expectations. The biggest concern, according to Ingersoll (2012), is the number of newly qualified teachers that leave the profession within the first five years. Jacobson (2016) found that approximately 45% of teachers in the United States of America (USA) leave the profession after the only five years. In the United Kingdom (UK), 40% of teachers leave within the first three years and in Canada it is estimated to be at 30% in the first five years (Karsenti & Collin, 2013).

Throughout the literature it is evident that there are many consequences when teachers leave the profession, but two problematic respects seem to be repetitive. Firstly, there is a financial implication, as teacher training is not inexpensive. Karsenti and Collin (2013) argue that very few students in the world walk away with a tertiary degree without some form of financial burden. This means that student loans are often not repaid before the teacher leaves the profession (Ingersoll, 2012). This is not the only economic burden though. Initial training, often funded by governments, provinces, states, and federal grants, do not earn a return on this investment for the government entity involved (Jacobson, 2016; Karsenti & Collin, 2013). This is also the case for many recruitment companies (Martinetz, 2012) and professional development paid for by schools and districts (Karsenti & Collin, 2013). In a country like the UAE, where more than 90% of the teachers

are expatriates (De Wet, 2018), the cost is even higher. The schools, whether privately or publicly funded, pay for airfare, relocation, visa applications and medical aid of newly appointed teachers (De Wet, 2018; Tabari, 2014). When these teachers leave within the first few months, the financial losses for the school itself are great.

The second major side-effect of teachers leaving the profession is a regression in the quality of education (Avalos, 2011; Ingersoll, 2011; Jacobson, 2016; Kamenetz, 2015; Karsenti & Collin, 2013). New teachers often start out with an idealistic goal (Jacobson, 2016), something that I undoubtedly can relate to. In Act I, Scene 6 of this thesis, I will elaborate on this idealistic dream of mine. Unfortunately, teachers seem to become increasingly demotivated as their teaching career is still in the proverbial honeymoon phase (Kamenetz, 2015; Karsenti & Collin, 2013). This means that these teachers are never given the opportunity to find their own voice in their classrooms but are rather chased away by the system (Jacobson, 2016). Teacher burnout affects new and experienced teachers (Martinetz, 2012) and learners experience their lack of enthusiasm and motivation first-hand (Kamenetz, 2015). The high volume of teachers leaving the profession naturally implies a lack of experienced teachers in classrooms (Kerkhoff & Cloud, 2020), something that concerns many governments in both developed and developing countries (Avalos, 2011; Jacobson, 2016; Kamenetz, 2015).

My husband, parents and siblings all remember the times when I voiced my desire to quit the teaching profession. I was not alone, yet I felt incredibly isolated – even more than the isolation I experienced during the Covid-19 lockdown between March and August 2020. I felt like the only teacher that did not like teaching anymore, even though I knew there were others that felt the same. I felt guilty about not putting the learners first. I felt angry that no one seemed to be realising the language gaps in classrooms, and I was furious when I did not know to whom or where to direct this anger. I was trying so hard to fit in the factory-styled box. I was trying to survive and do my best and be proud of who I was. I failed miserably.

At the end of the day it's another day over
With enough in your pocket to last for a week,
Pay the landlord, pay the shop,
Keep on grafting as long as you're able
Keep on grafting till you drop

Or it's back to the crumbs off the table

You've got to pay your way

At the end of the day

I could not afford to resign. I could not walk away from the wage. Globally, teachers' salaries appear to be a constant concern for teachers, governments, schools and parents (Gal et al., 2019; Hanushek, 2007). While there is a yawning gap between the highest and lowest paying countries for teachers, the global pay scales and averages for teachers indicate that teachers are not earning what they are worth (Gal et al., 2019; Hanushek, 2007; Imazeki, 2005; Rumberger, 1987). This "worth" has been widely discussed and criticised throughout the last three decades (Figlio, 1997; Imazeki, 2005; Hendricks, 2015), as it is not quantifiable but rather qualitative worth (George & Rhodes, 2019) that is in question. The average teacher spends about 25 to 30 hours actively teaching per week, but the hours spent on planning, assessment and extracurricular activities often mean that teachers work 60 hours per week (Imazeki, 2005; Kerkhoff & Cloud, 2020; Rumberger, 1987). Teaching is also a profession where work demands emotional commitment as well as physical presence (Kamenetz, 2015; Woessmann, 2011), an aspect that is easily forgotten when salary scales are discussed (Imazeki, 2005).

While Luxembourg, Switzerland and Korea are currently the highest paying countries for teachers (Gal et al., 2019), the cost of living or purchasing power parity (PPP) still makes teachers, relatively speaking, under-earning in these countries (George & Rhodes, 2019). This influences their standard of living, which in turn affects their emotional wellbeing (Imazeki, 2005; Kamenetz, 2015). Many teachers in developed and developing countries leave the profession every year because they feel they are not earning enough to thrive (Figlio, 1997; George & Rhodes, 2019; Woessmann, 2011). Kamenetz (2015) notes that teachers might stay in the profession longer if they were only given the chance to enhance their earning potential. Given that the average global teaching degree requires at least three years at a tertiary institution, teacher salaries are not in line with other professions (George & Rhodes, 2019; Hendricks, 2015). Even when salaries of newly qualified teachers may be realistic, the annual growth is not parallel to expectations set by other professions (Imazeki, 2005; Woessman, 2011).

According to Jacobson (2016) and Hendricks (2015), professionally trained and qualified teachers often take on extra work, like tutoring and online classes, in order to secure an additional income. While many other professionals only need to be concerned with their primary jobs, qualified

teachers are worried about their second income potential and the stresses that accompany these responsibilities (Imazeki, 2005; Karsenti & Collin, 2013; Rumberger, 1987). This in turn has a social implication. Many trained tertiary teachers feel that their own children are being neglected or that they are not giving their own dreams enough attention and some research indicates that the teaching profession can be blamed for failed marriages (Hendricks, 2015; Jacobson, 2016; Kamenetz, 2015; Woessmann, 2011). Imazeki (2005) and Kerkhoff and Cloud (2020) indicate that, globally, teachers' responsibilities, stress and workload are not directly proportionate to their salaries and money is one of the main reasons teachers decide to become expatriates (George & Rhodes, 2019), with the Middle East being a popular destination for expatriate teachers (De Wet, 2018). More than 10 000 expatriate teachers move to the UAE annually (*Schools in the UAE, c.*2009 & *Social Statistics: Education,* 2017) and according to the Ministry of Education's Open Data (2020), about 22 000 South African teachers currently reside in the UAE. In 2015, our family became part of the expatriate teacher statistics in the UAE and even though I do not want to sound like a superficial cliché, we did it for the money.

FANTINE TRIES TO HIDE HER CHILD, BORN OUT OF WEDLOCK, BUT THE SECRET IS REVEALED WHEN A CO-WORKER STEALS A LETTER FROM THE INNKEEPER, ASKING FOR MONEY FROM FANTINE. A FIGHT ENSUES AND THIS IS USED AS JUSTIFICATION BY THE FOREMAN TO FIRE FANTINE.

Scene 5. *The Docks.* A contextual literature review

FANTINE IS DETERMINED TO PROTECT COSETTE BY SENDING MONEY TO THE INNKEEPERS. SHE SELLS HER LAST BELONGINGS, HER TEETH AND HAIR, AND FINALLY SUCCUMBS TO DESPERATION BY BECOMING A PROSTITUTE WHO ATTRACTS THE LOCAL SAILORS.

I am trying very hard not to compare myself with a prostitute. I never sold my hair, teeth or any other body part in exchange for money, but in 2017 I felt as if I had given up my dream of being a phenomenal teacher. I am going to risk being melodramatic and say that I sold my soul for a few extra zeroes on my payslip. I did it for the money. Not long after I started teaching in the UAE, I realised that I was not the only one feeling like this. In order to better understand the unified feeling of discontent, I had to look at the history of the education system in the UAE and the motivation of expatriate teachers in UAE schools.

The UAE was established on 2 December 1971, with limited education opportunities and lacking experienced leaders on the educational front (De Wet, 2018; Tabari, 2014). Since then the UAE has adapted and reformed several times in order to establish higher quality education throughout the country (Carsons, 2013; Abosalem, 2016). One of the many things the UAE did was hire expatriate teachers to develop the literacy levels of the local, national children (Ghamri, 2012). Throughout the last five decades, the UAE has employed increasing numbers of international teachers, not only to teach English, but also the core subjects of mathematics and science (Al Falasi, 2004; De Wet, 2018).

The academic year in the UAE starts at the end of August for teachers, while the learners join them during the first week in September. Term 1 usually continues for 16/17 weeks and then schools have a 2/3-week winter break in December. Term 2 runs for 12 weeks between January and March, followed by a 10-day spring break. Term 3 lasts for 14/15 weeks and the academic year is finalised by the first week of July. Schools in the UAE are classified into two categories: government schools and private schools. In the following table, I summarise the main characteristics of each of these types of school, as can be found in De Wet (2018), Masudi (2017) and Tabari (2014).

Table 1: Comparison of government and private schools in the UAE

	Government Schools	**Private Schools**
Owners and management	Government of the UAE, Ministry of Education (MoE) in Dubai and Abu Dhabi Department of Education and Knowledge (ADEK)	Privately owned by either individuals or larger corporations and also managed by them.
Principal and teachers	Emirati principals, with a variety of expatriate vice-principals and teachers	Chosen and employed at the discretion of the owner
Learners	Open to Muslim, Arabic-speaking learners only	Any nationality and religion are welcome to attend
Fees	Free of charge	Ranges from 10 000–120 000 AED per learner per year
Curricula	UAE Curriculum, specifically written for the UAE, but based on the American curriculum	Unique to each school, but the International Baccalaureate, American, and British curricula are most popular
Qualification and accreditation	UAE Certificate of Secondary Completion is issued, but universities outside of the Middle East require an additional AS- or A-level qualification before admitting a learner for tertiary studies	Depending on the curriculum followed, accreditation is international and most universities accept these as entry requirements for tertiary education

All schools in the UAE must adhere to the laws, rules and regulations set out by the MoE and ADEK (Masudi, 2017) and no educational institution is exempt from following the strict policies implemented by these government entities (Tabari, 2014). All teachers, regardless of their nationality or personal beliefs, are subject to the laws of the UAE (De Wet, 2018). According to the

MoE Open Data (2020) there are 72 000 teachers in the UAE, of which 65 500 are expatriates. The salaries offered by schools in the UAE are one of the greatest lures for expatriates (De Wet, 2018). The UAE is one of the largest global investors in education, with 25% of total government funding directed towards education (*Schools in the UAE,* c.2009 & *Social Statistics: Education*, 2017), and more than 1.1 billion AED being spent annually in Dubai alone (Langton, 2017). The UAE offers remarkable benefits when luring international teachers, including a 0% tax implication, paid accommodation, medical aid and all visa fees (Carsons, 2013; Tabari, 2014). When my husband arrived in Abu Dhabi in 2015, he also received 20 000 AED in cash as a relocation fee. That was before he even set foot in a classroom. The financial benefits of teaching in the UAE are almost surreal when compared to other countries in the world (Langton, 2017; Tabari, 2014). When we left South Africa in 2015, we did not intend to emigrate. We were merely leaving to make some money and then return to our birth country. We did it for our children. We did it for our future. We desperately justified our actions based on financial benefits, like so many other teachers in the UAE.

While adapting to a new country is an obvious challenge for expatriate teachers (Smit et al., 2016), the UAE poses additional difficulties for expatriate teachers (Carsons, 2013). The literacy levels of learners is one of the greatest concerns of teachers in all subjects (De Wet, 2018; Gardner, 2010; Tabari, 2014), yet the expectations are set at international standards, often too high and unobtainable for UAE schools (Abosalem, 2016; De Wet, 2018). Sharif et al. (2016) developed a UAE version of the Factors Influencing Teaching (FIT) scale to determine the main factors that have an effect on the quality of teaching in the UAE; they found that even though teachers are satisfied with the financial packages that the UAE offers, there is still a lack of intrinsic motivation for teachers in schools. Teachers in the UAE might earn more than they would in other countries (Ghamri, 2012), but they are not necessarily happier or more content (Carsons, 2013), something that I would only learn after a few months of teaching in the UAE.

My daughter's year 2 teacher in 2016 was a red-headed Irish girl. She was 22 years old and "not really interested in teaching". Her words, not mine. I thought that it was extremely unprofessional to say this to a parent of one of your learners, but soon realised that this was a common line of thought and that very few teachers regarded this as embarrassing. The newly qualified teachers in the UAE made no secret of the fact that they are there to make money, travel and “just have fun”. As part of validating the data written in my journals from 2016 to 2017, I made contact with a few of the teachers I met in my first year of teaching at BBS via social media. They echoed my memories:

"Teaching in the UAE was just a side-effect of my being there."

"I came to the UAE to play, not teach."

"I had to teach to fund my fun."

"I was not really interested in teaching in the UAE. I came for the money."

"You go to the UAE for the money. You travel. You brunch. You book into expensive hotels. Then you go back home to start your teaching career."

It did not take long for me to fall in this trap too. When things became almost unbearable and I wanted to quit, my mantra was "*another day, another dirham*". When I got angry, dejected and hopeless, I told myself "*another day, another dirham*". I lived from one weekend to the next holiday, wishing time in school would pass as quickly and painlessly as possible.

Staff turnover is just one of the many challenges that the education system in the UAE faces (Langton, 2016; Masudi, 2017; Tabari, 2014). Most teacher contracts are only for 24 months (Masudi, 2017) and the average time a teacher spends in the UAE is 30 to 40 months in total (Khalaf, 2009; Tabari, 2014). The large staff turnover brings a lack of consistency in schools and this has a negative effect on the overall quality of education in the UAE (Al Falasi, 2004; Carsons, 2013; Smit et al., 2016). In the 2015–2016 academic year, BBS had a staff turnover of 98%. I was the *only* teacher left in the secondary school. Not even the principal or vice-principal stayed for a second year. That meant that when the new academic year started in September 2016, I was subjected to a new set of rules, new administrative regulations and a whole new managerial style. Skaalvik and Skaalvik (2011) explain that having some form of safety net in the form of management staff is one of the key components when it comes to limiting teacher burnout and stress. This might not have been a conscious contributor to my unhappiness at the time, but in hindsight, it definitely had an impact on my daily stress levels. The new principal at BBS relied heavily on me for answering questions on the daily routines of the school, since I was the only one with experience at BBS, even if I had only been at the school for eight months before he joined. When I spoke to him in October 2020, reminiscing about the 2016–2017 academic year at BBS, he admitted that he often felt guilty about putting so much pressure on me at the start of that year.

After nearly two years of teaching in the UAE, I felt blessed for affording many things I never had the fortune of experiencing in South Africa, yet I was not happy. I felt the cliché of "money cannot buy happiness" hit home for the first time. I remember standing in front of a class in South Africa in 2005, so eager to invoke curiosity within the learners in front of me. I was dispirited when they did not want to participate and rolled their eyes at me. At that time I did not yet realise that trust and a

strong relationship takes time to form. I wanted immediately to be an exceptional teacher. So I quit. In 2016 I did not want to make the same mistake, so I stayed. I was so disappointed when things did not change. I wanted to be a perfect, wonderful teacher, but found myself writing in my diary on 3 February 2017:

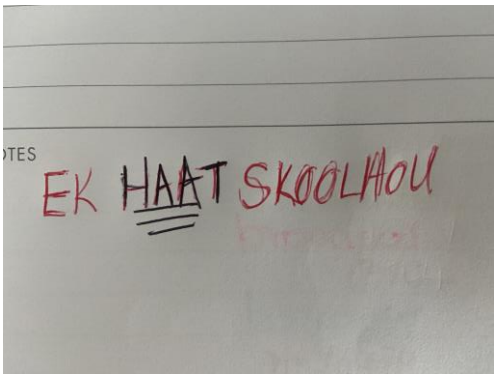


Figure 5: Diary entry 3 February 2017
(Translation: "I HATE teaching.")

I think I wanted the UAE to be a quick fix for my professional unhappiness and when it did not deliver, I was disappointed with myself too. I felt alone and without direction. On the docks, Fantine witnessed the prostitutes singing.

Lovely ladies, ready for the call.
Standing up or lying down or any way at all.
Bargain prices up against the wall.

I felt nothing more than a *lovely* lady, selling myself for some luxuries. Financially, our family was benefitting from life in the UAE. We took trips to exclusive resorts, we saved more than we would ever have been able to in South Africa, we indulged in luxuries, and as a family we were happy. But I dreaded going to school every morning. I set up a timer on my phone to count down the minutes until I could sign out. I was living two lives: one as a mother and a wife, laughing with her family every weekend ... and one of a miserable teacher, hating every minute spent at school.

Scene 6. *I dreamed a dream.* A literature review on teacher motivation

AFTER A HARSH AND RATHER CRUEL INTERACTION WITH A CLIENT, FANTINE REFLECTS ON HER LIFE. SHE FEELS HOPELESS, EMPTY AND NAIVE FOR BELIEVING IN ANY DREAM SHE HAD EVER HAD.

Metaphorically speaking, Fantine is a relatable character for many teachers globally. She represents the idealistic dreams of teachers who too often die because of the harsh realities in the teaching profession. Fantine felt guilty about giving up. Similarly it is also quite common for teachers leaving the profession to feel guilty about giving up on their initial dreams (Jacobson, 2016). According to Carsons (2013), teachers want to change the future by shaping minds, while Sharif et al. (2016) argue that teachers simply want to impart knowledge. Many motivational reasons have been given for the choice of a teaching career (Gardner, 2010; Jacobson, 2016; Thompson, 2016), but the one that resonates with me is that teachers are fuelled by the love for learning (Jacobson, 2016).

Artzt and Armour-Thomas (2002) state that, universally, great teachers are not born, they are made. This is one of the primary goals of educational institutions throughout the world: to *make* great educators (Alsup, 2006; Stinson, 2009). Some tertiary institutions are exceptional when it comes to delivering academic and theoretical work (Artzt & Armour-Thomas, 2002), while others focus strongly on practical implementation and gaining experience in real-life classrooms (Ayers, 1993; Skaalvik & Skaalvik, 2011). These institutions are not dependent on country or curriculum, but rather naturally dispersed throughout the world, and not limited to one singular demographic (Alsup, 2006). The golden highway for educational development would be found in an institution that finds the perfect equilibrium between theory and practice (Merrill & Stuckey, 2014) while maintaining the idealistic goals of every individual educational government (Stinson, 2009). Stinson (2009, p. 1) explains that "teaching is an art which is never perfected, only enhanced", but very few teachers realise this when starting out (Artzt & Armour-Thomas, 2002; Stinson, 2009).

Shulman (1998) argues that teachers lose their spirit and idealistic goals when met with management, learners, curriculum content, administrative duties, and the often-unrealistic expectations set by these parties. Karsenti and Collin (2013) explain that most new teachers walk into a classroom with stars in their eyes and an idealistic mindset. Many new teachers are convinced that they will be consistently outstanding teachers, motivated, driven, enthusiastic, and even popular (Ayers, 1993; Jensen, 2009). This idealism, also referred to as utopianism, is a common trait among

many new teachers (Jensen, 2009; Wainer, 2011). Unfortunately when reality sets in, some teachers experience a loss of the idealistic and original dreams (Ayers, 1993; Jacobson, 2016) and too often they opt to leave the profession instead of staying to find out how they can change.

There was a time when love was blind

and the world was a song,

and the song was exciting.

There was a time... then it all went wrong

sings not only Fantine, but many teachers too, myself included. I so desperately wanted to be an exceptional teacher. I longed for engaging classrooms, thrilling lessons, creative freedom, and parents who supported their children at home. I had high, enthusiastic expectations about the teaching profession, not only when I started teaching in South Africa, but also when I stepped back into the classroom in the UAE. I thought that the pause in my teaching career would be sufficient to recharge my idealistic batteries. While Lampert (2001) argues that a career break will do wonders for some teachers, I felt the opposite. It did not take long for me to identify with Fantine's words:

There are dreams that cannot be and there are storms we cannot weather.

I had a dream my life would be, so different from this hell I'm living.

So different now from what it seemed, now life has killed the dream I dreamed.

On my first day of teaching in the UAE I was anxious, for various reasons. I had not taught mathematics for almost ten years. I had not had an employer, nor had I had to report to anyone during the last decade. I felt wary and yet I was excited to rekindle my romance with education in a classroom setting. My idealistic dream was shattered by the challenges I had to face in and out of the classroom. I never felt as if I was worthy or good enough. I tried applying a reflexive attitude, changing and adapting in every situation to make the best out of every moment, but my resilience faltered and I found myself merely surviving on "*another day another dirham*". My husband would often declare that we could not change the UAE's education system, since we did not have the power, or the influence, but we could save as much money as possible. We went to school just to earn a wage. In 2018, both my husband and I completed our master's degrees, in which many of these difficulties were officially identified, including low literacy levels, a lack of resources, mismanagement of schools, and an enormous gap between the curriculum and the learners' ability (De Wet, 2018). This made the environment we were teaching in appear real and not like the result of our perception or imagination.

I worked tirelessly in the beginning to make sure that I was well prepared for all my lessons. I designed games for the learners to play, linking them to the curriculum and encouraging the learners to explore the content. I read up on the British curriculum, familiarised myself with the scope of work that needed to be covered and I even registered to write the International General Certificate of Secondary Education (IGCSE), Advanced Subsidiary (AS)- and Advanced (A)-level examinations in mathematics. The IGCSE certificate marks the end of a learner's secondary schooling, Year 11 in the British curriculum, and without this certificate, getting into any tertiary institution is highly unlikely. An AS qualification follows in Year 12 and in Year 13 learners have the option to sit the A-level examination. Neither Year 12 nor Year 13 is compulsory and not all schools offer the course, as the content is suited for higher ability learners, and teachers able to teach AS- and A-levels are scarce. I decided to write all of these exams, because I wanted to ensure I felt comfortable with the content of the mathematics curriculum and make sure I understood what the learners were experiencing when preparing for these exams. The exams are sent to the UAE from the UK, written under strict exam conditions, then sent back to the UK to be externally assessed. Schools and teachers have no power over the grades being awarded. This is one of the greatest issues I often had to address, as parents did not always understand that teachers had no control over the final results.

Vygotsky's (1962) social constructivist theory became relevant when I could see the way the social context influenced the cognitive development of learners. Schaffer (1996) states that learners will learn from their culture first, before learning from a teacher in a classroom. I saw this theory in practice. In February 2016, my Year 8 class wrote a topic test on measurement. After I had assessed the 15-mark assessment, I handed it back to them. The next day I got called into the director of the school's office. Two parents, the director of the school, and a woman from human resources (HR) were waiting for me in the boardroom. The parents demanded that I amend the test to count only out of 13, as one of the questions was unfair. The question was simple: "Draw a line of 60 mm". Since only one of the 20 learners had a ruler, I handed out rulers to them, but according to the parents, these rulers "were broken", as the rulers were only marked in centimetres. I thought they were joking, so I chuckled. The director reprimanded me on my professional attitude and that I should never patronise parents' concerns. The parents then further complained that no A4-paper would "ever be big enough" to draw this line. I tried calmly explaining that 10 mm is equal to 1 cm, a mathematical measurement and not something that I could control. Neither of the parents accepted my explanations and after 35 minutes of listening to them argue in Arabic with the HR woman, I was forced to sign a letter stating that I was wrong. I had to give all the learners 2 additional marks,

even though the original question was only worth 1 mark. I had to apologise to them for my ignorance. I was issued a formal warning letter, stating that my "incompetence led to parent conserned" (sic – the spelling error was made in the official document). I shrugged it off at the time, dismissing the incident as too surreal to even fight about. Vygotsky (1978) argues that children's cognitive development is dependent on the social constructs they experience before they enter a formal educational setting. I looked at the parents, then gazed at the learners, and I could not argue with Vygotsky's theory at all.

At the end of the 2017 academic year, the director of the school relocated to New Zealand. I never thought I would have to speak to her again, but as part of constructing reliable and trustworthy data, I sent her an email in December 2020. I briefly recalled the incident and asked her to recollect her own memories and send me her thoughts and/or comments on the matter. The reply came a few days later, in which she explained that those types of incidents were common while she acted as director of the school. The owner of the school refused to listen to her, or any teacher, rejecting any form of logical reasoning, and *always* sided with the parents, or as the owner called them, the "customers". This was the main reason she had left the UAE: she could not merge her own moral code with the practices of BBS. She felt as if the school were setting up learners to fail by often dismissing mathematical reasoning and scientific fact in order to keep the parents happy with their children's grades. She commented that these incidents left teachers at BBS frustrated and often resulted in them leaving the school.

A few weeks later, there was an incident where Ahmed* hit Faris* with his pencil case in class (*not their real names). I was ordered to phone the parents of the boys involved and did so during my lunch break. Faris's mother was understanding, accepted my apology and trusted that the matter would be dealt with appropriately. I dialled the number for Ahmed's father and was relieved when a man answered in English. After telling him what happened he responded with "my son is not in your school, you have the wrong person". I double checked Ahmed's information and decided to ask our pastoral leader for advice. After school I got a message from Ahmed's father: "You are right. That is my son. I will hit him when I see him." I felt confused that a father did not know which school his son was attending. A few weeks later, I found out that Ahmed was the third son to his father's third wife. He has 16 siblings, not one of them in our school.

There are many examples of ridiculous encounters I experienced in my first year of teaching in the UAE. I tried relaying some of these stories to my friends back in South Africa, but they seemed so

far-fetched that I would not believe them if I heard them from a third party. None of these occurrences helped my motivation or enthusiasm. I started doubting our decision to move to the UAE, questioning the dangers of cultural immersion. The UAE is very proud of its culture, heritage and religion, but by disregarding the shortcomings, the people are losing out on possible progress and development (De Wet, 2018; Masudi, 2017). Neither the MoE nor ADEK will allow any learner from the ages of four to sixteen to fail an academic year (De Wet, 2018). Regardless of ability, learners are allowed to attend school based on their date of birth alone (Masudi, 2017). I often overheard learners saying that they did not care about exams because they would pass anyway. In the culture I found myself in, the concept of failure was almost non-existent. At the end of each term, I was obligated to hand a certificate of progress to every learner in my class, whether there was progress or not. Schaffer (1996) and Vygotsky (1962) were right: I would surely struggle to teach these learners anything because the society and culture they are a part of teaches them that they cannot fail, even if they learn nothing.

Scene 7. *Fantine's arrest.* A reflective review on data

A VERY SICK FANTINE FIGHTS BACK AGAINST AN ABUSIVE CUSTOMER AND JAVERT, NOW A POLICE INSPECTOR, ARRIVES TO ARREST HER.

In 2016 I fought the system. I wanted to start an uprising and cause a revolution, because I desperately wanted to believe that my idealistic dream could still come true. In order to understand why I went from being an aggressor to an evolutionary thinker, I need to reflect on some of the events that happened during that time.

Reflective practice involves the ability to look back on one's actions and thoughts and evaluate the decisions made (Schön, 1983). The process of reflection is an effective part of developmental progress (Bolton, 2010) and Dewey (1933) contends that all teachers should be trained to be reflective practitioners in order to improve their teaching effectiveness. Schön (1983) refers to two types of reflective research: *reflection-in-action* and *reflection-on-action*. Reflection-in-action occurs when the reflection and action happen simultaneously, while reflection-on-action is reflection after an action has taken place (Nagle, 2008; Schön, 1983). Throughout my thesis, I will use reflection-on-action, but during the scenes dealing with Covid-19, I will refer to reflection-in-action, as the events are taking place as I am conducting the research.

Brookfield (1998) suggests that reflective research takes place through four complementary lenses and Nagle (2008) agrees that these four lenses can be used interchangeably in research. The first lens refers to the researcher's autobiography (Brookfield, 1998) and her* own, subjective perception of what is happening, linking it to the autoethnography trait of subjectivity (Ellis, 2004).

*(*since this is a postmodern thesis and I am the researcher, I will consistently refer to the researcher as a female when using pronouns*).

The more we, as humans, talk about our own experiences, the more we realise that they are often collective dilemmas (Brookfield, 1998; Stinson, 2009). The second lens is through the eyes of the learners (Brookfield, 1998) and this often forms the focus of ethnographic studies (Maree, 2016). We want to believe that our learners interpret our actions just as we mean them, but cultural diversity and personal perceptions warp our actions into a subjective experience for every learner (Brookfield, 1998; Schön, 1983). The third lens is our colleagues' experiences and serves as a critical mirror (Brookfield, 1998), wherein we may not only address the trustworthiness of our personal feelings, but also make verisimilitude possible (Bochner, 2014). The fourth lens is one of

theoretical literature (Brookfield, 1998) and an invaluable and non-negotiable part of any research thesis (Maree, 2016).

Gibbs (1998) suggests that when data are being collected for research, certain stages should be followed when employing reflections in order for the dependability of the research to be addressed. After the initial experience, a description should follow, without any conclusions being drawn (Finlay, 2008; Gibbs, 1998). The feelings of the researcher should then be noted, without any analysing (Finlay, 2008). An evaluation of the notes should follow before a detailed analysis can take place (Gibbs, 1998). A general conclusion should precede a personal conclusion and, finally, a personal action plan can be drafted (Gibbs, 1998). This model of reflection is often cited as Gibbs's reflective cycle (Finlay, 2008) and I used this cycle as guidance when sorting my collected and constructed data.

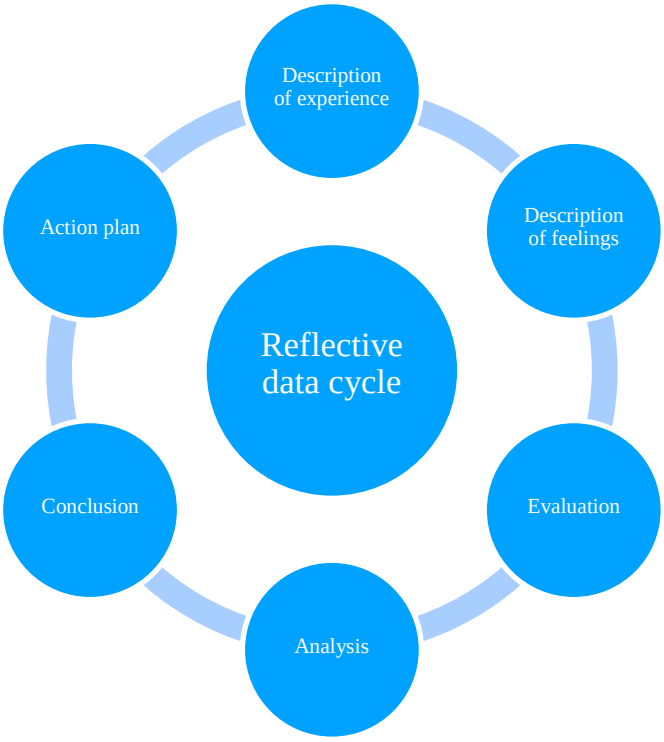


Figure 6: Reflective data cycle by Gibbs (1998)

It did not take long for me to become acutely aware of the inequitable and unjust behaviour of the school's management. At the end of my first term at BBS, when I handed in my data sheet, with recorded marks for the first six weeks of teaching in 2016, I got a threatening emailed response. I was to adjust all my marks by 15 to 25% in order to show no failures. If I did not comply with the

"friendly request", an official warning letter would be issued under the "act of sub-ordinance". The email was full of spelling mistakes and grammatical errors, but the threats about job security were evident. I had less than six hours to amend my marks. A learner, who had not completed a single task, got 2% in the exam and failed every informal and formal class assessment, suddenly had a 65% average on his report card. The extent of obvious unfairness when it came to reporting grades to parents was seemingly accepted practice in BBS. Some colleagues commented that it was "fraud", "immoral", and "just wrong on so many levels", while others simply shrugged and admitted that they spared themselves the threatening emails by simply awarding outstanding marks from the beginning. Thankfully, as I am writing this thesis, I am still in contact with most of the teachers that taught with me at BBS during that time. I could thus corroborate my recollections and journal entries with them, lending valuable validation to my data construction process. Without leading any of the "witnesses", they all offered more examples of similar practices.

A few weeks later, I had to fill in a self-evaluation form and when I queried the manner in which marks were handled, I was called in by the director of the school, again. I was told that since I was from a "third-world country" my opinion was "dismissed as a result of poor education". On the same day, the secondary principal jokingly referred to one of the British teacher's hangover in the staff room and the teacher was applauded for coming into school, even if "he passed out a little on his desk". At the end of my probationary three months, I received my first performance review, signed by the head of mathematics and the principal. I was graded as a "poor, inadequate teacher that needs substantial support". I wanted to quit, but then Fantine, voiced by Anne Hathaway, sang in the car on my way home, that afternoon:

There's a child who sorely needs me

Please monsieur, she's but this high

Holy God, is there no mercy?

If I go to jail, she'll die

I cried myself to sleep that night but showed up the next day with a new resolve: I would shift my focus and concentrate on the learners, as they needed, no ... *deserved*, at least one good, caring teacher.

Nothing changed immediately. I was not miraculously cured of dread when the alarm went off in the mornings, urging me to go to school to earn my wage. But I slowly started thinking about *how* I could make small changes. Unaware of Gibbs's cycle (1998) at the time, I subconsciously started a

reflection cycle of my own. I started writing down my experiences and how they made me feel. I spent more and more time on trying to figure out *why* these experiences were making me feel the way they did. I talked about these experiences and feelings more, noting down possible causes for the emotions involved and daydreaming about possible solutions. Reading through those journal entries clearly shows inconsistent turmoil. There is little logic or coherent structure to my anecdotal musings, but they have proved to be invaluable in the data construction process of trying to find out *when* and *how* and *why* things have changed.

Figure 7: Some of the journals and diaries I kept between 2015 and 2021

These diaries and journals are filled with my own poetry, short stories, musings, interests, lists and opinions, but also contain quotes, lyrics and references from writers, bloggers, musicians, colleagues, family and friends, and random people I had small interactions with. Writing has always been a comfort of mine and most of these bounded papers ended up in the bottom drawer of the chest in our main bedroom. When I started reading through them again as the idea of this thesis was born, I became actively aware of the role that reflection had played in my life. It is in my school diary of 2016 that I found the following:

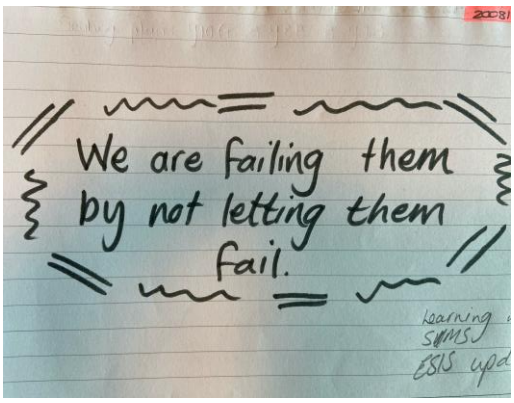


Figure 8: Doodle from my diary, created during a staff meeting in September 2016

These words reminded me of my time at BBS and how I struggled with the concept of simply passing learners on from one grade to the next. The system would not allow me to fail them and I truly felt that this was one of the reasons learners were unmotivated to study. Learners knew that they would simply be promoted to the next academic year, regardless of how much effort they had put into their academic work. If they did not have the intrinsic motivation to work, they would do nothing in class. The idea that the government, the school and the parents condone this ignorance ties in with Vygotsky's (1987) belief that adults transmit the intellectual tools of their culture to the learners, who in turn internalise the social rules before they understand the importance of academic development and progress (Schaffer, 1996). This also helped me understand the *ethno* of my *auto* a little better.

I was teaching mathematics to Years 7–11 at the time, to both male and female classes. In the UAE genders are separated at age 12 in all schools. Most of the learners showed up to school without any equipment, books, or stationery. I started keeping their books in class, handing out pencils at the start of the lesson and then taking them back when the bell rang. I had to treat teenagers like toddlers, something I would often refer to as my own "sanity saving technique" or my "sst". I have seen learners being dropped off in the mornings in expensive cars, driven by chauffeurs, not parents. I have heard the same learners beg for food from friends in the canteen, as they did not have a packed lunch. I saw a learner wearing a Cartier wrist bangle, worth approximately 6500 USD (a colleague and I googled it out of curiosity), but her hair was ridden with head lice and her ears were dirty, obviously not cleaned for many months. I cringed in disgust, not only because I could literally see the head lice moving in her braids, but also because I wanted to report her parents to the authorities for neglect. However, I knew that it would be career suicide if I tried to do anything about the failure of parents to care for their children. Even if most learners had nannies and drivers to cater to their basic needs, the lack of parental involvement became more and more

evident. I felt pity and sympathy for so many learners, motivating me to prioritise them above the management. I tried to engage the learners by using tangible items, playing games, showing them videos and even telling them creative stories. I attempted to adapt the content to such a basic level, using Arabic translations, so that the concepts could be accessible for them. My efforts were in vain and I was met with blatant disrespect and ignorance. I reprimanded a Year 9 boy for not doing any work in class and he made a complaint, stating that I had called him a donkey, a serious offense in the UAE. I could be dismissed immediately if I were to compare any learner to any animal; not even in jest would this be tolerated. After consistently arguing that he was speaking the truth, repeating "Wa'Allah, Wa'Allah" (*I swear to Allah*) throughout his speech, some of the other learners were finally called in to testify. After three weeks of disciplinary hearings, his claims were branded as "untruthful" and the case was dismissed. There were no repercussions for the boy, but I was warned that "this type of behaviour" would not be tolerated. I did not even know what the "behaviour" referred to, but I accepted my warning letter without argument, knowing that fighting it would be a waste of my energy.

As I started to construct my own data, I naturally came to collect data too. I spoke to colleagues at BBS, teacher friends at other schools in Abu Dhabi and Dubai, and even some school administrators, who offered stories from a variety of different schools in the UAE. To verify these accounts seems like a digression, but I did establish verisimilar parallels to my own experience, making me see a part of the culture a little more clearly. While some stories sounded surreal, others reminded me of things I had witnessed at BBS. I still wonder why the school never intervened in any of these cases of obvious neglect or even abuse. The school director offered no explanation in her email to me, but simply stated that she was consistently made aware of her job security. Ironically, her name is printed on the BBS Safeguarding Statement of September 2016 that all teachers had to sign, vowing that they would always prioritise the physical and emotional safety and security of learners.

VALJEAN, PASSES BY THE SCENE OF JAVERT TRYING TO ARREST FANTINE AND WHEN HE REALISES THAT FANTINE ONCE WORKED IN HIS FACTORY, HE IS GUILT-STRICKEN. HE ORDERS JAVERT TO RELEASE HER:

"You've done your duty, let her be. She needs a doctor, not a jail"

This is what I told myself too. I needed a remedy, not an escape. So I desperately persisted.

Scene 8. ***Who am I?*** **Methodology and design.**

While Fantine is in hospital, Valjean is still hiding from Javert. When another man is arrested and about to go to jail on Valjean's behalf, Valjean's moral belief convinces him to confess his true identity to the court.

I am in need of confession too, that is why I am choosing to write an autoethnographical thesis. In a conventional thesis, one would first discuss the philosophical assumptions and choose a paradigmatic perspective, before explaining the methodology of the proposed research. But I could not decide on a paradigm or conceptual framework if I could not first answer the question of

Who am I ?

These are the same words Valjean used when confronted with his moral dilemma. I want to confess all the guilty feelings, explore the thoughts that led to a positive change and then, by immersing myself in the reflections of collected and constructed data, understand *how* and *why* the (r)evolution came about.

Spry (2001) explains how autoethnography challenges the traditional, canonical manner of conducting and representing research. As a relatively new genre of research (Adams & Holman Jones, 2015; Ellis, 2004), with much criticism from traditional methodologists (Buzard, 2003; Wyatt, 2008), autoethnography seeks to describe (*graphy)* personal experiences (*auto*) in order to understand cultural experiences (*ethno*) (Ellis, 2004). Reed-Danahay (1997) describes autoethnography as a form of research where the life of the researcher is the focus of the study. Autoethnography is both a process and a product (Adams et al., 2015) and after the *crisis of confidence* that was inspired by postmodernism in the 1980s, learners became "increasingly troubled by social science's ontological, epistemological and axiological limitations" (Ellis et al., 2010, p. 346). The personal accounts and narratives subsequently became more popular as a research method and the shared experiences proved to be a valuable contribution to the literature (Bochner, 2014; Ellis, 2004; Ellis et al., 2010). Autoethnography has evolved in application and presentation throughout the last two decades and it will continue to change, as the individual research and the researcher are dynamic and not limited to one specific format, especially during a global pandemic (Buzard, 2003; Ellis, 2004; Ray & Uekusa, 2020; Reed-Danahay, 1997).

As a form of qualitative research, the autoethnographic researcher uses reflective data collection strategies to explore personal experiences and anecdotes and make them generalisable (Ellis, 2004;

Maréchal, 2010). As personal data collection is often more complex than counting things, analysing a questionnaire, or sticking to measurable elements, especially when triangulation and trustworthiness are mentioned, data can also be constructed by subjective and personal accounts (Adams et al., 2015; Du Preez & De Klerk, 2019; Maree, 2016). Bochner (2014), Ellis (2004) and Maréchal (2010) agree that a simplistic definition of autoethnography is not plausible, as different researchers focus on any one of a myriad of focal points in an autoethnography study. Hayano (1979) argues that the researcher should focus her own experiences on the culture she is immersing herself in and that the cultural value of her surrounding environment should never be out of sight. Maréchal (2010) states that the researcher's self-investigation is the centre of the research and the cultural context only adds to the value of the research, being formed by both data collection and data construction simultaneously (Adams et al., 2015). Ellis (2004) and Bochner (2014) agree that autoethnography is not yet fully evolved and the focus will change with each specific intent of each unique study, something that Ray and Uekusa (2020) address during their research on autoethnography in an unprecedented time of isolation.

The purpose of autoethnography is diverse and multidimensional (Holt, 2003). Autoethnography allows the researcher to engross herself in her own history and experiences and relate the information, stories and epiphanies in an attempt to better understand the world as a whole (Adams et al., 2015; Denzin & Lincoln, 2005; Ellis, 2004). This understanding can be used to revolt against a current system (Adams et al., 2015) or to simply fill gaps in existing research (Holt, 2003), thus contributing to the teacher collective. Another purpose can be to articulate some insider knowledge of a specific cultural experience (Maréchal, 2010). Ellis and Bochner (2000) suggest that autoethnographers do not limit themselves to one purpose, as the purpose of the study will naturally become clear as the research progresses.

Autoethnography is broadly classified into two types: analytical and evocative (Ellingson & Ellis, 2008). Analytical autoethnography attempts to theoretically explain social phenomena (Chang, 2016) and is composed of more than just narrative elements (Bochner, 2014; Ellis, 2004;). Five key features of analytic autoethnography have been identified (Bochner & Ellis, 2016; Ellingson & Ellis, 2008), including complete member researcher status, narrative visibility of the researcher's self, analytic reflexivity, dialogue with the information, and commitment to an analytic agenda (Chang, 2016; Ellis et al., 2010). Evocative autoethnography concentrates on narrative descriptions and representations to evoke emotional interaction between the researcher and the reader (Bochner, 2014). The narratives can be conflict-driven and dramatic, challenging personal experiences to

become public in order to address social issues (Ellis et al., 2010). This is not only powerful, but also essential for cultural progress (Bochner & Ellis, 2016) and has some parallels with the critical paradigm of research thinking (Denzin & Lincoln, 2005). According to Bochner (2014) and Ellingson and Ellis (2008), it is not necessary for the researcher to choose only one type, as a culmination of both types might be evident in the research thesis. The literature and research on autoethnography is becoming exponentially more popular, as researchers are finding their personal voices in the research realm (Adams et al., 2015). Ellis (2004), Bochner and Ellis (2016), Chang (2008), Ray and Uekusa (2020), and Ellingson and Ellis (2008) all stress that accounts should be seen as the data and presented like novels, fracturing the boundaries that canonically divide literature from the social sciences. I find value in both analytical and evocative autoethnographies and therefore choose to use a combination of both, as Ellingson and Ellis (2008) suggest. Valjean sings:

Can I conceal myself for evermore? Pretend I'm not the man I was before?

And must my name until I die, be no more than an alibi?

Must I lie? How can I ever face my fellow men? How can I ever face myself again?

Who am I? Who am I?

It would be easy to do nothing and simply ignore the changes. A research thesis is not the only way to reflect, but when I honestly look into the mirror, I know that I am more than just a number. I want to prove to myself that the tears and frustrations were not in vain and I want a positive, tangible result for all the miserable hours I spent as a teacher. An autoethnography is a methodology that suits my journey to answer the question: *Why am I who I am?*

Scene 9. *Fantine's Death.* A reflexive review on data

FANTINE IS TAKEN TO HOSPITAL BY VALJEAN, WHERE SHE DREAMS OF COSETTE. VALJEAN PROMISES FANTINE THAT HE WILL FIND AND PROTECT HER DAUGHTER.

Carlson (2011) writes that almost universally, when people look back on their lives while on their deathbed, they wish they had spent more time with the people they truly loved. Fantine's reflections were thus not unique, but Valjean elevated her reflections by providing impartial analysis to her situation. He provided a solution to her fear, letting her slip peacefully into eternity. As Fantine dies, so do her personal reflections, but her reflexive aspirations stay alive, through Valjean.

As I sifted through diaries, journals, emails, correspondence, social media accounts, and other possibilities for fractional data collection sites, I became more and more aware of myself in the role of a researcher, and in turn additional data were constructed. This is what Lucy (2004) and Ashmore (1989) describe as reflexivity and, according to Ellingson and Ellis (2008), reflexivity is a natural and essential part of becoming an autoethnographical researcher. Reflexivity involves consciously acknowledging the preconceptions and assumptions of the researcher that will undoubtedly affect and shape the outcome (Popper, 2002; Woolgar, 1988). Autoethnographers should self-critique their frame of reference, perceptions, opinions, cultural biases and personal ethical issues by being reflexively aware and conscious of their subjectivity (Gay, 2009; Lucy, 2004). Within epistemology, reflexivity causes a circular relationship between cause and effect, forcing the researcher to look at her reflections analytically and with a specific focus and purpose in mind (Archer, 2007; Bochner, 2014). Reflexivity originates from self-reference in sociology, where the effects of an action are referred back to the original instigation (Gay, 2009). If individuals are shaped largely by their environments, Archer (2007) and Popper (2002) agree that a low level of reflexivity can be attributed to these individuals. On the other hand, a high level of reflexivity would result in an individual shaping her own norms, politics, opinions, values, tastes and desires (Archer, 2007; Lucy, 2004; Popper, 2002). The latter bears similarity to the notion of autonomy (Ellis et al., 2010) and in my own opinion, with the sources of Lucy (2004) and Ellis (2004), can distinguish a superficial autobiographer from a reflexive autoethnographer.

An obstacle often observed in reflection-based data collection is *reflexive predictions* (Gay, 2009; Grunberg & Modigliani, 1954; Lucy, 2004), where the researcher is constantly aware of the predicted outcomes and thus bases all her data collection so as to support the predicted outcomes (Archer, 2007; Ashmore, 1989; Popper, 2002). While autoethnography is subjective in nature, the

researcher should be mindful not to conclude the research before data have been thoroughly collected, constructed, sorted, analysed and evaluated (Ellis et al., 2010). When working with reflexivity amid reflections, the obstacle of reflexive predictions is minimised (Archer, 2007; Gay, 2009). The data that are being collected throughout my research, stem from several origins. Ellis (2004), Gibbs (1998), Gay (2009) and Maree (2016) all suggest that these origins be clearly identified by the researcher. Accordingly, the following table guided my sphere of data collection.

Table 2: Data collection sites

Where am I looking for data?	Why is this valid?
School diaries kept for the academic years from 2015–2021	Official and professional organisers give a structured timeline of events (Grbich, 2007).
Official documents and emails, including self-evaluation forms, letters of recommendation, professional development feedback, performance management reports.	These documents help focus the trustworthiness and reliability of the data collected from diaries, journals and reflective notes (Finlay, 2008).
Notebooks and journals from 2015–2021. These include my personal blog, *Slaai Sonder Blare* (Salad without Lettuce) that I started in April 2016	Emotions, feelings and more personal reflections can be found in the pages of diaries, notebooks and journals (Gay, 2009).
Social media posts from Facebook, Instagram, and Twitter, as well as texts and messages	Social media can often be a secondary source of personal reflections and even comments made by peers and friends can serve as a trustworthy guide to subjective experiences, keeping the verisimilitude relevant (Ingersoll, 2012).
Informal conversations with colleagues, friends, family, and even co-workers	Ensuring that the data collated from my personal realm of perception can be validated (Ellis, 2004).
Other, postmodern polygons of information.	Sometimes data can be found in unlikely places (Maree, 2016). Listening to a playlist from 2016 brought back so many memories, that I simply cannot ignore the value of the data *site*.

I did not limit myself to a specific site or location for data collection. By doing so, I have ensured an honest and true representation of the last five to six years and, in turn, have restricted the possibility of reflexive predictions. During the data collection process, gaps in the data were also identified and thus data were also *constructed* by using the data collected. The data were organised using a timeline, ranging from August 2015 to February 2021, spanning almost six years of teaching in the UAE. Gibbs's (1998) model of reflection guided my data evaluation and hard copies of the following table preceded every organised section of data.

Table 3: Guide for data evaluation

Initial experience	Description (no conclusion)	Feelings (no analysing)	Evaluation	Detailed analysis	Conclusion (general/personal)
x	X	x	x	x	x

The only part of Gibbs's model I omitted was the personal action plan that is supposed to follow the conclusion. I was not looking for a solution to a problem or incident that had passed. I was looking for theoretical explanations that could offer insight, understanding and possible answers to my research question: *How* and *why* was a miserable teacher (r)evolutionised?

Even when I shifted the focus of my teaching practice to the learners, I still felt miserable. I tried relentlessly to be strong for the learners' sake. I kept on attempting lesson plans that I was sure would change the learners' attitudes towards learning. I reminded myself every morning that I could survive another day in school. I repeated positive affirmations on being happy and making a difference. I persisted, but when reading through all the journals of 2016, I realise that I was keeping myself busy with superficial things. I was addressing symptoms, instead of trying to find the root of the problem. I joined a yoga club, but quit after just four classes. I paid for a meditation course, but only completed the first six sessions. I started a cookbook of my own, experimented with a variety of dishes, but only for a few weeks. The rest of the pages are still empty. I had holistic commitment issues. I was obviously unmotivated. I wanted to quit teaching, but I had no idea about what I wanted to do. I wanted to leave the UAE, but could not understand why I wanted

to leave or where I wanted to go. On 3 October 2016, at 10:04 UAE time, I received this message from a friend via WhatsApp:

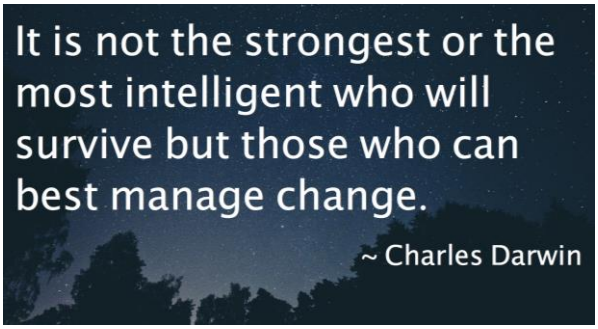
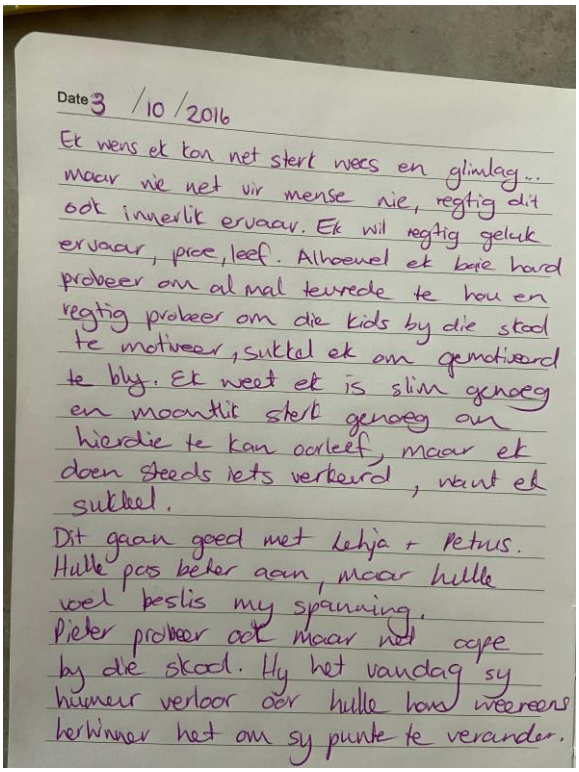


Figure 9: Message received from a friend in October 2016

I do not remember exactly what I was doing when I received the message, but I do recall looking at the message that night in bed. I had just finished writing in my journal and was about to make sure that the alarm was set for the next day, when I saw the message again. The words suddenly had meaning. Why? Because minutes before I read the message, I wrote in my journal:



I wish I could be strong and smile. Not only for others, but truly experience it too. I want to experience, taste, live happiness. Even though I try really hard to keep everyone happy, and really try to motivate the kids at school, I am struggling to motivate myself. I know I am smart enough, and possibly even strong enough to survive this, but I am doing something wrong, because I am struggling.

Figure 10: Journal entry, 3 October 2016, with a translation of the first paragraph

I immediately realised the similarities between what I had just written and the text I had just read. The message echoed the words I used in my own writing. And it was like the answer almost seemed too easy. Was it really not about being strong and smart? Was this what I was doing wrong all the time? Was I really just focusing on keeping up appearances and not addressing the changes that I needed to make? This was undoubtedly a pivotal moment in my evolution. Even though I was aware of Charles Darwin's theory of evolution, the quote encouraged me to read up more on evolution. I started consciously focusing on all the changes our family, and I personally, had had to make. I thought change would be enough.

Initially, my adaptations were not positive. I started caring less. I shrugged off emails threatening to dock my pay if I signed in more than two minutes later than the required 07:15. In November 2016, I was reprimanded for having "negative body language" during an entire school meeting. I typed up a fake "sincere apology" and then laughed about it later. In the Arabic culture it is considered *'iihana* (a great insult) when you throw your shoe at someone. This does not relate to the intent to hurt, but stems from the fact that Muslims consider the soles of their feet to be dirty and impure. When a learner threw his shoe at me because I refused to let him use the elevator at school, I laughed, turned away and did nothing. I was offered a very expensive Rolex wristwatch for the mark scheme for the June examinations and, even though I refused, I must honestly admit that I was very tempted. I did not feel guilty about the ethical implications of this act, but I was simply scared that someone would find out and I would lose my job. I did however "tutor" learners from other schools for additional money. I write "tutor" in inverted commas for a reason. I did not teach them anything, nor did I help them gain any knowledge. I showed up at enormous villas, got handed an empty exam paper, which I then had to work out for them. The learners then simply memorised the answers for the next day's official exam sitting. Where they got the exam from, I do not know. I never asked and I honestly did not care. I got paid anything between 400 and 700 AED per paper, depending on the curriculum and the grade. These exams and assessments might only have been issued internally, but it did not make me feel less guilty. I knew that they would not pass an official exam, nor would they achieve the grades required by tertiary institutions by continuing with this method of “learning”, but I was just so tired of caring that I continued anyway. And I reminded myself of the "changes" I needed to make to evolve.

I showed up at school on time every day. I was present in lessons but I stopped planning. I simply opened a textbook, tried my best to explain one or two examples and then look as busy as I possibly could until the bell marked the end of the hour lesson. I did not want to think about the children

sitting in the class and their needs. I did not want to consider the possibility that I was throwing my energy into an endless pit, while selling my soul for money. But one morning, in a school bathroom, I walked in on a hysterical girl throwing, what I thought, was a tantrum. She was lying on the floor wailing, kicking her feet against the wall and slamming her fists on the toilet. My instinct was to turn around and walk away, but my eyes met hers and before I could help it, I was on the floor, consoling her. She had gotten her first menstrual cycle that morning. Although she was being raised in a wealthy home, with both parents present, three older sisters and the consistent company of a nanny, she had absolutely no idea what was happening to her body. When she saw the evidence in her underwear, she thought she was dying. In that moment, while sitting on a dirty bathroom floor, I asked myself: "What are you changing into?" and I felt horrible. I thought about my own daughter and wondered how I would feel and react if it was her on that bathroom floor. What type of teacher would I want to be there for her? If I wanted better, I needed to *be* better.

Survival is not dependent on change alone, but rather on the management of the change. Evolution, as described by Darwin (1856), is not regressive in nature. Evolution implies that something changes to improve or advance the quality of life. When combining evolution with reflection and reflexivity, three complex concepts blend together to give insight into the positive changes that I experienced, not only as a teacher but also personally. It was not instantaneous. It was not an easy road without regression and by no means have I arrived at any form of final destination in my personal growth, but I did change. I survived teaching, unhappiness, being miserable, and feeling dejected, by actively changing my perspective and focus. I will strive to continue to adapt, because evolution is, indeed, never-ending.

Scene 10. *The Confrontation.* Trustworthiness

WHILE FANTINE IS DYING, JAVERT CONFRONTS VALJEAN IN THE HOSPITAL. JAVERT WANTS TO ARREST VALJEAN, BUT DETERMINED TO SAVE COSETTE, VALJEAN ESCAPES.

Throughout the novel of *Les Misérables*, Javert is the officer, guard and police inspector in charge of ensuring people follow the rules. He is a law-abiding citizen and a God-fearing man, driven by the need to do the right thing. During my own research process, I would have liked to have had the services of a metaphorical Javert available to ensure the trustworthiness of my data and the way in which I presented it. The decision to write an autoethnographical, qualitative research thesis is never an easy option (Ellis, 2004; Silverman, 2013), especially when the validity and reliability is questioned (Hughes & Pennington, 2017).

While validity refers to the relationship between the interpretation of the data and the social phenomenon being studied (Ellis, 2004; Hammersley, 1990; Silverman, 2013), Ellis (2004) urges the critical reader to look at validity in an autoethnography as being a true account of the researcher's experience and the relatability of the situations. This is what Ellis (2004) and Hughes and Pennington (2017) refer to as seeking verisimilitude, or the appearance of being real and true (Bochner, 2014). Guba (1981) refers to this as the quantitative equivalent “credibility” of qualitative research, or the congruency of the findings with reality (Maree, 2016), and a first step in ensuring the validity of the research. The narratives in research are not less worthy than numerical data (Bochner, 2014) and Jansen (2011) and Ellis (2004) urge researchers not to dismiss the collective anecdotes as data. The relatability of the research is defined by Denzin (1983) as transferability and Lincoln and Guba (1985) warn that is should not be confused with generalisability. Even if all accounts are not relatable, research should invoke debate and discussion (Ellis, 2004; Hughes & Pennington, 2017; Jansen, 2011) and it does not make the lesser accounts untrue (Bochner, 2014; Ellis, 2004). Silverman (2013, p. 286) warns the qualitative researcher to "not be overly defensive" as there is no "golden key to validity". Ray and Uekusa (2020) add that self-narrative can be trustworthy on its own, if honestly penned.

Reliability refers to the consistency of the measurement (Silverman, 2013) and Maree (2016) states that the concept of "dependability" is preferred in qualitative research. In autoethnography, the focus should rather be on the consistent truthfulness of the author and the usefulness to the collective, rather than the accuracy of questions answered (Denzin, 2000; Ellis, 2004; Plummer,

2001). Instead of focusing on the generalisability of the data, the researcher should rather focus on resonance of the narrative (Bochner, 2014; Ellis, 2004). Plummer (2001, p. 401) adds that the narrative expression "needs to have rhetorical power enhanced by aesthetic delight" in order for the dependability of the research to be successful.

In any autoethnography, the confirmability is biased in itself (Ellis, 2004). Lincoln and Guba (1985) argue that the perception and bias of the researcher should be taken into account, but Bochner (2014) states that this is in fact the basis of an autoethnographic thesis. As I am using a metaphor as the conceptual framework, Javert will proverbially be a reminder of staying true to my data, stories and reflections throughout this journey. I planned not only to write the narrative, but also to constantly ask myself "why" and "why not" this is important; "what" and "what not" had an effect and "how" and "how not" this would influence the holistic view on discovering the answer to my research question. This, according to Silverman (2013), Ellis (2004), Plummer (2001) and Hughes and Pennington (2017), will suffice when addressing the validity and reliability of a qualitative autoethnography.

VALJEAN BEGS JAVERT TO LET HIM GO AND SAVE COSETTE:

Before you say another word, Javert
Before you chain me up like a slave again
Listen to me! There is something I must do
This woman leaves behind a suffering child
There is none, but me who can intercede
In mercy's name, three days are all I need
Then I'll return, I pledge my word

When writing an autoethnography, the researcher often becomes overly aware of the trustworthiness and then the narrative of data becomes less important (Holt, 2003; Hughes & Pennington, 2017). I did not want to be enslaved by trustworthiness, but rather wanted the data to be celebrated when trustworthiness was established. I needed time away from the theoretical critiques, but in the end, I returned to answer the issues regarding the trustworthiness of the research. While reading through the explanations, definitions and examples set out by researchers like Ellis (2004), Bochner (2014), Holt (2003), Silverman (2013), Stinson (2009) and Plummer (2001), it became clear that an autoethnography is not about setting out to prove that the data is valid, reliable,

dependable and generalisable, rather that this would be established through a consistently truthful narrative. Amidst a very busy schedule, I noted the following entry in my school organiser of 2018–2019:

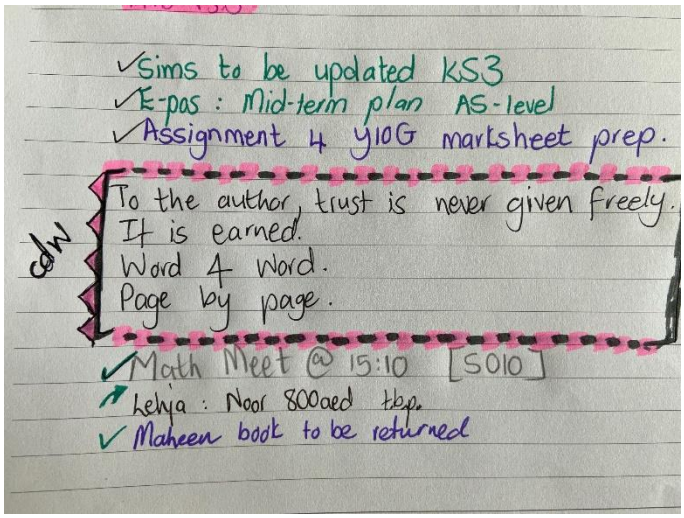


Figure 11: Diary entry, 14 January 2019

This seems applicable when dealing with an issue of trust in autoethnographical research. The trustworthiness of autoethnography is not secured by eloquently rephrasing definitions of relevant terms; rather, the trustworthiness of the research is a slow and steady process of establishing verisimilitude and resonance with the reader (Ellis, 2004; Reed-Danahay, 1997).

Just like Valjean,

I pledge my word

to be aware of the trustworthiness throughout my research. I needed to narrate as painstakingly and honestly as possible, however uncomfortable it might seem, to explore the possible answer(s) to my research question.

I understand that I am not trusted, yet.

Scene 11. *Castle on a Cloud*. A qualitative approach

COSETTE CAN BE SEEN COLLECTING WATER IN THE WOODS, WHILE DREAMING ABOUT A LIFE WHERE SOMEONE LOVES HER UNCONDITIONALLY.

In many ways, Cosette can be seen as the axis around which the narrative of *Les Misérables* rotates. The fact that her picture adorns most posters and symbolises the people of the revolution should have been the first clue to her importance. Almost all the characters get to meet or are influenced by her. Cosette has qualities associated with the main character of a novel, even though she is not the protagonist of *Les Misérables* (Grossman & Grossman, 1994). Neither she, nor her actions, are quantifiable, but she is the representation of dreams. Dreams we tell through stories and fables and fairy tales, not only to entertain children and learners, but also to educate them (Adams et al., 2015). Relaying stories from our past can be considered informal autoethnographical accounts (Ellis, 2004), and while I am not dismissing the importance of numbers and statistics in society, my research is not dependent on quantitative data. Qualitative research was a natural implication when I chose an autoethnography as research method. Silverman (2013, p. 279) states that qualitative research "demands theoretical sophistication and methodological rigour" and when applied in an autoethnography it becomes increasingly more demanding (Ellis, 2004). When addressing an issue that requires exploration in a natural setting, qualitative research has a subjective origin and linguistic dependability (Creswell, 2013; Maree, 2016; Silverman, 2013). Clandinin and Connelly (2000) explain that narrative writing may turn research into an experience, as it allows researchers to address internal questions relating to emotions and feelings, as well as external factors like the setting, time frame and cultural submersion.

I am trying to make sense of the world around me, not with numbers, but with words. I dream about a place where no child is a slave to the world they grow up in and I dream about a world where teachers are making this possible. The qualitative approach allowed me to seek data not only from memory, but also from old notebooks, diaries and journals, and a vast array of emails and correspondence. Bochner (2014) suggests that musical playlists, often-watched movies and preferred literature can tell many interesting things about someone, so I even consulted these in order to understand my own self. My own interpretations and subjective perceptions form the major narrative of the research thesis, as is usually the case with autoethnography (Ellis, 2004).

Cosette may also metaphorically represent the learners of the world. Learners are being "kept" in the name of protection and not all of them are "sold" or delivered to teachers who truly care. Yet

they are the axiomatic devices that make our world go round and although the number of children can be counted, their influence and meaning in society can only be a measure of quality, making the qualitative approach suitable for this proposed research.

I saw a form of Cosette that morning in the girls' bathroom. A young, innocent girl, faced with the normal biology of a menstrual cycle. I could not save her from her innkeepers. I could simply listen to the rants of her father. I was called into the principal's office after the incident in the bathroom. Not because the school wanted to offer support to the girl, but because the father was furious with me. He even threatened to have me deported as I had "no right to talk about menstruation". I am not a qualified Biology teacher, nor did he give any permission for this sensitive education to be taught to his daughter. I politely asked what he wanted me to do. Leave her own the bathroom floor? Let her break a hand by smashing the wall? She was clearly extremely emotional and unsure of what was happening, so what would he like me to do? He looked at me, slammed his fist on the table and yelled something in Arabic. He was obviously very angry. I got a second warning letter. It stated that "I acted outside of my perimeter of expertism". Again, this is not a typing error, but exactly how it was written on the official document. I did not feel anger, but was deeply saddened by the reactions of the parents and the school. I am convinced that there are more stories like these, not only in the UAE, but throughout the world. I do not want to digress from my research quest by collecting examples, but I do want to offer the possibility that there are more "Cosettes" who dream of a life where they are simply loved:

I know a place where no one's lost
I know a place where no one cries
Crying at all is not allowed
Not in my castle on a cloud

The poor discipline in classes started to make sense. The learners are not MISbehaving, they were simply behaving like they normally did. The more I spoke to other teachers and the more I attempted to understand why learners behaved as they did, the stronger my sympathy grew. I deviated from mathematical instruction in classes to just have conversations with learners. I wanted to understand where they were going to after school and what they did. I wanted to know what interests they had, what movies they watched, what typical dinners looked like, and how they interacted with friends. The learners' demeanour changed the more I spoke to them. They offered more information than I often bargained for. I wrote down many of the stories they told me because

I thought I would eventually write a book on my experiences in the UAE. Little did I know at the time that these stories would serve a purpose for a research thesis.

Many of the learners were part of large families. In the Muslim community, it is not uncommon for a man to have up to four wives. Some of these wives share a single home, meaning that some learners lived in a household with 14 siblings, where you had to scream for attention. So they employed the same method in a classroom with 20 learners. Culturally, it is not necessarily considered bad manners when everyone speaks at once, so they did the same in class. They spat and threw shoes because this behaviour was condoned at home; consequently, they did not understand why they were reprimanded for the same behaviour at school.

Even in the homes where there were fewer than five siblings, the culture was vastly different to the one I understood. The parents were present, but the responsibility of caring for them fell on the nannies. The nannies fed and clothed them, but they never reprimand them, as this might cost them their job. The nannies could ask them to wash, but they could not enforce it. There was often no structure at home. Learners might only go to bed in the early hours of the morning and then come to school tired. Many learners had no adult guidance at home, just nanny supervision, so when they had personal questions, Google would have to suffice. They knew that the nannies were scared of losing their income, so the children ran wild, doing whatever they wanted, whenever they wanted. Then they came to school, and they simply did not understand *how* to behave as the teachers expected them to. I knew I would never be able to change a culture, but by understanding the culture, I could change how I reacted to bad behaviour and a lack of motivation. I had discussions with the learners on how my culture differed from theirs and *why* they got into trouble when they talked in class, or threw shoes, or walked around distracting others while I was trying to teach. I tried to motivate them to complete certain tasks, even if it was simply learning how to read the time or measure a line. My attempts were rarely successful, but I could see some small improvements.

I became aware that football was something that most boys were interested in, so I would start a maths lesson with a little bit of information on a famous footballer, or some statistics on a recent match. I would then "bribe" them to do some mathematics by promising them some "reward" if they completed the work. This meant that we would sometimes watch a YouTube video, or discuss a team's new uniform at the end of the lesson. I knew that I only used about 50–70% of every lesson on actual mathematical content, but at least they learnt something. In the girls' classes we spoke about fashion, movies, music and even food. I was surprised to realise that the learners were

actually very competitive in nature and I would use charts to track progress and announce winners at the end of the week. It felt like I was constantly in trouble with the school's management though, receiving emails filled with threats and instructions. My teaching style did not fit into their idea of a teaching curriculum, regardless of my small victories.

The story of *Les Misérables* revolves around Cosette, yet she is unaware of most of the events happening around her. She had no idea about the death of her mother, she was unaware that she was a slave to the Thénardiers, and Valjean's past was not known to her. Similarly, learners in schools are often unaware of the turmoil of governments, politics, management and teacher struggles, yet schools revolve around them. Without learners, a school cannot exist (Stinson, 2009), yet somehow the learners are not always the priority. Many schools in the UAE had turned into businesses, as Al Ghamri (2014) proves, negatively affecting the quality of education in varying degrees of concern. In the next scene, I will explore the effects of the school management hierarchy on the quality of education.

Scene 12. *Master of the House.* A digression on school management

THE THÉNARDIERS ARE THE INNKEEPERS RESPONSIBLE FOR COSETTE. THEY TREAT HER AS A SERVANT, WHILE DISHONESTLY RUNNING THEIR INN BY STEALING FROM CUSTOMERS.

In the original novel, the Thénardiers are brutal, lawless, aggressive characters, but some screen and stage adaptations have made them zany, dishonest and clown-like, mostly to relieve the serious themes of the play with some comedy (Grossman & Grossman, 1994). I asked myself whether the governance of education could be described as brutal and dishonest. I wanted to not only understand the ethnography of the learners, but also the management of education in the UAE, thus ensuring that I could explore the evolution honestly and holistically.

Education systems throughout the world have always been scrutinised for a variety of issues (Alsup, 20016; Gardener, 2010; Tabari, 2014). One of the most universal concerns has always been the standard curriculum content, inherited from previous generations and mildly adapted by strategists, not teachers (Alsup, 2006; Avalos, 2011; Gardner, 2010). Teachers often complain that content is not relevant to the learners and the demographic they are teaching (Abosalem, 2016; Burisek, 2006; Imazeki, 2005), and the UAE is no exception (De Wet, 2018). In the USA, Canada, Australia, Russia, France, England, Saudi-Arabia and South Africa, researchers (Carsons, 2013; Gardner, 2010; Jacobson, 2016; Kamenetz, 2015; Lampert, 2001) have found that currently curriculum content is rarely developed by teachers in the profession and that it is not nearly as dynamic as it should ideally be. Educational policies are developed by researchers and politicians, not by teachers (Alsup, 2006; Gardner, 2010) and thus often leads to impractical administration, overburdening the teachers and hindering effective teaching (Romberg, 2013; Skaalvik & Skaalvik, 2011; Sharif et al., 2016;).

Many education systems are brutal with the implementation of content curriculum and unwilling to adapt at all (Carsons, 2013; Jacobson, 2016; Sharif et al., 2016). In Korea, 39.2% of teenage suicides are due to school pressure and expectations (Bonanomi, 2017) and in the USA schools have been feeling more pressure from teachers to adapt curriculum content to address relatability to the learners (Jacobson, 2016). Many school systems throughout the world do not take the learners' ability into consideration (De Wet, 2018). In the UAE, certain special education needs will be ignored, even if it means that learners fall behind (Tabari, 2014). The brutality also extends to the

teachers at the schools. As the literature review indicated, most teachers experience a form of burnout at some stage, all due to pressure from school management, teachers and district mandates.

I experienced the unemotional treatment of teachers by management during my first year of teaching in the UAE. I was often surprised by the blunt and cruel comments made during staff meetings and many emails were threatening, sometimes even attacking teachers personally. While I do not want to imply that all school administrators and managers contribute to the unhappiness of teachers, my journals prove that it was surely the case for me. I was not miserable in the UAE *only* because of management, but they played a part.

Education systems can also be dishonest when they write the policies, because schools are not primarily focusing on the education of learners, but rather on politically or economically driven factors (Avalos, 2011; De Wet, 2018; Lampert, 2001; Tabari, 2014). Because of the ridiculously high expectations, teachers often turn into dishonest practitioners themselves, as Penelope Palmer points out in her article published in May 2019 on www.tes.com.

Figure 12: Screenshot of article from www.tes.com, 8 May 2019

Palmer (2019) reports on the dishonesty of teachers, whether it is by faking grades, writing reports to support their own opinion instead of the truth, or being dishonest when it comes to professional development. I was a part of this dishonesty. I awarded grades to learners that they did not deserve, simply because I did not feel like fighting with management. While I did not spend the full lesson time on teaching curriculum content, I would never adapt my official lesson plans, nor report on the actual progress the learners were making. I struggled with learning walks and lesson observations when I started teaching in the UAE, but other teachers showed me how to "window dress". This implied that I could impress any manager who walked into my classroom by simply using the correct vocabulary, some additional resources and simple practised techniques. Reflecting back on this dishonesty makes me realise that the untruthful way in which I acted at school contributed to my unhappiness, making this realisation a personal victory. I do not believe that I am always and consistently 100% honest now, but I at least try to be, proving another small change in the evolutionary process.

Every teacher inevitably has a "Master of the House", in a variety of formats. The innkeepers may be the educational system in the country, state or province. They may be a principal, head of department, or even the curriculum content. Teachers, universally speaking, have little or no autonomy in their schools or classrooms (Abosalem, 2016; Imazeki, 2005; Jacobson, 2016). They are simply guests at the "inn" we call schools. This may seem like a negative statement, but it is not intended to sketch a grim picture. There are wonderful inns in the world, some with five-star ratings and extremely competent owners, managers and housekeepers. Unfortunately, I started teaching in a school in the UAE that had very few similarities to a respectable inn. The school was solely managed by a Muslim Arab owner and his sole purpose was to make a profit. He appointed a school director, not to make wonderful educational opportunities possible, but to appease parents, keep teachers in line, and make sure that he could laugh all the way to the Islamic bank. Every email he sent out was in the name of Allah. He started every meeting with a Muslim prayer. He said everything you wanted to hear in person, but then would contradict his words in a follow-up email.

At the end of the academic year in June 2016, he held an open day, similar to all other schools in the UAE, where prospective learners and parents could come and have a look at the school. At this time, 95% of the existing staff had already resigned and I was one of the few who would come back for the next academic year. There were just five teachers present and we were sat in the front of the small sports hall. During the opening speech, he praised Allah for all the blessings bestowed on the

school and then went on to critique the other schools in the surrounding area. All I could hear was Thénardier singing:

Welcome, Monsieur, sit yourself down
And meet the best innkeeper in town
As for the rest, all of 'em crooks:
Rooking their guests and cooking the books
Seldom do you see
Honest men like me
A gent of good intent
Who's content to be
Master of the house, doling out the charm
Ready with a handshake and an open palm

Private schools in the UAE are often run by owners with an economic goal (Tabari, 2014). The learners are not necessarily the main focus of schools in the UAE, as most private schools are financially driven (De Wet, 2018). Tabari (2014) and Abosalem (2016) point out that most private schools in the UAE have stakeholders and owners, unfortunately shifting the focus from quality education to simply making money. Principals are often employed simply to be puppets on an owner's string (Tabari, 2016). Principals in the UAE often just say and do things to keep parents happy, because the parents are seen as paying customers (De Wet, 2018). We were instructed to say and do things in a specific way, just to ensure that the parents did not complain about the quality of the education. There are so many issues to address, like the ignorance in relation to the low literacy levels among learners (De Wet, 2018), the disregard for depression and other mental disabilities (Toghyani et al., 2008), and the inadequate resources that we are required to use (De Wet, 2018), but principals and managers are not willing to listen or address to these concerns (Tabari, 2014). I tried talking to the Head of Mathematics on several occasions, but he was not interested in improvement. He only “wanted to collect a pay check, not change the world”. Even when some teachers came together as a collective in a meeting to address some issues, the meeting was simply dismissed after 10 minutes. It both unsettled and comforted me to know that I was not the only one feeling dispirited and tired.

The Thénardiers were neither honest nor kind, and they certainly did not have their customers' best interest at heart. School management systems, unfortunately, often prove to do the same. As the Thénardiers sing, it might as well be the management of the school in which I started my evolutionary journey:

Master of the house, keeper of the zoo

Ready to relieve 'em of a sou or two

Watering the wine, making up the weight

Pickin' up their knick-knacks when they can't see straight

Everybody loves a landlord

Everybody's bosom friend

I do whatever pleases

Jesus! Won't I bleed 'em in the end!

Scene 13. *The Bargain.* Conceptual Framework

VALJEAN BARGAINS WITH THE THÉNARDIERS AND EVENTUALLY PAYS THEM SO THAT HE CAN TAKE COSETTE AWAY, LIKE HE PROMISED FANTINE HE WOULD.

Although there was no bargaining involved with the school's management, I did shift my focus towards the learners. I consciously made efforts to disregard management's threatening emails, rude comments and sinister glances in my directions. I wrote in my diary that I owed it to myself to *at least try* harder to claim back my original desire to become an amazing teacher. Valjean's promise to Fantine became my promise to my idealistic dream.

I did, however, bargain with many theoretical and conceptual frameworks when exploring the possible avenues for this thesis. While a theoretical framework can be more generally applied (Grant & Osanloo, 2014), a conceptual framework can address a specific abstract to be better understood (Kövecses, 2017). A conceptual framework could best describe the natural development and progression of my research quest (Camp, 2001; Punch, 2006). I decided to provide a conceptual framework for my thesis.

Jansen (2011) encourages doctoral students to think independently when contributing to the research realm. The more autoethnographies I read, the more the benefit of using a metaphor stood out. After careful consideration and many months of reading, conceptual metaphor theory (CMT) emerged as a possible framework for my research. As my conceptual framework, I used a combination of the original, albeit translated version, of Victor Hugo's *Les Misérables*, with a variety of musicals and movies adapted from the novel. While there are some differences between the novel and the screen and stage adaptations, the storyline and characters remain essentially the same.

Aristotle was one of the first philosophers to comment on the use of metaphors in linguistics, as it makes learning seem like a pleasant activity (Wood, 2007). Throughout the development of linguistics, metaphors and similes arose as poetic devices for aesthetic pleasantries, but also to make the meaning of the writer clearer (Feldman & Narayanan, 2004; Moon, 2004). Lakoff and Johnson (1980) were the first to introduce the idea of a metaphor as a conceptual framework in philosophy and it has since been expanded on greatly (Kövecses, 2017). Although Lakoff and Johnson acknowledge that there are many differences in the philosophies underpinning Aristotle's work to where the contemporary researchers venture, we cannot ignore that metaphors have been used for

centuries to help deepen the understanding of concepts (Kövecses, 2017; Wood, 2007). Pinker (2007) shares two contrasting uses of metaphor: killjoy theory and messianic theory. The killjoy theory is the one philosophical researchers should avoid (Gola & Ervas, 2013), as by definition, the speaker is not aware of the origin of the metaphor and therefore the source and target domains of the metaphor are often misunderstood (Pinker, 2007; Steen, 2010). Messianic theory is closer to Lakoff and Johnson's conceptual theory, where the source domain is the origin of the metaphor and is understood in detail, so that the target domain can be better explained (Kövecses, 2017; Moon, 2004; Pinker, 2007).

CMT has proven to be nothing less than a systematic set of correlations, correspondences and links that acts as a bridge between two separated domains of knowledge and experience by means of *mapping* (Cameron, 2003; Gibbs, 2009; Kövecses, 2017). Mapping refers to taking a known and understood concept, the source, and relating it to a lesser known field of knowledge, the target (Feldman & Narayanan, 2004; Gola & Ervas, 2013). CMT helps many researchers in a variety of fields, but especially in the social sciences and qualitative research, to map the understanding of a primary source and link it to a target domain (Kövecses, 2017).

One of the greatest advantages of CMT is that it guides the researcher in his quest (Gibbs, 2009) and gives structure to all the data collected (Gola & Ervas, 2013; Kövecses, 2017). To use CMT successfully, the researcher should ensure that the source domain and the target domain have relevance and resonance with each other (Moon, 2004; Steen, 2010), but it should not be dismissed that similarities as well as differences can be celebrated (Gibbs, 2009; Kövecses, 2017). This is also one of the warnings that Pinker (2007) and Cameron (2003) issue to the researcher, to not force the metaphor to fit into all aspects of the target domain, but rather be open for opposite or perpendicular meanings. In an effort to better understand the world I find myself in, relating to a field of passion, this is not only a personally affected choice, which is acceptable in its own right (Cameron, 2003; Gibbs, 2009), but also a way of cognitively becoming more aware of the data collected throughout my life (Gibbs, 2009). Kövecses (2017) argues that whenever a source domain is applied to a specific target, we tend to see the target differently.

Les Misérables is more than just a story for me. I was 15 years old when the movie with Liam Neeson (Valjean), Geoffrey Rush (Javert), Uma Thurman (Fantine) and Claire Danes (Cosette) was released. It was a Saturday morning and I walked to the cinema complex, about six kilometres from my aunt’s house, where I was living at the time. I had not spoken to my parents in many weeks, my

aunt shouted at me for listening to music and I desperately wanted to run away, but I knew that I had nowhere to go. I had a little money saved and since I had not been in a movie theatre since the release of *Lion King* in 1994, I decided to treat myself. I had never heard of *Les Misérables* before, but it was either this unknown film or *Rugrats*. There were only about eight or ten people in the cinema and the smell of popcorn made my mouth water, but I simply could not afford the luxury. I was enthralled by the story of Valjean, and captivated by the music of *Les Misérables*. When the end credits rolled, I could not get myself to leave the theatre, so I hid away in a dark corner while staff picked up a few empty popcorn boxes and then I watched the movie a second time. I walked back home, with hope in my heart. With the melodramatic inclinations of a hormonal teenager, I felt like I was Valjean and I knew my parole would come up soon. When my aunt yelled at me for coming home late, I apologised to her, but in my head I sang with Valjean:

I found her wandering in the wood
This little child, I found her trembling in the shadows
There is a duty I must heed,
There is a promise I have made
Fantine's suffering is over
And I speak here with her voice
And I stand here in her place
From this day and evermore

I was saving myself. In the town's library I found a stage adapted script, from which I copied all the lyrics into my personal diary. When I later moved to the school dormitory, I spent hours reliving the story of *Les Misérables.* My friends thought I was crazy, but something had changed within me. Two years later, my father was working in London and at the end of his contract, my mother, my brother and I flew from South Africa to spend Christmas with him. *Les Misérables* was showing at a London theatre. I begged and pleaded until my parents bought me a ticket. I sat in the second last row and even though I could barely see the faces of the actors on the stage, it was, to this day, one of the best experiences of my life. Fast forward more than a decade and the choice of using *Les Misérables* as my metaphor for this thesis, seem logical and natural to me.

For this autoethnographical journey to have some structure, I use the storyline of *Les Misérables* as guidance. I have assigned certain attributes to each character from the story and as the scenes

unfold, so does the holistic picture of my journey. I have used lyrics to aesthetically enhance the experience of the narrative and give an extra layer of understanding to the concepts I am trying to convey. Although I focus on my last five years of teaching, it would be dishonest to simply ignore my past, so I reminisce and fill in some blank spaces in order to establish verisimilitude and enhance the trustworthiness of the thesis, a trait crucial to autoethnography.

I look at my life as a teacher, through the lens of *Les Misérables,* in the hopes of finding a reasonable explanation for my personal (r)evolution.
Will it be/was it sometimes uncomfortable? Yes.
Will/did it maybe seem forced at times? Of course.
Will/did I struggle to find the balance? Absolutely.
Is this natural and part of the process? Undoubtedly.

Scene 14. *Suddenly I see.* Epistemology and ontology

VALJEAN AND COSETTE LEAVE FOR PARIS. AS COSETTE FALLS ASLEEP IN VALJEAN'S ARMS, HE IS OVERWHELMED WITH EMOTION.

In most autoethnographies, there is an epiphany for the researcher; a point where things simply gel together to form a cohesive unit that makes sense (Bochner, 2014; Ellis, 2004). Valjean experienced this epiphany when he looked down at the sleeping Cosette in his arms. His world suddenly changed, he felt love, and he had a strong sense that his life suddenly had a deeper meaning. I had more than simply one inkling during my research journey, the epistemology and ontology being one of the larger epiphanies. All research questions are born in knowledge (Ashmore, 1989; Gossett, 1997) and mine is no different.

Knowledge is broadly divided into *doxa*, vulgar knowledge based on opinions and observations, and *episteme*, rigorous knowledge acquired from analysis and study (Aylesworth, 2015; Creswell, 2013; Wright, 1981). While ontology deals with vulgar knowledge of *what we know*, epistemology relates to rigorous knowledge of *how we know* (Creswell, 2013; Maree, 2016). Ontological truths are divided into two entities: *concrete*, knowledge that can be seen, experienced, and scientifically explained, and *abstract*, knowledge that is believed and felt but cannot be quantified (Creswell, 2013; Guba, 1981; Klages, 2012). Empedocles (490–430 BC) stated that the world was born from the four elements (wind, water, fire and air) and moved by two forces, love and hate (Wright, 1981) and from this perception epistemology was born (Aylesworth, 2015). The autoethnographer needs to use the ontological knowledge of *what* we know by exploring the epistemological knowledge of *how we know* what we know (Ellis & Bochner, 2010).

I felt extremely confused when reading through paradigmatic perspectives, as I found a variety of truths in a diverse spectrum of ontologies and epistemologies. While I rejected rationalism, empiricism and positivism, I related to the individual assumptions of interpretivism. I found worth in the personalised conflict of critical theory and the explanation doctrines of behaviourism. CMT forced me to read through structuralism and even made me venture into the world of idealism. I was frustrated not to find comfort or an anchor in any of these paradigms. Then, one sunny Friday afternoon, after a long digital meeting with a friend in which I lamented my frustrations, I found I could sing ...

Suddenly the world, seems a different place

Somehow full of grace, full of light

How was I to know that so much hope was held inside me?

What has passed is gone, now we journey on through the night

I have discovered postmodernism as a paradigm and what a wonderful discovery it has been! So amazing that I will even dare to start a sentence with a conjunction and use an exclamation mark in a formal research thesis. And because I am now officially claiming to be a postmodern thinker, I may even get away with it ☺. Postmodernism will relieve me of the conventional paradigmatic perspectives. It will turn the ordinary water into wine and when I cannot see straight, postmodernism will be there to guide me to discover the answer(s) to my research question.

Autoethnography was born from a postmodern perspective (Ellis, 2004) and after reading through many postmodernist essays, I could not be dissuaded from following this philosophical perspective in my research. Lyotard (1997), the father of postmodernism (De Vos et al., 2011), in rejecting some of the conventional traits of modernism wanted to understand the contemporary world he lived in. Researchers like Klages (2012), Cahoone (2003), Grbich (2004) and Aylesworth (2015) agree that defining postmodernism is not a simple task and therefore no singular definition exists. Pluckrose and Lindsay (2020) assert that by design, postmodernism is difficult to define or summarise, as it is a multifaceted phenomenon. Postmodernism is rather a pluralistic epistemology, blurring the lines between conventional genres and pushing the traditional boundaries of ideologies (Creswell, 2013; De Vos et al., 2011; Grbich, 2007; Thomas, 1993). Postmodernism rejects objective truths, metanarratives and is essentially clustered around the nature of knowledge, power, and language (Pluckrose & Lindsay, 2020). This suited my quest well. A strong focus on self-reflection is one of the main characteristics of postmodernism and postmodernists accept that everyone's reality will differ, as we experience the world differently (Aylesworth, 2015; Maree, 2016; Patton, 2002). Postmodernism challenges traditional conventions (Klages, 2012), tolerates ambiguity (Cahoone, 2003), emphasises diversity (Maree, 2016), rejects objectivity (Lyotard, 1997), and argues that science is not a universal truth (Grbich, 2004; Klages, 2012). These are all things that I can relate to.

I challenge the canonical convention of the layout of a research thesis by presenting my paradigms, methodologies, data and analysis in the form of a novel, with two acts, consisting of 23 and 19

scenes respectively. The content may seem enigmatic in the beginning, but the thesis is meant to be read at least twice, so that the full, coherent and holistic perspective can become clear. Events are not necessarily in chronological order and are all subjectively based. I am not seeking a universal truth, but rather want to establish resonance and a sense of verisimilitude with a select group of teachers.

Postmodernism is not a "school of thought", but rather a "unified intellectual movement" (Zeeman et al., 2002, p. 96) that changes dynamically as the situation requires (Cahoone, 2003). Within postmodernism, knowledge is not constructed in a singular way, but rather experienced and co-created in a multitude of ways, employing a reflexive attitude (Aylesworth, 2015; Creswell, 2013; De Vos et al., 2011; Ellis, 2004). The ontological assumption of postmodernism stems from relativism, where one can only determine your knowledge when you take into account your surroundings and prior knowledge (Cahoone, 2003; Foucault, 2006; Maree, 2016). Everyone's truth is uniquely constructed within their own understanding and the formal aesthetics of the mass culture is rejected (Aylesworth, 2015; Klages, 2012). My experiences and truths are used to construct an answer to a highly personal research question and as postmodernism values uncertainty and disorder (Klages, 2012; Maree, 2016), I find solace in the paradigm.

Anderson (1994) identifies four pillars of postmodernism and states that these pillars are used to build knowledge around a thought paradigm. The first pillar is one where identity is constructed not by traditions, but rather by relevant cultural forces, aligning with the social constructivism of Vygotsky (1978). The second pillar states that morality is not made and distributed, but rather found through choice and dialogue (Anderson, 1994; Pluckrose & Lindsay, 2020). The third pillar identified by Anderson (1994) deals with the endless playful nature and improvisation of postmodernism, something that I find refreshing and useful throughout my thesis. Finally, postmodernism is part of multicultural globalisation, where borders and social constructs can be crossed, reconstructed and redefined, depending on the positionality of the thinker (Anderson, 1994; Klages, 2012; Pluckrose & Lindsay, 2020).

Since autoethnography is highly subjective (Bochner, 2014), the postmodern perspective suits the methodology well. Postmodernism focuses on *how* we perceive the world, instead of *what* we are perceiving (Klages, 2012) and every fragmented piece of reality, every difference, is celebrated (Hesse-Biber & Leavy, 2006). Postmodernists can be playful, ironic and even uncomfortable in their way of dealing with data, as long as they are consistently truthful to themselves, again drawing

the parallel to autoethnography (Bochner, 2014; Grbich, 2007; Klages, 2012). The axiological beliefs of postmodernists are respectful and accepting of differences (Anderson, 1994; De Vos et al., 2012). Within postmodernism, intertextuality, history and the environment are great contributing factors to experiencing and exploring the truth (Cahoone, 2003). Apart from references to *Les Misérables*, I also use diaries, newspaper articles, blog entries, memes, social media posts as intertextual references, making postmodernism fit my research hand like a couture glove.

Within postmodernism, it is possible to have a multi-layered theoretical base on which to build research (Cahoone, 2003; Zeeman et al., 2002). Vygotsky's theory of socio-constructivism forms a natural secondary platform for this thesis, as the community plays a significant role in the development and progress of learners (Anderson, 1994; Schaffer, 1996; Vygotsky, 1978). While Piaget (1959) argues that the social context has little impact on learners' development, Vygotsky (1978) ranks the social construct as a higher priority than cognitive development, as he believes that children learn from their social surroundings first, before developing academically. Since autoethnography has strong ties within the social culture of the researcher (Bochner, 2014), Vygotsky's socio-constructivist theory is a logical extension of postmodernism as epistemology and ontology (Grbich, 2007; Rogoff, 1990; Vygotsky, 1962). According to Vygotsky (1978), *what* we know comes after *how* we came to know what we know, as we start developing within a sociocultural environment before higher mental functions can be attained. Immersing myself in the Middle Eastern, Arabic, Muslim culture, I could see the differences in *how* my own children's learning differed from the local learners' attainment strategies.

We may not all raise the role of the Valjean to the same level of importance; we may not agree on the manner in which Cosette was taken away by a stranger; we may not all find meaning in the same words, but within postmodernism I celebrate the differences of opinion. I create my own reality by immersing myself in the data collected. I will draw from a variety of theories to construct my own, all within the wonderful realm of postmodernism. I look for my own answers by reflecting consciously while reflexively adapting my strategy. I am not seeking immediate progress. I understand that one answer will lead to more questions. I will reform and disrupt, react and resist, and then delve some more. In the end (or will it be the beginning?), I want to claim that I am a postmodern autoethnographer. With this newfound objective in mind, Valjean's song manifested new meaning:

Nevermore alone

Nevermore apart

You have warmed my heart like the sun.

You have brought the gift of life

And love so long denied me.

Suddenly I see

What I could not see

Something suddenly

Has begun

I thank thee, postmodernism and continue with fresh enthusiasm.

The new academic year started in September 2016, with a full new staff. I was the only secondary teacher carried over from the previous academic year. While the director of school remained, a new head of secondary school was appointed. He had no previous experience as a head of school and he arrived in the UAE six days before the schools opened. During our first staff meeting, I had to answer all questions about school policies and the UAE context. Even though I was inexperienced myself, I was suddenly considered to be a fountain of information. I felt a little bit more confident as the first term gained momentum. I lowered my expectations in class and made sure that the progress and attainment looked sufficient on paper. I found a compromise within myself when it came to grades and lesson plans.

The new academic year also brought new learners into classes. A new girl, Nouf* (*not her real name), joined the Year 8 cohort. Nouf had an extra finger on each hand, growing at a 90-degree angle from her pinkie finger. She was a lovely, friendly girl, but even though she was 13 years old, she acted like a toddler. Apart from her six fingers on each hand, Nouf's ears also sat on her jawline, about five centimetres below her temples. I asked the school councillor whether Nouf had been diagnosed with any special needs and was met with disgust and anger. I learnt that diagnosing learners with special needs was a struggle at best. A teacher was only allowed to mention concern after several attempts had been made to assist a learner individually. Then the parents would have to agree to a screening. Only a few specialised centres are allowed to screen children for special needs in the UAE and they are expensive and not easily accessible to everyone. The screening process can take several months. Nouf was not diagnosed, even though she could not read, write or even communicate a full sentence in English. During a parents' evening I found out that her mother was also her father's first cousin. I was shocked at first, but after reading up on basic genetics, coming to

understand interbreeding and its congenital effects, I understood Nouf a little better. I would never dare mention this to anyone, as I would surely be fired for crossing a line, but it helped me be compassionate towards Nouf. I expected (academically speaking) less of her and simply gave her patience, love and kind words. I gave her more basic worksheets, calling this a "strategy of differentiation" on the required lesson plans. Nobody seemed to notice and I attempted to teach Nouf to at least count to 30, read a digital clock and use a ruler correctly.

The UAE strives for full inclusivity in all schools (Abosalem, 2016) and refer to people with any disability and/or special need as *People of Determination.* I became aware of the learners' abilities and slowly I saw traits of hyperactivity, autism, dyslexia, dyscalculia, dysgraphia, language disorders, and even Asperger's syndrome. I am not a specialist and I was not attempting to diagnose such learners. I simply read up on certain behaviours I witnessed in class and then tried to adapt my teaching to support these learners better. I never once said anything to anyone else at school, too scared to lose my job if I overstepped a boundary. I smiled when a profoundly deaf boy joined the school in November and the teachers received an email stating that "he has difficulty hearing". That was one of the many euphemisms I encountered in emails and staff meetings, especially where special education needs (SEN) were concerned. Management shied away from any terminology associated with SEN learners and not even the SEN leader, who also fulfilled the role of child protection officer (CPO), wanted to enquire about possible diagnoses for certain learners. This made me even more aware of my inability to truly make a difference to certain learners' lives. Early in December 2016, I wrote in my personal diary about the ridiculousness and absurdity of the situation. I drew a skewed version of the *Blue Fool* painting by post-conceptual artist, Christopher Wool, which sold for $5 million in 2012. The painting reflected my feelings at the time towards the management of the school.

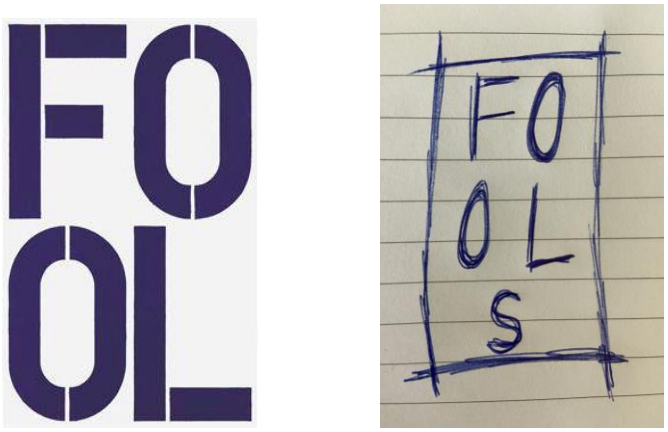


Figure 13: Wool's artwork (left) which inspired my drawing (right)

My "art" might never be worth millions, but like Wool, I felt like a simple word could speak volumes. I got used to the system I perceived as crooked. I got better at suppressing the urge to revolt against the owner of the school and, by default, the principal. I learnt how to ignore passive-aggressive behaviours and focused on what I could actually manage. We moved into a larger apartment on a beautiful island just outside of the city of Abu Dhabi. We made friends, travelled more, and we settled comfortably in our personal space. Very consciously, we divided our personal lives from our professional ones. At home we lived, at school we simply survived.

On my daughter's birthday, 22 March 2017, I arrived at school to an inbox filled with angry emails about ridiculous things. Without hesitation, I typed up my resignation letter and sent it to the principal and our HR department. Less than two hours later, I had an anxiety attack about the repercussions of what I had done.

Nouf cried when she heard that I would be leaving at the end of the academic year. I cried more. Mostly because I was thankful my parents are not related by blood, but also because I knew that Nouf would never know better… and probably marry her own cousin on her sixteenth birthday.

Scene 15. *The convent.* An evolution in progress

VALJEAN AND COSETTE FIND SHELTER IN THE PETIT-PICPUS CONVENT IN PARIS. VALJEAN BECOMES A GARDENER AND COSETTE ENROLS A STUDENT AT THE CONVENT SCHOOL.

Valjean sang to Cosette on arrival at the convent

Here we pray for new beginnings

Here our lives can start again

I felt the resonance of these words when I quit my teaching job at BBS, even though I felt unsure about my future. In the next four weeks, I sent out my CV and went for several interviews but declined every offer. I vowed to myself that I would not just take on a job for the sake of a salary at the end of the month. It was not easy to throw potential paycheques in the rubbish bin. I did not sleep well and I was constantly worried about the future. My husband assured me that we could survive without my income, especially if I were to home school our own children, something I desperately wanted to avoid. Friends tried to convince me that home schooling would be amazing, but I honestly felt that my children would benefit more from social interactions in a school environment. I wanted to be their mom, not their teacher, so I consciously decided to focus on my children and started looking for a new school for them. I read reviews and asked friends for their opinions. After some discussion and research, we decided to move our children to another British school in Abu Dhabi. At the end of April 2017, while registering them at Gems Cambridge International School (CIA), I talked to the registrar and she helped me secure an interview for the next day. In less than 72 hours, I had a job for the next academic year. Looking back, this was one of those pivotal moments in my evolution. I felt hopeful, like the change would not only bring about new possibilities, but also that I was better prepared for this "new" start. I felt as if a weight has been lifted from my shoulders and I could suddenly walk with my head held high again. I cancelled all my tutoring sessions and started every morning with five minutes of slow breathing exercises. I was adamant that I would make a positive shift, not only for my own sake, but also on behalf of my children.

Unfortunately, BBS wanted to wring every last drop of energy I had left out of me before the school year ended. The owner refused to pay me for the summer holiday, giving all sorts of ridiculous reasons, which meant I lost two months' salary. The school did not want to release my children from their online registration system, claiming that I had not paid their school fees. I felt as if a noose was being tied around my neck and I struggled to breathe. I was bitter and angry and resented the

school with every fibre in my being. I prayed to all the gods that the time could just move faster, so that I can walk away through the beige coloured gates and never look back. When the last bell rang for the 2016/2017 academic year, I almost ran out of the door, not interested in fighting for what was rightfully mine. I walked away with a financial loss, but with knowledge and experience (both positive and negative) that money would not be able to buy.

Today, I can reflect and realise that there were many wonderful things that happened during that time. I published a book on parenting in South Africa, *Superma en ander mites* (Supermom and other myths). This was a long-time dream and when I saw the book on the shelves while on holiday in South Africa, I wept with joy. A friend suggested I take a meditation course with her, which I did and loved every minute of, finding inner balance and centring my positivity. With the help of an amazing supervisor, I defended my master's degree proposal successfully and I felt excited and nervous to embark on a more academic journey. When I read through my journals now, I am ashamed that I did not celebrate these successes at the time. I was so consumed by the negativity of BBS and hating my job that I neglected my gratitude. Goodwin (2001) acknowledges that it is common to suffer from a lack of recognition of positive events when a person is unhappy in the workplace. Humans like to think that they can distinguish between work and home, but the truth is that we do not often separate the spheres of work and home (Goodwin, 2001; Holt, 2003). What we do in one space inevitably influences our thoughts and feelings in the other (Ellis, 2004; Holt, 2003; Karsenti & Collin, 2013). It is often only during reflective practice that we can bear witness to the positives amid the negatives that determined our language at a specific time (Lucy, 2004). I experienced this personally.

After a six-week holiday in July/August 2017, I felt recharged and ready for a new chapter in the UAE. I had no illusions about CIA being perfect, although I was excited to join a larger educational company. I accepted a position as secondary mathematics teacher to teach the Year 9–11 IGCSE curriculum and Year 12–13 AS- and A-levels. During the induction week for new teachers, in August 2017, I immediately noticed the obvious differences between BBS and CIA. CIA is part of Gems Education, currently the largest operator of schools in the world, with more than 70 schools in 12 countries. CIA is much larger than BBS, with more than 3500 learners and 88 different nationalities, ranging from ages 4–19. I walked through the doors of CIA and felt excited. Room S010 (second floor, room 10) had my name on it. It smelled of fresh paint and one of the walls had huge windows overlooking the quadrant. I chose a yellow and blue theme from the list handed out at orientation, and within a few hours, I had beautiful, bright blue chairs behind brand new desks. I

requested yellow backing paper with blue borders for my pin-boards and by the end of the second school day, the assistants had fulfilled my request. My classroom made me smile even before a single learner set foot in it. This may seem like such a simple thing, but Avalos (2011) notes that giving teachers some autonomy in decorating their teaching environment has an impact on their motivation and enthusiasm. I can vouch for this positive effect. At the back of my room, I had three large bookshelves stocked with a variety of textbooks. A large interactive white board was installed on the front wall of the room. CIA boasted a large stationery store where I could simply collect board markers, pencils, staplers or whatever stationary I could possibly require. Apart from a new laptop, I was also issued with an access card, which allowed me unlimited copies from any one of the industrial printer/copiers that could be found all around the school. It felt like the Utopia I once dreamed of. Upon reflection, I realise that the feeling of elated joy and excessive happiness at CIA was due to the serial position effect, a term coined by Ebbinghaus in 1913. According to Ebbinghaus's research, a person's memory is affected by either the *primacy* or *recency* effect (Jones & Goethals, 1972). Sometimes people remember their first impressions of something specific better than the experiences that come later, indicating that the primacy effect is in play (Ones et al., 2017). The fact that my last experience in a school in the UAE was not positive ensured that even the slightest improvement would be extremely well received. This can be explained by the recency effect in practice (Coleman, 2006; Jex, 2002). I was so desperate for an improvement in my disposition as a teacher, that I was willing to accept anything as an evolutionary moment. This is normal in any career where the employee is unhappy in the workplace (Ones et at., 2017) and as long as the researcher is aware of this bias, it should not be a cause for concern in the trustworthiness of the data (Jex, 2002). Ellis (2004) adds that autoethnographers should delve into the explanations of feelings to better understand situations, something that I thoroughly enjoy doing.

The schools opened for learners in September and the noises that filled the corridors were ones of laughter and joy. Teachers greeted each other with smiles in the morning and not once during my probation period did I feel unwelcome. The secondary school principal was visible on the corridors during the school day, yet I never felt as if he were checking up on me, or looking to find fault. It was a welcome change from my experience at BBS. As Term 1 unfolded, I realised that CIA had its own set of challenges. The learners' abilities varied greatly. I had learners who achieved above 90% consistently in every class test, assessment and exam, while others struggled to sit down, and some could not ask for a pencil in a coherent English sentence. There were parents who were so involved in their children's progress that I would receive daily emails from them, but there were also parents

who I never met or communicated with. Some management initiatives were amazing and I enthusiastically got involved in Teaching and Learning Development (TLD), High Performance Learning (HPL) and Workbook Scrutiny (WS). Yet, sometimes I felt like rolling my eyes when instructions were emailed out for a specific task. Holistically, it felt like a "normal" school, with "normal" problems. I write "normal" between inverted commas, because I recognise that the definition of "normal" is dependent on more than a dictionary. Skaalvik and Skaalvik (2011) state that the appreciation of flaws and the acknowledgement of successes should be used consistently to improve the overall balance and progress in a working environment like a school. Skaalvik and Skaalvik (2011) and Sharif et al. (2016) agree that a "perfect" school can only exist on paper, because in reality humans bring unique challenges to any institution. I slowly settled into my new classroom and I made quite a few mistakes during the first few weeks. I mispronounced names, gave the wrong homework to the wrong class, and sent out an email meant for a specific parent to all the parents in the class. Not once was I called into any office. I apologised frequently for my errors, laughed about silly mishaps, and every day I relaxed a little more. I started to enjoy teaching again. After my first formal lesson observation in October 2017, I was graded as a

> "***Very Good Teacher*** *with the potential to become* ***Outstanding*** *with some support on British Curriculum progress checks and differentiation for gifted and talented learners".*

I was so relieved when I read the report that I cried in the staff bathroom.

In November 2017, I was observed for a second time and I received my first "Outstanding" grade. Writing this, it seems like everything was easy. I changed schools and *voila!* Everything was perfect. It was not that simple though and looking back it seems unbelievable that a mere few months had changed me so much. I was actively working on relaxing more, meditating daily, enforcing positive mantras in the house, and even drinking more water felt as if it made a difference. It was hard work and I did not succeed every day. I also drank too much wine, lost my temper, shed some tears, and overslept on the odd occasion. Nevertheless, there was change. However small, I can now see the positive transformations. Evolution was in progress. I went through organisers, journals, emails and social media posts and sorted some (what I consider) pivotal moments into broad categories. The table on the next page summarises some of my initial experiences, descriptions and feelings, without analysing anything, just as Gibbs (1998) suggests.

Table 4: Summary of some moments that mark change, September – December 2017

	Experiences	Descriptions	Feelings
My children	My children laughed more, had friends over for playdates, and were excited to explore the UAE.	They got accustomed to not seeing grandparents regularly and adapted to a life in the UAE.	I felt like I was giving them new opportunities and seeing them happy, made me happy.
Money	I noticed that I spent more money on decorating our apartment and on new experiences like waterparks and zoos.	Saving was still important, but I did not want to live a "temporary, expat" life devoid of personal enjoyment.	I did not feel like a visitor anymore. I wanted to settle physically, as well as emotionally, and embrace the UAE and all it had to offer.
Learner interactions	I started joking with learners in class, forming relationships beyond the curriculum.	I had the confidence to speak to learners about more than just work, because I was not afraid of management, and I understood the culture a bit better.	I felt my idealistic teacher dream come alive again. I was happy.
Curriculum content	I could answer a very difficult exam question without referring back to a textbook or online resource.	I became more familiar with the content and felt more at ease when explaining difficult concepts.	I felt successful by simply being in the classroom.

Team support	I actively participated in staff meetings, made suggestions and made notes that I implemented in my teaching methodology.	The HoD applauded me for taking initiative, and I was asked to share my good practice as a "teaching tip" at the start of a whole school meeting.	I felt as if I had worth. I was valued as a teacher and felt as if I had something to contribute for a positive change.
Management	I attended all professional development meetings, even though they were not compulsory.	I signed up for three courses and completed them earlier than expected.	I wanted to improve myself, not to impress anyone else, but because I was genuinely interested.

I spent countless hours trying to evaluate and analyse every single moment, exploring and theorising about the possibilities relating to *how* and *why* things suddenly seemed so different. I wanted a quick answer to how my evolution took place. Reflections seldom lead to simple answers (Stinson, 2009) and I often found myself digressing from the original research question.

When we first arrived in the UAE, I shied away from answering emotional questions from my children. I failed to acknowledge my own sadness and in turn ignored theirs. Ironically, as soon as I started talking about the things that I missed about South Africa and the more I cried in front of them, the calmer and more content they seemed to become with their own emotions. Initially, our main focus was to save as much money as we possibly could. We lived frugally and spent very little on luxuries, including decorating, experiences and toys. This made our apartment always seem like someone else's abode. I often felt like a visitor and not a resident. I knew that we were only expatriates, but I hated the idea that we were living for the idea of some day in the future. When I hung a framed picture of our family that was taken on our last Christmas Day in South Africa in 2014, I remember thinking that if I wanted to do more than survive, I had to make a home of this apartment. So I went to a home store and bought things that sparked joy, disregarding the price tags.

I spent money on throws, scatter cushions, pretty linen, and even splurged on a coffee machine. I was happy at home because I was happy at school. In the cyclic process, as my happiness at home increased, so did my happiness at school, proving the intersection of the home and work spheres, as described by Goodwin (2001) and Holt (2003). I became a part of the CIA team, feeling like I belonged. I gained confidence by asking questions and trying to contribute as much as I possibly could. I actively learnt more foreign words so that I could address learners in their mother tongue. I could ask them to *fique quieto* ("be quiet" in Portuguese), or praised them with *'ahsant* ("well done" in Arabic). It was a process of consistently being aware of my attitude and focusing on positive changes.

All the smaller evolutionary changes contributed to bigger and more noticeable transformations. This naturally led to a more conscious awareness of my collected data, as well as the data being constructed. The following table is an extended example of the data I used in Table 3 to evaluate, analyse and conclude my initial descriptive experiences, again drawing inspiration from Gibbs's (1998) cycle.

Table 5: Evaluation, analysis and conclusion about some moments that marked change, September – December 2017

	Evaluate	Analyse	Conclusion
My children	I talked more about the grandparents and did not shy away from sadness.	My children felt more comfortable in knowing that they could miss their family.	By addressing the issue, instead of shying away from it, our happiness improved.
Money	Although I saved less, I did not feel guilty about spending money on nice things.	It was a tangible reward for working hard, enjoying what I earned.	The apartment felt like a home and this in turn became our "happy place".

Learner interactions	I felt more comfortable to speak about cultures and our differences.	Getting to know the learners on a more personal level enhanced my teaching experience.	Teaching is more than just relaying information; it is about building relationships with learners to enhance the learning experience.
Curriculum content	I gained confidence with the content.	I was able to challenge the learners more and I could explain difficult concepts in a more relatable way.	The better you understand something, the better you can teach it.
Team support	Because they complimented me, I wanted to do more.	I no longer felt like an outsider.	I shared resources more frequently, which created a positive cycle of compliments and me wanting to participate and contribute more.
Management	Without forcing anyone, management encouraged participation in whole-school activities.	There is a difference between a leader and a boss.	Management has a great impact on teacher motivation.

Darwin (1859) is clear about the fact that evolution knows no fixed timeline and that every organism, every cell and every adaptation is made in a unique time frame. It took Valjean almost a decade to evolve from bitter prisoner to loving father and while I went from sobbing to smiling in mere weeks, the evolution started even before I set foot on that aeroplane that brought my family to the UAE. Tivel (2012) states that the process of evolution often does not have a fixed starting point, but that the changes might be witnessed within a shorter time frame. Elwell (2013) adds that evolution is mostly infinite. I am convinced that my personal evolution contributed to my professional evolution and, in the upcoming scenes, I will explore the changes in more detail to better understand *how* and *why* the evolution took place.

Scene 16. *Stars.* Possible limitations

JAVERT MAKES A VOW TO THE STARS – WHICH REPRESENT HIS BELIEF IN A JUST AND ORDERED UNIVERSE WHERE SUFFERING IS A PUNISHMENT FOR SIN – THAT HE WILL FIND VALJEAN AND RECAPTURE HIM.

Since qualitative research, an autoethnography as method and a postmodern paradigm are all subjectively based in personal knowledge, I think it would be fair to assume that I am my own biggest limitation. Not only did I produce, create and construct the data, I am now also the one collecting, sorting, analysing and interpreting the data. The obvious lack of participants might seem like a limitation but, when applying an autoethnography as a research design, it is natural (Ellis, 2004). While subjectivity can be seen as a limitation when dealing with quantitative data (Creswell, 2013; Maree, 2016), subjectivity is what fuels postmodernists' qualitative research (Lyotard, 1997). Within the postmodern paradigm, freedom of subjectivity and incorporation of other perspectives throughout the research will help alleviate pressure on this limitation (Aylesworth, 2015).

Autoethnographers, especially when writing from a postmodern perspective, are not looking for the truth or answers in the world *out there* (Bochner, 2014; Ellis, 2004), but rather *inside* themselves (Ellis, 2004). I am not trying to convince anyone of my truths, because as a postmodernist I celebrate that we have differences. I would rather build a relationship of trust throughout the narrative, as one would hope to do in a successful autoethnography (Hughes & Pennington, 2017). I vow, like Javert, to never lose sight of the verisimilitude of the data and ensure that I am honest and true in seeking truthful answers to my research question. Javert sings that the stars are his guides when seeking truth and justice:

> Stars, in your multitudes... scarce to be counted, filling the darkness with order and light.
>
> You are the sentinels, silent and sure, keeping watch in the night

Limitations are not restricted to the formal research requirements of this thesis, but also flow naturally into the researcher's environment. Teaching at CIA brought its own set of possible limitations. Manning et al. (2016) prove that it is possible to intentionally forget a recent experience as a psychological method of self-preservation. This is more common than expected, especially when it comes to career options and choices (Manning et al., 2016). Unsworth's et al.'s (2012) theory that one holds onto the most recent, positive experiences and shoves the past, horrible experiences into the subconscious is also relevant. I did not want to think about BBS frequently, but simply ignoring the past does not erase it. Manning et al. (2016) and Unsworth et al. (2012) both

prove that negative experiences need to be resolved in order for the subject to completely and honestly move on to the proverbial greener pastures. This autoethnographic thesis has forced me to address this possible limitation by reflecting on past experiences and theorising how they aided in my personal revolution.

While our brains are optimised and naturally inclined to hold on to negative feelings and emotions (Manning et al., 2016), sometimes the opposite happens. Creed et al. (2002) explore the way in which, after a career change, some people tend to immerse themselves in the positive things of the new employment and completely ignore all the shortcomings. Reflectively speaking, I think this is exactly what I did. I deliberately and consciously chose to focus on all the wonderful things at CIA, dismissing any notion that might indicate a problem or gap for improvement. I constantly reminded myself that things could be worse, a typical trait witnessed by Creed et al. (2002) in preventing progress by limiting shortcomings. Arendt (1963) writes that one cannot progress if a limitation is not first identified, and even though he was referring to revolutions, it is relevant in the research of Creed et al. (2002). I wanted to feel angry when important dates and information were miscommunicated by management, but then suppressed the anger by convincing myself that "it could have been worse", a repetitive journal entry that I noticed throughout my data collection. CIA was/is not perfect, but for the first few months of teaching there, I truly believed that it was.

It is so easy to fall into a negative space at work, especially when the majority of employees are complaining more than they approve (Creed et al., 2002). Thanks to a Facebook memory, I also discovered that I had read *The Power of Positive Thinking* by Norman Vincent Peale (2004) in September 2017, a book that urges the reader to stay away from negative office talk. The staffroom was often dominated by complaints and criticisms, very similar to those I experienced at BBS, but I avoided getting involved with any of these conversations. CIA was an exciting novelty and while it would eventually, naturally wear off, I was adamant to keep the positive energy for as long as possible. Manning et al. (2016) do, however, warn that this positive focus may shield the reality, causing the truth to be hidden.

Kenon and Palsole (2019) warn that professional development can be hindered by personal struggles and that companies should not disregard the emotional and personal wellbeing of their staff members when aiming to improve the quality of work. I often found myself ignoring the irritations I felt at CIA. I did not want to talk about the negative things about school, especially when I was at home. There is a great lack of any criticism in my diaries and journals directed at

CIA, something I now understand may be a limitation of my data. I also avoided personal conversations when I was at school, only having superficial conversations with colleagues and declining all social invitations. Since I was happy at school and at home, I was convinced that if I kept the two worlds separate, I would be able to perform better at work and be happier at home. This strategy worked for the first few months, but as Kenon and Palsole (2019) expect, it was not sustainable practice. Unsworth et al. (2012) and Manning et al. (2016) argue that finding work–life balance is essential for true happiness and positivity at home and at work, a concept that Kenon and Palsole (2016) warn should not be seen as a destination, as it is a continuous balancing act. At the end of my first academic year at CIA, I was promoted to the position of Key Stage 3 Leader in the mathematics department. I would be in charge of all planning of the Year 7–9 curriculum content and ensuring that Year 9 learners were sufficiently prepared to start their IGCSE journey in Year 10. I completed my master's degree in 2018 and as a family we travelled to Sri-Lanka, Australia, Russia and Egypt. My journals are testament to my happiness and gratitude during that time, both professionally and personally.

In the novel of *Les Misérables*, Hugo wrote that during the time Valjean spent at the convent, he was happy and content. Javert, on the other hand, was still frantically searching for justice. Javert sang to the stars:

you know your place in the sky,

you hold your course and your aim

And for a moment, I could believe that both Valjean and I were just like those stars, keeping steady on our life's journey.

Scene 17. ***Paris/Look Down.*** **A revolution begins**

IN 1832, NINE YEARS AFTER VALJEAN SAVED COSETTE, AN UPRISING IN PARIS IS LOOMING WITH THE IMPENDING DEATH OF GENERAL LAMARQUE, ONE OF THE FEW MEN IN GOVERNMENT WHO SHOW COMPASSION AND MERCY TO THE POOR. MARIUS AND ENJOLRAS ARE TWO STUDENT REVOLUTIONARIES MINGLING IN THE STREET. THE THÉNARDIERS HAVE LOST THEIR INN AND IS NOW RUNNING A STREET GANG. THEIR DAUGHTER, EPONINE, IS IN LOVE WITH MARIUS, BUT HE IS OBLIVIOUS TO HER AFFECTION. THE THÉNARDIERS' SON, GAVROCHE, IS STREETWISE, AND SEEMS TO KNOW EVERYTHING THAT IS HAPPENING IN THE SLUMS.

I did not have nine years to settle in my newfound comfort zone. An unexpected revolution in the global teaching profession would be set in motion in December 2019. Coronavirus disease (Covid-19) was first identified in Wuhan, China and resulted in a global, ongoing pandemic (Hui et al., 2020). The first case of Covid-19 has been traced back to early November 2019 (Ma, 2020) and as of 14 March 2021, more than 119.6 million cases have been reported across the globe, with more than 2.6 million deaths (https://www.worldometers.info/coronavirus/).

According to the World Health Organisation (WHO) (2020) there is a large family of coronaviruses, known to cause respiratory infections in humans. Covid-19 is a new strain of the coronavirus that is extremely contagious (Hui et al., 2020) and was only officially named in February 2020 (WHO, 2020). The virus spreads primarily through small droplets from the mouth or nose when a person sneezes, coughs or speaks (Fauci et al., 2020; WHO, 2020). Social distancing, regular hand washing and the wearing of masks and gloves are preventive measures that have been put in place throughout the world (Cascella et al., 2020; Ma, 2020; WHO, 2020). Fever, dry cough, tiredness and mild flu-like symptoms are the first indicators of possible Covid-19 infections (Velavan & Meyer, 2020; WHO, 2020). Most symptoms only show up after two weeks of being infected, making Covid-19 especially contagious, as the carrier is often unaware of their infectiousness (Hui et al., 2020; Ma, 2020; WHO, 2020). Approximately 80% of people recover without hospitalisation, while the other 20% become seriously ill and develop difficulty breathing (Cascella et al., 2020; Fauci et al., 2020; WHO, 2020). People over the age of 60 and those with underlying medical conditions like heart and/or lung disease, high blood pressure, diabetes, cancer, or any respiratory issues are especially vulnerable (Hui et al., 2020; Ma, 2020; WHO, 2020). Dong et al. (2020) found that infants younger than 24 months of age are at higher risk due to their developing immune system and that children aged between two and 12 are often carriers of the

virus without showing any symptoms. This makes schools an especially vulnerable place for spreading the infections (Dong et al., 2020; WHO, 2020). The WHO (2020) declared Covid-19 a global pandemic in early March 2020, with most countries abruptly ceasing air travel, closing businesses and schools, and not allowing social gatherings.

On 29 January 2020, the UAE was the first country in the Middle East to report a Covid-19 case (Turak, 2020), but the news seemed rather unimportant at the time and life seemed to be going on as normal. Although there were some travel warnings (Mansoor, 2020), borders were still open for travel. On 6 February 2020, our school closed for a mid-term break and our family travelled to Spain and Portugal, via Saudi Arabia, for a holiday. During this time, we read the news, but the airports seemed to be running as usual and we did not even consider that Covid-19 would have such an immense impact on our lives. I have read through my journal in detail and gone through every social media post I made during our trip and not once did I mention the coronavirus or Covid-19. This is testament of how blissfully unaware we were of the virus in early February 2020.

Figure 14: Our family on vacation in Salamanca, Spain, 9 February 2020

We landed back in the UAE on 15 February 2020 and on the morning of 16 February 2020, we got an email stating that there was a rising concern for schools in the UAE over the Covid-19 outbreak and that we should check our emails regularly for updates. Travel was not yet banned, but the UAE government strongly advised against any travel and schools issued warnings about travel to parents and teachers. The schools were set to close for the spring break on 26 March 2020 and we had tickets booked to fly to Namibia for 27 March 2020.

During the two weeks following our return, there were many speculations and rumours about schools closing in the UAE. By this time, schools in Italy, Spain and China had already closed

(Armitage & Nellums, 2020), but the UAE government had made no official statement yet. On 5 March 2020, all staff received an email from the MoE, confirming that spring break would start on 6 March 2020 for learners. Teachers were expected to spend the two weeks preparing for distance learning which would commence on 22 March 2020 and would last for two weeks. This meant that our spring break holiday travel would have to be cancelled. We had less than four hours to gather all our personal belongings, to ensure that we packed up our classrooms and to leave the school grounds. We had no idea what to expect, how to prepare and what distance education would really mean. While hybrid classrooms and blended learning are not new concepts (Justi & Gilbert, 1999; Vess, 2005), it is not something that I was aware of pre-Covid. For me, and for many teachers at CIA, it was *uncharted territory* in *unprecedented times*. In March 2020, these words seemed to be popular in emails, social media posts and newspaper articles. I could not have predicted the events that would follow the announcement of school closure. The feelings of teachers at CIA varied between outrage, disappointment, fear, sadness and excitement, all based in uncertainty. Burwell (2021) offers resonance when stating that most teachers in the UAE felt frustrated and uncertain during the onset of Covid-19, not only worrying about how their work would change, but also concerned about their job security, safety and health. Doucet et al. (2020, p. 1) claimed that schools needed to put "Maslow before Bloom", indicating that personal feelings and the safety of teachers and learners should be a greater priority than gaining knowledge from a curriculum structure.

The WHO (2020) announced the Covid-19 outbreak as a pandemic on 11 March 2020 and within days global travel restrictions had been put in place (Chinazzi et al., 2020). Countries and cities went into lockdown, with small business, malls, schools, churches and many other public spaces like cinemas and park being closed until further notice. The UAE was no exception. Malls closed, with only essential shops remaining open. Curfews were put into place for all residents, with only restricted movement allowed. Roads were sanitised daily and the police were more visible than ever, handing out hefty fines to those not wearing masks correctly, or not keeping a 1.5-metre distance from others when socialising. As a family, we decided to stay calm and be as safe as possible. As teachers, my husband and I were awaiting instructions on how to plan and prepare lessons for distance learning. At this time we had no knowledge of hybrid learning or blended pedagogy, or how to plan for such lessons. We had little or no knowledge on applications that could be used to make digital classrooms more interactive. Honestly, we did not even know what a digital classroom might look like. There was not a lot of time to do research of my own, I had to simply follow my instinct as I awaited instructions from the school. I did not know what to expect, but knowing that it would only last for two weeks made me feel calmer. This was only a temporary fix.

We were scheduled to start distance learning on 22 March 2020. The expectation was that one lesson per class per week would be a live interaction with the learners via Zoom. For the remaining lessons, we would need to upload resources onto the school's network. From there the learners would download the work onto their personal tablets, computers, cell phones or laptops, and complete the work remotely. On 5 April 2020, we would return to school and things would go back to normal. If only we had had a metaphorical Gavroche to warn us...

Scene 18. *The Robbery.* The robbery

IN PARIS, THE THÉNARDIERS AND THEIR GANG ATTEMPT TO CON SOME TOURISTS, WHO TURN OUT TO BE VALJEAN AND COSETTE. WHILE THEY ARE TALKING TO VALJEAN, COSETTE AND MARIUS MEET AND FALL IN LOVE INSTANTLY. JAVERT SHOWS UP AND PREVENTS THE THÉNARDIERS FROM ROBBING VALJEAN.

"The MOE stole my holiday."

"The UAE should pay back my flights, as it feels like I was robbed!"

"The school cannot take away my break by letting me plan lessons. It is thievery."

"This larceny is not in my contract!"

These are but some of the messages that CIA teachers sent in WhatsApp groups after the announcement came that our holiday dates had been moved. The teachers wanted someone to be angry with, and the MoE, ADEK and the school were seemingly acceptable targets. At the time, I felt conflicted. I was disappointed our holiday to Namibia was cancelled, but I also felt a sense of relief, as I did not want to travel during a global pandemic. I wanted to be angry at the school, but I knew that none of these restrictions were implemented by our principal. These were orders from the government and the school had no choice but to comply (Burwell, 2021; Martinez & Broemmel, 2021). Being reminded of the proverbial Javert made me question the real robber in this instance. I had to at least attempt to answer this (in)justice truthfully.

Did the UAE create the virus to spread fear and close schools? No.

Did the MoE or ADEK deliberately construct the situations to prevent teachers from going on holiday? No.

Did our school not want the teachers to travel or rest during spring break? No.

Was it even a choice? No.

Was only the UAE affected? No.

The title of Scene 18 thus seems suitable and relevant to so many stories throughout the world, aligning the purpose to that of CMT. The narrative of this scene has value in the *auto*, *ethno* and *graphy* spheres of this postmodern thesis. Lomas (2016) comments on how negative feelings can give rise to positive changes, overlapping Darwin's (1856) definition of evolution, where shortcomings will translate to evolutionary changes. I acknowledge that the initial reception of Covid-19 varied greatly between countries, districts, schools and teachers (Martinez & Broemmel, 2021), but my initial experience was not a positive one. In fact, my journal entries are aligned with the emotions of resistance, uncertainty, agitation, anger and fear, like so many other teachers in the

UAE give testimony to (Burwell, 2021). At CIA there was a common trend of similar emotions. Some teachers were angry about money lost as a result of cancelled flights and travel plans. Others were concerned about the amount of teaching time that would be lost and the constraints it would put on those learners that were going to write their IGCSE, AS- and A-level examinations in June. Some teachers were worried about using new technologies, while others complained about not having access to a printer, textbooks or even a whiteboard. Some teachers were truly concerned about their health, while other laughed off the idea of getting sick. I would be lying if I said I was not conflicted too. I hated giving up our holiday, but I did not complain that I did not have to set the alarm clock for 5 a.m. anymore. We were told that schools would re-open on 5 April 2020, so it felt like an extended holiday at the time. As I am writing this, more than a year has passed since the schools closed. I was definitely not prepared for what was to come.

During the two-week preparation period, I tried to adapt all my PowerPoint slides in such a way that learners would be able to follow the mathematical steps easily. I added pictures, explanations, definitions and additional examples. I embedded Loom videos, links to You Tube videos, and animations to make the PowerPoints seem more engaging. I honestly thought that this would be sufficient for learning at home, temporarily. When the learners tuned into their lessons digitally on 22 March, teachers quickly became aware of issues we had not considered before. Our school network crashed because it could not handle 3500+ learners, their parents, tutors and more than 300 staff all trying to access it at once. The work thus had to be emailed individually to every learner, by subject and year group. The administration, without warning or preamble, quadrupled on Day 1 of distance learning. Apart from the immense administrative load the teachers were not expecting, we also did not anticipate the problems that would arise from parents. Many parents received the emails at work, while the children were at home with nannies or caregivers. Some parents did not have access to computers at home, which meant they had to open the work on their phones. In some households, there was only one computer, which had to serve up to six learners. The complaints from parents seemed overwhelming, and teachers did not have any answers.

"...cannot access the system..."

"... don't have a computer..."

"...no internet at home..."

"...cannot print the worksheet..."

"...too much work..."

"...I have to work while assisting my five children..."

Within the first 48 hours of distance education, CIA embraced Microsoft Teams as the primary platform of communication with learners. I was teaching eight different classes at the time, which led me to spend about 12 hours adding each learner individually to my digital classrooms. Many teachers were completely overwhelmed by the new system, with one teacher bursting into tears during an online meeting. The first week of distance learning was extremely challenging for teachers, learners, and parents, not only at CIA but throughout the UAE (Burwell, 2021). I spent an average of 16 hours every day in front of my computer, trying to help teachers, parents, learners, and even myself. I constantly reminded myself that this was only temporary and as soon as we got back to school, things would be normal again. The wise words of a friend echoed in the back of my mind: "***This too shall pass***."

Only eight days later, on 30 March 2020, teachers across the UAE read in the news:

Figure 15: News article, 30 May 2020

We would not return to school for the remainder of the academic year. With only a week's experience, teachers in the UAE were thrown into a raging ocean, without any life jackets, and told to not only swim, but also to try and save those around them. Burwell (2021, p. 95) describes this as a "perfect storm", where severe unconventional circumstances are responsible for dramatic changes to society. Apart from teaching learners curriculum content, teachers were expected to help parents be more involved, while the parents themselves were struggling to maintain some sense of normal in their homes. Within the first few days, we received notice of official lesson observations that were set to take place. The news was flooded with statistics on how the coronavirus was spreading throughout the world, people losing their jobs, countries going into severe lockdown and salaries being cut. I was more than simply worried about teaching, my income, my children, our family's health ... the list of concerns seemed to be ever growing. My heart felt heavy, and I knew that I was not the only teacher, mom, wife, woman, human feeling this way, even though our family was isolated from the rest of the world. Javert prevented the Thénardiers from robbing Valjean, and I

hope that the verisimilar context of Covid-19 will guide the trustworthiness of my data to prevent a robbery from taking place. I hope that Lomas (2016) is right and that the feeling of negativity may be (r)evolutionised into something wonderful for the education realm. It is too soon to fully proclaim a revolution. It is not sensible to predict what the outcome of Covid-19 may bring. As I am reflecting-in-action, I am embracing the postmodern paradigm of accepting a variety of opinions, celebrating the differences. I am adapting my original research proposal to include Covid-19 and the effects on my teaching, as without it this thesis would not have the verisimilar qualities of an autoethnographical thesis. With this, I set the stage for the next scene of preparing for a revolution.

Scene 19. *Red and Black.* Getting ready for the revolution

IN A SMALL CAFÉ, ENJOLRAS EXHORTS A GROUP OF IDEALISTIC STUDENTS TO PREPARE FOR REVOLUTION. MARIUS INTERRUPTS THE SERIOUS ATMOSPHERE BY FANTASISING ABOUT HIS NEWFOUND LOVE, MUCH TO THE AMUSEMENT OF HIS COMPATRIOTS.

A revolution occurs when a system is forcibly overthrown to make way for a new system (Goodwin, 2001). My "system" of teaching in a physical classroom, with learners present at their desks, and books in front of them, was forcibly overthrown by the school closure brought on by the Covid-19 pandemic. I had to implement a new system of teaching – online. I was furious when I received an email stating that I "need to keep lessons as normal as possible" in the most abnormal time of our lives. Armitage and Nellums (2021) and Huber (2021) agree that schools needed to adapt their expectations of both teachers and learners in order to manage and maintain more sustainable, effective teaching practice. School principals should have changed strategies immediately in order to prevent accelerated teacher burnout (Azorin, 2020; Ho & Tay, 2020). Huber (2021, p. 5) explains that the Covid-19 crisis started a period of "great challenge for all actors in the education and school context". If schools would not adapt their policies and procedures, outlining new, lighter expectations, teachers and learners would suffer (Huber & Helm, 2020; Fernandez & Shaw, 2020; Martinez & Broemmel, 2021). Fullan (2020) adds that without the right leadership, schools would fail both learners and teachers during the pandemic.

Without any prior training on distance education, or any experience of any of the applications and platforms, and the stress of an uncertain future, I was a part of the teacher cohort that had to adapt to a new system very quickly. The opinions and feelings of teachers in our school ranged from making inappropriate jokes to being outraged. I do not think I have ever received so many generic emails, messages, voice notes and shared documents in such a short span of time. The common theme was, undoubtedly, uncertainty. From the learners, parents and teachers, to the principal, director and head office representatives, there were simply no answers to all of the thousands of questions. This was indeed an unprecedented time for the education system, not only in the UAE but globally as well (Burwell, 2021; Doucet et al., 2020; Martinez & Broemmel, 2021). The previous pandemic was the Spanish Flu in 1918 and even though schools existed back then, remote teaching and distance learning were not even options. In 1918 Google did not yet exist and no child had access to computers or tablets. This meant that we could only learn fractionally from history (Armitage & Nellums, 2020; Harris, 2020). In March 2020, teachers from all over the world, in many different countries, swapped their classrooms for digital screens. We traded textbooks for online

presentations and worksheets for quizzes on digital applications. We were forced to rethink what, why, how and who we taught and re-examine our comforting, known methodologies and practice. We were metaphorical students preparing for a revolution.

There is a great difference between emergency remote teaching (ERT) and online learning (Hodges et al., 2020). Online education is not a novel concept and is something that has been studied for decades (Ho & Tay, 2020; Hodges et al., 2020; Vess, 2005). Hodges et al. (2020) explain that online learning encompasses instructional preparation and planning, using careful and systematic models of design and continuous development that will result in effective online learning. Online learning has specialist teachers, specifically trained to teach online lessons. The curriculum is developed specifically for use in online classrooms, and the pacing charts, assessment criteria and reflective practices are all designed with a specific goal in mind. Most, if not all of these, will be obviously absent in ERT (Hodges et al., 2020). ERT takes place when training moves from a traditional classroom to an online platform, without warning or much preparation time (Hodges et al., 2020; Skulmowski & Rey, 2020). Teachers are not specifically trained for these lessons, the curriculum is not adequately adapted for online learning alone and the current resources being used might not be effective or sufficient (Azorin, 2020; Hodges et al., 2020). While ERT is to be used in emergencies, like global pandemics, online learning will be established practice, developed over time and continuously improved (Ho & Tay, 2020; Hodges et al., 2020; Nishida, 2020). Online learning instructors are trained specialists in their respective fields of knowledge (Hodges et al., 2020), while few teachers in schools would have had training on full-time online learning programmes (Azorin, 2020; Huber, 2021). Owing to the quick and unexpected school closures, schools had little choice in moving to instruction online (Armitage & Nellums, 2020) and while this offered them flexibility, the timeframe in which this shift had to take place was staggering (Hodges et al., 2020). School support structures that would normally be able to assist teachers with technological queries would not be able to offer the same level of support to all staff members at the same time within such a short span of time (Hodges et al., 2020), implying that teachers would be left to deal with training for ERT themselves (Doucet et al., 2020; Hodges et al., 2020). Not everyone was up to the challenge. Globally, teachers experienced anxiety and stress (Burwell, 2021; Harris, 2020), and CIA was no exception. I experienced many personal obstacles during the first few weeks of distance education, but the school as a community was not exempt from impediments.

One of the first and most common complaints was access to unlimited data. Many of our learners could not access their learning materials. Then Gulf Business reported that the Telecommunications

Regulatory Authority in the UAE would offer free data to help students with no home internet (Mansoor, 2020). I became increasingly aware of learners whose parent or parents had lost their jobs and were without income. Gems Education supported more than 26 000 families financially throughout the UAE and within eight weeks had given more than one million dirham in relief to parents at its schools (Masudi et al., 2020). CIA gave more than 500 laptops to families so that they could still actively engage in lessons. As a mathematics department, we had Amazon deliver 312 scientific calculators to our senior learners. I had to order a printer, paper and other miscellaneous stationery, because I now had to create resources at home – not only for me as a teacher, but also because my own children were now being home schooled. I am not writing this to complain; I am stating this to highlight my gratitude. We could afford these things. Everything we ordered was delivered to our doorstep, without any issues. As problems arose, possible solutions were offered by a variety of people and institutions. The more I spoke to friends in South Africa, Namibia, Australia, New Zealand, Canada, the USA and China, the more I realised that the UAE blessed its teachers with luxuries, while others were struggling with basics.

This did not mean that I no longer felt uncertain. Digital platforms and applications were implemented quickly. Microsoft Teams, Google Classroom, My Learning, Nearpod, SeeSaw, Loom, Quizzis, Quizlet, Paddlet, Kahoot... and these were just the ones that were introduced to us in the first few weeks. I felt overwhelmed by the strange, unfamiliar expectations and the increase in accountability. Simple PowerPoint slides being uploaded onto our classes' shared networks were no longer good enough. Worksheets were considered inadequate. By Week 5 of ERT, we were expected to deliver live lessons to all our classes. Then simply sharing your screen with the PowerPoint was no longer good enough either. We had to engage learners more by embedding external applications in our live lessons. Learners were expected to hand in assignments weekly, with teachers having to assess each individual assignment and provide personalised feedback. We had to check the learners' academic progress on a daily basis, while making sure we took attendance, informed the parents of all progress made and lessons missed, and handed out achievement certificates and digital disciplinary warnings, for every ... single ... lesson. Emails implored us to "do as we normally do". This made me angry, because nothing about the pandemic was normal, yet the expectation was that we act as if it was. I was exhausted. I could also see the fatigue in my husband sitting on the other end of the (once) dining room table. We spent hours planning and preparing, because the lessons were no longer for the learners only. We knew that every slide, every activity and every exercise would be scrutinised by parents too.

Apart from the academic pressure, the school expected all teachers to be a part of the social interaction of the school. This meant that we had to make videos of us working out, making healthy smoothies, playing outside, or any other extracurricular activities we might be involved with. We sang in a choir, participated in online quizzes, and ensured that every week we could send evidence for the school to post on social media.

During our first four years in the UAE, I worked consciously to separate our home from our school. School was a place of work, rules and focus. It was not necessarily an unhappy place, but it was definitely an environment where I had to think before I said anything so as not to step on toes or disrupt the peace. Home was our happy place. It was our “safe zone”, where we could say whatever we wanted, do whatever we pleased and it was definitely our comfortable haven where we could relax. Suddenly the lines were blurred. Our dining room transformed into a classroom for two teachers. Our patio set was moved into the living room so that my own children could have a space to do their school work. Our laundry room became a playroom, the floors scattered with Lego blocks and dolls and Nerf guns. The laundry found a new home in the master bedroom and the entrance hall was suddenly a pantry. Our once tranquil home was now a chaotic rush of constant scheduling, household chores, classrooms, study spaces, cooking classes, and a variety of creative activities to keep us entertained while being isolated indoors. While my son was having his online science lesson in the hallway, my daughter was doing guided reading with her teacher in the dining room, my husband was teaching chemistry to a Year 13 class in the kitchen, and I sat on the toilet in the guest bathroom, explaining function notation to Year 10 girls. Between lessons I often unpacked and repacked the dishwasher, put laundry in the machine, cooked breakfast/lunch/dinner, read articles for this thesis, helped with homework, built a small pyramid of sponges for my son’s art assignment, arranged three drive-by baby showers … and by writing this list, I think I know why I felt constantly depleted of energy.

On 23 April 2020, Ramadan was announced. This is the holy month for Muslims, where they fast from sunrise to sunset every day. It is a time of family and prayer. Covid-19 changed that. All mosques and places of worship were closed, so prayers were to be done at home, something that saddened many of our Muslim friends. Iftar, the break of the fast every day at sunset, is usually a celebration with others, but in 2020 it was subdued. During live lessons, I experienced a great lack of energy and participation from learners in classes. Muslim learners complained that "this Ramadan does not feel right" and that they felt guilty about not focusing enough. I felt sympathy for the learners who could not celebrate their religion as they normally did.

At the end of April 2020, all external, international examinations were officially cancelled. This meant that our Year 11, 12 and 13 learners would have no official examinations. Parents and learners were just as concerned and when asking teachers for reassurance, they were left with no answers.

> *"What about university applications?"* I don't know.
>
> *"What about my IGCSE certificate?"* I don't know.
>
> *"How can they determine my grade?"* I don't know.
>
> *"Can I do a re-sit in November?"* I don't know.

It was only weeks later that we got the instruction that we should "send grades" for our learners. It seemed simple, but then came the list of expectations. We had to provide evidence for every single grade we gave. While some worksheets could be accepted, others could not. While some exams would be acceptable, others would not. While some online classes could count, others would not. The difference between what was expected and what was not, still eludes me. After many meetings, the teachers were even more confused than before. The guidelines were vague and the expectations were unclear. By the end of June 2020, many of the teachers at our school had been treated for stress, anxiety, depression and burnout. Some teachers resigned to return to their home countries, but others simply decided that the new way of teaching was not for them. My husband, one of the most positive people I know, was feeling hopeless and dejected, questioning his decision to stay in the profession himself. Teachers were not feeling positive about education – not in the UAE (Burwell, 2021) or globally (Huber & Helm, 2020). While I did feel tired at times, I felt this small glimmer of hope deep inside my being. I was praying to all the gods that this might set about some changes in the education sphere. Slowly but surely, I could see teachers being appreciated again. I saw how teachers started focusing on the core of curriculum content again, ensuring learners were taken care of emotionally as well. I will elaborate on these changes in scenes to come, but reflecting back, I can see how the postmodern lens was focusing my perspective on the positives. I always wanted to address and redress the social injustices that I witnessed in schools, both here and in South Africa. This links to the evolutionary traits of postmodernism, where rejection spreads into activism and often leads to critical evaluation and inevitable improvement (Pluckrose & Lindsay, 2020). Even amid the turmoil, exhaustion and uncertainty, I never once wrote down any of the words I used to describe my teacher self before. I was not miserable. I did not want to quit. I did not hate teaching. This begged the question that circles back to my research goal:

Why not?

Scene 20. *In my life.* Reflective (evolutionary) resilience

COSETTE CONSIDERS HER CHANCE MEETING WITH MARIUS AND CONFRONTS VALJEAN ABOUT THE SECRETS HE KEEPS ABOUT THEIR PAST. THIS FORCES VALJEAN TO REFLECT ON HIS LIFE WITH COSETTE.

As the teachers and learners at CIA were slowly settling into the new, chaotic, strange, dynamic way of teaching and learning, I was forced to reflect on my own independence. So many teachers around me were miserable, yet I was more than just coping, it felt like I was thriving. Words from journals and diaries indicate that even amid my exhaustion, I was still eager to learn about new applications to use. While I sometimes got frustrated with the situation, and even aimed my anger at management at times, generally speaking I was more than just surviving: I was happy. When I originally set out to plan this thesis, I wanted to solely focus on the last five years of my life, but if anything, this autoethnographical journey has taught me that:

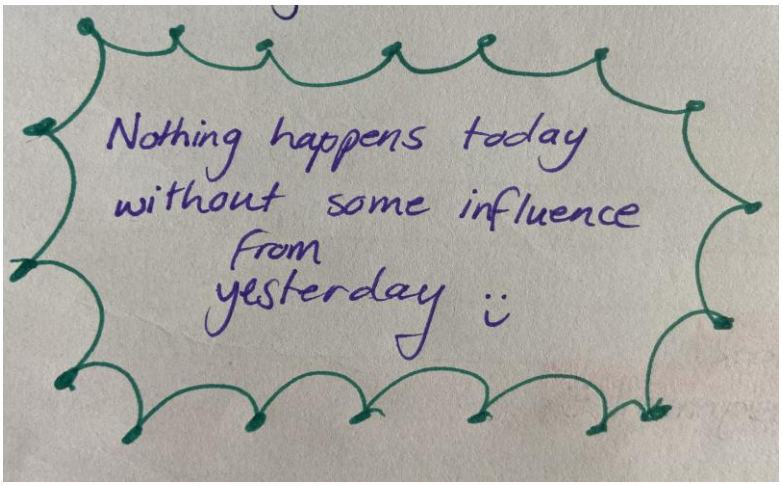


Figure 16: School diary note, 26 April 2020

I noted this down after a general meeting with the form tutors of Year 8, where one teacher suggested that we learn from our past, in order to improve our future. While her words were contextually bound to teaching moral education during form time, it made me think about my own past; how unhappy I was at BBS and how I no longer felt miserable all the time. It forced me to dwell on my past to seek possible answers for my ongoing evolution. Valjean and Cosette converse reflectively:

In my life

There are so many questions and answers

That somehow seem wrong

I have always been hesitant to dwell too much on my past. Talking about how I was raised often felt useless and nonsensical. This does not mean I never shared anecdotes or simple stories from my childhood, but I just always shied away from in-depth analysis of my parents, the religion enforced in our home, the political stances taken, and the social aspects of my environment back then. My husband, who was brought up in a typical, happy, middle-class home in South Africa in the 1980s and 90s often wonders why I do not share as much about my past as he does about his.

There's so little you say of the life you have known

Why you keep to yourself

So dark, so dark and deep,

The secrets that you keep

I laughed at my husband's reaction when he heard the words sung by Cosette, directed at Valjean. He was convinced that I had made up the lyrics to suit the purpose of this scene, and when I played the song, sung by Amanda Seyfried on the soundtrack of *Les Misérables*, he was surprised at how relatable the words seemed. I did not have a happy, carefree childhood. I did not have the opportunity to be a rebellious, normal teenager. I was a stereotypical textbook case of a *troubled youth*, who was supposed to get pregnant in high school, work in a minimum wage job, and maybe have an addiction to nicotine, alcohol or even drugs. When I, as objectively as possible, look back on my life thus far, I know that I am an outlier and, in all honesty, I do not know why. As part of the HPL initiative at our school, much focus is placed on a person's values, attitudes and attributes (VAAs). One of these foci seems like a simple characteristic, but is one that I believe helped me on my journey:

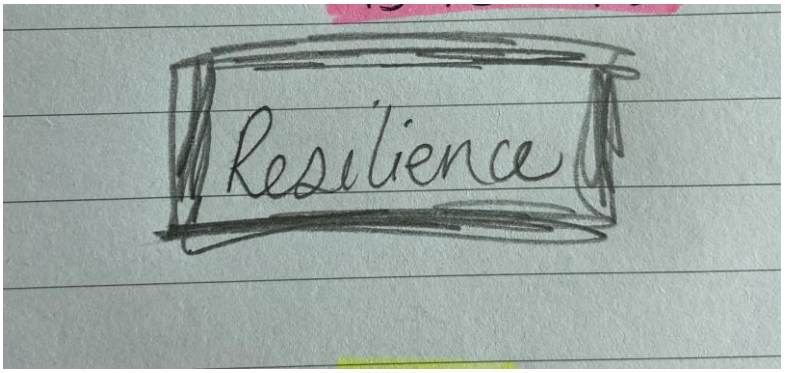


Figure 17: School diary scribble, 26 April 2020

Resilience refers to a person's capacity to overcome and recover from difficulties, either emotionally or physically (Masten, 2014; Siebert, 2005). Robertson (2012) notes that resilience

implies the coping ability of a person, regardless of the setbacks, barriers, resources and limitations endured. Resilience has strong ties in the field of psychology as it is often used as a method for measuring emotional strength (Gonzales, 2012; Masten, 2014; Richardson, 2002). Masten (2014) argues that resilience is a *positive adaptation* after a challenging encounter and, since Tivel (2012) describes an evolution as being a *positive adaptation* to the current environment, the link between resilience and evolution is cogent. Many factors influence and give way to both resilience and evolution, including but not limited to life transitions, social changes, traumatic events, environmental pressures, poverty, violence, political uprisings and emotional abuse (Elwell, 2013; Richardson, 2002; Robertson, 2012). According to Siebert (2005), resilience is more than simply overcoming an emotionally challenging obstacle; it is also about continuing life with hope and competent functioning. While some researchers (Gonzales, 2012; Richardson, 2002) like to distinguish between resilience and resiliency as two separate concepts, other researchers (Masten, 2014; Siebert, 2005) argue that they are interlinked so closely that on the surface the terms can be used interchangeably. For the purpose of this thesis, I side with the latter opinion.

As early as 1973, studies have been conducted on why some people show more resilience than others do (Masten, 2014). Neurobiological research is an emerging field in the study of resilience, trying to prove that resilience is epigenetic and inherited from parents (Siebert, 2005), also linked to evolutionary traits or the genetic inheritance of other personal characteristics, as set out by Tivel (2012). Siebert (2005) proves that resilience has a basis in the biological nervous system: self-confidence in the somatic nervous system; self-esteem based in the autonomic nervous system and self-concept based in the central nervous system. Psychological traits can thus be linked to the strength and resilience of a person's biological, physical nervous system (Gonzales, 2012; Siebert, 2005). While I certainly could that have had my nervous system checked at a medical facility, I felt that would be a digression not worthy of this thesis, as the process is time-consuming, financially strenuous, and the results would not necessarily deliver possible answers to my research question. I side with Masten (2014) that resilience is not genetic, but rather made.

Reich et al. (2012) argue that adult resilience is deeply rooted in psychology and even though connotations can be made to the physical body, more answers can be found in the psyche of a person. I decided to look at how parents raise resilient children to determine what my parents possibly did (or did not do) that made me so resilient. Shannon (2019) simplifies and lists some ways in which parents can build resilience.

- **Boosting self-esteem**. Self-confidence and self-awareness stem from a positive environment where children are taught to believe in their abilities and capabilities, also alleviating pressure on failure (Masten, 2014; Reich et al., 2012).
- **Let them make mistakes**. Reich et al. (2012) note that children who are allowed to make mistakes grow up to not see every crisis or negative incident as an unbearable burden, but rather focus on solving the problem.
- **Lend perspective to their problems.** Resilience implies that the holistic picture of a problem is not neglected, but rather that a problem is put into perspective to really determine the level of crisis that needs to be dealt with (Gonzales, 2012).
- **Teach children self-control.** "We cannot control the world, but we can control how we react to the world" is something I say regularly to my own children.
- **Make their emotions valuable**. Richardson (2002) notes that resilience can only be strengthened when emotions are experienced as a legitimate and worthy way of experiencing the world around us.
- **Connect and make relationships possible.** This is also highlighted by Masten (2014), who argues that maintaining good relationships with family and friends is essential for developing resilience at a young age.
- **Take a positive approach**. Being brought up in a positive house, where parents are not constantly complaining, ensures that children grow into inherently positive adults (Reich et al., 2016).
- **Offer choices.** Children need to learn to make good choices, but this would be an impossible task if they never have any choices (Shannon, 2019; common sense).
- **Broaden their horizons**. Children need to be exposed to positive role models, books, movies, countries and stories unrelated to their everyday life so that they can put their own situation into perspective (Masten, 2014; Shannon, 2019).
- **Set realistic goals**. Accepting that not every circumstance can be changed, and that not everything is in our control, is one of the many traits of resilient people (Gonzales, 2012).
- **Encourage them to get in touch with their spiritual side**. Richardson (2002), Shannon (2019) and Reich et al. (2012) note that people who are aware of their mental and spiritual wellbeing, whether seated in religion, meditation practice, or even just spiritual awareness, tend to be more resilient.
- **Be accepting of whom they are**.

Compiling this list was a mentally exhausting exercise and I toiled constantly, trying to find examples from my own childhood to explain my resilience. I was born in 1983, into a middle-class, white, suburban family in South Africa. My father was a young manager at a steel factory, and my mother was a bank teller. My father was extremely strict and he had a hard set of rules to be followed at home. I remember being constantly afraid of him, as his reaction to any situation was consistent: he yelled. My mother was raised in a very religious household, following the teachings of the Latter Rain Mission, more commonly known in South Africa as "Blourokkies" (Blue Dresses), because all the women were required to dress in light blue dresses, with black stockings and blue hats. My mother rebelled against this and after she married my father and she refused to wear this religious uniform. In 2009, after many years of therapy, she admitted that she was afraid of my father during that time. My maternal grandmother stayed with us and cared for me while my parents were at work, and always dressed in a light blue dress with black stockings. Every day. Ouma Poppie (Gran's name) was, without doubt, the first *Bishop* in my life. With extreme patience, she taught me how to read and encouraged me to choose a variety of books. She showed me the differences between fiction and non-fiction, and listened to me for hours, sounding out words and then making up my own stories. When my father yelled at me, she let me lie with her in bed where she told me wonderful stories of forests and oceans and creatures that live in worlds we cannot even visit. She taught me how to cook and even let me use a knife to cut my own apples. We baked mud cupcakes outside and she showed me how to grow Aloe Vera plants, make rosemary tea and knit a scarf. When I did something wrong, she never yelled, but we made tea and sat on the porch while she spoke to me in a soft voice.

I was five years old when my brother was born. Ouma Poppie left. She moved to a church old age home and, even though I was only five, to this day I remember how much I hated my parents for not allowing her to stay. My mother went back to work when her maternity leave ended and my brother and I were sent to a day care facility. My mother agrees that I hated every minute of day care. She remembers me crying myself to sleep and begging to go and live with Ouma Poppie.

In trying to find reasons for my resilience, my reflections consistently led back to Ouma Poppie. She was the one boosting my self-esteem, letting me make mistakes, lending perspective to my problems, teaching me self-control, making my emotions valuable, creating a positive relationship, offering me choices, broadening my horizons, helping me set realistic goals, encouraging me to get in touch with my spiritual side, and accepting me for what I was.

In my life

She has burst like the music of angels,

The light of the sun

Ouma Poppie passed away in August 2019. Throughout my life, she influenced me in ways I cannot even begin to fully comprehend. When my mother filed for divorce in 1992, it was Ouma Poppie who soothed me over the phone, telling me to read stories to my brother. This helped me stay out of fights and forget about the ugliness of divorce. The divorce was never finalised and my father decided to repent his sins and become a man of God. He started his own business, which inevitably failed and meant that our family was stuck in a mansion without food to eat. It was Ouma Poppie who sent money for food, which made my mom cry even more. My father accepted a job in another province, but he made it clear that there would be no money for school and he argued that I should start praying more. Ouma Poppie suggested that I ask the school for a bursary, which I did. So my parents moved away with my brother, while I stayed with my father's sister. A few weeks later, my aunt implied that I was hoping to have an affair with my uncle. After a horrendous screaming match between her and my uncle, it was determined that I could no longer live with them. I begged the school principal to let me sleep in the school's hostel. I worked in the school library on Mondays and Wednesdays, washed the squash courts over weekends, helped in the hostel kitchen on Fridays and Tuesdays, and helped in the storerooms. Anything to earn some money. I did not even inform my parents that I was no longer living with family. Months went by and when the school closed for the Christmas holidays, Ouma Poppie suggested that I should stay with her. I was by far the youngest person in the old age home. I spent hours talking to the old people, writing hundreds of stories in my journal, a faded brown Croxley classwork book. I loved helping in the kitchen, dishing up plates of food and serving it to the pensioners. The medical staff were patient with me, letting me hand out medicine, help with changing sheets and allowing me to put cream on the legs and arms of patients. I returned to school with renewed energy and determination to succeed.

At the end of that year, I had some savings, I was the top academic performer in my year group, had written several books full of poetry and short stories, and had a suitcase filled with trophies and certificates. I also received a letter stating that I had a full scholarship for the next academic year. Then my mom showed up one morning, in a small, white van, stating that I would be going "home" with her. I was devastated and this time Ouma Poppie had no answers.

My father cried when he saw me. My brother hugged me and offered me his room. My mother converted the garage into my room. There was a single bed squished in between stacks of boxes, with new, purple bed linen. On the pillow was a thick, black journal. There were tears in mom's eyes when she hugged me. "This is only temporary", she whispered and for the first time in a long time, I wanted to believed her.

In my life

There is someone who touches my life

Waiting here

Waiting near

After more than two decades, the resentment and anger has made way for the comfortable, amicable relationship I have with my parents today. They officially divorced in December 2020, yet seemingly, they are better friends now than what they ever were during their marriage of almost 40 years. I have a wonderful friendship with my brother and his wife, who now live in Australia. I had long conversations with my parents and brother as part of ensuring the trustworthiness and validity of this data construct. While they confirmed the factual events, some emotional admissions invoked shock and deeper reflection. I choose to focus on the now, but I will never disregard my past. I have proven to myself that I am resilient. It is this resilience that has helped me do more than simply survive the UAE. It was a resilient choice, originally instilled but still driven by Ouma Poppie. She taught me how to be independently resilient, how to positively evolve, and to actively adapt and if it was not for this thesis, I might have never realised her true value. She was a modernist in her own right and even though I cannot phone her anymore, I see, feel and hear her everywhere. She is in every letter I am able to read and every dinner I am able to cook. She is in the prayer my son recites before breakfast and she is in the dolls clothes my daughter is creating. She lives on in my resilience.

Scene 21. ***A heart full of love.*** **Independent learning**

MARIUS AND COSETTE CONFESS THEIR MUTUAL LOVE AS THEY MEET AGAIN, WHILE A HEARTBROKEN ÉPONINE WATCHES FROM A DISTANCE.

Independent learning was wonderful for a few learners, but not all learners benefited from distance learning. I was privileged to have a person who taught me resilience at a young age, but during ERT, I was made aware of how many children were not so fortunate. In a classroom, the teacher is there to support all the learners, actively engaging them in lessons and continuously encouraging them to progress. During remote teaching, independent skills proved to be either a saving grace or a great disadvantage to the learners.

Schools throughout the world encourage independent learning, as this is a way in which schools prepare learners for a life after school (Lampert, 2001). At CIA, independent learning forms an integral part of the school development plan, curriculum development, lesson planning and teaching and learning practices. Independent learning is defined as autonomous thinking, acting and learning (Moore, 2009) and when applied to school learning, it implies that learning can take place without the consistent and active support of a teacher (Kamenetz, 2015). During our initial two weeks of preparation for ERT, the mathematics department described independent learning as the ability of learners to study and work through the given study material, in a timely fashion, by taking responsibility for their own learning. Learners should log on to the digital portal, download the required resources that were uploaded by the teachers, sign in to live lessons, complete worksheets and assignments before the due date, and ask questions when the work was not understood. While this sounded wonderful on paper, I personally felt that this was a very high expectation for learners between 11 and 15 years old. This level of self-discipline is often not possible even for adults, yet somehow it was now expected of children. My concerns during the initial meetings were disregarded and the expectations were sent out to parents and learners.

Kenon and Palsole (2019) argue that independent learning is cultivated from a young age and it should be encouraged throughout adolescence in order for a person to become a truly independent worker. Piaget (1959) and Vygotsky (1962) have very different opinions on how independent learning can be acquired. While Piaget (1959) argues that discovery learning will guide learners to stronger cognitive development, Freund (1990) proves that Vygotsky's theory on social learning *before* cognitive development is more sustainable. The more knowledgeable other (MKO) refers to someone who has a better understanding of a particular task, concept or intellectual process

(McLeod, 2018; Rogoff, 1990). The MKO in any situation can take many forms, including, but not limited to, a teacher, a parent, a peer, a sibling, or even in today's technological era, the internet (McLeod, 2018; Schaffer, 1996). The MKO is related to Vygotsky's principle of the zone of proximal development (ZPD) and highlights the difference in what a child can learn independently and what the same child can achieve with some guidance from an MKO (McLeod, 2018; Rogoff, 1990; Vygotsky, 1978). In school, the teacher serves the role of MKO, consistently developing the ZPD for the learners in class. During ERT, the MKO might or might not be present in the form of a parent or sibling, but if the learner does not have the recognition or ability to seek help when needed, development will decline. According to Huber (2021), learning should be more encompassing than just acquiring curriculum content and information, as motivational and emotional aspects of development should not be ignored. Ho and Tay (2020) agree when they state that learners' emotional development is not always easy to assess or monitor, especially during ERT. This is in line with the reasoning of Doucet et al. (2020) who maintain that Maslow's hierarchy of needs should be addressed before the focus moves to Bloom's taxonomy of progress and academic development.

When taking into consideration the fact that our school cohort spanned more than 3600 learners, the logical deduction would be to assume that we were going to be dealing with varied household situations. Yet, this was initially ignored when ERT was implemented. Within the first few weeks, the harsh reality dawned on the teachers via emails, complaints, phone calls, messages and complete ignorance from some families. Support from the teacher is crucial when dealing with multicultural and diverse classrooms (De Wet, 2018; Fullan, 2020), and ERT accentuated the lack of support for some learners. Even if they had access to the internet on their own computer, tablet or smartphone, and they could access all the work themselves, it did not mean that they actually did the work. This links to Rogoff's (1990) argument that the success of independent learning can never be universal, as cultures, access, situations and even personalities differ too much. Some learners blatantly admitted that they gave the work to their nannies or tutors to complete, while other simply ignored all follow-up emails and messages. A social structure that involves having nannies and tutors is common in the UAE, and is something that influences learners' motivation to develop independent learning skills. I noticed that the stronger academic learners engaged more actively in lessons, while the weaker classes had poor attendance and the majority did not submit any work. I smiled when the bright learners asked for additional worksheets, extra assignments and research topics, but I felt that the lower ability learners fell more and more behind. There was no teacher urging them to work, encouraging them to at least try, or even just boost their confidence a bit.

Many of them switched on their laptops, logged in to lessons, but then disappeared behind a muted, blank screen. Emails to their parents did not help. Some parents were not literate in English, so the pleas for stronger support at home were ignored. The ignorance was not necessarily intentional, but simply a question of the MKO being absent. Other parents simply failed to even open their email accounts and many 'read receipts' as requested by the school's email servers, were not received. According to Moore (2009), De Wet (2018) and Elwell (2013), a variety of factors can influence independent learning, including support from home, mental wellbeing, personality types, the level of self-esteem and self-actualisation, environmental factors, consistent encouragement from peers and parents, and structured educational support, to name but a few. Yet, few of these factors were taken into consideration when the school set the expectations for ERT, unknowingly creating a divide in accessibility for learners.

Some parents were becoming increasingly concerned about the amount of work that was being sent home. Covid-19 closed all physical office doors, meaning that millions of employees had to work remotely. As most parents were now working from home, they felt overburdened by the workload and the expectations of the school. After four weeks, we received instructions to halve the workload for every lesson and only set one assignment per week. Slowly, as we explored the unknown territory of remote learning, a balance was being constructed.

The Thénardiers show up with their gang, intending to rob Valjean's house, but Éponine screams a warning. Valjean is alerted and believes that Javert has found him. Valjean tells Cosette that it's time once again for them to go on the run, and starts planning for them to flee France.

During our third week of ERT, we received an email stating that we would be observed in our online lessons. The senior management team would be "dropping into a variety of lessons" to determine the level of consistency with which the teachers were teaching. These lesson observations would be used as "formal professional evaluations" and would determine "your personalized career path". While the email was cleverly worded to not be threatening or negative, it left me feeling insecure and angry. How could I be graded on something that I did not sign up for? Something that I had no training for or experience in doing? I was still getting to grips with my own fears about Covid-19, struggling to find balance in home/work life, trying my best to learn new applications for digital classrooms, and suddenly I felt like a deer caught in the headlights. Burwell (2021), Doucet et al. (2020) and Harris (2020) agree that during the onset of Covid-19, no lesson observations

should take place, with school management rather providing optional training for teachers to help guide them during this unprecedented time. Lesson observations serve a wonderful purpose, but only when implemented with the goal of professional development, and surely not in one of the most trying and difficult times for teachers (Armstrong, 2015; Fernandez & Shaw, 2020; Huber, 2021; Nishida, 2020).

I felt the pressure of continuing my journey as an "outstanding teacher" and I spent hours preparing for my first lesson observation. No one showed up. At the end of the day, I received an email confirming that that my lesson observation had been moved to the next day. I spent the whole night preparing a new lesson. Again, no one showed up. Therefore, when I were notified that they would be in my lessons the next day, I did not prepare anything spectacular. The director of the school, the principal, and two vice-principals entered my lesson. I could only laugh. Two hours later, I sat in an online meeting, listening to them rushing through a checklist of what I should and should not do. I nodded, smiled and politely refused when asked if I would like to know my "grade". The principal was clearly surprised and asked why I was not interested in my grade. Thankfully the feedback was recorded, so I could transcribe my answer:

> "*I am an outstanding teacher. I know I am. I love what I do. This situation is not natural, sustainable, relevant, or worthy. I appreciate your time and effort, but I do not think that any of the expectations set were clear enough. I am not going to be held accountable for a global pandemic where I was forced into emergency remote learning, that I had not control over. I will teach mathematics to the best of my ability. I will encourage learners to participate and provide support where it is possible. Please, take no offense when I say that your grade will not determine my worth. I thank you for some constructive feedback, but that is all I am taking from this*."

There was an uncomfortable silence before the director of the school simply said "point well made" and the meeting was ended. Since then I have not had one formal lesson observation, even though the whole senior leadership team (SLT) was always invited to my live lessons. This was a moment of clarity that reiterated my belief that evolution had taken place, however small. I would never have said or done this four years ago. I did not feel fear or uncertainty. I was not being disrespectful or rebellious. I was simply being honest.

Personally, teachers had to deal with so much more than just remote learning. Covid-19 was still a real threat. Malls, parks, beaches, pools and all other public spaces were closed and a countrywide curfew was implemented. We could not travel between cities or between 8 p.m. and 6 a.m. and children under the age of 12 and people over 60 were not allowed to leave their homes. It felt surreal when I left the house after six weeks to buy some essential groceries. I needed to keep myself sane, meanwhile ensuring that the children were being taken care of emotionally and home schooling took place, ensuring that food was on the table, laundry was done regularly, the house was cleaned ... and all of this while planning lessons and teaching online for seven to nine hours a day. There were other emotional interferences too. My friend was diagnosed with breast cancer and had a double mastectomy. She could receive no visitors in hospital and WhatsApp messages and Zoom meetings became the only way I could offer support. Another friend was struggling with postpartum depression and since I could not visit her, text messages and phone calls became our only means of communication. When she did not answer promptly, I would worry about her, often leading to poor sleep and fatigue. Apart from phone calls and text messages, I could not physically hug a friend who lost her mother or deliver food packages to those families who had lost their income due to Covid-19. There were days when I wanted to run away and not look back, but I did not, because I looked at my children and knew that I wanted to instil resilience in them too. I would simply have to lead by example.

Scene 22. *On my own.* On their own

ÉPONINE WALKS THE STREETS OF PARIS ALONE, IMAGINING THAT MARIUS IS THERE WITH HER, BUT LAMENTS THAT HER LOVE FOR MARIUS WILL NEVER BE RECIPROCATED.

I often refer to them as *orphans of oil*: the children in the UAE that lack nothing in the way of physical, material things, but are seemingly emotionally neglected. I first used the term when I was still teaching at BBS, but have since seen and met many of them. At CIA there were not as many of them, and they easily disappeared in the crowd, but it does not mean that the harsh realities were not there. They are the learners driven from a palatial home to school to a mall, in expensive cars, by drivers in their service. They have unlimited credit cards, but apart from friends in similar situations, they have no one to talk to. They are raising themselves, surrounded by wealth and luxury. I have seen learners with fingernails that have not been cleaned or cut for months, hair that is so tangled it seems like shaving it off would be the only solution, and learners that smelt so bad I had to call in the pastoral team for advice. These learners are the ones that often kept me awake at night. Yes, they were often disruptive and disrespectful in class, but the mother inside me could not help but notice the screams for attention. When we were in school, I used to talk to these learners outside of classrooms and try to engage them on a more personal level, so that I could also reach them in a more formal classroom setting. However, when the classroom was taken away, and I suddenly had to teach a screen, these learners were constantly at the back of my mind. These learners rarely logged in to live lessons, only occasionally submitted worksheets and assignments, and I often wondered if they were okay. I knew that academically they were falling behind, but my bigger concern was whether they were surviving emotionally. I had a meeting with our pastoral leader and a few other members of staff, and I felt better after learning that I was not the only teacher who was worried about these learners. Unfortunately, there was no real solution to our predicament. We all knew the boundaries where teaching stopped and parenting was supposed to start.

My teacher friends in South Africa were similarly concerned about those learners who did not have food at home, and from the USA I was told of concerns about domestic abuse. Teachers all over the world were more than just frustrated with their own situations, they were also concerned with the situations of the learners (Fullan, 2020; Ho & Tay, 2020). On 14 June 2020, one of my acquaintances in the UAE created a *Go Fund Me* page for Goitsimang Moshikaro, a 17-year-old South African girl, abandoned by her father in the UAE on 24 February 2020.

Figure 18: *Go Fund Me* page for Goitsimang

More than 10 000 USD were raised and a South African couple opened their home for Goitsimang, but there were many other children not so fortunate. As people lost their jobs and sources of income during the pandemic, teachers became increasingly more aware of child neglect and emotional abuse. The frustration could be seen and heard in global and local news, with no solution on the horizon.

One Sunday morning we received the news that one of the Year 7 boys at our schools had lost his father to Covid-19. Amidst all the craziness of remote learning, resource creation, lesson observations, financial losses and emotional burdens, I had tended to forget that there was also a pandemic in the world. Ironically, the pandemic had started it all. I became so caught up in my "new" job of online teacher, that I forgot what had created this "job" in the first place.

I closed my school laptop, even though I knew there was still work to be done. I minimised all the windows on my personal laptop. I poured myself a large glass of wine and then video called one of my friends, living in Cape Town. She was also going through a difficult time and together we made inappropriate jokes, laughed too hard and eventually even cried together. I vowed to not be lonely during this isolation. I promised myself that I would be more involved with my own children because that was something that I could control. Covid-19 disrupted the world, our country, the schools, and inevitably also my life. I cannot control Covid-19. I cannot cure the virus. I can only control how I react to it. A reasoning prescribed by Archer (2007) as part of the evolutionary process (Tivel, 2012). I am indebted to the friend who reminded me that Covid-19 is neither a full stop nor a death sentence. It is only

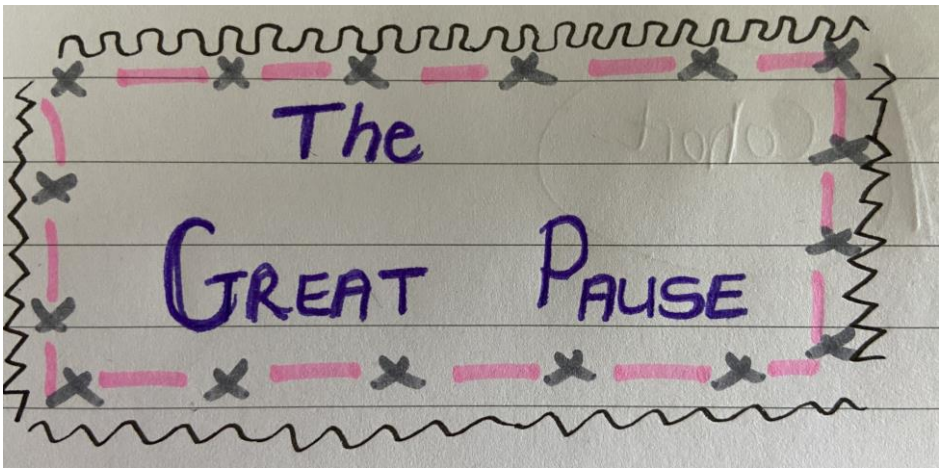


Figure 19: Diary entry, 18 June 2020

Azorin (2020) explores the possibility of a new education system that will arise from this global pandemic and I feel excited about the possibility of change. When the anecdotes, musings, narrative, examples and even the order of events seem chaotic and unorganised, I leave it intentionally so. Postmodernism has taught me that I do not have to make excuses for being emotionally involved in the process of autoethnography; I should simply be aware of the possible limitations thereof and embrace the evolution.

Scene 23. *One day more.* The danger of regression

ON THE EVE OF THE 1832 PARIS UPRISING, VALJEAN PREPARES TO GO INTO EXILE.

Seventeen years after Valjean broke his parole, he is again preparing to run from the law. His actions speak of regression. Aylesworth (2015) describes regression as a return to a former, less developed state. After 15 weeks of online teaching, I found that I was referring to "another day another dirham" again. When I said it out loud for the first time in years, my husband looked at me with a quizzical look on his face. This started a discussion on the possible regression we had experienced with our teaching confidence during Covid-19. While I was comfortable and confident in a classroom setting, becoming a teacher behind a screen felt awkward and strange. After four years of slowly evolving from a wretched teacher to a less miserable one, I was scared and acutely aware of the fact that I could be returning to a mind-set of "only one more day". I never felt like I wanted to leave the profession, but I was acutely aware of the challenges and the possibility and danger of regression. This awareness forced me to reflect on my evolution and I soon realised, it was not only me that had changed. ERT slowly started evolving into online teaching. Teachers gained experience, the curriculum content was adapted, learners got used to a new way of learning and even parents started to form a routine. These changes were not immediate, perfect or always successful, but even the smallest of evolution, is still a change for the better.

MARIUS AND COSETTE SAY GOODBYE TO EACH OTHER, WHILE ÉPONINE ACKNOWLEDGES THAT MARIUS WILL NEVER LOVE HER.

Learners bid their academic year farewell in both the most unusual and the most unnatural ways. Our school graduations and celebration assemblies had to be conducted via digital meetings. Teachers made videos for their classes to say goodbye. There were no class parties or silly songs and so many teachers agreed that it felt strange not to see our learners before the long summer holiday. Learners were not able to have a farewell assembly with their friends and their academic progress could not be recognised in front of an audience. When a learner sent me a message stating that she would miss me over the summer holiday, I immediately thought of the words Eponine sang:

One more day all on my own

Will we ever meet again?

Teachers in the UAE were feeling extremely unsure. Every morning I would open the digital newspaper to read another set of uncertainties. We did not know if schools would reopen in September 2020 for the new academic year. We did not know if remote learning would continue, because we did not know if Covid-19 would be contained and controlled to such an extent that it would be safe for children to go back to school again. Even the six weeks of summer felt uncertain. In the UAE, borders between Abu Dhabi and the other emirates were still closed for travel, so international travel even less likely. There were rumours; rumours of one-way tickets being issued, teachers losing their jobs, schools shutting their doors permanently, and that people would not be able to return to their families if they were stuck outside the country. The honest truth was that we did not know and the uncertainty was both unsettling and a cause for anxiety. My children did not leave the house for four months. We did not travel and we only got to meet with friends and family via Zoom meetings. We spent our six-week summer holiday isolated in an apartment.

ENJOLRAS ENCOURAGES ALL OF PARIS TO JOIN THE REVOLUTION AS HE AND THE OTHER STUDENTS PREPARE FOR BATTLE.

I want to take away from Covid-19 everything that is positive and good. While the crowd is singing

The time is now

The day is here

One day more

I believe that the start of a revolution for the teaching profession is indeed NOW. We will not be able to return to school and fall back into our old habits. Too much has changed and too many new avenues have been opened up for us. Azorin (2020, p. 1) agrees "another education is coming". The demand for access to teaching resources definitely improved the quality of my resources, as well as ensuring that learners could revisit the topics they have struggled with. It opened up the possibility that not everything had to be printed and handed out in class, as so much work could be done online and digitally. Huber (2021) explains that the demand for digital resources has shown us what we are capable of. The parents were forced to be more involved in their children's academic progress, which led to them respecting teachers more and not always questioning our professional opinion. These are but a few of the positives that I will keep upon return to school.

JAVERT REVEALS HIS PLANS TO SPY ON THE STUDENTS.

With gratitude to Covid-19, I am now aware of *the backwards law*, as first described by Watts (1940). The basic concept is that the more we want the positive things, the more negative the experience becomes. I can vouch for the truth of this statement, as during the time of remote learning, I wanted and prayed for positive things, making me consistently more aware of the negativity around me. The more I yearned to go outside, the more I hated staying inside. Watts (1940) notes that the more we pursue something, the more we reinforce the fact that we are lacking it in the first place. Fortunately, the opposite is also true. As we learn to accept a negative experience, it turns into a positive experience. The global pandemic is undoubtedly a negative experience, but the more I came to terms with isolation, the more content and grateful I felt. The resonance of my research is becoming stronger, as I know that I am not the only teacher living the experience of remote learning during Covid-19, not only in the UAE but also globally.

The Thénardiers scheme to profit from the coming violence.

Unfortunately, many educational management systems are trying to capitalise on Covid-19. There are rumours about schools forcing their teachers to take pay cuts, even though their learners are still paying full school fees and teachers are working full-time. Some school owners are taking advantage of Covid-19 by dismissing staff from their positions, only keeping on the most essential members of staff to run the classes. One of my friends had to teach seven hours every day to classes of 70 learners at a time, because she was the only teacher left in her department, while five other teachers were dismissed. Some schools provided wonderful support to their teachers, while other schools expected so much that teachers were hospitalised for burnout and stress. Alexandra Finley is an assistant professor of History at the University of Pittsburgh. Even though I do not know her personally, her feelings on Twitter, 23 June 2020, related perfectly to my feeling at the time.

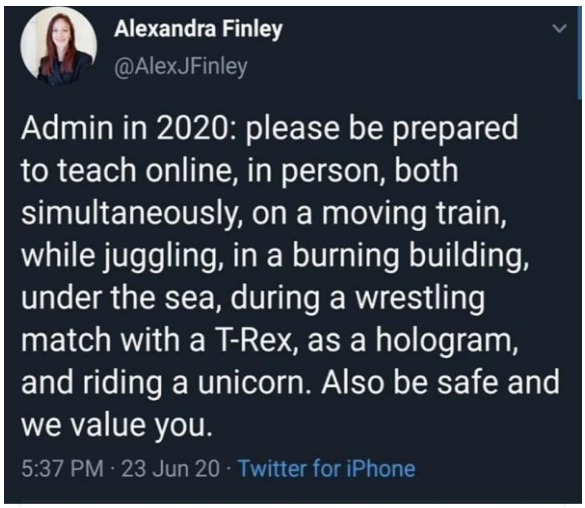


Figure 20: Twitter feed of Alexandra Finley, 23 June 2020

THE PEOPLE ANTICIPATE WHAT THE DAWN WILL BRING.

The future is uncertain, but I am convinced that the teaching profession will never be the same again.

Do you hear the people sing?

We need to change, evolve and take away some positive changes that Covid-19 set on, to improve our practice.

One day more

We will join these people's heroes

We will follow where they go

We will learn their little secrets

We will know the things they know

I have learnt so much; not only about remote learning, but also about the real wants and needs of the learners in class. Covid-19 afforded me time to actively work on this thesis. As I am getting ready to delve into the data in Act II, I sing at the top of my lungs about hope and determination and resilience:

One more dawn

One more day

One day more

Intermission

In a theatre setting, the intermission of a play is usually used for a set or scene change. I will do the same. Thanks to the wonderful food of the UAE and the time spent indoors as a result of Covid-19, I definitely do not look the same as I did in 2015. When reading through journals and dairies, I know that my thought processes have changed. I changed. Evolved. Even though I am aware that the evolution will never be perfectly completed, I acknowledge how far I have come already. By implication, Act II will therefore be slightly different. At this point in the thesis I have collected the data by sorting through journals, diaries, social media posts and emails, as well as other recorded memories. Data construction was completed after sorting through all the collected data and missing pieces were collected from various conversations and documents.

The time is now

The day is here

The time is here to academically and truthfully describe, analyse and finally evaluate the data. Even though there are data analysis cycles available for qualitative research, I agree with Ellis (2004) that when it comes to autoethnographical data, the analysis can be complex, as it is highly subjective, personalised, and does not always fit the norm. After many careful considerations (and attempts) I configured my own data analysis mode by combining ideas and interests in a logical, personalised way, as postmodernism encourages a researcher to do. I primarily drew inspiration from Gibbs's cycle (1998), but I wanted to elaborate on the process. Postmodernly speaking, MY truth might not be YOUR truth. That is okay.

I see my data collection and data construction as puzzle pieces. At the moment they are still scrambled and they do not form a coherent picture.

Figure 21: A visual representation of my collected and constructed data

My grandma, Ouma Poppie, taught me three easy steps to complete a jigsaw puzzle:

1. First sort out all the pieces by collecting the corners and edges.
2. Build the frame so that you can have clear borders and boundaries for the picture.
3. Now build in the middle parts to complete the picture.

The similarity between building a puzzle and describing, analysing and evaluating data is uncanny; not ignoring or devaluating the complex in-between steps of intellectual problem-solving skills. I am metaphorically building a picture and subsequently building a literal puzzle on paper for visual effect – one that represents my personal evolution amid the revolution in the teaching profession. I married these ideas and will, in Act II, use a metaphor within a metaphor to deal with my data, something that has been suggested by Gola and Ervas (2013). To manage and deal with my data puzzle pieces effectively, they had to be progressively sorted according to a timeline, placed within the metaphor of my conceptual framework, show both evolutionary and revolutionary traits, and finally answer my original research question. As this seemed like a complex and daunting task, I decided to map my data into a linear scatterplot. The development of the scatterplot led to this preliminary set of axes:

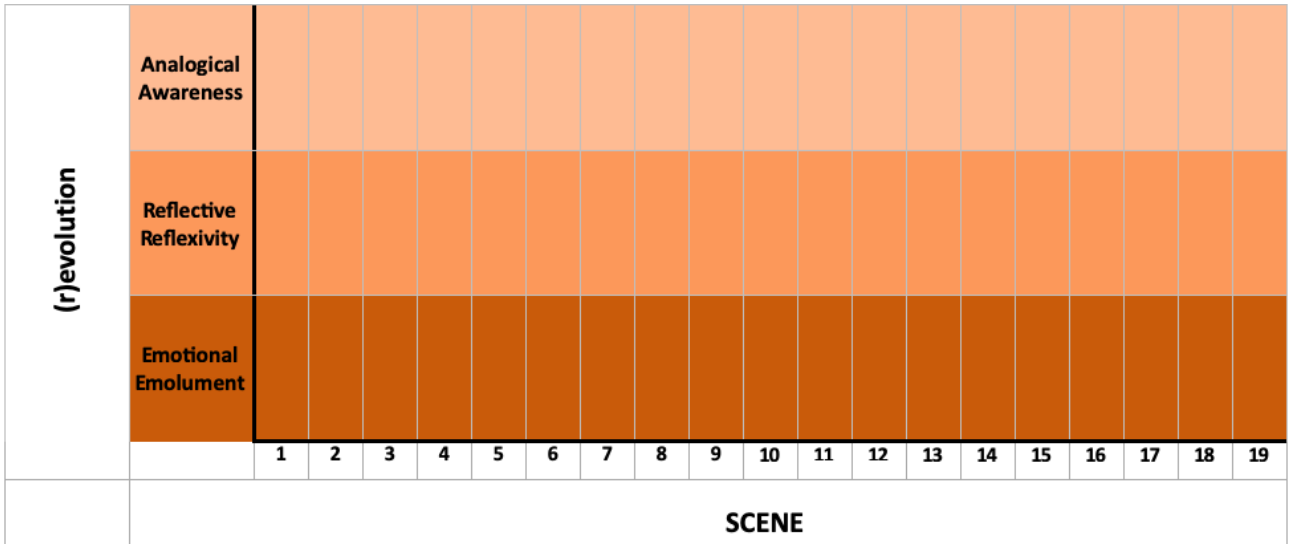


Figure 22: The basis of my personal, postmodern, ERA graph

I call this an ERA graph for a variety of reasons. An **era** is defined as a period of time marked by a distinctive character or events (Coleman, 2006) and has meaning in definitions of both evolution and revolution. Darwin (1859) was the first to note that every part of any evolutionary process has distinctive characteristics that in turn can define an era of a specific species. Tivel (2012) applies the conceptual era of evolution in the social sciences when annotating every progressive event with

certain characteristics, specific to that time in history. Revolutions are era-definitive in their own right (Brinton, 1938) as every revolution has a particular set of traits, designated to an explicit time in the revolutionary process (Elwell, 2013). The use of the word *era* was thus intentional, but I will intellectually layer it by using ERA as an acronym:

Emotional Emolument,

Reflective Reflexivity,

Analogical Awareness.

This is why:

As I was sorting through my data, I recognised a trend: most of the incidents and events had an emotional catalyst. When I delved into every event, I could identify the emotional expense involved, a fee that was metaphorically paid, leading to the rebranding of the word *emolument.* The first phase of my (r)evolutionary data cycle, is therefore titled *Emotional Emolument* to describe the incident and identify the emotions driven within this event. Act II, Scenes 1–4, will thus be spent *describing* the events and acknowledging the emotional expenses, without analysing them beyond the narrative.

In order to understand the events in a more contextual and holistic manner, reflectivity and reflexivity are two concepts interchangeably used to analyse past events (Gay, 2009). I am aware of my own self and my positionality as subjective researcher (reflexivity), while looking back at past events in a conscious manner (reflection). This gave way for the *Reflective Reflexivity* phase of my data inquiry. Following the emotional emolument, Act II, Scenes 5–14, will be spent on *analysing* the incidents to find more meaning in the thesis construct.

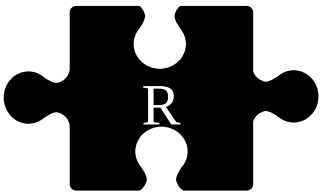
Finally, analogy refers to the correspondence, comparison or partial similarity between two things, typically for the purpose of explanation (Bullock & Trombley, 1999), while awareness relates to the knowledge of something (Coleman, 2006). To finally find possible answer(s) to my original research question, I need to marry my data to the literature reviewed, thus validating *Analogical Awareness* as the third phase of my data cycle. In Scenes 15–18 of Act II, my original research questions will be celebrated with conclusive narrative that ties in with the existing knowledge and contributes to the teacher collective.

Neither evolution nor revolution is a cyclic process, so I opted for a linear graph to show how the data led to an explanation of my (r)evolution. As a mathematics teacher, it also made sense, as the

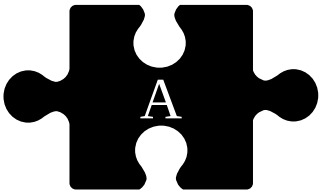
linear relationship between certain events (x-axis) and the ERA progress (y-axis) is always positive, relating to the fact that evolution cannot be regressive. With varying gradients and an infinite timeline, the graph seemed more than suitable for my specific purpose.

As I sort my data puzzle pieces into the graph, the metaphor becomes even more suitable.

Step 1 of building a puzzle and that of data description have similar characteristics: by finding the corners of a puzzle, we are also identifying the emotional cornerstones and parameters of the data. We just have to look for the shapes and put them in place. A clear picture is not yet required.



Step 2 of puzzle building outlines the borders of the picture to be completed, while this step in data analysis implies that one can start to see the holistic picture forming, even though everything is not yet clear. We might not understand fully what we are about to discover, but we can see the magic starting. (A fun explanation from Ouma Poppie on building puzzles that seems suitable at the moment.)



Step 3 is completing the puzzle by exploring which piece fits in where. It is useful to refer back to the original picture for reference, similar to the researcher referring back to the original research questions. We use analogies to find meaning in the constructs and critically evaluate the completed narrative to ensure that everything *fits*.

My research question naturally dispersed into two parallel concepts, namely, my own, personal evolution and the revolution in the teaching profession. While I was obviously essential throughout the former, my adapted agility and grit became evident throughout the latter. I not only survived the UAE, I also learnt how to live and be happy here too. When a global pandemic forcefully transformed the education sector, I did not substantially regress, but it was my evolved self that made me progress through it. Act II celebrates not only my data, but also my journey. I linked the scenes in Act II to my timeline of events, and I gradually added the puzzle pieces to the ERA graph. In the end a few things emerged: a completed picture, a comprehensive narrative, and a linear graph showing the evolution of data, and all of these culminated into answering my research question(s). Gibbs (1995), Maree (2016) and Guba (1981) all highlight the value of a visual aid in research. The

following table serves as a visual guide to quickly reference and find the different phases of data (r)evolution:

Table 6: Data developmental stages

	Emotional Emolument Discussion of data	**Reflective Reflexivity Analysis of data**	**Analogical Awareness Evaluation of data**
Revolution:			
Corner Piece 1: NEED	Scene 1	Scene 7	Scene 15
Corner Piece 2: PLANNING	Scene 2	Scene 8	Scene 16
Corner Piece 3: EXPECTATIONS	Scene 3	Scene 9	Scene 17
Corner Piece 4: SUPPORT	Scene 4	Scene 10	Scene 18
Evolution:			
Corner Piece 1: NEED	Scene 1	Scene 6	Scene 15
Corner Piece 2: PLANNING	Scene 2	Scene 11	Scene 16
Corner Piece 3: EXPECTATIONS	Scene 3	Scene 12 & 13	Scene 17
Corner Piece 4: SUPPORT	Scene 4	Scene 14	Scene 18

The repetitive nature of the graph is in line with postmodernism, where repeating something to the point of discomfort might lead to the natural recall of information (Cahoone, 2003; Elwell, 2013) – similar to a casual reminder that cell phones must be switched off for the duration of the autoethnographic performance.

ACT II

Scene 1. ***Do you hear the people sing?***

Discussing the *need* for (r)evolution

GAVROCHE TELLS THE STUDENTS OF GENERAL LAMARQUE'S DEATH. THEY REALISE THAT THEY CAN USE THE PUBLIC'S DISMAY TO INCITE THEIR REVOLUTION AND THAT THE TIME IS PERFECT FOR STARTING THE UPRISING.

The first corner piece of my puzzle is found in the knowledge that a (r)evolution was needed, by both the education system throughout the world and me. My literature review (Act I, Scene 4) proves that teachers throughout the world have been unhappy in their practice for many years. Pre-Covid, teachers were overburdened with administration, lack of funding, poor salaries when compared to other professions that require a degree, extensive expectations from management and parents, outdated curriculum content ... the list seems universal, even though not all complaints are relevant to all contexts. Teachers leave the profession within the first few years, owing to a lack of support for their problems. The gap between the system on paper and the implementation in classrooms seems to be getting greater. Parents have been putting more pressure on teachers to improve learners' grades, instead of teaching the learners to take responsibility for their own learning. Teachers are held accountable for every failure and this pressure in turn leads to a negative teaching environment, as teachers are often tired, angry, dejected and ready to simply give up. I experienced this feeling twice. First, when I was a newly qualified teacher in South Africa and then again in the UAE. It felt like I could do nothing right, and I was constantly in trouble for simply trying to be an inspirational teacher. A change was needed, but even though research suggests reform and change, the *system* would not listen, so it had to be forcefully overthrown, the true definition of a revolution. Early 2020 witnessed the outbreak of Covid-19, a global pandemic that changed the execution of education almost instantly. Teachers had to move from classrooms to screens, and the need to adapt resources, expectations, methodologies and content was a natural implication of the pandemic.

Covid-19 is a pandemic that has claimed lives, ruined economies and caused havoc in social structures, but it is also the climactic event that has started a possible revolution for the teaching profession. Covid-19 forced the world to stop and see what teachers are truly doing in classrooms, and what they are potentially capable of. All I can hope and pray for, as I am sure many other teachers would agree, is that when things return to "normal" again, it will be anything but the same

as pre-Covid. I can almost hear teachers all over the globe singing along with the cast of *Les Misérables* as the curtains rise for Act II.

Do you hear the people sing?
Singing a song of angry men?
It is the music of a people
who will not be slaves again!

During the revolution, I was also forced to look at the necessity of my personal evolution. My diaries and journals prove that I too was in need of a change. I was not happy in South Africa, but I was not happy teaching in the UAE either. My first two years of teaching in the UAE taught me that my resilience was not enough for a happy life. I was simply surviving, instead of living. I survived some traumatic events from my past by simply shoving them into a "something that happened" box and closing the lid. In the UAE, the box refused to stay closed. In South Africa, I was distracted by birthday parties, family get-togethers, cheese-and-wine nights and superfluous events that made me "forget" about the trauma. I shoved every uncomfortable thought and memory far away into my subconscious. Some might call it denial or ignorance, now I simply see it for the coping-mechanism that it was. But mechanisms do not last forever. They break and falter at the times we least expect them to.

When our family of four arrived in Abu Dhabi, we were alone. I started teaching without any friends to complain to. It was me and my husband, and two children who depended on us for stability and security. Somewhere in this madness, I was forced to stop and open than dreaded box. The hate, anger, guilt and resentment that I felt towards my parents had to be addressed. The feeling of being an incompetent, inadequate parent myself had to be resolved. My false confidence had to be torn away, so that I could fix whatever was broken on the inside. If I truly, honestly, undoubtedly wanted to be happy, which I did, I had to start clearing space in my head for new meaning. The need for evolution had not fully surfaced, but it was not absent either.

I rewrote so many stories and events of my first two years in the UAE that some of them sound surreal when I read them again. I can describe ridiculous warning letters, ironic instances of wealthy children being hungry at school, and even relay statistics on low literacy levels. My emotional cup proverbially overflows when I try to complete a narrative on my own evolution though. There was a need to evolve; I just was not actively aware of it. By writing everything down, the need became therapy, and I could also join the chorus:

When the beating of your heart
Echoes the beating of the drums
There is a life about to start
When tomorrow comes

From the data collected and constructed, it was clear that a personal evolution was imminent, and it was born out of frustration, anger, resentment, melancholy and even fear of the unknown. Reflexively, I bear witness to the alterations taking place in the educational realm. They were needed pre-Covid and this need intensified during the pandemic. The revolution started with uncertainty, panic, anxiety, irritation, wrath and annoyance. The emotional emolument paid the price for the required changes in both spheres.

A new need arose during our summer break (July/August 2020): we needed to return to school. My husband and I became increasingly aware of the emotional toll of not leaving the house for months on end and not socialising with other people. We not only wanted, we needed a return to some sense of "normal". Our bodies needed fresh air, healthy bacteria and vitamin D from the sun, while our minds needed stimulation away from screens, in interaction with other people. When the schools opened at the end of August 2020, additional needs were added: a need to voice our concerns, a need for different expectations and a need for support. At this point I realised that the need for evolution would be like evolution itself – never-ending – as we simply needed to adapt and change as society, time, technology and our basic needs do. Revolution might have a primary need that fuels the changes, but the imbedded, secondary level of needs will also be adapting throughout the process. Revolution is merely a letter in the alphabet without evolution (pun intended).

This knowledge is enough to plot the first puzzle piece in my ERA-graph, a cornerstone for the data that will follow.

Corner puzzle piece 1 from Act II, Scene 1: Description of the NEED for a (r)evolution

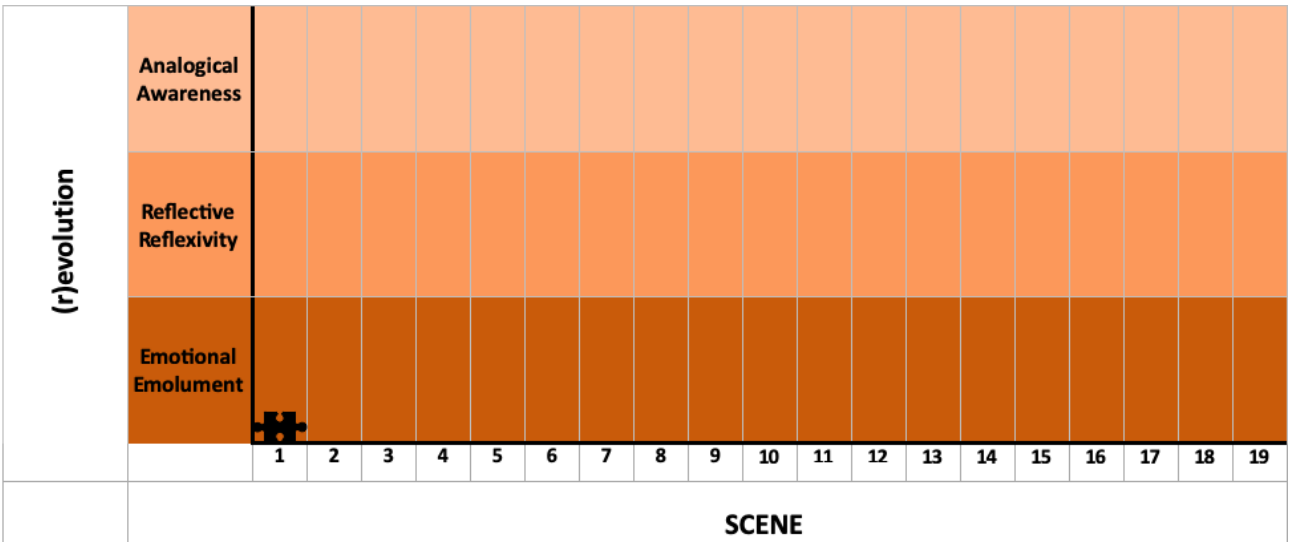


Figure 23: ERA-graph at the end of Scene 1

Scene 2. ***Building the barricade***

Discussing the *plan* for (r)evolution

AS THE STUDENTS BUILD A BARRICADE TO SERVE AS THEIR RALLYING POINT, JAVERT, DISGUISED AS A REBEL, VOLUNTEERS TO SPY ON THE GOVERNMENT TROOPS. MARIUS DISCOVERS THAT ÉPONINE HAS DISGUISED HERSELF AS A BOY TO JOIN THE REBELS AND, WANTING TO KEEP HER AWAY FROM THE IMPENDING VIOLENCE, HE SENDS HER TO DELIVER A FAREWELL LETTER TO COSETTE. VALJEAN INTERCEPTS THE LETTER AND LEARNS ABOUT MARIUS AND COSETTE'S ROMANCE.

When the schools closed in March 2020, teachers had to start building the metaphorical barricade. We gave up our holiday to plan and prepare for remote learning. Personally, I was preparing to explore the emotionally pivotal moments in my life. Thus, the second corner piece of the puzzle emerged as *planning*.

Teachers are natural planners (Kamenetz, 2015), as preparation is a key component of their job description (Jacobson, 2016). We tried to be as prepared as we possibly could. Planning for the *expected* was not too challenging. At the start of Covid-19, we planned for distance education. As a teacher I expected learners and parents to feel unsure in this new teaching strategy, so I redesigned PowerPoint slides, made videos to explain mathematical concepts, discovered Loom, an online application to make videos of PowerPoint presentations, and tried to predict what learners might need. I made sure worksheets were easy to follow and I included worked answers so that learners could check their own understanding by means of self-assessment. As a mathematics department, we anticipated higher expectations, as maths is one of the core subjects, so we planned accordingly. We created extra worksheets, and assessments were more focused and readily available. I expected parents to be overly involved in their children's academic progress, thus I made sure that every detail was perfect. I anticipated that parents would ask for more work, as they would be afraid that their child would fall behind, so I uploaded additional exercises for their perusal. The science, English, geography and IT departments applied the same methodology in their planning. **We were all wrong**. We could anticipate and plan for many possible outcomes, but during this unprecedented time, with no frame of reference, planning for the unexpected was more than challenging.

I never imagined that parents would complain about *too much* work. I never expected so many additional questions from learners. I did not foresee lesson observations from management within the first two weeks, professional development sessions running for four hours after school, or even just presenting live lessons daily to classes. I never envisaged a Year 10 boy having an anxiety attack behind a screen, or a 13-year-old girl attending her grandfather's funeral via a video call. Even though I tried to thoroughly anticipate and plan for certain events, it seems impossible to be prepared for everything.

We planned to travel for our summer holiday. It was cancelled. The school planned for a smooth return in the new academic year, starting in August 2020. Sanitisation stations were installed, desks were spaced out to allow for social distancing, masks were made mandatory, and a negative Covid test was required by all teachers and learners above the age of 12 to enter the school premises. Temperature check stations were set up at every entrance to the school and the school formed a Covid team to ensure that everything went according to plan. The plan failed. The school opened for learners on 31 August 2020, but on 15 September 2020 we got the news that the school would be closed and quarantined again until further notice. Although every precautionary measure had been taken, positive Covid-19 cases where detected and, as per government instructions, led to the school closing immediately. The initial implementation of planning lasted for only 12 school days. Then we needed to replan and restructure and re-evaluate our plans, again. My 10-year old daughter described the experience as an emotional rollercoaster and I could not argue with her logic. I was happy to be home again, sad to be away from my class, angry that things were not going as we planned, while thankful that we were still healthy … the ellipsis an indication of the emotions that seemed to be running wild, continuously, as we tumbled through the start of a new academic year. At the time of writing this thesis, we are two-thirds into the 2020/2021 academic year and, when reflecting, I can identify how much time was spent on planning and how many of these plans were actually executed. I cannot help but wonder how I would do things differently, knowing what I know now.

For this thesis, I planned to delve into the last five years of my teaching career. I planned to collate my stories into an academic narrative using an autoethnography as the method. I expected to spend two to three years sorting and working through the data I had collected during my teaching years in the UAE. Covid-19 stuck up a virus finger at my perfectly planned thesis recipe. I never planned that Covid-19 would ensure that my own children would not leave the house for almost six months and that a revolution would be part of my evolution as a scholar. I went through the five stages of

grief, developed by Santrock (2007), namely Denial, Anger, Depression, Bargaining, and Acceptance, but not gradually. I experienced emotional turmoil daily, weekly, monthly and even in reverse order. I never planned to delve into my childhood, yet in search of answers I was naturally led to explore my personality traits, heritage and history. While I planned for six weeks of travel during our summer holiday, I could now spend it working through my data, shrinking my proposed academic timeline. Ten months ago, my planning looked completely different and never in my wildest, most imaginative dreams, could I have anticipated what 2020, and then 2021, would bring. I have a strong suspicion that I am not the only one who was surprised.

Eponine disguised herself as a boy in order to be a part of the revolution. The learners disguised themselves behind screens, but they too formed part of the revolution. Not only as a teacher, but also personally, I had learnt so much from the learners in turn. I learnt that they were not shy to share their technological knowledge, they were much more creative than I gave them credit for, and they actually missed going to school. This made me feel hopeful, thankful and sad, all at the same time, again proving that the emotional emolument was not to be taken for granted. I felt like Valjean, intercepting the "love letter" between the learners and their independence. I was worried that the learners would not need me anymore, while also stressing about the learners who I knew were struggling on their own. During this phase of the data collection, I noted that even when we plan to plan for the unexpected, we often fail, and ironically succeed in the strangest of ways. At this point I feel comfortable enough to add a second puzzle piece to my ERA graph of (r)evolution.

Corner puzzle piece 2, from Act II, Scene 2: Description of the PLANNING of a (r)evolution

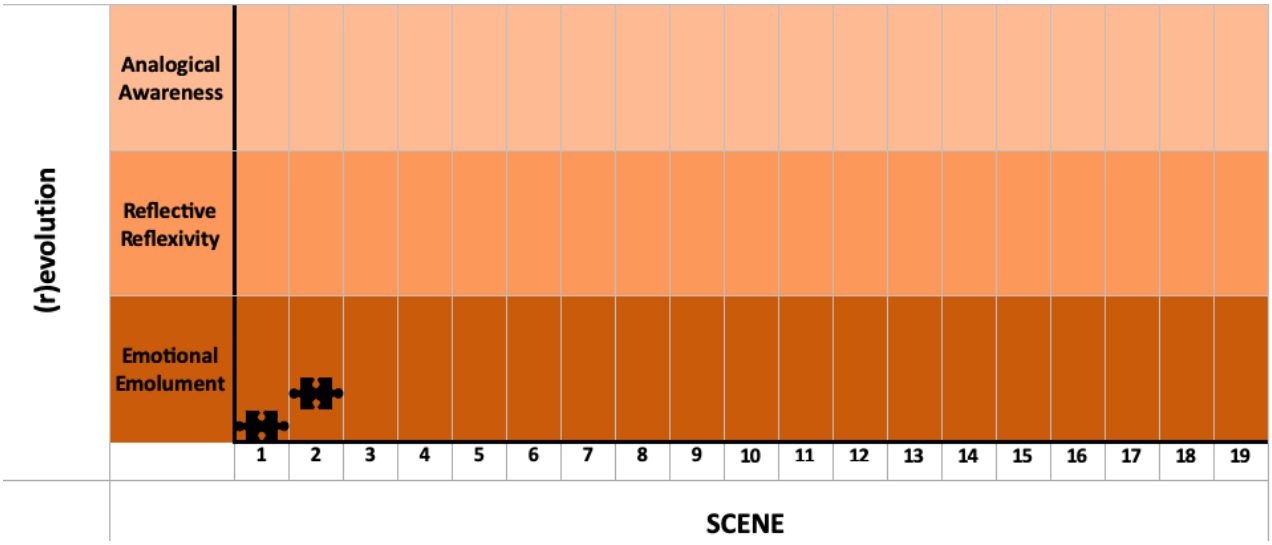


Figure 24: ERA graph at the end of Scene 2

Scene 3. ***Javert at the barricade.***

Discussing the *expectations* for (r)evolution

THE FRENCH ARMY ARRIVES AT THE BARRICADE AND DEMANDS THAT THE STUDENTS SURRENDER. JAVERT TELLS THE STUDENTS THAT THE GOVERNMENT WILL NOT ATTACK THAT NIGHT, BUT GAVROCHE EXPOSES HIM AS A SPY, AND THE STUDENTS DETAIN JAVERT. THEIR PLAN IS TO SPARK A GENERAL UPRISING WITH THEIR ACT OF DEFIANCE, HOPING THAT ALL THE PEOPLE OF PARIS WILL SIDE WITH THEM AND OVERWHELM THE ARMY.

The planning of the narrative of evolution, as well as the planning of the revolution in progress, made me naturally focus on the expectations, similar to the events unfolding in this scene from *Les Misérables*. The French army expected the students to surrender, Javert expected the students to listen to him and the students expected the people to side with the revolution. Thus, the third corner of the puzzle falls into place as *expectations*.

In March 2020, the MoE in the UAE expected schools to implement a new form of the curriculum, with new quality assurance methods, over unfamiliar digital platforms, and they wanted it done within 10 working days. School management and the SLT expected teachers to plan, prepare, execute and evaluate this new format of teaching. Social media, online newspapers and my personal messages exploded with expectations of failure from teachers all over the world.

"It cannot be done."

"It will never work."

"Too much strain on teachers and parents."

"It seems impossible."

These are just a few of the messages sent to me in the first few days of preparing for remote learning. While feverishly planning to meet some of the expectations, while feeling unsafe and unsure about the accountability of the proposed teaching strategies, teachers seemed more emotional than ever. The list of expectations seemed to grow daily, adding to the anxiety and stress experienced by teachers.

A few expectations that were sent out on our second day of remote teaching included, but were not limited to:

*At least two hours of live lessons per class per subject per week. Cameras are to be switched on at all times and every lesson should be recorded for quality assurance and safety precautions.
*Formal and professional attire to be worn during all live lessons.
*Sending attendance reminders to classes before 7.30 a.m. every morning.
*Daily attendance per class to be recorded and sent to heads of year before the end of every lesson.
*Assignments and worksheets to be sent out weekly, assessed within three days and parents notified via email of results. Concerns should be raised within 96 hours and a list of support material should be provided.
*Department meetings to be held at least once a week. Agenda to be sent to the vice-principal.
*Lesson observations to take place twice a week. Reports to be sent to the Head of Secondary.
*Quality assurance to be recorded once per week. Report to be sent to HoD.
*All VAAs and Advanced Cognitive Performance (ACPs) to be implemented in every lesson. Proof of HPL lesson planning and implementation should be sent to HoD weekly.
*PowerPoint slides, lesson plans, resources and additional links to be uploaded on the shared drives at least 24 hours in advance.
*Assessment and exam dates to be set at least three weeks in advance, with ample opportunity for the learners to revise.

These were added to the already extensive list of expectations sent out the week before. When speaking to colleagues, I can confidently say that we were all feeling overwhelmed, stressed and extremely emotional. The expectations seemed unrealistic and impossible to achieve, especially when taking into consideration that many teachers had families of their own and time travel was not yet possible. The 24 hours in every day just did not seem enough. Our principal noted in a morning email that we should push ourselves to go "beyond the expectations". I laughed out loud when I read this, because while it might have been sent with motivational intent, the unrealistic absurdity of the whole situation made me feel inadequate. Even when the school closed for summer, after 17 weeks of "surviving" remote learning, I looked at the expectations and they still seemed ridiculous and unobtainable. More than ever I realised that there was an enormous gap between the SLT of our school and what was actually happening in classrooms. It seemed like management expected things to look good on paper, not realising that it is not sustainable practice. There was a small silver lining to the dark cloud of expectations. As time passed, SLT popped into online lessons more frequently.

Slowly, the initial expectations dwindled, becoming more and more realistic. On 2 July 2020, during our last meeting for the academic year, I wrote this down:

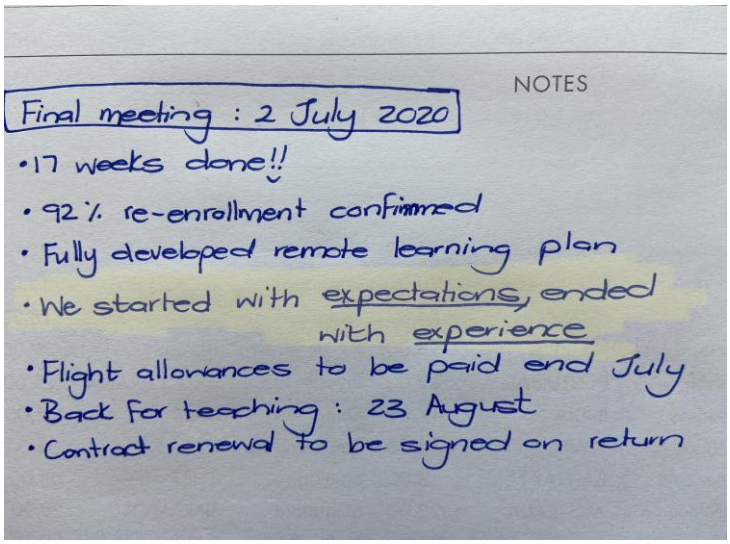


Figure 25: Diary entry from 2 July 2020

We started with EXPECTATIONS, but ended with EXPERIENCE. This was one of the most constructive lessons I learnt from this journey and something that I will apply for the rest of my life. It made me think back to the idealistic self I was when I started teaching in South Africa many years ago. I had expectations that were crushed by experience. As I delved through the data of my personal life, looking beyond the last five years, I could see how the expectations turned into experience and they were not always directly proportionate to one another.

Neither of my parents are educated on a tertiary level. My father never completed high school and left for national service in the army when he was only 17 years old. My mother accepted a position as a bank teller after she completed high school. None of their siblings has a qualification either. Growing up, I was never encouraged to think about the possibility of tertiary education. I attended government schools in medium-to-low-income demographic areas, meaning that very few of my friends or peers were thinking about attending colleges or universities. It was generally accepted that I would simply go straight into employment after high school, like most of my peers and the rest of my family. The academic expectations were low, yet here I am working on a doctoral thesis.

Throughout my life I was able to identify the set expectations from my parents and peers and I am blessed, happy and grateful to report that I exceeded most of those (relatively low) expectations. I

was not innocent when setting up certain expectations myself. When we moved to the UAE, I expected to be a wonderful teacher. I expected that I would be supported by management, that the learners would be eager to learn and that I would be happier than ever before. It was a bitter lesson to learn that expectations are often idealistic and not realistic, and that meeting those expectations requires hard work, sacrifices and continuous adaptation.

When the schools opened in September 2020, there were expectations again. The school expected things to run smoothly as long as they planned for everything. I expected to be tired on our return, physically and emotionally adapting to "normal" again. I anticipated anxiety from my children, envisaged us all struggling to get up in the morning, and even expected some emotional outbursts. Beautifully, my theory on experience proved to be true again. The school closed. We were not nearly as tired as I expected us to be, and the children were thrilled to be back in school. Truly, we started with expectations and ended with experience.

While the revolution's expectations had to be funnelled into a more obtainable measure, my evolution's expectations were dispersed in a cumulative manner, proving that expectations can be inversely related to the experience gained. Setting expectations and meeting them are almost always two separate activities, with only some shared traits, and how they will flow and evolve is unpredictable, just as Covid-19 proved to be. Another piece of the puzzle is thus added to my data graph.

Corner Puzzle Piece 3, from Act II, Scene 3: Description of the EXPECTATIONS of a (r)evolution

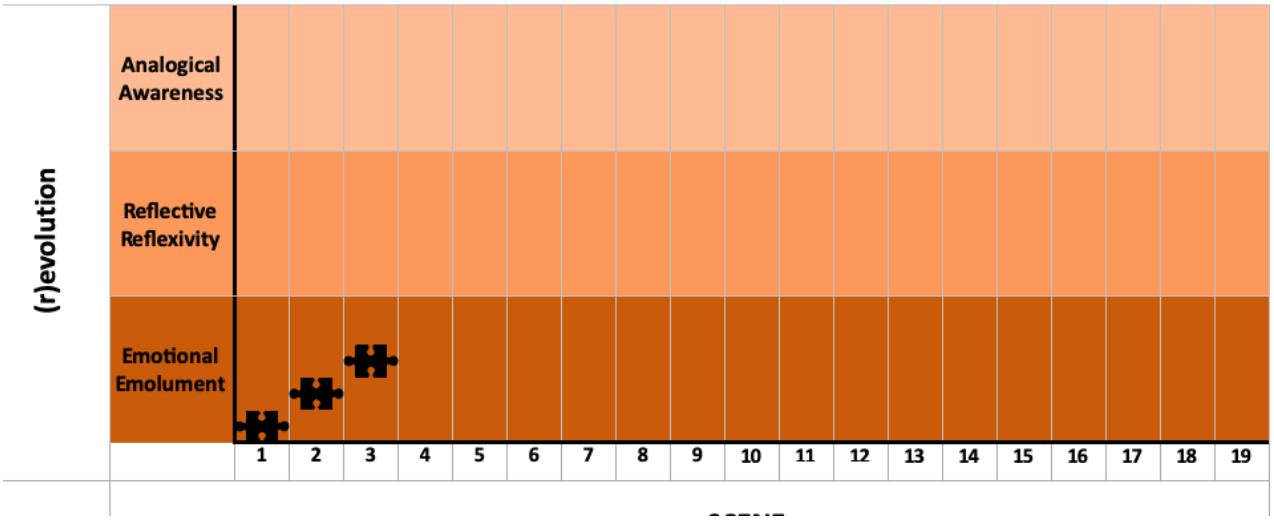


Figure 26: ERA graph at the end of Scene 3

Scene 4. ***The first attack.***

Discussing the *support* for (r)evolution

VALJEAN, DISGUISED AS A SOLDIER, ARRIVES AT THE BARRICADE, HOPING THAT HE MIGHT PROTECT MARIUS FOR COSETTE'S SAKE. DURING THE FIRST ATTACK VALJEAN SAVES ENJOLRAS BY SHOOTING AT A SNIPER. IN RETURN, HE ASKS ENJOLRAS TO BE THE ONE TO EXECUTE THE IMPRISONED JAVERT. BUT VALJEAN FREES JAVERT AND EVEN THOUGH JAVERT WARNS VALJEAN THAT HE WILL NOT GIVE UP HIS PURSUIT OF JUSTICE, VALJEAN SAYS THERE ARE NO CONDITIONS TO HIS RELEASE, AND HOLDS NO ILL-WILL TOWARD JAVERT FOR DOING HIS DUTY.

The events in Scene 4 of *Les Misérables* synchronise metaphorically and beautifully with the data of my thesis. I wanted to protect the learners and their learning. In order to do so I *disguised* myself behind a screen, but I never stopped teaching. I was given the opportunity to *save* a few learners with additional support and, in return, I was rewarded with *freedom and trust* from management. Instead of arguing about the trustworthiness of my data, I am accepting the postmodern concept of my truth being the only truth that matters in this moment and I am thus setting the validity and reliability free. I am convinced that the verisimilitude will be enough to justify trust in the data. As the CMT supports the structure of my narrative, the final corner piece of the puzzle is identified as *support*.

When the schools were closed in early March 2020, the MoE and the UAE government supported families and schools by providing equipment and additional funding. The schools immediately focused on parental and learner support. Teachers had to support not only learners, but also parents. The parents focused on the support of their children's learning at home. Somehow support for teachers was shoved under the proverbial rug, again. We were expected to work extra hours, upload additional documentation, provide support in a variety of different ways and yet support for the teachers was missing. This realisation made me feel angry and resentful, yet at the end of the month we received our full salary, so I found myself chanting "another day, another dirham" again.

It was early on 30 March 2020, during a meeting with the SLT, that I spoke those dreaded words out loud for the first time in many months. The microphone of my computer was muted when I

uttered the mantra that I came to hate, but the shock on my husband's face, who was sitting across from me at the table, proved that I had verbalised the thought. I suddenly felt scared and anxious about a possible regression. I impulsively decided to take action, unmuted myself, and asked our principal, "How are teachers being supported in this strange journey we find ourselves in?" There was silence at first, but then the other members of staff started asking similar questions:

"How can we share resources?"

"How can we make communication easier?"

"How can we alleviate the administrative load?"

For the first time in my teaching career, I experienced teachers working together, supporting each other like team members ideally should. The school supported the teachers by giving us all full access to the shared network drive. We had an optional yoga session in the mornings, where one of the members of the PE department led us through breathing exercises. The director of Special Education and Needs (SEN) shared mental and emotional wellbeing exercises every morning. More and more teachers commented on how the support was not only improving their mental health, but it also motivated them to do more. As we progressed through remote learning, there was also a gradual shift of focus from the parents. I received regular emails from parents asking how they could support me and other teachers. It honestly felt that teacher appreciation grew, while the stress and anxiety simmered down. Previously, I often felt like an "us" (the teachers) against "them" (parents/learners), but suddenly we were a team, striving towards a shared goal. And it felt good.

The support continued when we physically returned to school in September 2020. Teachers who were in the “high risk” category for Covid-19 were given support to continue working from home. A crèche facility was created at school for the children of staff, where they could safely wait for their teacher parents at the end of every school day. Mental health awareness and emotional wellbeing continued to be a part of the daily regime at school and therapy sessions for teachers and other members of staff were created online. The sharing of resources seemed to be accepted as normal practice, alleviating administrative pressure for teachers. The positive changes made me smile and experience a feeling of a small victory. The support faltered at times, especially when parent evenings were scheduled twice a week, leading to an additional six hours spent in front of screens every week. Additional HPL and Peer Learning Communities (PLC) meetings were held once a week, adding four to five more hours of work per week. In March 2021, a year after schools were closed for the first time, it seemed like teachers were more comfortable in teaching, whether it

was remotely, or in a hybrid/blended model in a classroom. The support from schools, parents and colleagues definitely contributed to this level of adapted confidence.

Personally, I had felt unsupported for a very long time. It was "me against the world", as I melodramatically wrote in a teenage diary. However, this feeling was all part of the emotional emolument that I needed to pay. My grandma was always there, even if not always present. In Act I, Scene 18, I explored her role in the building of resilience, something that has clearly been a critical support structure in my life. A more practical example of how she supported me, regardless of her presence or direct guidance, was the fact that she cultivated a love for reading. Books supported me in a way that I cannot disregard, as did the knowledge gained by reading more. Evolution requires no environmental support (Darwin, 1859), but emotional support can be the difference between failure and success in personal growth (Ellingson & Ellis, 2008). Gonzales (2012) eloquently describes resilience as an art that can be mastered by learning how to support yourself, even in the most troubling of times. This idea resonated strongly within my data. As a child, teenager, student, newlywed, mother, expatriate and teacher, this is something that I unknowingly learnt how to do: support myself. How?

My grandma raised me to be an independent thinker when she taught me to read. I learnt life lessons from characters in books and when problems presented themselves, I often thought of how these characters would solve the situation.

When I was feeling hopeless:

"Daar is altyd 'n antwoord, jy moet net soek" (*There is always an answer, you just need to look for it*) – Bettie Naudé, *Saartjie*.

I started reading this series of books when I was about eight years old. It followed the life of *Saartjie*, a rebellious teenage girl who explored the world in a creative way, with her best friends being a part of her adventures. I learnt many life lessons from *Saartjie*, but more importantly, the book urged me to have dreams beyond the ordinary.

When I wanted to quit:

"The proper function of man is to live, not to exist" – Jack London, *Into the wild*.

Many books I read implored me to venture beyond the expectations set by my environment. I loved reading books based on true events, as I often felt they supported the urge I had to do more than just exist.

When I was afraid:

"Be bold. Be daring. That is the only way to win at life." – Richard Branson, *Screw It, Just Do It.*

The older I got, the more varied my reading list became. I thoroughly enjoyed reading up on psychology, business strategies, biographies, conspiracy theories and even erotica. The world's boundaries seemed to disappear with every book I read and the support I unknowingly got from between the covers of books made me realise that my potential stretches to where I let it stop. Books often gave me (they still do) renewed energy, hope and motivation to be better. The list of examples can be found in the more than 30 journals I have kept through the last three decades. The journals in themselves became a method of emotional support. The support given in the form of words in books was consistent, not only while growing up and facing challenges, but also during my evolutionary time in the UAE.

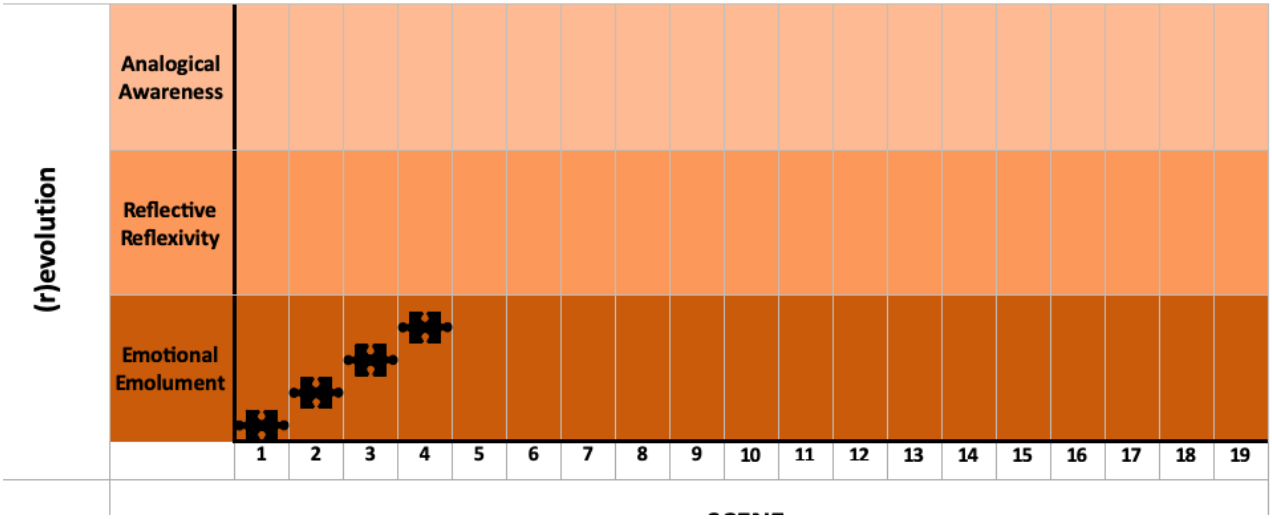
During the last two decades, my husband has proved to be an unconditional cheerleader for my happiness. His unwavering support extends beyond words. While I can probably write books filled with clichés about his support, I am hesitant to devalue his worth in my world with cheap romance-novel-like perceptions. I will however offer a few examples, substantiated by journal entries, social media posts and conversations about collected memories. Before we were even married, he inspired me to start my own business when I was unhappy teaching in South Africa. I did not have any entrepreneurial experience, yet he believed in my capability before anyone else would. He provided financial security so that I could spend time on developing and marketing a business model that was unique in the South African context. When I struggled with my relationship with my parents, he never judged, nor did he take sides, but rather he offered logical conversation to solve problems. Once we moved to the UAE, he often reminded me that I did not *have* to work; however, he never urged me to quit, but rather spurred me on to change. He has always been relentless in his pursuit of our family's physical safety, financial security, emotional wellbeing and sense of unity. His immense patience in listening to my emotional outbursts was always accompanied by an analytical sense of relativity. With his partnership, we have raised two children who are natural, independent supporters too. I cannot write a whole scene on support and omit my family's part, simply because I fear it will come across as superficial sweetness. When I, as objectively as possible, look at the data

I have constructed over the last few years, their names come up not only in what I can do for them, but also what they do for me. From bringing me coffee in bed when I was too depressed to get up, to making me laugh uncontrollably in the car on our way home after a horrible day at school. They are a support system made of unicorns and rainbows, not without fault or expectations of their own, which has made my emotional emolument priceless.

With the support identified, the fourth puzzle piece can be fitted into the ERA graph.

Corner puzzle piece 4, from Act II, Scene 4: Description of the SUPPORT of a (r)evolution

Figure 27: ERA-graph at the end of Scene 4



The picture of my (r)evolution is nowhere near complete, but the four corner pieces of my intellectual puzzle have been identified. The **need** for a (r)evolution has been the motivation that led to the **planning** thereof. **Expectations** could be set and finally **support** was provided. These four phases of (r)evolution required an emotional emolument and a contextual awareness, before reflective reflexivity could be applied in the analysis of the data. A visual representation of the intellectual puzzle can be seen in Figure 28.

Figure 28: The corner pieces of the puzzle: Need, planning, expectations, support

The next step in the puzzle building would be to start putting the frame together. It is also during this phase that the emotional emolument would shift into the reflective reflexivity phase of analysing the data.

We must be ready for the fight

For the final fight

Let no one sleep tonight!

Scene 5. ***Little fall of rain***

From discussing to analysing a (r)evolution

AS ÉPONINE RETURNS TO FIND MARIUS, SHE IS SHOT BY THE SOLDIERS CROSSING THE BARRICADE. SHE DIES IN MARIUS'S ARMS, JUST AFTER SHE REVEALS HER LOVE FOR HIM. THE STUDENTS MOURN THIS FIRST LOSS OF LIFE AT THE BARRICADES AND RESOLVE TO FIGHT IN HER NAME.

Not all learners *survived* distance education. When the computers were switched on at the start of remote learning, there was an eagerness to participate in the "new" form of lessons, but as time passed, I witnessed how some learners faded into the background. Some got clever. They would log in to the lesson, switch their cameras off, mute their microphones and then they would disappear behind the screen. There would be no participation from them, they would never answer a question, and it would be obvious that they were not sitting behind their laptop/computer/tablet. Yet, on the attendance sheet it would show that they were present for the full duration of the lesson. When assigned homework was returned, it became clear that learners had shared their work with friends and then they handed in the exact same work. Individual progress became extremely difficult to track and the authenticity of work was consistently questionable. During Weeks 12 and 13 of remote learning, examinations were scheduled. A variety of online platforms could be used for these exams and the choice was at the discretion of each department. Our mathematics exams were divided into two sections: one part to be answered on the Nearpod application and the other would have to be completed on Dr Frost mathematics, an interactive mathematics website for schools. Over the course of the two-week exam period, I could see how some learners had fallen behind. The results spoke more of regression and failure than of progress and attainment. Without the constant motivation in classrooms and the persistent support from parents at home, some learners simply walked away from their academic development. At age 13 most learners are simply not emotionally developed enough to take responsibility for their independent learning. Even in the senior classes it was astonishing to see how many 16 to 18-year-old learners simply shrugged off their learning and instead opted for leisure time, not even trying to hide the fact that they were watching YouTube and Netflix while I was solving quadratic equations during online lessons.

Since teachers were forced to lighten the workload for learners during remote learning, I could not finish the scheme of work set out at the beginning of the academic year. While this might not seem like an issue in the lower grades, I was concerned about the senior classes, where the content to be

taught is vast and the time in classes is limited. I raised concern about the pressure we would face when schools opened and we would be expected to play catch-up to complete the course work, and simultaneously allow for sufficient revision and exam preparation. The learners who had done well academically in school prior to remote learning, seemed to excel during distance education too. They were eager to complete the work assigned, but also applied themselves to doing the additional work and assignments. Accordingly, I was not as concerned for these learners as I was for those who had been struggling since the start of the academic year.

My experience from the last five years had taught me that some learners need a teacher more than they need a book. These learners need human interaction in order to understand certain mathematical concepts. They need explanations and examples done in such a way that they are sensibly a part of their learning. They need to hold a tissue box to understand the concept of a cuboid. They need the structure of a lesson to get them focused: sit down, open your book, write the date, write the learning objective. They need a teacher to remind them to look up, write down, answer a question, give an opinion. Some learners simply require an MKO in order to progress academically, and I agree with Vygotsky (1987) when he rejects Piaget's (1959) notion that it is possible to separate learning from social context. Seemingly "small things" like a teacher reminding a learner to write the date, or non-verbally signalling a learner to focus, got lost during remote teaching but had a great impact on their academic progress. I had three SEN learners in my Year 8 boys class. While I had seen small steps of progress in actual class, these boys became totally left behind during remote learning. All three of them scored less than 5% in their final mathematic examinations.

I could not help but think of all the *orphans of oil* that I had met over the last five years of teaching. I lay awake at night, wondering what happened to the girl with six fingers on each hand, the girl who had a breakdown when she started menstruating, and the boy who lost his father to Covid-19. I knew I could not save them all and that upset me even more. Personally, I knew I had to let go of things I did not have control over, but it is easier said than done. When comparing my diary of 2016 to my diary of 2020, the internal evolution became clear. In 2016 I would start many sentences with "I feel...", "I am...", "I want...", while my 2020 diary refers to "they need...", "...we should... for them..." and "...my responsibilities towards them...". When I realised this, I had an epiphany. The more I shifted my focus away from my own happiness and started working on the needs of others, the happier I became. When a learner grasped a concept, their success became my success. The more I listened to them talking, the more likely they were to keep quiet and listen to me in return.

The more freedom I gave them to explore certain topics and concepts, the more they turned to me for help and advice. It became a positive cycle of learning from one another, instead of me just conveying curriculum content in the hopes of them learning something.

This realisation was the first time I felt a little closer to answering the question of how I ended up being less miserable. Now it seems like such a simple thing to do, but it was not obvious at all. I spent my whole life fighting for myself, so it was just natural to do the same when I started teaching in the UAE. Yet, I was pushed into such an unhappy corner that I had no other option but to ask for support and seek alternatives. I am thankful that when Covid-19 pushed us into isolation, I was evolved enough to cope with the new challenges, adapt to the strangest of situations, and still focus on "them", knowing that I would be okay. Eponine sang, as she was dying in Marius' arms:

A little fall of rain

Can hardly hurt me now

Although she was not necessarily referring to resilience, I can definitely find meaning in her song. I felt stronger as a teacher than I ever had before. I felt resilient enough to do more than survive the challenges that Covid-19 brought into classrooms. I managed to work on myself even though I sometimes felt tired, angry and frustrated. It is this reflexive reflection that helped me fit the fifth puzzle piece into the ERA-graph.

Puzzle edge 1, from Act II, Scene 5: From discussing to analysing a (r)evolution

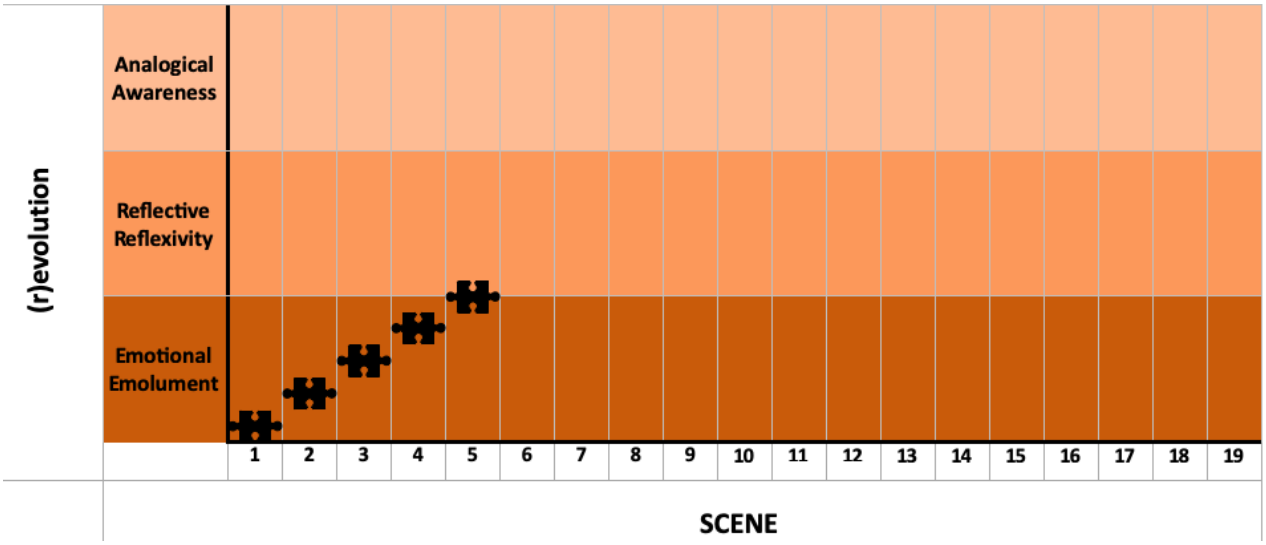


Figure 29: ERA-graph at the end of Scene 5

Scene 6. *Drink with me.*

Analysing the *need* for an evolution

THE STUDENTS SETTLE DOWN FOR THE NIGHT, REMINISCE ABOUT THE PAST AND EXPRESS THEIR ANXIETY ABOUT THE BATTLE TO COME.

Honestly, I always thought that reflecting, reminiscing and thinking back on past events was a personal coping mechanism. I knew I could not change the past, but I was adamant to learn from my history and not repeat the mistakes I had made. The more I delved into the data I had collected since 2016, the more I realised that reflecting on my own evolution improved my current understanding of who I was, and encouraged me to become an even better version of myself. Reflecting-on-action, by looking at past events and analysing how they influenced my life here and now (Schön, 1983), was not always an easy task. I knew I needed to change and create my own happiness, but actually doing it was something completely different. As the students settle down in the tavern, reminiscing, I find resonance in the words they sing:

Drink with me to days gone by
To the life (To the life) that used (That used) to be (To be)
At the shrine of friendship, never say die
Let the wine of friendship never run dry
Here's to (Here's to you) you and here's to me

I did not fully understand how far I had come until I started this thesis. I was once an unwanted child, a lost teenager, a confused young adult, a desperate student and a struggling teacher. During the pandemic that forced us into a great pause, remote learning, social isolation and fear of the unknown, I also discovered the true "wine" of friendship. I need human interaction, even though I do not like hugs, public displays of affection, or kissing strangers on the cheek. I need to have long conversations about the true meaning of life and philosophical musings about life after death, but I also need to have conversations about conspiracy theories, the weather, and how to distinguish the Kardashians from one another (I still do not really know about the last one). Piaget (1959) would probably have trouble pinpointing the exact stage of emotional development, while Vygotsky (1962) would simply say that social context precedes cognitive development. Adams et al. (2015)

could possibly argue that this is naturally a part of an autoethnographer's journey, and Lyotard (1997) could place my feelings in a postmodern box of accepting the chaos. The fact that I miss actual, three-dimensional, physical human interaction is more than just adding to the verisimilitude and resonance of my autoethnography. It proves that I am now able to acknowledge what I need and when I need it, something that I was not able to recognise before. Brookfield (1998) credits the first lens of reflection-on-action, namely autobiographical subjectivity and perception, to this awareness. It was more than just being aware of what I needed though. I was forced to truly focus on the content of conversations I had with people. When I arrived in the UAE, all people could ever talk about was how nice and wonderful everything was. When I started teaching, all I could talk about was school. But the moment I started being more conscious about the content of my conversations, the more I focused on finding solutions, instead of just complaining about the problems. I needed to change.

I started having long discussions with my parents, reminiscing about my childhood. Their perspective on how I was raised was not far removed from my own, but for the first time we could openly discuss events that were conversationally forbidden for many years. This contributed to the trustworthiness of my autoethnography, as Ellis (2004) and Bochner (2014) suggest. I hosted many digital gatherings with my friends on a variety of different continents and their personal journeys inspired me to delve more into my own heritage and history. By acknowledging our collective dilemmas, the truth that I, as a postmodern autoethnographer seek, became more likely to be found (Bolton, 2010; Burisek, 2006). I spoke with family members that I had not seen in years, realising that their faces were more than just a representation of the world that I wanted to escape from. They held dreams of their own. To hear and see how people reacted to the Covid-19 outbreak lent perspective to my personal evolution and to listen to colleagues rant about the teaching profession addressed the third lens of reflective practice, as described by Brookfield (1998). The more I talked about problems and focused on their solutions, the happier and less isolated I felt.

The emotional turmoil I experienced when I started teaching in the UAE was a culmination of personal ideologies and feeling powerless in the system. I remember how the word "inadequate" made me feel when I read it on that first report I received. I felt worthless, not only professionally, but also personally. That one word set in motion so many other negative feelings that I could not seem to escape. Darwin (1859) suggests that a creature in distress is often the crucial point for the start of an evolutionary process. I was in distress. My children started acting anxious and stressed too, making me feel even more guilty and inadequate. Tivel (2012) comments that species are ever-

evolving, but often when their offspring are being threatened, the process of evolution is accelerated.

It was a Tuesday morning in 2016 when I confronted my emotions for the first time. I dropped off my son at his kindergarten class and was walking my daughter to her class in the Year 1 corridor. My daughter cried every morning as I left her with her teacher, but I was convinced that she would get used to the people and the country and the language and that things would automatically improve. On this Tuesday morning though, she was not crying like a child, she was silently sobbing. I looked down at her and my heart broke into a million little pieces. So I stopped. I put down my bag, sat on the floor in the middle of the crowded corridor, dragged her into my lap and I cried as I held her to my chest. I do not know how long we sat there and I do not remember how many people asked me if we were okay. I just remember feeling lighter, braver and much, much better when we eventually got up. She wiped my tears away as I wiped hers. Then we smiled at each other and went to our respective classes. My offspring were being threatened. I needed change.

Something wonderful happened after that incident. As soon as I acknowledged the emotional weight that our whole family was carrying at the time, the thicker the silver lining around our dark cloud became. It was not instantaneous. There were many more ups, downs and diagonals. But I never again ignored emotions, especially in front of my children. If I was sad, I cried. When I was angry, I spoke about it. If I was tired, I took a nap on the couch. By admitting my emotional state, I was not succumbing to it, but rather addressing it, showing my children that it is okay to be emotional. This had a wonderful side-effect: we laughed so much more.

By acknowledging the emotional trauma I experienced by leaving South Africa, being mercilessly audited in a system I was not trained for, trying to adapt to a new culture, and attempting to be a good mother and wife, I breathed a little easier. I was not close to accepting it yet, but Reed-Danahay's (1997) autoethnographic stance, on the therapeutic value of acknowledgement of certain emotional events, consoled me on my journey. It took me more than two years to learn how to step back from a professional judgement and not take everything so extremely personally. Even though postmodernism rejects objectivity (Klages, 2012), I found that sometimes looking at a piece of paper, like a report card, objectively saved me from a personal crisis. Gradually, I started placing certain emotions in boxes, characterising my feelings in order to take control of them. This is what Lucy (2004) describes as reflexive awareness. There was a "I miss South Africa" box, a box labelled "I hate the school I am teaching in", and a "We are happy and healthy in our home" box.

Without even realising it at the time, I separated the time allocated to deal with these boxes. Cry at home, be angry at school, laugh in the pool... and slowly I merged the boxes as I learnt how to cope with the emotions. Reflecting on the need for evolution, I can now reflexively add that the need for change was highlighted by my children and put into perspective through many conversations during Covid-19. The descriptive emotional emolument of the need for evolution led to reflective analysis and I can therefore confidently add to my ERA graph.

Edge 2, from Act II, Scene 6: The analysis of the NEED for an evolution

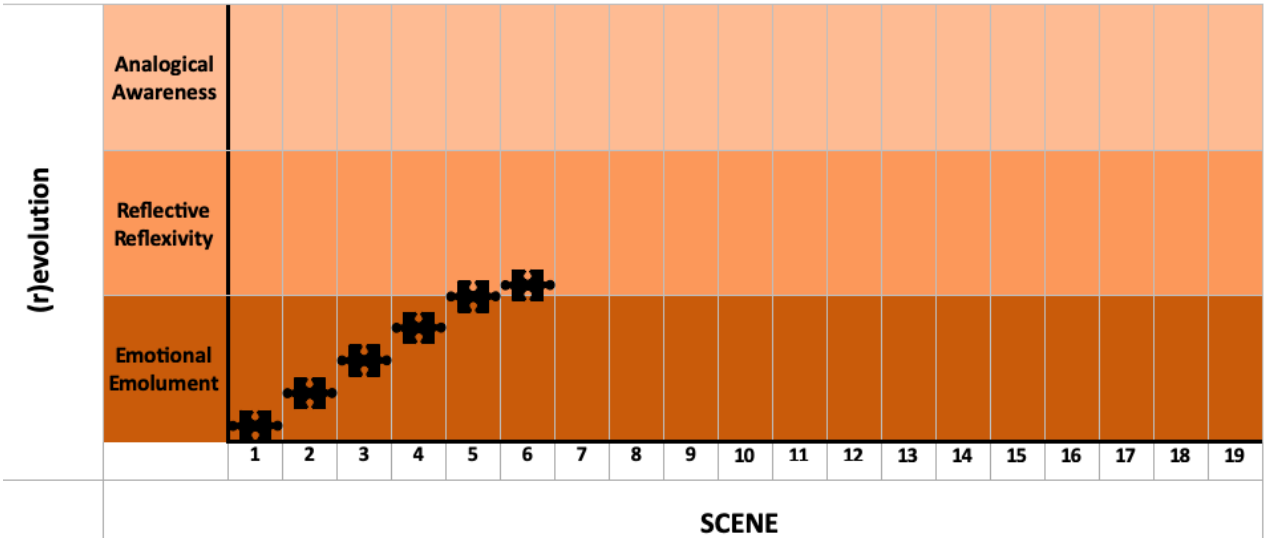


Figure 30: ERA graph at the end of Scene 6

Scene 7. ***Bring him home***

Analysing the *need* for a revolution

AS MARIUS SLEEPS, VALJEAN PRAYS TO GOD TO PROTECT MARIUS, EVEN IF THE COST OF MARIUS'S SAFETY IS HIS OWN LIFE. AS DAWN APPROACHES, ENJOLRAS REALISES THAT THE PEOPLE OF PARIS HAVE NOT RISEN UP WITH THEM, BUT RESOLVES TO FIGHT ON IN SPITE OF THE IMPOSSIBLE ODDS.

The need for a change in the educational realm has been long overdue. Jacobson (2016), Kamenetz (2015), Martinetz (2012) and Avalos (2011) are but a few of the researchers who have addressed the global outcries of teachers, expressing concern about the number of teachers who are leaving the profession at alarming rates. The UAE may be host to a unique education system, with more than two-thirds of their teachers being expatriates (De Wet, 2018), but the need for change has been formally noted on several occasions (De Wet, 2018; Gardner, 2010; Nishida, 2020; Tabari, 2014). In both of the schools I have taught in in Abu Dhabi, I could argue the same: change was needed. Correction: change IS needed.

Pre-Covid, schools throughout the UAE were only concerned with grades. The MoE grades every school on a scale:

Unacceptable – Below Average – Good – Very Good – Outstanding

Grading takes place every second year and I can personally attest to the stress and anxiety that such inspections bring to the schools. The same system is used in every school to grade the teachers too. This means that teachers are constantly being reminded to be “outstanding” and that anything less than that grade is simply not good enough. Universities do not "make" teachers (Morales, 2011), but with the correct support, experience can shape any educator into a wonderful teacher (Skaalvik & Skaalvik, 2011). Schools, however, appear to set expectations for teachers to tick boxes, so that they can simply be classified as “outstanding”, and Avalos (2011) reckons that this is one of the many reasons newly qualified teachers leave the profession: they are not given the opportunity to gain experience; rather, they are expected to perform at a set standard. This lack of autonomy is another reason to beg for change in the system (Karsenti & Collin, 2015). One of the most important lessons I learnt was to understand the definition of a *true* outstanding teacher. On paper, theoretically, anyone can become an outstanding teacher. Realistically, it is neither sustainable nor effective to try and aim for this distinction. I wrote in my personal diary in November 2019 that I would rather be a

consistent, effective teacher, even if it meant that I would be professionally classified only as "good", than be branded as "outstanding" but not really teaching the learners anything. I became a master manipulator when it came to ticking boxes. I could deliver outstanding lessons without much notice, but in my heart I knew that an "outstanding" teacher on paper does not mean you are a truly *good* teacher. Something needed to change.

Pre-Covid, teachers seemed to have become so engrossed in all the extra administration, pressure from parents, expectations from management and dealing with their own struggles that they "forgot" what the school was actually about, something that both Avalos (2011) and Jacobson (2016) argue to be a problem for sustainable practice. I was guilty of this too. I was so focused on attaining an "outstanding" grade that I often missed the goal of "imparting knowledge" completely. Before Covid-19 forced us to a great pause for reflection, teachers were simply ticking boxes, meeting basic expectations, and trying not to anger the management of the school. Even in my Year 11 classes, I was constantly "prepping for exams" instead of really teaching concepts, understanding, and problem-solving skills.

CIA employs a HPL pathway that has to be implemented in every class, by every teacher, regardless of grade or subject. It consists of two parts: VAAs and ACPs. The VAAs are sub-categorised into the foci of empathy, agility and hard work, while the ACPs attempt to incorporate five different thinking styles, namely linking, meta-thinking, problem-solving, realising and analysing. I printed posters for my classroom, with beautiful pictures, depicting each VAA and ACP. I designed PowerPoints that showcased little icons referring to the ACPs and VAAs. I included references in the schemes of work and lesson plans, and even had small tick boxes at the end of class tests, all to prove that I was in fact using HPL in my classroom. Truth be told, I never really used the concepts of HPL in the correct way. I simply ticked boxes to make sure that I stayed out of trouble. When Covid-19 caused all schools to close, HPL was one of the first things I ignored. The need for HPL was not a priority at this time, and later the actual usefulness of HPL would be discussed. This is one example of so many redundant and nonsensical practices that needed to be re-evaluated. I often referred to these practices as "fluff". It is like decorating an empty book and then trying to sell it as an award-winning novel. Reflecting on pre-Covid methodologies, highlights the need for change, especially in CIA. This contributes to the verisimilitude of my autoethnography, while also adding to the resonance as trustworthiness. And it makes me pray with Valjean:

God on high, hear my prayer

When the schools closed in March 2020, I did not expect the start of a possible revolution for the teaching profession. I do not think I even realised that there was a possibility for improvement and change. As soon as we started teaching remotely, I became aware of the opportunity for progressive transformation. All the “fluff” disappeared. I was not being scrutinised for my work attire. I could literally roll out of bed at 7.10 a.m. and be in my virtual classroom at 7.15 a.m., while still wearing pyjama bottoms and sipping coffee with unbrushed teeth. I was not concerned about my announcement boards being updated with the weekly news, nor did I have to perform uniform checks, check that learners had their equipment at school or mention HPL strategies for each lesson. I could simply teach.

There was a very clear shift in focus. Lessons were aimed at learning. Only learning. The required five minute starters, progress checks and plenaries were momentarily forgotten. For the first time in years, I could actually teach mathematics for longer than 35 minutes at a time, without interrupting conceptual explanations by referring to HPL terminology, or attempting to be creative and allowing learners to “discover” mathematical proofs. It was wonderful.

It was not all ideal. There were days that I truly loved teaching my biological children at home, while we were sitting on the porch, cutting toast into fractions, or when we were creating stories using Lego blocks and clay. Unfortunately, the novelty wore off and I found that teaching from home while simultaneously trying to maintain a happy household was getting more difficult. Many teachers agreed with me. Distinguishing between work and home seemed to be more important than we ever realised before. Closing a laptop and walking away from "school" was difficult and I would end up answering e mails and replying to messages until the early hours of the morning.

There were also some positive realisations, like that classrooms are more than just rooms. Classrooms are much more effective for teaching and learning than a digital screen. Group work proved to be ineffective during remote learning, while letting learners work in groups has often shown to be a great motivator for learners, as Vygotsky (1987) and Rogoff (1990) would agree. My classroom has a "word wall" where the keywords of every topic are displayed in a variety of different languages. During remote learning I often missed this wall and felt like I wasted time defining the same concept again and again. The importance of social structure and context can again be drawn from Vygotsky (1978), where the ZPD is more effective in the presence of an MKO in the

learning environment. I could not teach the topic of *constructions*, as not all learners had access to protractors, compasses, or even rulers, while I had access to these resources in my classroom. I had difficulty teaching *transformations* as not all learners had access to graph paper and even though some clever alternatives were suggested, I believe that the topic could be made so much more fun and interactive in the classroom. However, by being forced to experiment with a variety of applications, I became excited by the interactions of learners and I promised myself to use these applications when we returned to school.

The social interaction between learners arose as one of the most undervalued aspects of school life. When I asked my classes what they missed most about being in class, they unanimously said, "my friends", again proving Vygotsky (1978) to be correct with his socio-constructivist theory. Kenon and Palsole (2019) prove that independent learning is often taught through group work and social interactions, as learners learn from one another and in turn make the knowledge subjective to their own frame of reference. I have seen this happen in class before, where one group session will make way for individual progress. This was missing during remote learning and made me long for the classroom again.

Pre-Covid, very little attention was given to the emotional wellbeing of teachers. I would never even dream of being sent an invitation to online yoga sessions, led by our physical education department. I would never imagine that our school would have a programme set up for checking in on teachers' physical symptoms of stress and anxiety, and their energy levels. Yet, during remote learning, Covid-19 created awareness. I wrote in my diary in June 2020, that the humanity and mortality of teachers had been noticed for the first time, and it felt amazing to be seen and acknowledged. Reflectively speaking, change was more needed than we could even realise.

Teachers are made, not born (Artzt & Armour-Thomas, 2011). Teachers are made through classrooms, interaction with learners, making mistakes, talking about life in between lessons, and giving high fives when a difficult concept is understood. Teachers are made when you see the metaphorical light go on inside a young mind, when you witness a group exploring trigonometric graphs and finding the pattern, and when a note is found on your desk, claiming that you are the "best teacher in the world". I missed my classroom. I missed the learners. I did not miss the ridiculous expectations, boxes to tick, or useless meetings on topics that could have been discussed in an email.

Did we gain experience as remote teachers? Yes.

Did we learn amazing things? Sure.

Was I happy teaching from home? Sometimes.

Did I want to go back to school? Absolutely, but some things needed to change.

Covid-19 was unexpected and challenging, but it brought me (and other teachers too) back to the basics of the profession: the love for teaching. Jacobson (2016) argues that as long as teachers love teaching, the learners will learn. I realised that I often did not enjoy teaching anymore, simply because there was too much fluff. During the remote learning, when the fluff was stripped away, I could feel my excitement about preparing lessons with the learners in mind, and not the SLT. Pre-Covid teaching methodologies needed change. Covid started the revolution. I was excited to see what the future might bring. And so another puzzle piece was added to my graph.

Edge 3, from Act II, Scene 7: The analysis of the NEED for a revolution

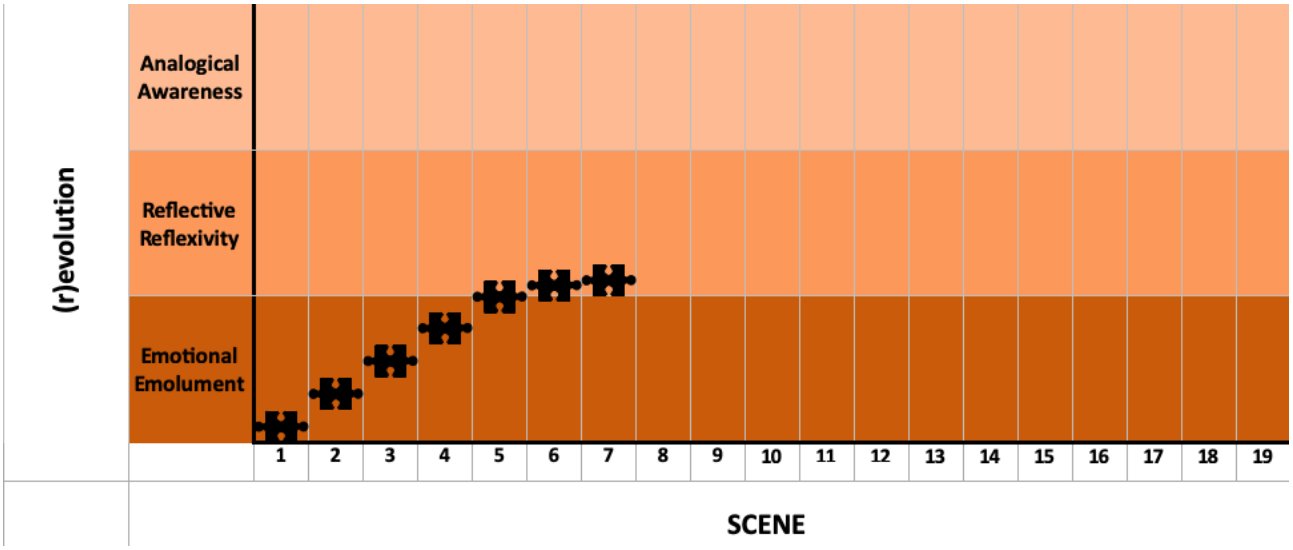


Figure 31: ERA graph at the end of Scene 7

Scene 8. ***Death of Gavroche***

Analysing the *planning* for a revolution

GAVROCHE SNEAKS OUT TO COLLECT AMMUNITION FROM BODIES ON THE OTHER SIDE OF THE BARRICADE AND IS TRAGICALLY KILLED. THE ARMY GIVES THE STUDENTS A FINAL WARNING, BUT THE REBELS PERSEVERE AND FIGHT UNTIL THE LAST MAN FALLS. THE REBELS DID NOT ANTICIPATE SO MANY DEATHS AND WHILE SOME GIVE UP HALFWAY THROUGH THE BATTLE, ENJOLRAS REFUSES TO GIVE UP.

The older I get, the more I prefer to be in control of a situation. I have always been strong-willed and determined, not liking group work at all. Spontaneous is not a word I would use to describe my left brain dominant personality. I prefer to manage situations on my own and dealing with unforeseen circumstances has rarely been a pleasure. Covid-19 presented an extreme, unprecedented situation. All my planning for travels and holidays and baby showers and birthday parties were cancelled. It felt as if everything was out of my control. I could not even go out and buy groceries when I wanted to, because suddenly the whole country was in lockdown. Curfews were put into place and travelling between emirates required permits. Masks were made compulsory and walking on the sidewalk without a mask could lead to a fine. Personally, I struggled with the lack of control over the situation and the more online meetings I was forced to attend, the more I realised that I was not the only one feeling frustrated and angry. Not being able to go into school and print out a mark scheme, or being unable to collect resources, made me feel unsure, unsafe, and definitely not in control of the situation. Teachers were all worried about losing their jobs and the insecurity led to outbursts from members of staff that I never considered to be emotional. The future seemed vague and uncertain, and this highlighted our sense of feeling unprotected, physically, financially, and emotionally. Yet we were expected to plan for this revolution of remote learning.

I wanted someone to blame and it soon became obvious that others felt the same way. The government, school, principal, parents and even the learners were victims of the teachers' blame-shifting, but via news articles, school emails, and online meetings, we soon realised that the whole world was in uncharted territory. I wanted to be angry at our principal, but could logically define my anger, because it was not his choice to close the school. I could not be angry with the learners, it was not their choice either. I wrote angry emails to the SLT and parents, which I never sent,

because I could not rationally justify their role in my resentment. No one, not even the government, had answers or scientifically based predictions of what the future might hold. And if they did, they certainly were not shared with us. The pandemic was unplanned and unexpected, and so the instinctive fight-or-flight response kicked in. Cannon (1932) first described this theory in the 1920s when he witnessed how certain animals reacted to perceived harmful attacks being made on them. Since then psychologists have attributed the same fight-or-flight reactions to humans when they are faced with possible life-threatening situations (Plaford, 2013). While some teachers were persistent in their endeavours to succeed during remote learning, others simply closed their computers and walked away. According to an email from the director of our school, the school had an unprecedented number of resignations, even though they did everything in their power to retain the current staff. Although the fight-or-flight response can be explained by biological factors, like hormone excretion and the sympathetic nervous system (Cannon, 1932), the reason *why* these systems do not react the same in all human bodies is extremely complex (Plaford, 2013). Gray (1990) adds that while the fight-or-flight theory is sufficient to describe certain animal behaviours, an additional response should be added for humans, namely the freeze response. Corr et al. (2006) describe the fight-flight-freeze system (FFFS) as a mediating emotion of fear, not anxiety, and something that is uniquely human. Some teachers fled by resigning, others simply froze by not doing anything, and then there were the fighters.

I could possibly biologically explain that certain hormones made me fight, but I was still perplexed as to why I *did not* simply quit. Autoethnography urges the researcher to not only seek the answer to the *why* questions, but also to the *why not* questions (Bochner & Ellis, 2006) in order to fully comprehend the concept (Chang, 2016). This is also an aim for the postmodern thinker, to understand both the *how* and *how not* before coming to any sort of conclusion (Klages, 2012). Weems and Silverman (2006) argue that adults who had some emotional trauma while growing up tend to have stronger fight responses in unplanned situations, as it gives them a feeling of perceived control. Gray (1990) notes that the flight response is often taken by those with higher levels of emotional reactivity, where more hormones are secreted in a dangerous situation. While I may have showcased some dramatic flair in my life, I was never overly emotional, implying that biologically I was more prone to fight than to flee. Corr et al. (2006) elaborate on Gray's (1990) work on the freeze response, noting that the freeze response is often a reaction of those with lower self-esteem, and physically impaired attributes, again minimising my probability of freezing. I was raised to be a fighter, even if not consciously. My grandma forced me to always look for a solution instead of giving up. The resilience she taught me contributed to the fact that I am a natural competitor and

fighter. I cannot answer for those teachers who left, I cannot answer for those who stayed, but I understand a little better *why* I stayed to fight.

The "fight" started with great expectations to plan for remote learning. I read through one of the first emails that was sent out when the schools closed early in March 2020. The list of expected planning strategies was lengthy, yet vague. One of the 16 *initial* bulleted points read:

> *Every lesson should be carefully planned, with a starter and plenary included. The activities should be differentiated, learner progress should be monitored throughout the lesson, and engagement should be encouraged. Teachers are encouraged to use a variety of online platforms, be creative and innovative, and consistently apply HPL. Lessons should be kept at the high expected standard, but still keep it simple enough.*

I was confused, bewildered and amused when I read those emails. The list kept on growing as every member of SLT, every HoD, and every teacher chimed in with some elaborate idea on how to make "magic" happen in digital classrooms. Reflecting on these emails, I understand why some teachers resigned. The number of paradoxes, ironies and blatantly impossible tasks that were set by the management was both frightening and hilarious. This is what Ingersoll (2012) refers to as managerial constraints on effective teaching and what Azorin (2020) uses to explore the possibility of a new type of education that may emerge from the current Covid system. The gap between the idea that managers had of what was happening in classrooms, and what was actually possible in classrooms, seemed to be ever growing, something that Imazeki (2005) pointed out fifteen years ago, yet still seems to be relevant in 2020/2021 (Burwell, 2020).

I spent the two-week "holiday" in March planning lessons as carefully and thoroughly as I possibly could. On Day 1 of remote learning, our school network crashed. According to an email that was sent out later that day, the system could not manage the number of users logging on at the same time. All planning had to be adapted within 24 hours so that we could move from our original network to Microsoft Teams.

ENJOLRAS, IN HIS LAST MOMENTS BEFORE HE DIES, EXHORTS:

Let others rise to take our place,

until the Earth is free!

This is an apt description of how I felt at the end of Day 1, but I kept on fighting. In that moment I learnt an invaluable lesson: it is dangerous to over-plan without "expecting unknown variables to mess everything up" (Personal diary entry, 23 March 2020).

We planned to only spent two weeks in remote lessons. It lasted for the rest of the academic year. We planned for a return to school in September. That lasted only two and a half weeks before we were sent back home. We planned a full academic year, with examinations, mid-term breaks, holidays, and too many events to count. In 2021, the IGCSE exams were cancelled again. Nothing came to pass as planned. Goodwin (2001) and Brinton (1938) explain that no revolution is completed as it was originally planned, as politics are often unpredictable and volatile, especially when an emotional overthrow of the government is intended. This makes the metaphor of a revolution even more fitting and, within CMT, ensures an enriched verisimilitude. Accordingly, another edge piece of the puzzle is fitted.

Edge 4, from Act II, Scene 8: The analysis of the PLANNING for a revolution

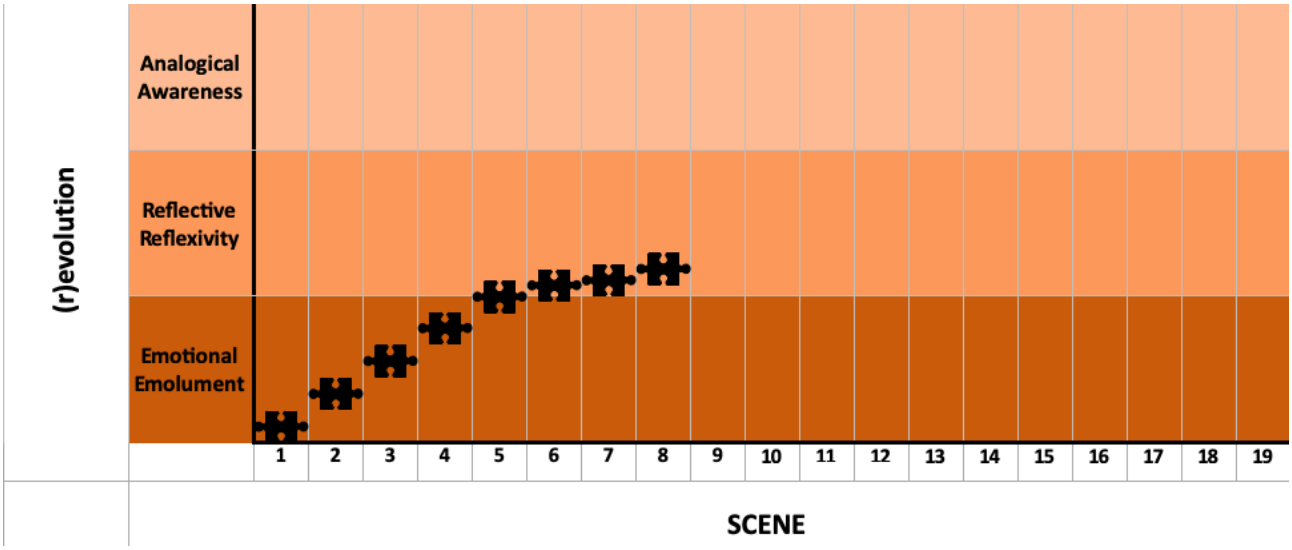


Figure 32: ERA graph at the end of Scene 8

Scene 9. ***The final battle***

Analysing the *expectations* of a revolution

AT THE BARRICADE, EVERYONE EXCEPT VALJEAN AND A GRAVELY WOUNDED MARIUS IS KILLED. VALJEAN ESCAPES INTO THE SEWERS WITH MARIUS ON HIS BACK. JAVERT RETURNS TO THE BARRICADE, SEARCHING FOR VALJEAN AMONG THE BODIES, AND FINDS THE OPEN SEWER GRATING.

On 2 July 2020 the schools closed for the summer holiday. We had completed the most unexpected, challenging, longest term of the academic year. After two weeks of planning and 15 weeks of remote learning, I looked back astonished at what had been achieved. I read through the expectations set out at the beginning of our online journey and compared them to the expectations sent out two weeks before the schools closed. The lists are dramatically different. The expectations at the onset of remote learning were unrealistic, but not because management intended the outcome to be perfect. I learnt that the funnelling of expectations cannot be taught or bought, but only accumulated by living an experience. Management learnt the same lesson.

It felt like management had listened to our requirements for the first time. During informal conversations with colleagues, as suggested by Brookfield (1998) as part of reflection-in-action data collection and construction, I learnt that my experiences were not unique. Stinson (2009) notes that the more we talk about our experiences, the more we realise the worth of our collective dilemmas, something that resonates within the teachers' collective I am adding to through this autoethnography. This also ties in with the third complementary lens of reflective research, namely the critical mirror of our colleagues' experience (Brookfield, 1998). The curriculum content was adapted for the lower grades, the pacing charts were restructured, assessment standards were modified to be more accommodating, communication processes were simplified, strict lesson plans were altered to be more versatile, and administrative duties were reduced to just the most basic necessities. While teachers have been asking for some of these reforms for years, it was as if management truly took note for the first time. Reflexively speaking, I was no longer being formed by the immediate environment, but was constructing my own reality, truth and attainable goals, something that Lucy (2004) and Ellis (2004) describe as part of becoming more than just a superficial autobiographer.

I have asked myself *why* management only took notice of the teachers' needs now (during remote learning) countless times. I browsed through emails and journal entries in search of some definitive answers and became excited when I found the first trace to a possible answer. On 6 April 2020, I wrote that I had no less than five members of senior management drop into my online lessons. They were only there for five to ten minutes at a time and I honestly thought they were only checking in to see if I was in fact doing my job. The frequency of these visits increased as the weeks progressed and the expectations were filtered so as to be more realistic. While we were physically attending school, management was so busy with administration, parents, planning, meetings, and budgeting, that they lost track of what is actually happening in the classroom. SLT relied on reports to "know" how the teachers were doing in class, as it was impossible for them to drop into lessons weekly. Consequently, they tended to lose sight of what teachers were actually doing, which is why so many unrealistic expectations were being set in schools. During remote learning, however, it was suddenly possible for senior management to drop into ten different lessons within every hour period. Witnessing what teachers were doing and how they were coping was suddenly just a click away. I had a long conversation with our vice-principal in this regard and she admitted that there was a newfound respect in management meetings for the work that teachers do. While SLT did not necessarily consciously decide to funnel the expectations, it was a natural development as they needed to amend their original planning strategies to be in line with realistic goals. It was easy to ignore teachers' personal struggles in school, but these issues became hurdles that management had to deal with during Covid-19 in order for the school to function properly. Fernandez and Shaw (2020) agree that academic supervisors were forced to look at what teachers were actually doing in their classes during remote learning, and this made more realistic expectations possible (Fullan, 2020; Harris, 2020).

One of the teachers had been having issues with her school laptop since November 2019, but she was told on several occasions that the situation would be dealt with "later". Yet, when remote learning was announced, her laptop was fixed within hours. Another teacher had been asking for support with her husband's visa sponsorship and while her requests had been ignored since September 2019, her problem was sorted within the first week of remote teaching. There are many examples of how the school's management had to be actively involved in solving some of the teachers' and support staff's personal problems in order for the staff to be able to do their jobs. One teacher noted that it was as if the school had realised for the first time that they could not function without the teachers. We all laughed, but the irony became a poignant point of conversation. The focus was on teachers and their wellbeing again. The positive side-effect was that these teachers

were more motivated than ever to go beyond the set expectations. Ho and Tay (2020) mention that the pressure from parents on schools forced SLT members to ensure that learning continued, which in turn shifted the focus to the struggles teachers experienced daily (Martinez & Broemmel, 2021).

I was also forced to be less selfish about my own situation. I was confronted with every learners' personal situation. This involuntary altruistic perspective affected the way I planned and delivered my lessons, and altered the expectations I set for the learners. At the beginning of remote learning I did not compromise on deadlines for homework tasks, but as I learnt that many learners had to share one laptop between up to six children, I became more flexible with the submission of assignments. I adapted an initially rigorous approach in lessons to a more informal environment, as I learnt about financial, social and even religious struggles in some families. These are things that I would not have noticed in class, or not be made aware of in "normal" school procedure. Maree (2016) suggests that data can be found in unlikely places, and so I noticed a change in my music playlists. Music was suggested by learners, and I actually listened to what they were listening to. I could have conversations about Cardi B, K-pop, Drake and Lana del Rey, artists I had known nothing about before. Doucet et al. (2020) suggest that if the teacher can be more personally involved with the learners in the formal setting of a classroom situation, the learners' basic needs can be attended to informally and through discussion. This links to Vygotsky's (1987) idea that we also learn by being socially active. I often admitted that I did not necessarily like the sounds that my ears were clearly not accustomed to, but the fact that I took note and made effort was definitely appreciated by the learners. I had time to care. I undoubtedly think that having a more holistic picture of the learners in my class and their personal struggles helped me to plan and prepare better lessons to suit their needs. I prepared a lesson on real-life graphs, using an example of babies and how they teethe, but after learning that a learner's baby sister had choked to death the week before, I could omit this example without compromising the content. I could reflexively adapt more easily.

In September 2020 we returned to school. If I compare the set of expectations that were sent out at the start of the academic year in 2019 with the expectations that were sent out one year later, I cannot help but be amazed with the progress made. Avalos (2011) notes that too often schools expect too much of teachers, especially at the start of the academic year. Administration is one of the great contributing factors as to why teachers leave the profession (Jacobson, 2016) and the lack of managerial support does not help the burnout that teachers experience (Martinetz, 2012). Covid-19 seemed to have a relaxing, rationalising effect on the school management. The list of expectations were concise, simple and not elaborate at all, and the main focus was teaching content.

The secondary focus was undeniably the mental wellbeing of learners. This made me smile. Stinson (2009) mentions that teaching can only be enhanced, never perfected, and for me the academic year felt more than just a little "enhanced". I felt as if I could simply teach. I could care about learners and find new ways to motivate them, circling back to my initial goal of becoming a teacher: the simple love for learning (Jacobson, 2016).

The UAE has always struggled with a high staff-turnover (Masudi, 2017; Tabari, 2014), but because of the global pandemic, teachers stayed. Flying out of the country seemed to be extremely difficult, as was securing jobs in other countries. For the first time since we arrived in the UAE, there were no significant changes in the staff. Our mathematics department continued where we had left off at the end of the previous academic year, sharing resources, sending motivational quotes, and supporting each other in wonderful, socially distant ways.

The expectations of teachers from management and parents changed. The expectations of management and learners from teachers were altered. The whole school had a shift in focus and I think the shift was as simple as looking beyond your own situation and showing some tolerance for the unknown circumstances of those around us. At the end of the 2019/2020 academic year, I accepted that learning would not survive if not for the teachers willing to carry those learners on their backs, through sewers, unknown events, uncharted territories, and into new possibilities. The fifth edge of the puzzle fits into the ERA-graph of (r)evolution.

Edge 5, from Act II, Scene 9: The analysis of the EXPECTATION of a revolution

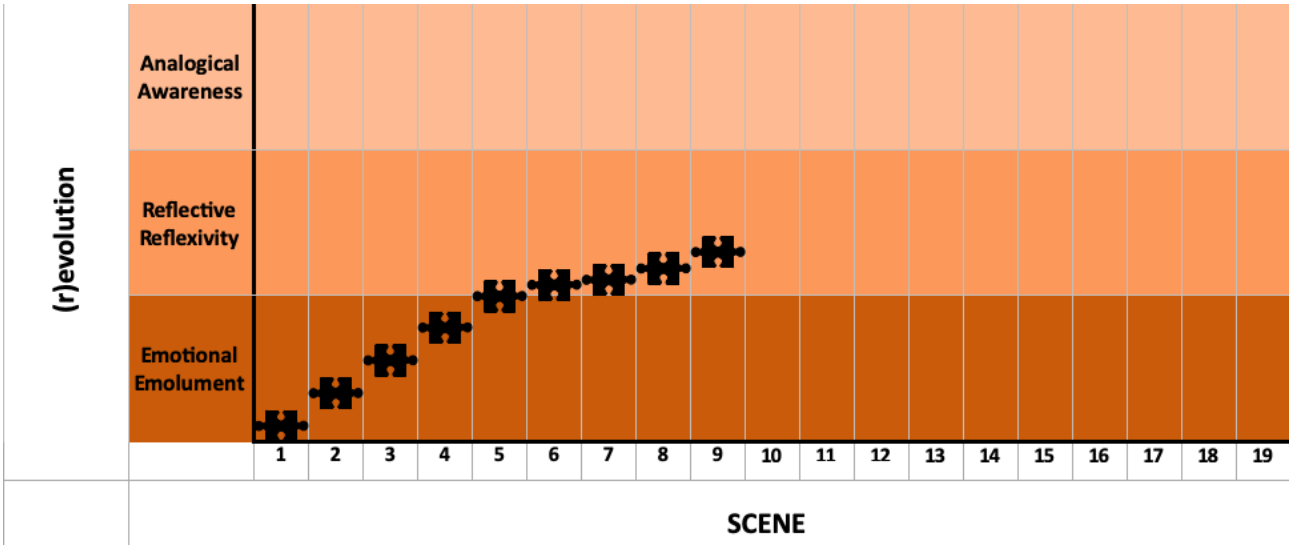


Figure 33: ERA graph at the end of Scene 9

Scene 10. ***The Sewers.***

Analysing the *support* for a revolution

VALJEAN CARRIES MARIUS THROUGH THE SEWERS BUT COLLAPSES WITH EXHAUSTION. WHILE LOOTING BODIES IN THE SEWERS, THÉNARDIER TAKES A RING FROM THE UNCONSCIOUS MARIUS, BUT FLEES WHEN VALJEAN REGAINS CONSCIOUSNESS. WHEN VALJEAN CARRIES MARIUS TO THE SEWER EXIT, HE FINDS JAVERT WAITING FOR HIM. VALJEAN BEGS JAVERT FOR ONE HOUR TO TAKE MARIUS TO A DOCTOR. JAVERT RELUCTANTLY AGREES.

Teachers carried the independent learning on their shoulders throughout remote learning. At the start I felt exhausted, overwhelmed and alone. I felt unsupported, even though I was part of a 300+ staff cohort. As Javert awaits Valjean, I knew that the resonance of my data was waiting for me. I had to utilise the third and fourth complementary lenses of reflective practice, as described by Brookfield (1998) and Schön (1983). I had to talk to my colleagues and ensure that the verisimilitude of my feelings could be validated. Furthermore, I had to collate this data with existing literature to ensure that the subjectivity was not an overemotional reaction to a profound situation, but rather a trusted method of analysing collected data.

It was true: teachers felt overburdened and unsupported. They had to cope with their own personal situations, while managing the stress of the changing course in their profession. While Karsenti and Collin (2015) agree that teacher reinforcement has been globally lacking for many decades, the isolation that Covid-19 established highlighted the support deficiency. Fullan (2020) and Huber (2021) address the changing nature of school leadership amid the global pandemic and highlight their more practical approach as opposed to theory-based pre-Covid. As time passed and more members of the SLT attended live lessons, the expectations were adapted. This is not where the small transformations ended. As a teacher, I identified three pillars of support that arose during the 15-week remote learning period, all teacher-centred.

The first support structure was formally assembled by school management. Carsons (2013) notes that management can be brutal in their implementation of certain policies and procedures, often not understanding the true needs of teachers, but I experienced first-hand how management adapted their strategy. Burwell (2021) comments on principals in the UAE who changed their strategies dramatically, often to keep up with teachers' needs. Teachers would often complain that the content

is not relevant (Abosalem, 2016), but during the implementation of remote learning, curriculum content was adapted quickly. The dishonesty that was once witnessed within management systems (Avalos, 2011) seemed to fade into the background as the management of schools was forced to face the fact: learners need to learn. When you take away the classroom, the additional resources and all the administration that is required in school, the only thing that is truly left, is learning, something that Ho and Tay (2020) also mention. Not only did the school support the teachers with regard to the curriculum content, but administrative duties were reduced to the bare necessities, and the expectations of additional, often unnecessary, extracurricular activities were cancelled. Focus was shifted from the "ideally outstanding" lessons to making sure teachers were emotionally capable of dealing with online teaching. An awareness of our mental wellbeing, physical safety and overall health was created and supported.

The second and probably strongest support structure that grew throughout distance education was definitely among teachers themselves. In school we were always so busy planning and presenting lessons that the sharing of resources was simply never a priority. Although we had access to a shared network and all our resources were uploaded there, I rarely used the resource bank. I simply preferred to create my own resources, as sifting through many PowerPoint slides was simply too time-consuming. However, during remote learning, the sharing of resources took on a new dimension. Instead of the mathematics department simply sharing resources in a shared folder, we opted to divide into groups and took responsibility for specific year groups. In our second online mathematics meeting, we discussed the basic structure of all our lessons, so as to make sure all PowerPoints and content had consistent and sufficient progress. We used the scheme of work and accompanying learning outcomes as the basis and divided the remaining topics into the weeks left for remote learning. The workload was suddenly equally shared and instead of planning 16 to 24 lessons per week, each teacher was only to design just three to five. The single resource would then be shared with all classes. This alleviated an immense amount of pressure and saved us a lot of time, two things that Avalos (2011) and Jacobson (2016) identified as the two main causes of teacher burnout. Although I adapted some of the lessons more specifically for my classes, I did not have to look through hundreds of existing resources to find the perfect one. I had a basis to work from and this made preparing for lessons so much easier. As an after-effect of this methodology, the quality of lessons also improved, a factor that Karsenti and Collin (2013) highlight as problematic in the teaching profession, especially since teachers are rarely given the opportunity to work *with* one another instead of *alongside* each other. I had so much more time to spend planning my lessons, so a lot more thought and detail went into every lesson. The parents even commented on the high

quality of mathematics resources and this encouraged the teachers to be even more concise and detailed in their planning. In our last mathematics meeting, we all agreed that we would continue doing this in the next academic year. I felt like I was working in a team and not in a group of individuals. When we were in school, I often felt as if we were constantly competing with one another. Formal lesson observations and the grading of teachers meant that we were not supporting each other to improve the department, but rather trying to be better than the teacher next door. This definitely changed during remote learning.

As an extension of this newfound peer support, I was also able to learn new pedagogies, methodologies and simple tricks to enhance my teaching. Hendricks (2015) argues that teachers can develop faster and more efficiently professionally when given the opportunity to learn from peers, something that Vygotsky (1978) agrees with. When I worked through eight different teachers' PowerPoints and lessons, I learnt so much more than I ever did in any professional development training session. I could experiment with their different teaching strategies and find what worked (and did not) work for me. I was introduced to Indian and Irish teaching styles and was amazed at how they differed from my own. In school we were never given the opportunity to sit in on each other's lessons, but during remote learning I even had the chance to present their lessons and see how successfully I could apply different pedagogies. Never have I had so many conversations about different teaching methods, strategies and techniques as I did during the 15 weeks of distance education and it was simply wonderful.

A third form of support emerged from the parents of the learners. Skaalvik and Skaalvik (2011) maintain that parents often overlook the worth and workload of teachers, and expect unreasonable results, regardless of whether this pertains to academic achievement or personal progress. I could literally compare emails from pre-Covid days with emails during Covid, received from the same parents, to see how some parents' perception had changed. From "I do not understand how…" to "How can I help with…". A few parents actually apologised for their demanding behaviour prior to distance learning, and I received wonderful words of encouragement, gratitude and support. I could only hope that this would continue when we returned to school.

There will always be schools and managements that will try to exploit their staff members. I have heard horrible stories from schools in the UAE, where teachers have been dismissed without pay, or their salaries have been cut by up to 75%. The more stories I heard about teachers being left unsupported by their schools, the more gratitude I felt towards my own place of employment. CIA

is not perfect, and the implementation of remote learning was anything but flawless, but the school did everything in its power to back the teachers, other staff, learners, parents and their extended families during this time of crisis. Yes, the expectations were high, but the effort was rewarded with appreciation and support. Valjean sings when he sees Javert waiting for him:

I knew you wouldn't wait too long

The faithful servant at his post once more!

I witnessed the resonance of my data in staff meetings, casual conversations, social media posts, emails, and even text messages. Skulmowski and Rey (2020) attest to the fact that teachers who felt supported during the onset of Covid were teaching more effectively. The pandemic might seem surreal and enigmatic, but the verisimilitude of the teaching profession experiencing a transformation could be seen throughout the world in social media, news and personal blogs. Apple Music and You Tube Music even compiled teacher playlists to support teachers throughout the world, proving that it was not only me who had experienced the start of a revolution for the teaching profession. The puzzle piece that was added to my ERA graph at the end of Scene 10 is thus dedicated to all those who have supported teachers throughout this pandemic.

Edge 6, from Act II, Scene 10: The analysis of SUPPORT of a revolution

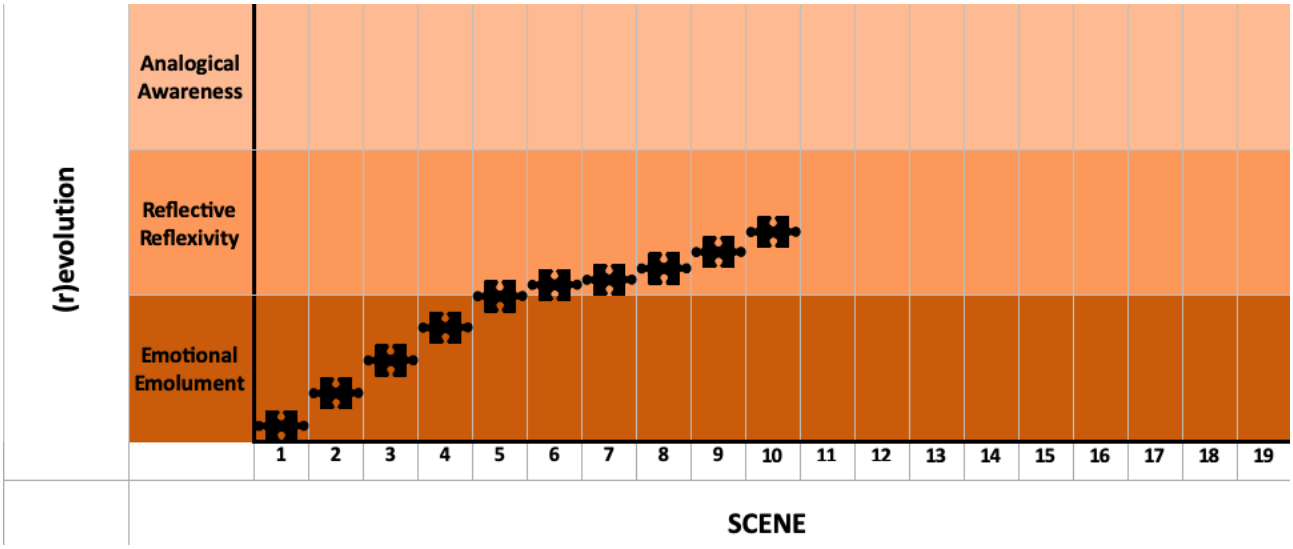


Figure 34: ERA graph at the end of Scene 10

Scene 11. ***Javert's suicide.***

Analysing the *planning* for an evolution

JAVERT IS UNABLE TO RECONCILE VALJEAN'S MERCIFUL ACTS WITH HIS PERCEPTION OF VALJEAN AS A CRIMINAL. JAVERT FINDS HIMSELF TORN BETWEEN HIS BELIEF IN GOD AND HIS DESIRE TO ADHERE TO THE LAW. HE COMMITS SUICIDE BY THROWING HIMSELF INTO THE SEINE.

Autoethnography is a relatively "new" form of methodology, and the perception of *simply* writing stories is not easy to reconcile with the rigorous, canonical world of research (Adams et al., 2015; Chang, 2016; Denzin & Lincoln, 2005; Ellis, 2004). Many traditional researchers mention that they feel torn between the dynamic and exciting opportunities that autoethnography presents, while still trying to adhere to the conventional laws of academic research (Ellingson & Ellis, 2008; Ellis, 2004; Holt, 2003). Adams et al. (2015), Spry (2001), Buzard (2003) and Wyatt (2008) all indicate that the trustworthiness of autoethnographical data can be compromised if the researcher is not consistently aware of the honesty of her cultural immersion. CMT assists in aligning my fears of trustworthiness within my methodology, as Gibbs (2009) and Cameron (2003) argue it should. I am not planning to "kill" my trustworthiness by means of desperate suicide, but I cannot ignore the feeling of content that I feel when I look at the data that I collected and constructed over the last months. While some of my original plans were executed as planned, the majority of my groundwork had to be adapted continuously. Hugo digressed often in the writing of the novel (Grossman & Grossman, 1994) and similarly I had to redesign my plan as part of the evolution of this thesis.

I originally planned to focus only on my evolution as a teacher, but as my trustworthiness was in danger, I simply could not ignore the role that Covid-19 played in my journey as a teacher and the effects it had on my teaching. I meticulously planned the deconstruction of my raw data, spanning from the day we arrived in the UAE until the end of 2019. I planned how I would sort the data and reconstruct the important moments to showcase my evolution from a miserable educator to a happy teacher. While I did not want to delve into my past prior to us relocating to the UAE, the validity and reliability of the work would have been threatened had some of the vital role players and events in my life been omitted. Just like amazing teachers are formed through experience (Artzt & Armour-Thomas, 2002), so humans are shaped by the events and people in their lives (Carlson, 2011).

Probably one of the most important lessons I have learnt during this research journey is that nothing can be planned perfectly. Reflexivity accounts for the preconceptions I might have had prior to the formal data collection (Gay, 2009) and reflectivity should align the data with my assumptions (Lucy, 2004). I planned this concisely, but was (sometimes uncomfortably) surprised that I was wrong. I only recalled partial truths and, when confronted with a more holistic picture, was forced to revise, rework and re-evaluate my strategies in order to stay truthful to my cause. I simply had to address my reflexive predications, as Grunberg and Modigliani (1954) urge the researcher to do. I collected old pictures from childhood. I talked to relatives that I had not spoken to in years. I discovered a photograph of me and my grandma in front of the house I was raised in. I thought the visual triggers would give hints as to where my resilience and agility were born. I planned to have this detailed timeline of my life, showcasing every little trauma and how I was literally raised to be a fighting survivor. What I did not expect was the photos of me and my parents, on holiday together. We looked so happy in the photos, yet I could not remember this seemingly happy time. As humans, it is much easier to remember the negative and/or traumatic events than it is to remember the happy times (Jex, 2002) and Jones and Goethals (1972) suggest that by merely acknowledging the knowledge of contributing factors to memory retention, a more *honest* picture will naturally transpire.

My mother found a crate filled with certificates, medals, trophies and all sorts of memorabilia from my school career. I knew I did well academically, but I was surprised to find certificates for dedication, hard work, resilience, perseverance, commitment, and even loyalty. I was so focused on academic achievements throughout my school life that I always shrugged off the other accolades as trivial. It is only now that I realise what an immense role these characteristics have played throughout my life. Even as a rebellious teenager, I was committed to my academic work, firmly believing that this would be the "ticket" to a better life. I underestimated the hardships I had to endure in order to make me a resilient fighter, someone who does not shy away from a challenge. This links to the backwards law (Watts, 1940) which holds that negative experiences can have a positive influence later in life. Ebbinghaus (1913) and Lomas (2016) agree that by signalling past memories, present healing can be more effective, and future success more probable. Javert sings:

It was his hour at last
To put a seal on my fate
Wipe out the past
And wash me clean off the slate

By averting my original plan and addressing my past, I acknowledged the trustworthiness of my data (Ellis, 2004). I accepted that I could never wipe out my past, but I found the cognisance to improve my future.

When we moved to the UAE, I was determined to succeed as a teacher, regardless of the challenges. I set goals for myself: be the inspiring teacher. I failed. So I set a new goal: be an outstanding teacher, as required by the school. I failed again. The idiosyncratic moment I realised that I was not a product that had to be moulded into a perfect shape, but that I should rather embrace my ability to be a lifelong learner… at THAT pivotal moment, I truly started my own evolution. I started by chasing a grade on a report, but I ended up with the motivation to really make a difference in young lives. In the beginning I taught lessons with the main focus of impressing the observers, but during remote teaching I often found myself forgetting about the observers and simply teaching the learners. My planning changed because my purpose changed. This reflective, honest confession is liberating. In postmodern style, I add another edge to the puzzle, while bidding the emotional turmoil caused by end goals farewell.

Edge 7, from Act II, Scene 11: The analysis of the PLANNING for an evolution

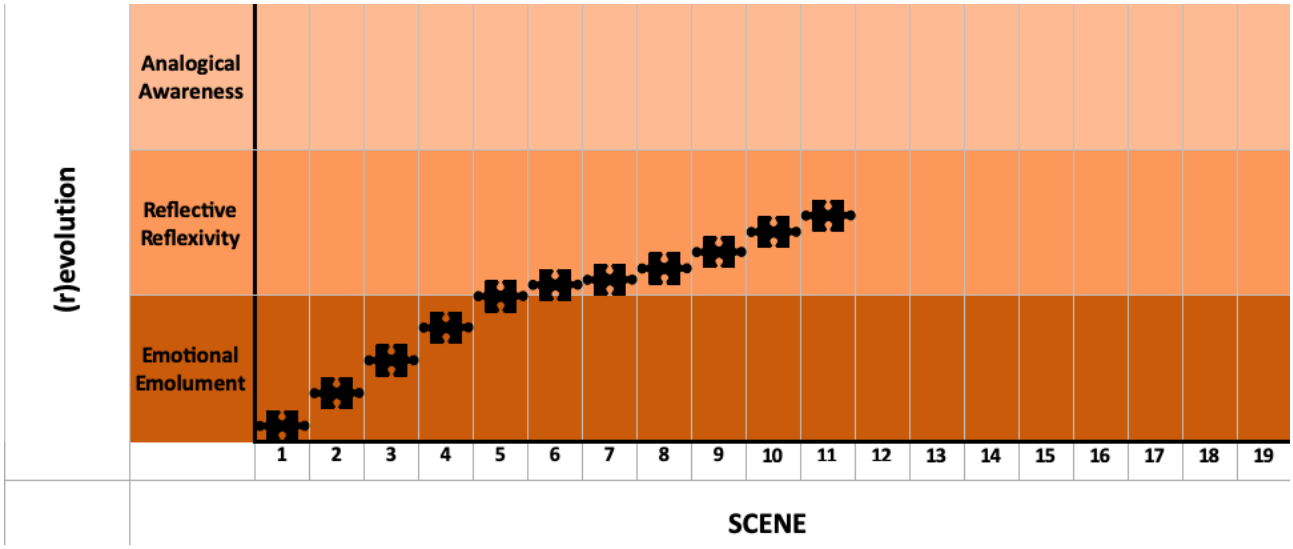


Figure 35: ERA graph at the end of Scene 11

Scene 12. *Turning.*

Analysing the *expectations* of an evolution, part 1

THE DEATHS OF STUDENT REVOLUTIONARIES ARE MOURNED BY WOMEN ON THE STREET.

As the women clean up the streets filled with the remains of dead soldiers, they sing:

Did you see them going off to fight?

Children of the barricade who didn't last the night

So many of the children I grew up with and went to school with met the expectations that were set for all of us. They did not last. For as long as I can remember, the expectations for my life were relatively low. Even when talking to my parents now, it is clear that the assumptions about my future did not include tertiary education or working abroad. It simply was not a part of the community I was raised in. The definition of success throughout my childhood was vague and included things like "not getting pregnant in high school" and "making a living on your own". But these expectations were dispersed in my mind, much like an inverse funnel. I was adamant about succeeding academically at school. I was determined to prove *them* all wrong. In the diary I kept as a young teenager, I wrote that I wanted to visit the places and eat the foods that I read about in books. I wanted to write my own stories and have long conversations about philosophical ideologies with people who asked more questions than they had answers for. I always felt different to my peers and was often classified as a snob, called a b*tch, and once I was even physically attacked during break time, in front of the school cafeteria for "thinking you are better than the rest of the school". I was determined to make my grandma proud and resolved to escape the life that everyone expected of me. I desperately wanted to "bolt from a mundane existence" (Melodramatic diary entry, June 1997).

I was so sure I had succeeded when I graduated. I expected the urge of "wanting more" to go away. It did not. Like so many other newly qualified teachers (Karsenti & Collin, 2013), I dreamt of changing the world the minute I stepped into a classroom, but I was quickly discouraged and dejected, singing with the women:

Who will wake them? No one ever will

No one ever told them that a summer day can kill

Ayers (1993) notes that most new teachers are convinced that they will be outstanding, they expect to be innovative, popular and motivating, enthusiastic and driven. Unfortunately, as Shulman (1998) points out, the reality of the everyday struggles that teachers experience render these Utopian ideals elusive. I was no exception. I left the profession to pursue other goals in the hope that I could find happiness in another profession, and I did. Reflecting on my time outside the teaching profession in South Africa, I undoubtedly experienced content and a sense that I shaped my own opinions, desires and values, all qualities Archer (2007) attributes to a higher level of reflexivity. As Carlson (2011) so aptly points out, *life* happens when you least expect it. We were not actively looking for opportunities outside South Africa, but when the possibility arose to experience a different lifestyle, with the added benefit of financial progress, we hardly hesitated in signing teaching contracts in the UAE. This lack of hesitant behaviour is what Carlson (2011) refers to as *intuitive* decisions, based on a deeper rooted dissatisfaction, often something that you are not even aware of. When honestly trying to find the evidence of possible discontent, as Ellis (2004) urges the autoethnographer to do, I was surprised to find more than I was looking for. Journals and social media entries indicated that I was feeling guilty about working too hard and spending too little time with my own children. Notes in my diaries report on how I managed financially, with little red marks indicating shortcomings and stresses. I was not acutely aware that any of these small factors would ever be enough for me to leave South Africa, yet we moved continents within months of signing papers.

I sincerely thought that moving to the UAE would not only be physical proof of my success, but also that I would be granted a second opportunity to be that idealistic teacher I once dreamt of being. I was dismayed with my personal evolution and teaching practice in the first two years. I had set my own expectations and was disheartened when they were not met accordingly. While I longed for engaging lessons and being an enthusiastic teacher, I found myself a prisoner of the financial benefits of the school. While the women sang, my heart broke:

Where's that new world when the fighting's done?

Nothing changes nothing ever will

Same old story what's the use of tears?

What's the use of praying if there's nobody who hears?

I was more than simply disheartened, but my resilience did not falter. I had a day-to-day plan. Get up, go to school. Survive the day. Collect a pay check. Repeat. I literally wrote the equivalent daily wage I was earning in my diary, as visual motivation. But as weeks turned into months, my resilience emerged. Reich et al. (2012) note that resilience grows stronger when someone is allowed to make mistakes and is given the chance to overcome that mistake without any outside influence. I grew stronger and more resilient, with better perseverance skills. The ebb and flow of exceeding and surrendering my own expectations, were crucial factors in my personal growth. The evolution throughout my life became stronger as I moved away from proving my success to others and instead focused on proving to myself that I was capable of being happy and content. The initial expectations were a necessary component of the evolutionary process. They served as a commencement of motivation and continued to be a driving force of commitment. During any ongoing evolutionary process, there is a pivotal moment of clarity where definitive changes can be witnessed (Darwin, 1859) and this for me happened in the UAE. I was free of the convictions and the expectations set by my parents, grandma, teachers and peers. The responsibility for my success was no longer dependent on their expectations, but determined by my own definition of satisfactory content. The eighth edge of the puzzle is placed as a tribute to all my personally exceeded expectations.

Edge 8, from Act II, Scene 12: The analysis of the EXPECTATIONS of an evolution, part 1

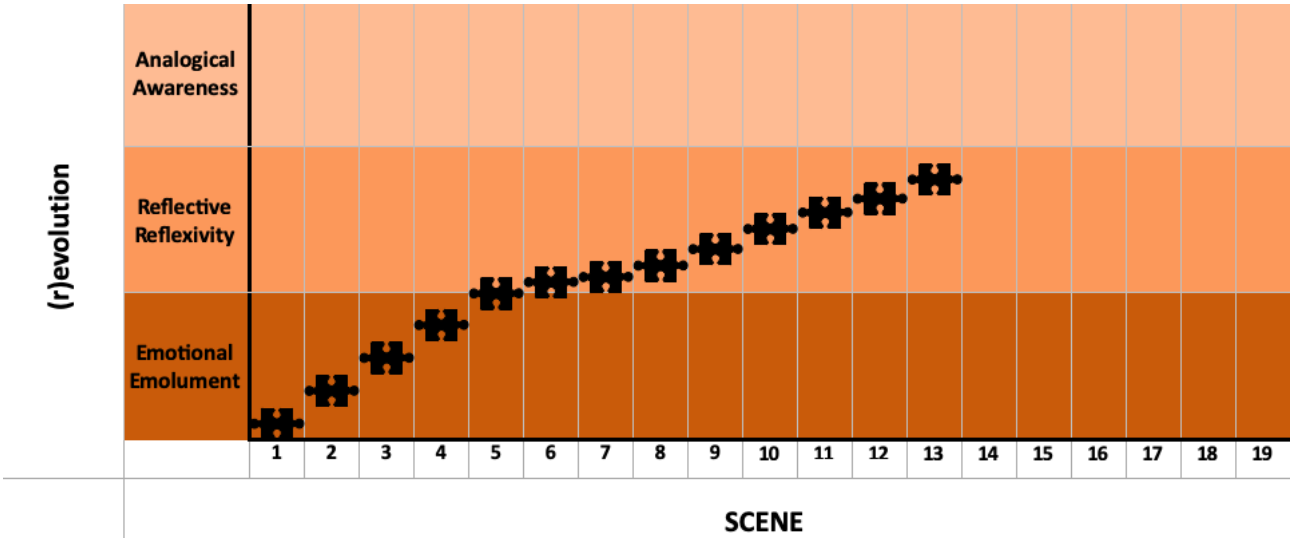


Figure 36: ERA graph at the end of Scene 12

Scene 13. ***Empty chairs at empty tables.***

Analysing the *expectations* of an evolution, part 2

MARIUS, WOUNDED BUT ALIVE, DESPAIRS AT THE SACRIFICE OF SO MANY LIVES AND AT THE DEATH OF HIS FRIENDS.

On 3 July 2020, I went into school to collect my personal belongings before the official start of the summer holiday. The school was closed for the academic year and only a few administrative staff were present. The great silence of the hallways, the empty classrooms, quiet staffroom and the mute staircases filled me with sadness, and as I sat down in my chair, in my blue and yellow classroom, I sang with Marius, voiced by Eddie Redmayne:

There's a grief that can't be spoken, there's a pain goes on and on.

Empty chairs at empty tables, now my friends are dead and gone.

Here they talked of revolution, here it was they lit the flame,

Here they sang about tomorrow and tomorrow never came.

I started the 2019/2020 academic year with high expectations and exciting plans. As teachers we were prepared for examinations and graduation ceremonies to celebrate our collaborative successes. As a family we looked forward to travelling, visiting family and friends abroad, and attending weddings in exciting locations. We excitedly planned baby showers, birthday parties and celebratory dinners. Covid-19 unexpectedly cancelled all of our expectations.

I sat at my desk in front of a deathly quiet classroom and in the stillness I was overcome with emotion. The whole world became quiet for a while. The airports were closed, roads were empty, parks were abandoned, and our little family crept into quarantine, isolating ourselves in an apartment. When a friend had to endure a double mastectomy in the hospital only a few kilometres away from our apartment, I felt powerless, knowing that I was not allowed to support her in hospital. In our friendship circles, we had to digitally welcome four new babies and celebrate birthdays from behind technological screens. I felt hopeless when a neighbour's brother committed suicide in India and she was unable to fly back to Delhi to support her family. Covid-19 stole the joy from certain occasions, but it also robbed us of mourning the death of loved ones.

There's a grief that can't be spoken, there's a pain goes on and on.

While sorting through papers in the desk drawers in my classroom, in that immensely silent classroom, I knew that the global pandemic would not be magically resolved within the next few weeks or months. I never believed that we were born to be isolated. I felt like human interaction is a natural expectation of being human. Cannon (1932) agrees when he observe that humans seem to be smiling more, and be in better health, as human interaction increases. I could see the smiles of learners weakening throughout our distance learning journey. As time passed, they would not even switch on their cameras anymore and I would find myself teaching to a black screen filled with initials. And while I was sitting in room S010, I felt the difference in teaching with all my senses. I missed the smell of sweaty boys entering the classroom after playing football during break. The silence on the corridors was deafening. There were no high fives to be handed out, no sweets to be shared, no witness to progress being made.

Chang (2016) argues that autoethnography is not meant to be a soliloquy from the researcher, but rather an academic dialogue between data and personal perspective. Cahoone (2003) notes that from the earliest development of modernism, isolation has been a threat to the trustworthiness of postmodern progress and urges all thinkers to collaborate with others on their thoughts, something that Burisek (2006) mentions as strengthening the verisimilitude and resonance of the research. Seclusion has not been kind to me. Academically, within evolution, autoethnography, postmodernism and even socio-constructivism (Vygotsky, 1978), isolation has had a negative effect on the validity of research. And when I looked at the

empty chairs at empty tables

I knew that the same could be said professionally. I reflected on the prior 17 weeks as a teacher. From planning and preparing online lessons, to reflexively adapting to all the challenges that were presented, I did not consider quitting. In July 2016, after a few months of teaching in the UAE, I desperately wanted to quit. Four years later, amid the Covid-19 pandemic, I was facing a different set of challenges, yet I did not feel like giving up. So something had changed. The journal entry of 3 July 2016, compared to the writings of 3 July 2020 are evidence of my evolution:

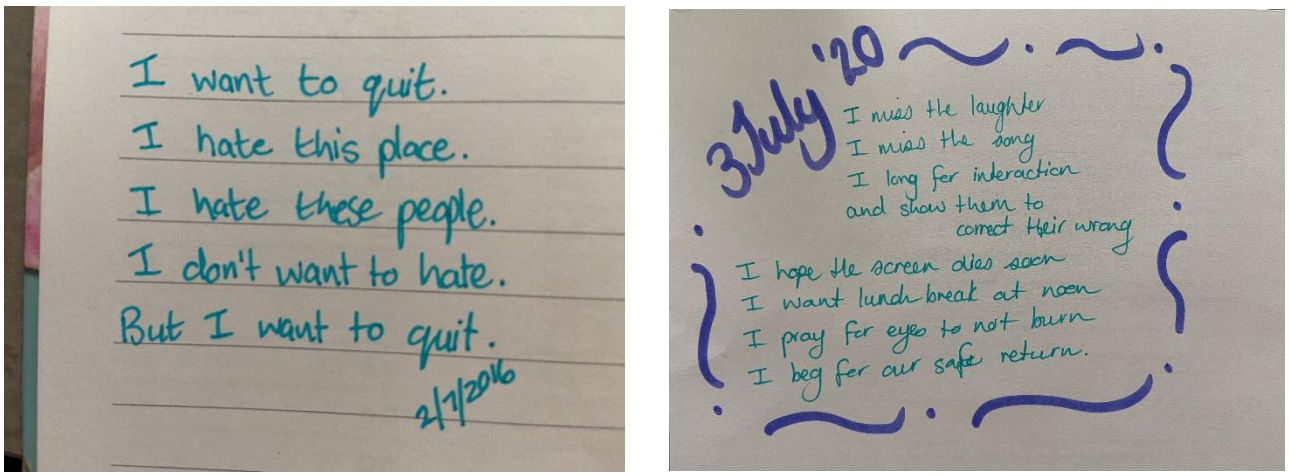


Figure 37: Comparison of two diary entries, July 2016 and July 2020

Marius mused:

Phantom faces at the window,

Phantom shadows on the floor,

Empty chairs at empty tables,

where my friends will meet no more.

The learners might not have been my friends, but they surely belonged in classrooms, and not behind screens. I wanted them back in school, to reprimand them when they needed to focus and praise them for persevering, working hard and getting the correct answer. Teaching has changed and I now realise that change is not always comfortable or welcome. Adapting to change is not always easy. When we first moved to the UAE, we had to adapt to a new country, peculiar cultures, strange religions, enigmatic languages, conservative rules and different lifestyles. We had to find our place as guests, while making sure we were emotionally stable. It was not always easy, nor was it consistently challenging, just like adapting to the implications of Covid-19. The differences between these two adaptations are immense, but the one common factor is my resilience. Siebert (2005) reasons that resilience grows stronger over time, especially when it has been taught from childhood. The two diary entries (Figure 37) prove this to be true for me: I evolved and I am still evolving.

When I revert back to my research question to attempt an answer, I am challenged by the inclusivity of certain character traits. Is simply being resilient sufficient for emotionally surviving a personal evolution? I do not think it is that simple. Neither does Gonzales (2012), as he points out that resilience is but one characteristic that could be a driving force of success, but it has never been the

only key that contributes to overcoming difficult situations. Is sheer willpower and determination enough to meet the demands of a professional revolution? It does not seem plausible. Jacobson (2016) encourages teachers to interact with others, ask for support, focus on the initial reason for becoming a teacher, and not to rely on sheer willpower alone to stay in the profession. While I possess certain characteristics that could imply tenacity and an assiduous work ethic, I am convinced more than ever that I could not have evolved, nor would I have survived the revolution, if it had not been for the support of others in a variety of contexts and degrees. I will explore this support in the next scene, but for now I confidently add another puzzle piece to the ERA graph.

Edge 9, from Act II, Scene 13: The analysis of the EXPECTATIONS of an evolution, part 2

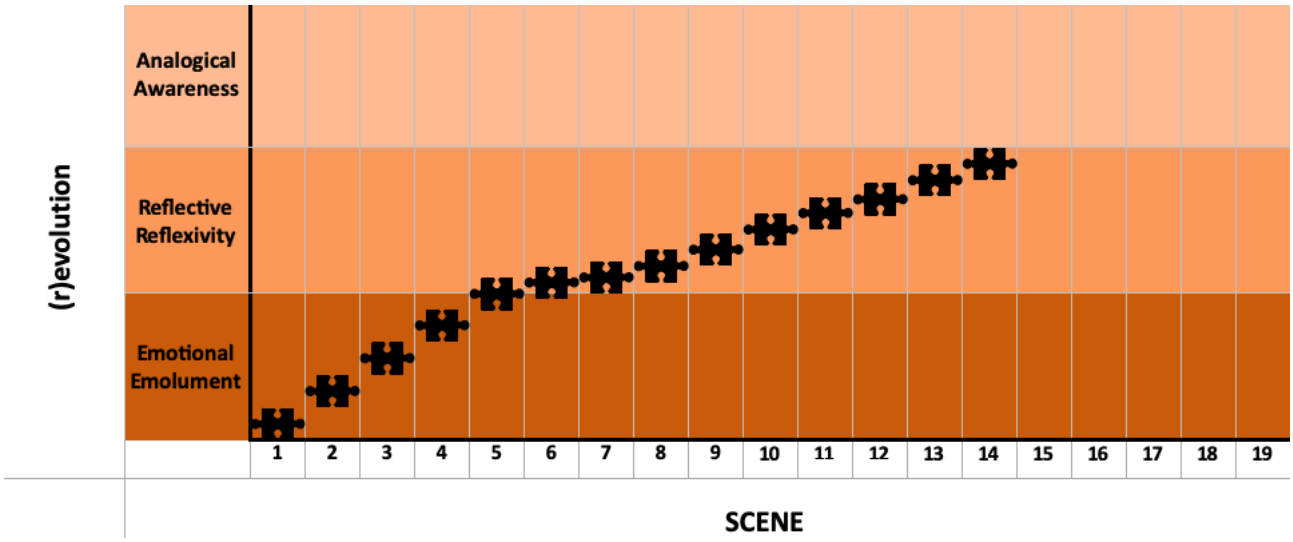


Figure 38: ERA graph at the end of Scene 13

Scene 14. ***Reprise: A heart full of love.***

Analysing the *support* for an evolution

AS MARIUS WONDERS WHO SAVED HIS LIFE, COSETTE COMFORTS HIM, AND THEY REAFFIRM THEIR BLOSSOMING ROMANCE.

Aldaem, an Arabic word for support and advocacy. Without *aldaem* Marius would not be alive. Without support I would not have changed. Without advocacy the education system would not be altered.

Every day

I wonder every day

Who was it

brought me here from the barricade ?

Burwell (2021), Kamenetz (2015) and Fullan (2020) agree that support is one of the consistent factors in a school's success. For the teachers, the support comes from management. The chance of a learner becoming an independent learner without the support of a teacher for guidance, or Vygotsky's (1987) MKO, is very unlikely (Ghamri, 2012; Sackstein, 2016). A learner needs the support of a teacher to progress academically towards independent learning (Romberg, 2003; Vygotsky, 1978). Sharif et al. (2016) inversely prove that this is also one of the motivational FITs, so learners in turn also support teachers. Unfortunately, as Karsenti and Collin (2013) point out, teachers are leaving the profession due to a lack of support. My experience has taught me that often teachers do not *ask* for the required support in the most effective way possible. Some teachers demand, instead of inquire, while others have an emotional outburst, instead of a logical discussion (Merrill & Stuckey, 2014). Moore (2009) attributes the fulfilment of required support to the manner in which an employee requests it, if at all. I was guilty of the same. I thought that I should and could handle all the problems I faced in my personal life. I was under the impression that my classroom management was in my hands alone. I constantly tried to address all my personal and professional challenges on my own. Whether it is pride, the fear of rejection, hesitance to feel ashamed or even just protecting yourself, it seems like people, myself included, do not ask for help easily (Peale, 2004; Pinker, 2007; Popper, 2002). Growing up, I was often left on my own to resolve issues, so I mistakenly interpreted this independence as a strong character trait. As a student I was convinced

that independent learning showcases intellect, while I dismissed group tasks as a waste of time and energy. Throughout this research journey, I learnt that asking for guidance is not a sign of weakness (Azorin, 2020; Lomas, 2016; Peale, 2004), but rather an act of confidence and evolution (Harris, 2020; Jones & Goethals, 1972). Requiring assistance does not make one fragile, but rather showcases emotional intelligence and progressive development (Kenon & Palsole, 2019). While I still believe that independent learning is important, I also recognise the value of teamwork and group efforts. The data collected and constructed throughout this research show that when I deal with my personal challenges on my own, emotions tend to take over the rational solution, a prediction accurately described by Jex (2002). Problems seem lighter and less demanding when they are being addressed by a group, instead of an individual (Ho & Tay, 2020).

The support throughout my life have been a culmination of people, places, experiences, and even things. I was supported by reading books, achieving academic grades, the knowledge and determination that I could *escape* my circumstances, Ouma Poppie, experiencing other cultures while travelling abroad, my husband, friends I met along the way, acquired resilience, and even some of the pets that joyously enriched my life. I sometimes neglected to acknowledge these support structures, yet their worth is undeniable. It is only through reflection that the true support could have been identified.

The same reasoning can be applied to my professional journey. My social media posts from 2015/2016 consistently paint a picture of happiness, while the truth was considerably far removed from the status updates. I was convinced that I had to carry the burden alone and show the world how wonderful life was treating me in the UAE. The first negative status update was written in June 2017, a few days before I left the school where I had started teaching in the UAE. I wrote (translated from Afrikaans):

"I vow to walk away from the hate and negativity and energy-consuming wormhole. I promise to seek the sunshine, not only from the sun, but also from those around me."

By consciously making the decision to address the struggles and negativity, I found others to have similar problems and struggles. This not only alleviated the feeling of isolation, but it also helped the verisimilitude of the data (Hayano, 1979) and is inevitable on the evolutionary road (Tivel, 2012). Without acknowledging the shortcomings and actively working on resolving them, emotional emolument would consume logic, halting evolution and hindering any form of possible progress (Watts, 1940; Weems & Silverman, 2006). Identifying and confronting the negative

factors built confidence, as the resonance of my struggles made my problems seem lighter and the probability of solving them seemed greater (Jacobson, 2016; Watts, 1940). Just as teachers proved to be stronger together during the Covid-19 pandemic, I can see the proof that I am stronger when I am aware of the support around me. Cosette sings to Marius

Every day you walk with stronger step

You walk with longer step, the worst is over

I find solace and motivation in these lyrics. I understand that I cannot plan for every possible outcome. I grasp the concept of being unprepared for unexpected things. However, I am no longer frightened by the possibility of feeling uncertain, unsafe or insecure, as I find solace in the knowledge that I will be supported, even if the support transpires in strange ways. I intrinsically know that I am not alone, lonely or isolated.

With all the years ahead of us

I will never go away

And we will be together, every day

I believe these words, now more than ever, as I add another puzzle piece to the ERA graph.

Edge 10, from Act II, Scene 14: The analysis of the SUPPORT of an evolution

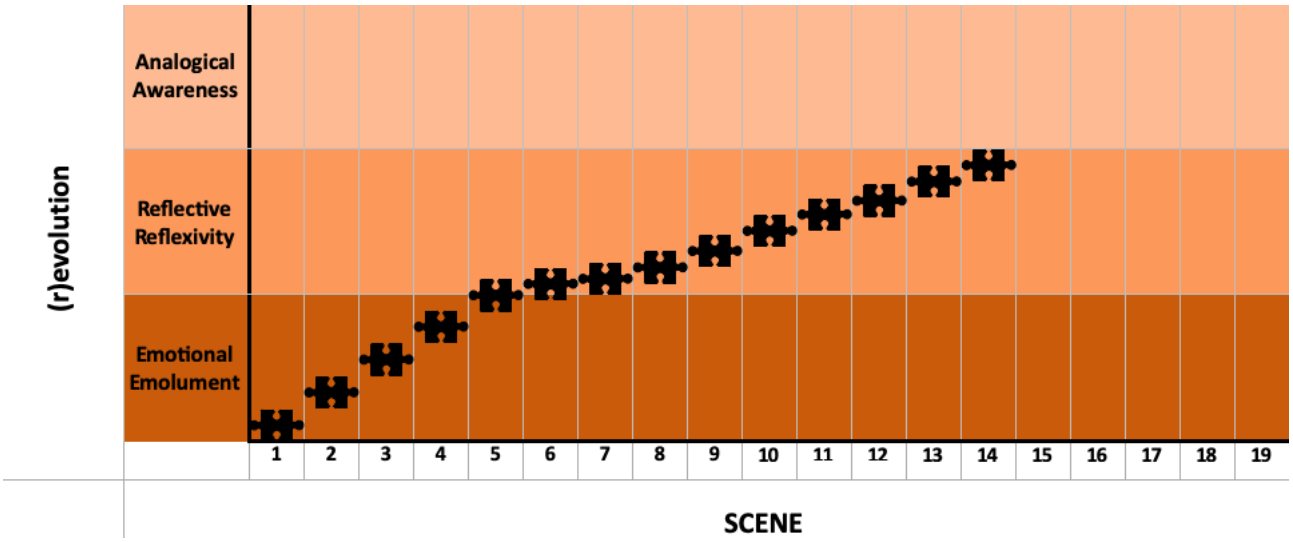


Figure 39: ERA graph at the end of Scene 14

This bring the thesis in line with the development of the plot of *Les Misérables*. Just before the climax is reached in the storyline of my conceptual metaphor, the data reach the final stages of evaluation. The four corner puzzle pieces of the data, namely Need, Planning, Expectations, and

Support, have been described during the emotional emolument phase. The reflective reflexivity phase ensured that both the evolutionary and revolutionary parts of the research question and data connecting the two spheres of the research question could be analysed with the aid of the literature reviews from Act I, while not dismissing the paradigmatic perspectives and theoretical convictions. The visual representation of the data as a puzzle looks like this:

Figure 40: The puzzle at the end of the Reflective Reflexivity phase of the data analysis

While the climax of *Les Misérables* would be reached within the next four scenes, followed by the denouement, the data will now be celebrated with analogical awareness and evaluation.

Scene 15. ***Confession.***

Evaluating the *need* for (r)evolution

VALJEAN CONFESSES TO MARIUS THAT HE IS AN ESCAPED CONVICT AND MUST GO AWAY AS HIS PRESENCE ENDANGERS COSETTE, FORCING MARIUS TO PROMISE NEVER TO TELL COSETTE.

There was undoubtedly a *need* for (r)evolution. In 2015, when I set foot on Middle Eastern soil for the first time, I was blissfully unaware of this need, but it was there. I never put in a formal request to the universe to facilitate change, it was an insensate, necessary development. Evolution is a part of life, like oxygen (Darwin, 1859), and it cannot be hindered by thinking it does not exist (Tivel, 2012). All organisms on earth go through phases of change and humans are not exempt. For some it is directly linked to age, for others it comes with marriage, happy events, children, divorce, emigration, or incidents of trauma (Lomas, 2016). Some call it a mid-life crisis while others define it as an evolutionary growth (Watts, 1940).

Change, progress, development, it does not matter how theoretical your definition of evolution is, it is inevitable (Darwin, 1859). Evolution takes on many forms, whether it be physical, emotional, or spiritual, and while we do not always have the power to determine or control the changes, we do have a choice in how we respond to the need got change (Archer, 2007; Cannon, 1932). Instinctively, we might react, but humans have the necessary cognitive complexity to differentiate between reaction and responding to change (Tivel, 2012). As soon as awareness of the *need* is established, the focus can shift to the *user*, as the organism is defined by Cannon (1932). If the *user* is identified, insight for improvement can be steadily made (Lomas, 2016; Tivel, 2012; Watts, 1940). I call this *PROBLEM AWARENESS.*

Reading through my personal journals it became evident that I could have stayed miserable. I *chose* not to. It was not a conscious decision at first, but rather a culmination of my resilience, stubborn nature, determination to prove others wrong and eventually a more deliberate step towards personal growth. The more aware I became of my need to change, the more set I was on achieving positive change. My teaching style pre-UAE has changed. I no longer strive to be popular and life changing. I focus on being consistent, while not ignoring my personal needs in order to be a “perfect” teacher. This empathetic nurturing of myself has led to greater confidence, which has also led to better

problem-solving and more flexible thinking. Adams et al. (2015) note that empathy for one's own worth will distinguish an autoethnographer from an autobiographer, making me sing with Valjean:

There's something now that must be done

You've spoken from the heart

And I must do the same

I always felt as if my story was not worth telling. Although I was always confident and resilient, I always shrugged off any compliments that came my way. I rarely acknowledged to myself how far I truly had come. Admitting this does not feel like gloating, but rather it eases my (usually anxious) being. There is value in the resonance of this narrative. I am not the only teacher on earth, I am not the only one who struggled. And if only one other teacher can relate, my story has value. There is a *need* for the teacher collective to be expanded and Ellis (2004) eloquently states that autoethnography is an exciting variant to fill the narrative apertures in research.

I experienced the *need* for a revolution in the teaching profession when I started teaching in South Africa, I was just not aware of the need. Globally, teachers have been begging for change for decades (Alsup, 2006) and the educational sector has been relatively stagnant compared to industries like politics, economics, technology and medicine (Stinson, 2009). Brinton (1938) argues that when society demands a radical change in the social structure, a revolution may emerge. In 2020 Covid-19 started this revolution. Yes, a virus might not be a typical igniter of a revolution, but Covid-19 dramatically changed the perception of the teaching profession. It did not take years; the changes were evident within weeks of the start of distance learning. Within the postmodern epistemology, it is not only plausible for non-human factors to influence the perceptions of society (Klages, 2012), but it also proves the autoethnographical basis of *how we know what we know* to be true (Ellis, 2004).

I know that Covid-19 changed education because I was physically and emotionally a part of the transformation. I know that the verisimilitude of the experience will not falter, as teachers throughout the world lived it too. Moaz (1996) considers a revolution successful, even if it is not yet completed, when changes can be seen by the greater society. The automaticity of teachers pre-Covid should have been a greater concern, but management systems and educational politics were too focused on improving the speed and accuracy of tasks, not questioning the validity and growth of the education sector (Jacobson, 2016; Karsenti & Collin, 2013; Stinson, 2009). The UAE was no exception. Teachers were not encouraged to be dynamic, even though professional development

was encouraged (Abosalem, 2016; Burwell, 2020). The *need* for change, progress and transformation was enhanced and highlighted during the global pandemic which forced schools to reassess their methodologies, policies and practices. Covid-19 forced us to rethink *what* we teach to the learners, *how* we teach it and critically evaluate *why* we employ certain teaching strategies. In 17 weeks of remote learning, we explored alternatives to the traditional, canonical way of teaching and found many wonderful ways in which we could improve outdated practices. Teachers were confessing, like Valjean, that what happened in classrooms was not always to the benefit of the learners, but more to appease management and "look good" on paper.

There is a story, sir

Of slavery and shame

All is not lost. In fact, this might be the start of something spectacular. When evaluating the pre-Covid *needs* of the education system and comparing them to *possible* post-Covid teaching practice, it becomes clear that Covid-19 was not a "quick fix" for all the existing problems and issues. In the story of *Les Misérables,* the revolution failed, yet there was a shift in focus to the real-life problems of the people. Similarly, Covid-19 did not encompass a full revolution for the teaching system, but it certainly raised awareness of the needs of teachers, learners and parents. There was empathy and tolerance. Covid-19 taught teachers, learners and parents that we are all on the same team, and working against each other, shifting blame and pointing fingers would not be beneficial for anyone. Valjean is in accord:

The time is come to journey on

And from this day he must be gone

When our school re-opened in September 2020, I could already see how the *needs* had changed. Physically, teachers needed more: masks, hand sanitisers, sanitising wipes, face shields and social distance stickers. Emotionally, teachers needed reassurance about job security, personal safety, anxiety relief and stronger Wi-Fi. The last example might be considered tongue-in-cheek humour, but teachers will know how stressful a lesson can become if the Wi-Fi signal means lagging visuals, broken communication and the loss of technological control. Once, not too long ago, we needed paper, more printing credits, stronger disciplinary action, more managerial support, a greater variety of resources, less administration and time. Our needs were revolutionised.

My first observation on our return to school was that the SLT actually noticed and listened to the needs of teachers. Although they did not have all the answers, or all the required information, they acknowledged the new needs, a massive improvement from the start of previous academic years.

I evolved. Not only professionally, but also personally. I once portrayed confidence as a mechanism to avoid acknowledging my insecurities. In the UAE, I was forced to face these insecurities in order to do more than simply survive. I had to adapt my needs, ask for support, adjust my expectations and learn how to be a learner. The immense emotional growth cannot be attributed to singular events or people, but it is undoubtedly a result of a culmination of factors. I am wary of simplifying a daunting, uncomfortable, exciting, emotional and tumultuous journey with one word, but the word "evolution" implies a never-ending, complex process. The teaching profession is being revolutionised. Why? Because the need was identified, acknowledged and addressed, and plans were made for improvement, something that would have been impossible had it not been for problem awareness.

Was it simple? No.
Did everything go to plan? No.
Were there surprising outcomes? For sure.
Was the (r)evolution positive? Absolutely.

And so I place the first centre puzzle piece, not only to complete the picture, but also to make the analogical awareness on the ERA graph visually effective.

Centre piece 1, from Act II, Scene 15: The evaluation of the NEED for a (r)evolution

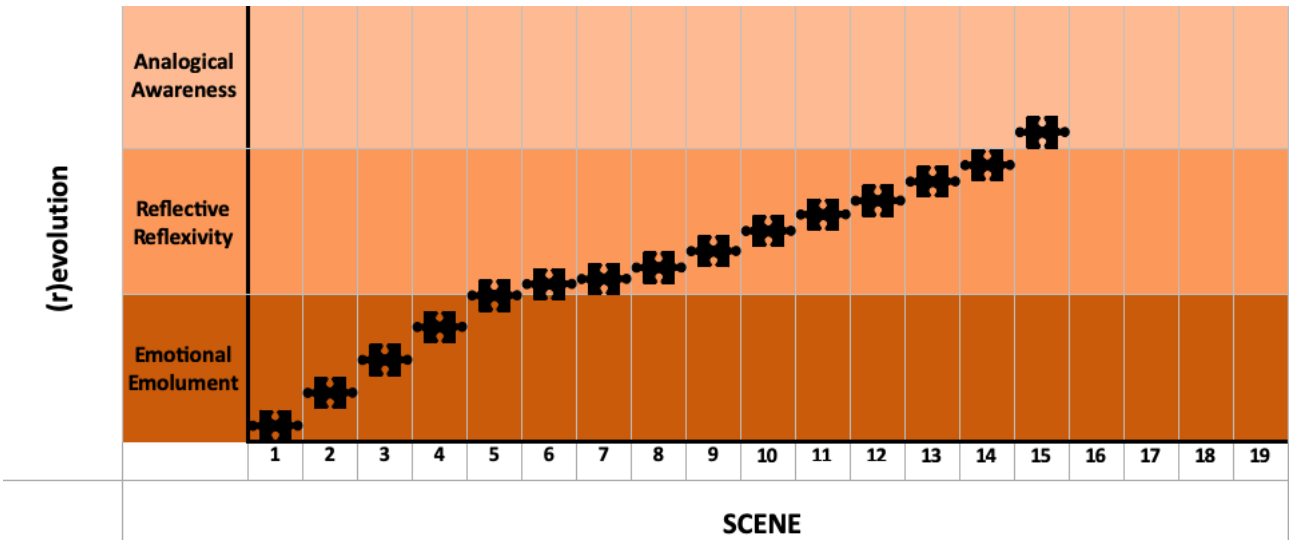


Figure 41: ERA graph at the end of Scene 15

Scene 16. ***Reprise: Suddenly I see***

Evaluating the *planning* for (r)evolution

COSETTE IS SAD TO LEARN ABOUT VALJEAN'S DISAPPEARANCE.

I did not plan my evolution, but I did plan on discovering it. I thought about my objective: to complete this thesis as an autoethnography. My mission was complex in its simplicity: to discover why I had evolved. I analysed my needs, theorised about strategies, and allocated resources and time in order to achieve my initial end goal. I planned the discovery of the research process carefully and, when reflecting, I smile at the realisation that only a small part of my thesis was executed as planned. Delving through my childhood memories, discovering the origin of my resilience and experiencing Covid-19 as a teacher were but a few of the unplanned detours on my journey. Even though the majority of my planning missed the initial, intended target, I still refer to this part of my process as *SOLUTION AWARENESS.* I had to create solutions by constantly adjusting my planning.

When I started teaching in the UAE I could not plan for the challenges I had to face. I could plan the most idealistic lessons on paper and present them flawlessly, but the successful reception of these lessons would be determined by the subjective perception of the observer. Even when I ticked all the boxes for outstanding lessons, I could not plan to be an outstanding teacher. I needed experience to evolve into a better teacher. This realisation would not be possible if not for the reflections required as part of my data collection strategy (Bolton, 2010). The ability to recognise rules is not an act of intellectual playfulness, but the capacity to bend these rules to create new, valid methods is considered to be a characteristic of an experienced teacher (Avalos, 2011). Fluent and flexible thinking cannot be taught, only encouraged (Böckler et al., 2017), and in the teaching profession, this facility could be considered essential for longevity (Fullan, 2020; Ingersoll, 2012).

We are the sum of our experiences. My professional growth would not have been possible had I not been submerged in unnerving classrooms, a mismanaged school and a lack of support. In turn, this led to personal growth, following which I could accept that I did not know everything. Being humbled by my lack of experience started as a negative experience, but today I look back and I know that I will forever be a lifelong learner (Watts, 1940). By becoming more aware of the possible solutions to my shortcomings, I strengthened my agility. I started experimenting with new

ideas, taking risks in my classroom. I became more open-minded and receptive to other ideas, a reflexive attitude that would implicate faster development and progress than reflection alone (Dewey, 1933; Gay, 2009). My grandma taught me how to read. While this may seem like a trivial incident, it was a crucial part of stimulating an enquiring mind. My eagerness to learn made me an independent thinker and a proactive problem-solver. The evolution of a miserable teacher would not have been possible without this empowering agility.

As a teacher cohort, we were given two weeks to plan for revolutionary, emergency remote learning, unexpectedly brought on by Covid-19. Most of our initial plans failed and we had to constantly adapt and change our strategies to really address the needs of learners. While some teachers did not adapt and resigned, others embraced the uncomfortable changes and saw them as a challenging opportunity for growth, the fight-flight-freeze reaction (Corr et al., 2006) in action. When the schools closed for the summer break, I came to the conclusion that those who gave up never experienced the feeling of success at the end, however small. One of the teachers who I mentored throughout the remote learning period, noted that while he was extremely scared and wary of distance education, he could look back and pat himself on the back. He survived unprecedented teaching and learnt more from this experience than he had learnt in the last three years at the school. This made me smile. Covid-19 taught us to adapt quickly. It taught us resilience and perseverance beyond our own selves. There was not sufficient time to thoroughly plan for remote learning. Not one teacher in our school had prior experience of such an extreme remote learning situation and nobody had ever been trained for distance education. More than 350 individuals started planning, based on their own ideas and preconceptions of what to expect. There was no support, nor was any guidance given. Everyone was expected to plan reflexively for something, but nobody knew what to truly expect. The ability to work effectively within the rules of a domain is what Clandinin and Connelly (2000) refer to as the development of analytical precision, and is a crucial part of problem-solving skills. Unfortunately, many teachers had never had prior opportunities to develop this skill, making them feel unsafe and unsupported. This lack of confidence and feeling of uncertainty is one of the many reasons teachers quit the profession (Jacobson, 2016). When the original plans faltered within the first 48 hours of implementation, teachers were dismayed about re-planning all their previous efforts. The creative and enterprising teachers took up the challenge and showed their metaphorical agile teeth, while many teachers simply froze and did nothing. Bolton (2010) believes that personality strengths and weaknesses are too often dismissed in the professional sphere of development. During Covid-19, his belief rang true. Darwin (1859) and Cannon (1932) attribute the survival of certain species to stronger,

evolutionary genetic traits. Finlay (2008), Jex (2002) and Gardner (2010) reason that graduates and professionals, like teachers, often leave the profession due to a lack of personal strength. With the outbreak of Covid-19, many teachers resigned, but more stayed. Some admittedly stayed because they could not afford to resign. Other stayed because they did not want to take any risks during the pandemic. Only a few stayed and became actively involved in finding solutions. Moaz (1996) writes that during a revolution, some will shy away, some will ignore what is going on, and others will fight for all they are worth to be a part of the change, again highlighting similarities with the FFFS. I cannot plan everything, even if I desperately wanted to. Being aware of my own frailties makes me stronger and more resilient, but not everyone has the same capabilities. I learnt not only to plan for the expected but also to anticipate the unexpected. Revolution is never easy or comfortable, and it does not always have a positive outcome, but change is inevitable (Brinton, 1938; Moaz, 1996), which is essentially growth in its own right.

Why was a miserable teacher (r)evolutionised? I needed and wanted to change. This thesis required planning, so I executed the groundwork thoroughly. Covid-19 was not planned, but it brought on a revolution in the education system. We attempted to plan for the unexpected and failed. Neither the school nor I could have planned for all the unanticipated events. The (r)evolution would have been unlikely had it been not for the *SOLUTION AWARENESS*. Agility, perseverance, resilience and creativity made my evolution and the revolution about to start in education possible. I am thankful.

Centre piece 2, from Act II, Scene 16: The evaluation of the PLANNING of a (r)evolution

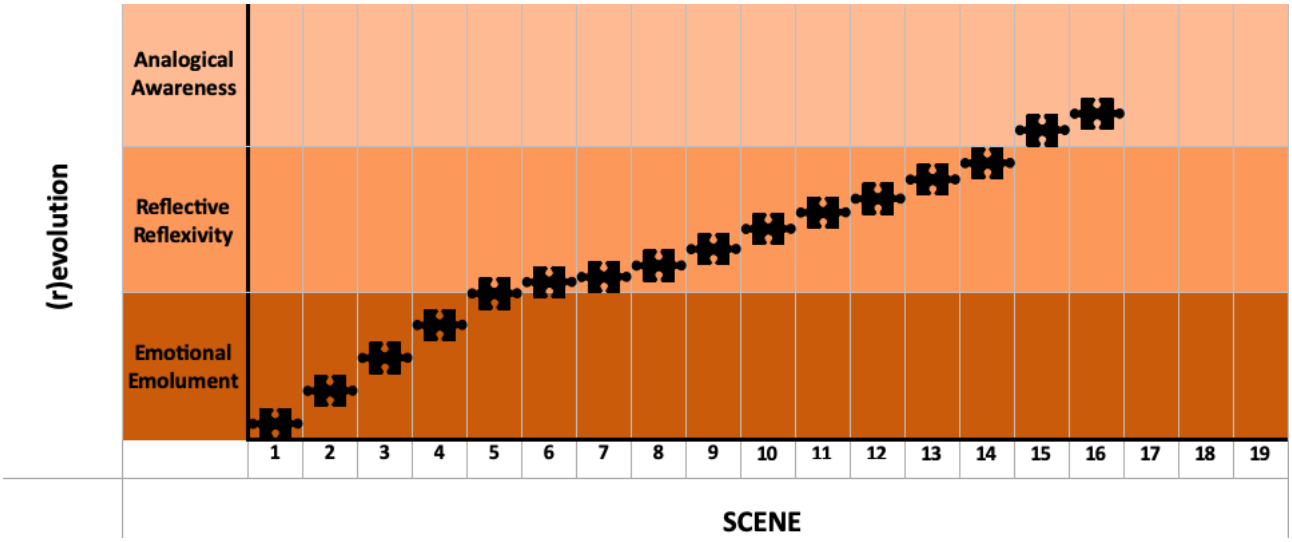


Figure 42: ERA graph at the end of Scene 16

Scene 17. ***The wedding***

Evaluating the *expectations* for (r)evolution

MARIUS AND COSETTE MARRY A FEW MONTHS LATER. THE THÉNARDIERS INTERRUPT THE RECEPTION AND MARIUS REALISES THAT IT WAS VALJEAN WHO SAVED HIS LIFE. THE NEWLYWEDS LEAVE TO FIND VALJEAN.

I can imagine that most bridal parties might expect some family drama on their wedding day, but thieves and dramatic truth bombs sound a little surreal. This is what Marius and Cosette had to deal with on their wedding day. The choir celebrates the joyous occasion:

In jubilation, sing their songs of praise

And crown this blessed time

With peace and love

I celebrated too. I realised that I had always set goals to outwit and outsmart the expectations of others. I saw these as challenges that I wanted to conquer, just so I could prove them wrong.

"You will never make a career out of public speaking" – one of my high school teachers.

"You don't need a degree to earn a living" – my uncle.

"You are an acceptable teacher that needs support to develop" – a principal.

I always thought that low expectations did not serve as motivation and while this might be true for some, it had the opposite effect on my determination, aligning Watts' (1940) backwards law with my own evolution. I did not expect a personal or professional (r)evolution when we moved to the UAE. I certainly had no expectations of completing a doctoral thesis during a global pandemic, but I no longer required the expectations of others to feed my determination. I sing with Thenardier at the wedding:

So it goes, heaven knows

Life has dealt me some terrible blows

I did not depend on the *terrible blows* to encourage me to progress. My own expectations were harder to manage, but they were also more focused on my personal development. Evolution is rarely quick and never easy (Darwin, 1859; Tivel, 2012), something that I describe as *IMPLEMENTATION AWARENESS.*

I could plan all I want. I could expect as much as I humanly could. Implementing and actively following through on all of the plans and expectations was more complex than I could have ever anticipated. I had to employ holistic thinking in order to see the generalisability of my emotions. I had to step outside my comfort zone and acknowledge that I was not the only teacher who felt discouraged and disempowered. My own situation could be extrapolated to other instances. Even if they were not congruent, the similarities would suffice for establishing verisimilitude and resonance, as required by autoethnography (Ellingson & Ellis, 2008). As I was navigating my narrative inquiry to find the *why* I stayed in the classroom, I became more aware of the teachers around me. I heard their complaints, understood their concerns, and I felt less isolated. This naturally boosted the purpose of my study, as I became more confident with the relatability of my own biography. The *auto* was addressed within the *ethno* of my environment.

The ability to seek connections from past experiences and relate them to the present is not only a crucial part of reflective research (Nagle, 2008), but it also helps alleviate the dangers of reflexive predictions (Grunberg & Modigliani, 1954). This linking of two separate knowledge domains fits within CMT and enhances the aptitude to move from concrete to abstract reasoning (Du Preez & De Klerk, 2019). I did not contemplate delving into my childhood but, by adapting the expectation, I dealt with more than the initial assumptions. I developed a deeper understanding of *why I am who I am* and could thus more truthfully answer the question of *why* I evolved. While I thought the ambiguity would lead to random vagueness, it instead shed light on the bigger picture. Ellis (2004) warns that too sharp a focus can result in losing sight of a comprehensive evaluation. Constant awareness of agility and an enterprising implementation of the expectations led to honest discoveries of personal, sometimes uncomfortable, truths.

Our expectations of life are often reduced and/or dispersed by experience; experience that can only be gained by implementing the planning and continuously adapting it. The school's high expectations at the start of remote learning were perceived as setting the teachers up for failure. The demands were unrealistic and unmanageable. Yet, having had no expectations, as I did when growing up, seemed to be a very poor motivator. Speaking from a postmodern perspective, there is no real truth when it comes to setting and meeting expectations (Klages, 2012). It is a delicate, incredibly subjective, balancing act that requires constant adjustment.

Pre-Covid I was focused on ticking boxes and checking things off a *to-do* list. I was not concerned about the ridiculousness of some expectations and merely did what was required, rarely questioning

the relevance of the expectations. Prior to remote learning, it appeared that most teachers, myself included, only complained about the unrealistic expectations of management, but nobody actively worked on possible solutions to relieve the situation or render practices sustainable. During distance education, management was forced to listen to the complaints regarding the expectations and adjust them accordingly. The expectations became increasingly more realistic and even though they were far from perfect at the end of the academic year, there were tangible improvements to be seen. Carsons (2013) states that teachers' motivation increases when their complaints are heard and attempts to address their needs are evident. According to Alsup (2006), Carsons (2013), Elwell (2013) and Jacobson (2016), teachers require some autonomy in class, while the expectations should be deliberately focused on teaching, and even if the expectations are met with scepticism, the continuous alignment thereof will lead to a symbiotic partnership of trust and respect.

I wrote in my diary, on 14 July 2020:

"When schools reopen in September, I expect a few things. I expect learners will learn and teachers will teach. I expect the system to never be perfect, nor predictable. Above all, I set the expectation to be a part of the solution to a better education system upon our return, regardless of the unpredictability of what awaits us."

I was not wrong. The expectations we received at the start of the new academic year were brief and notably more realistic when compared to the lists sent out in previous years. Some expectations were:

Teach to the best of your ability and resources.
Try to engage the learners and make them active participants in class.
Take attendance and communicate with parents and managers.
Ensure your own mental and physical wellbeing.

I was elated when I realised that the lessons learnt from the previous year had not been forgotten. The lyrics of the dialogue between Thenardier and Marius echo my sentiment on the effect Covid-19 has had on the teaching profession:

One thing more, mark this well

It was the night, the barricades fell

The unrealistic lens through which the SLT managed teachers was smashed during remote learning. Unsustainable teaching practices slowly became simpler and more effective, thus preventing teacher burnout and maintaining a sense of positivity and encouragement.

There is hope. Our expectations turned into experience through IMPLEMENTATION AWARENESS. The analogical awareness of adjusting expectations seems to be a key to sustainable success. As Marius whispers to Cosette, I feel hopeful:

This day's blessings are not over yet

Why was a teacher (r)evolutionised? Because I became aware of how expectations need to be either dispersed into something more, or funnelled into something achievable. For expectations to be truly successful, there needs to be a mutually beneficial relationship between managers and teachers, parents and learners, schools and students. The conversation should be never-ending, as the expectations should be ever transforming. This is (r)evolution.

Centre piece 3, from Act II, Scene 4: The evaluation of the EXPECTATIONS of a (r)evolution

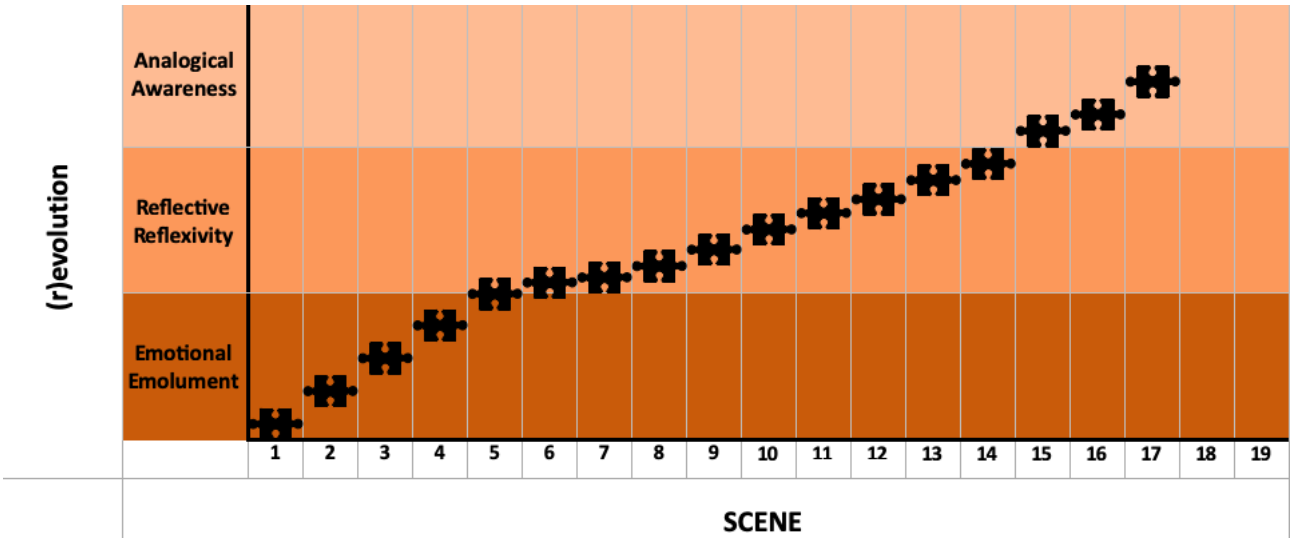


Figure 43: ERA graph at the end of Scene 17

Scene 18. ***Beggars at the Feast.***
Evaluating the *support* for (r)evolution

THE THÉNARDIERS GLOAT ABOUT THEIR CRAVEN PRACTICALITY THAT HAS SAVED THEIR LIVES TIME AND TIME AGAIN.

I always considered myself to be strongly independent. I was convinced that I neither needed, nor wanted any support and that I could achieve a lot of things on my own. My parents confirmed that even as a child I liked to play on my own and was never interested in having a lot of friends over. Reflection made me realise that I was never truly alone and that there was always a support system in place, whether I was consciously aware of it or not.

Ain't it a laugh? Ain't it a treat?
Hob-nobbin' here among the elite.
Here comes a prince, there goes a Jew
This one's a queer, but what can you do?

I was amused and intrigued by the multicultural cosmos that the UAE delivered. While I often found myself feeling alone, the more I reflect the stronger the realisation emerges that even the diversity proved to be a non-traditional form of support. Lucy (2004) agrees that realising support structures is one of the strongest effects of reflective data practices. Maree (2016) and Klages (2012) encourage the postmodern researcher to look for data in unlikely places by keeping an open mind to alternative perspectives. This is exactly what unknowingly happened. The environment created by the UAE, with diverse religions, languages and cultures, excited me. This excitement led to a deeper and more complex motivation to stay. While I was so focused on the money as a reason for persevering, cultural diversity essentially drove me to keep going. Lampert (2001) and Smit et al. (2016) mention that the physical environment always has an impact on the determination, happiness and overall mental health of a person, but it is often overlooked or oversimplified.

The more aware I became of the support throughout my evolution, the more I started trusting and depending on it. I have come to understand that support does not have to be positive success stories, even traumatic events can be supportive in growth. This metacognition is what Popper (2002) describes as the ability to knowingly use a wide range of thinking approaches to transfer knowledge between spheres, building confidence in the process. There is a resemblance between this

metacognition and metaphor use too (Steen, 2010), as finding similarities in two different circumstances of knowledge both strengthens understanding and nourishes self-evaluation. All this articulates into personal, intellectual confidence, also known as personalised evolution (Siebert, 2005; Tivel, 2012). The more reliant I became on certain support structures, the stronger my collaborative empathy grew, all within this wonderful, new, cultural diversity I am amazed by. By immersing myself in the new cultural setting, as autoethnography urges (Ellis, 2004), I became concerned for society, taking into account the heritage, beliefs, ethics, morals and just everyday way of living. I think back to the girl I met on the floor of a school bathroom, the boy who threw his shoes at me, the parent who dismissed my knowledge of measurement, the principal who branded me as "inadequate", but I am no longer angry. I feel thankful that those experiences shaped me into a stronger global citizen, striving to build a better community ethos, instead of just surviving.

Nobody could have expected the revolutionary changes that remote learning brought. The school became increasingly aware of the burdens teachers face and for the first time in my teaching career, I witnessed management adapting their expectations to support teachers more effectively. While there is consensus in research that teacher burnout is not imaginary and dramatic changes are needed, both globally and in the UAE (Jacobson, 2016; Skaalvik & Skaalvik, 2011; Stinson, 2009; Tabari, 2014), Covid-19 has emphasised these shortcomings during distance education and highlighted the desperate need for change. The wellbeing of staff was no longer something that was mentioned by SLT just to "look cool" or "sound popular". There were active engagements being logged in support of teachers during this emotional time. I was astounded to see to what extent the teacher cohort could actually support one another.

Pre-Covid, teachers were often so overburdened with administrative duties that supporting each other was not a priority. During remote learning, teachers not only supported each other with regard to resources and workload, but also helped one another carry emotional stress. Simply talking to each other about mental wellbeing ensured that there was a more universal resonance regarding the emotional emolument teachers had to pay during the pandemic. This was mutually beneficial and served as a coping mechanism in a strange, unprecedented situation. Teachers evolved their own helpfulness. Messages in Team Chat showed this development in obvious ways. When the sharing of resources was discussed, the progression is easy to identify:

> *"I don't think we need to…"* (12 March 2020)
> *"Maybe we can try for this week…"* (2 April 2020)

"It was sort of helpful…" (11 April 2020)

"I saved about six hours of planning…" (1 May 2020)

"Let's divide the workload for next week…" (6 May 2020)

"We can share it through our network and save it for next year…" (5 June 2020)

Revolution is not a solitary event completed by a single person (Brinton, 1938), but rather a culmination of smaller events, organised by like-minded people with the same goal, to ensure change (Brinton, 1938; Goodwin, 2001; Tilly, 1995). The teachers in our schools undoubtedly participated in this revolution in support. Parents became active participants in their children's learning journeys, not only by home-schooling them, but also by becoming aware of the "real worth" of a teacher, something that has been widely scrutinised and discussed since the early 1940s (Gonzales, 2012; Jacobson, 2016; Moaz, 1996). Teachers throughout the world have often felt underappreciated and undervalued, and too often they become the victims of poor academic results and social ineptness, making them leave the profession (Lampert, 2001; Merrill & Stuckey, 2014; Morales, 2011). Covid-19 shone a spotlight on teachers throughout the world. I smiled when I read through blogs, saw teacher-appreciation posts, and even heard songs being dedicated to the educators of the world. As a teacher, the revolution is bringing magic back.

We returned to school. I still feel supported. Management checks in regularly to ensure our needs are being met. Parents support their children at home, in turn supporting me. Teachers support each other by sharing stories, resources and workload. Life is nowhere near perfect, but I feel hopeful. *Insha-Allah*, God willing, all will be well soon.

And so I place the final piece of the puzzle which became the visual focus of my (r)evolution.

Centre piece 4, from Act II, Scene 18: The evaluation of the SUPPORT of a (r)evolution

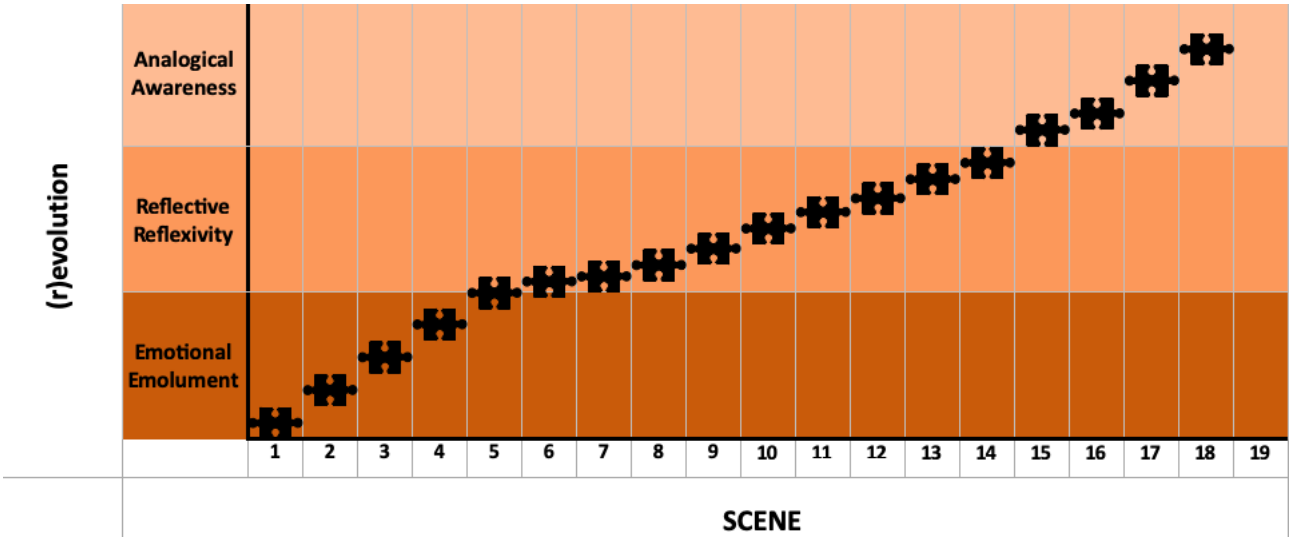


Figure 44: ERA graph at the end of Scene 18

Scene 19: Epilogue

At a convent, Valjean awaits his death. The spirit of Fantine appears to him and tells him that he has been forgiven and will soon be with God. Cosette and Marius arrive to find Valjean near death. Valjean thanks God for letting him live long enough to see Cosette again, and Marius thanks Valjean for saving his life. Valjean gives Cosette a letter confessing his troubled past and the truth about her mother. As he dies, the spirits of the Bishop, Fantine and Éponine guide him to Heaven. They are joined by the spirits of those who died at the barricades, who sing that in the next world, God lays low all tyranny and frees all oppressed people from their shackles.

Figure 45: The puzzle is built

As a young girl I was obsessed with puzzles. I could finish an intricate 1500-piece puzzle in a few days. When we arrived in the UAE, I acquired quite a few puzzles and spent holidays and weekends trying to fit the pieces together. The puzzle I built throughout this thesis only consisted of 18 pieces and yet it was by far the most difficult, time-consuming and rewarding postmodern project I have completed. In the denouement of my data, I want to address a definition of "revolution" that I only mentioned once, never explored, but never forgot about. A revolution, in a mathematical context, refers to the full orbit of an object, also known as a 360-degree turn around a specific point. In psychology, emotions and events can circle back to their origin, also causing a completed revolution. And according to Darwin (1859), any completed revolution is a part of evolution. In the

novel, Victor Hugo circles back to the beginning of Valjean's story, and in the musicals and screen adaptations, the songs are repeated, the characters are shown again and the story of revolution is concluded with Valjean's evolution… right up to his last breath.

I dreamed a dream

I once had stars in my eyes as I walked into a classroom. That dream did not die as I originally thought it did, it merely transformed into another. I now dream of being a consistent teacher who makes a difference, however small. I actively work on improving my skill set, focusing my energy and time on the things that make my life sensible, even if only for me. This subjective, personal goal fits into my postmodern perspective of accepting that my truth might not be your truth and gives me meaning in a weird and wonderful world.

Alone at the end of the day

I never felt more lonely than in 2015, when we had to settle in a new, multicultural, dynamic, yet conservative country. Yet I embraced the challenges and when my son told me "it's not wrong Mama, it is only different" I knew that we had more than acclimatised. We had grown. Evolved. We call the UAE home now, and while I am aware that this is not our forever home, I am content in the knowledge that we are where we are supposed to be. Islam teaches that one should be respectful of your setting in the universe, in Arabic "*min almftrd 'an 'akun huna*", as God will not put you in a place where you cannot make a difference. Even though I am not Muslim, I embrace this belief.

God on high

Hear my prayer

Although I was brought up in a strongly religious home, I never fully accepted a specific religion. I appreciate the teachings, I find meaning in the spiritual wanderings, and I respect the worship to a Higher Energy. In the last five years, I have found solace and grace in the unknown, again providing me with the strange comfort that I am no longer out on parole. I am free.

It's thanks to you that I am living

Again I lay down my life at your feet

Even when Covid-19 shook the world, I did not revert back to insecurity and anger. Instead, I trusted the support systems surrounding me. I talked and listened. I felt and acknowledged every emotion. I no longer shied away from feelings of despair, anger and sadness, but accepted that there is strength in showing emotions and dealing with them. The value of not placing a time constraint on healing has improved my life dramatically and the belief that there will be someone to pick me up when I falter made me even more resilient than before.

For now my life is blessed

Covid-19 was more than just a Great Pause. It was also a great way to move away from *wants* and *needs* to *what we have* and *what we really needed*. While this may sound like an altruistic cliché, it is important for me to understand that I can give so much more, support so much better, if I am content with my own possessions, physically, emotionally and spiritually. I learnt that negative events can have positive outcomes, childhood trauma can lead to wonderful resilience and transforming dreams can be evolutionary.

On this page

I write my last confession

It's the story

Of one who turned from hating

And so it will be written that I too turned from hating. I hated my childhood neighbourhood, the school I started teaching in, teachers that did not expect enough of me, managers who expected too much, unfairness, unkindness, dishonesty… the list of my hatred was truly tiring. I chose to let go. It was not easy, nor was it quick. I rolled my eyes when I read about how freeing forgiveness can be and even wrote the occasional "blah blah blah" in my personal diaries, proving how little I truly believed in exoneration.

Forgive me all my trespasses

And take me to your glory

Then I forgave myself and the world stopped spinning and started revolving. It is so easy to attribute certain strong characteristics and personality traits to our thinking style and behaviour, yet *forgiving* is perceived as a weakness. Still, forgiveness is how a society can rebuilt successfully after a revolution (Pigeon, 2008) and if it were not for the forgiving nature of nature, more species would have gone extinct by not evolving (Darwin, 1859). I had to forgive the girl who disregarded her parents and their efforts. I had to pardon the teacher that was not perfectly successful. I had to acquit the mother who made mistakes and excuse the wife who blundered. I had to award amnesty to the friend who was not always supportive. I had to make peace and try to be better.

And remember

The truth that once was spoken

To love another person

Is to see the face of God

By forgiving myself, I also had to learn to love myself. And so my circle is almost complete. In the *Preliminary note from the author* (page 1), I wrote that Valjean would make Maslow proud, because he achieved a level of self-actualisation that I was profoundly jealous of. I look at the thesis I wrote, the house I built, the career I carved, the human I have become, and I know that none of these would have been possible if I had not had a solid foundation. The answer(s) to my research question(s),

How was a miserable teacher (r)evolutionised?

rests on the same foundation: I evolved because my physiological needs were met. We earn good money in the UAE. We eat delicious food from all over the world, we never worry about a lack of fresh water and not a single one of our very basic needs are lacking.

I wanted more.

We live in one of the safest cities in the world, in a beautiful apartment, right next to the ocean. We have financial security, fantastic medical insurance, unlimited Wi-Fi, and more luxuries than we could ever have asked for.

I needed more.

I am loved. The more trust I invested in the support of family and friends, the stronger my sense of belonging grew. The UAE nourished my marriage in a way I could not anticipate. I experience an intimate connection like never before. I have friends who are now like family, and my family is cherished in all corners of the world.

I expected more.

My confidence is still growing, but I no longer expect to be the best. I expect to learn, every day. I reflect and realise how much I have accomplished, even though I know I am not done *yet.* I embrace the growth mindset that I have become accustomed to and find tranquillity in the knowledge that this is not superficial gloating, but rather dignified living.

I still plan for more.

I realise what I am, who I am. Self-actualisation is more than just knowledge of ability and potential, it extends into the realm of possibility. I forgave myself. I love myself. I acknowledge all my weaknesses and embrace my strengths. I confess that I am not perfect, but I promise to never stop looking. When I finally reflect on my life, I want to ensure that I see that love… you know… the one that looks like the face of God.

Do you hear the people sing

Lost in the valley of the night?

It is the music of a people

Who are climbing to the light

Teaching is the oldest profession on earth. Yes, even older than prostitution. Mothers taught their children about the world long before hormones kicked in. Teachers will never stop climbing towards the light. The importance of education is undisputed. Doctors, engineers, even lawyers and politicians, were once learners in a classroom. Without teachers, economies would collapse, war would erupt, global health would deteriorate and mothers will give up on their offspring. I might be a tad melodramatic, but the value of teachers throughout the world cannot be quantified. Throughout the last century, teachers have been crying out for and desperately seeking change. They asked for better resources, more support, better understanding, realistic expectations, and yes, salary increases. Their *song* was lost in the *valley of the night.* Yet, they did not stop *singing.* Then Covid-19 handed them a microphone. Suddenly their song could be heard in every household, in every parliamentary boardroom, in every principal's office, and even in commercial business centres. Covid-19 shut the school doors and opened minds. Within months, curricula were adapted, support structures were rolled out, needs were met and challenges were identified. 2020 has seen more progressive and dynamic development in the school system than the decade before could ever have hoped for. I experienced the way a government took charge to ensure the safety of a country's children. I witnessed how a school management amended policies and structures to guarantee the best support for their staff. Teachers formed a unitary team and worked together like never before. A revolution has begun.

Even the darkest night will end

And the sun will rise

Although it does not feel like it now, I know that Covid-19 will eventually end. Vaccines are already being rolled out and schools all over the world have started opening their doors again. Slowly but surely, the world is changing yet again. Some call it a "new normal", while others refer to it as "post-Covid". Whether there will ever be an official name remains to be seen, but I pray to all gods and energy forces that nothing goes back to the way it was. I want to be able to fly across borders again and I want to walk in the street without a mask, but I do not want to feel uncertain, unsafe and inadequate again. I do not want the school to stop doing all the wonderful things it implemented during distance learning. I want the learners back in class where I can hand out high-

fives and stick golden stars in workbooks. I need it. I will plan for it. I expect things to be different, but I trust I will have support. My ERA graph is finalised, for the moment. Through Emotional Emolument, Reflective Reflexivity and Analogical Awareness data grew into an evolutionary revolution, exceeding all needs and expectations, through planning and support.

Epilogue, from Act II, Scene 19: Concluding a (r)evolution

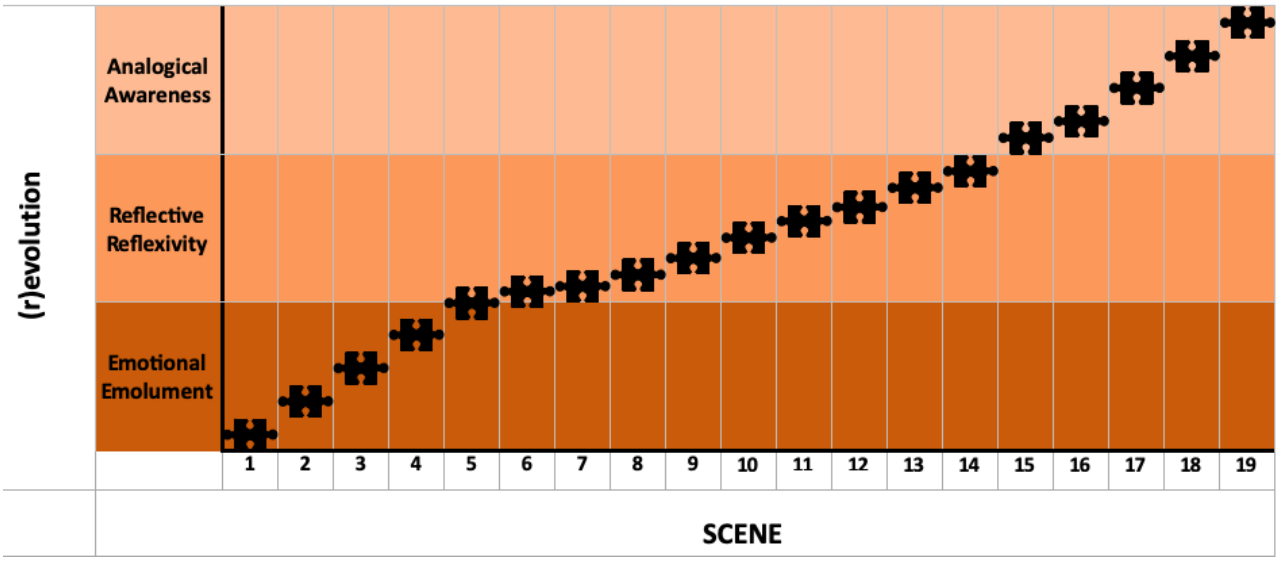


Figure 46: ERA graph at the end of Scene 19

Life has many complex questions and very few simple answers. This postmodern autoethnography had the purpose of verisimilitude and resonance. Something to add to the teacher collective.

My evolution is never-ending.

The revolution has just begun.

Will you join in our crusade?

Who will be strong and stand with me?

Somewhere beyond the barricade

Is there a world you long to see?

Do you hear the people sing?

Say, do you hear the distant drums?

It is the future that they bring

When tomorrow comes!

FIN.

Reviews

To offer the reader possible additional insights into the production of this thesis, the author has added a postmodern twist of reviews in third-person style.

The full reference for the guides that inspired these reviews can be found in the list of references.

Review 1: As guided by Lempriere (2019)

Technicalities

"Everyone's PhD journey is different, but no less impressive."

Let's talk CONTENT

A few formalities cannot be circumvented when writing a doctoral thesis. Writing an abstract that contains a precis of the research, as well as what the research will finally contribute, is a non-negotiable. The writer included the summary of the separate sections, including her methodology, paradigm, conceptual theory and purpose of study in the abstract. Apart from a dedication, the list of acknowledgements is well thought-through, with reference to CMT, giving it a slight, aesthetic flair. The thesis was proofread by a professional, minimising the chances of possible corrections after submission. The lists of figures, tables and abbreviations are clearly set out to make referencing easier for the reader. While the canonical table of contents has been substituted with two acts, containing scenes, the titles are clear and comprehensive, and even though there are no sub-headings present, the metaphorical use of *Les Misérables* guides the content and gives additional structure to the content.

Critiquing the FORMAT

The format of a thesis might be dependent on the university or institution of submission, but often the formatting rules can be lenient, as long as the purpose is clear and consistent. The writer made use of the American Psychological Association (7th edition) referencing system and consulted a variety of literature from as early as 1869 to as recent as 2021. Allegiance to the postmodern paradigm is evident throughout, with the most obvious evidence being seen in the structural format of the thesis.

Final CHECK

Before any form of celebration should be configured, the necessary paperwork should be filed. The declaration of originality, ethical statement, ethical clearance certificate, and additional information regarding the layout and structure of the thesis, were all added in a creative *Souvenir Programme.* In this programme, which is similar to one that one would receive when attending a musical performance at a theatre, the reader is given a small glimpse of the preparation and history of the thesis to follow.

Review 2: As guided by Mewburn (n.d.)

Vocabulary of sorts

"Academic writing is like a painful, upper-class dinner party"

Academic writing is not a natural extension of an instinctive writer, but rather something that is cultivated through years of reading, writing and formatting, and the willingness to learn from feedback. The writer of this thesis carefully stays away from the use of unscholarly, aggressive verbs like "asserts" and instead uses kinder verbs like "encourages" and "argues", inciting debate rather than establishing authority. Throughout the thesis the reader is made consistently aware of the writer's prejudice, subjectivity and sub-text, making it easier for the reader to interact with the text in an openly honest way. The writer is confident in both importing (reference at the end of evidence) and exporting (reference at the start of a sentence) existing literature.

With careful consideration, the writer weeded out the excessive use of brackets (unless absolutely necessary as parenthesis) and qualifiers like "sort of" and "in a sense", resulting in her seeming unapologetic and sure of her stance, yet never disregarding her own flaws. The writer risks the possibility of sounding flippant, but seems determined to use some puns, humorous similes and forced metaphors throughout the thesis. This might prove to be a newfound valuable tool in establishing trust and resonance with the reader, who is supposedly human too.

The interaction between literature and narrative seems to be comfortable, even if it is not always traditional. The writer relies on an honest vocabulary, and clear, concise descriptions of what is understood in the research context. The critical reader of this text will have to open the mind to a new way of conversing academically, without losing the integrity of the academic content.

Review 3: As guided by Thomson (2014)

Towards the finish line

"Just like a marathon runner, the doctoral researcher has to have stamina"

The compelling introduction mandates the postmodern feel of this autoethnography. With a clear purpose of study, the research question seems relevant and in line with the rationale of the writer. A vast array of existing literature has been consulted to not only assist with the attestation of the data, but also to acknowledge the perpendicular evidence. This confirms the purpose of a postmodern paradigm, where not only the *how* and *why* should be addressed, but also the *how not* and *why not.*

The approaches, methods, methodologies and theories have not only been identified, but also justified through literature references and a parallel narrative. While this may seem uncomfortable for some traditional academics, the writer acknowledges her unbiased conformity and justifies this cultural evolution by means of subjective interpretation in a postmodern, (r)evolutionary thesis. The philosophy and evaluation of the data collected and constructed will prove to be a contribution to the teacher collective. The open-ended *so what now?* implication is honestly dealt with.

No such thing as a perfect thesis exists. The researcher can rewrite the content countless times and still continually add more literature, more explanations, more data to find answer(s) to the research questions. The difficulty lies in knowing when to stop, when to draw the finish line, and then cross into the unknown quiet that comes after the submission of a thesis. Not even death is the end, as memories will remain. There is no end. Rather there is a ...

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