

In My Skin: An Autoethnographical Look at Educators with Tattoos

In this project, I am exploring what it means to work with young people while being heavily tattooed. As a Teaching Artist, every time I step into a classroom I am performing by stepping into a role outside of myself. As an added physical representation of who I am, my body art is simultaneously adding to and shaping that performance.

I have approached this project through autoethnography and I have used interviews with other tattooed educators to help shape and inspire the course of my narrative. In approaching the subject of tattoos and people working with youth, I knew that there was no way I could interact with it without my own lens as a tattooed educator coloring my research. Therefore, through my personal narration, laced with interviews of other tattooed educators, I intend to share experiences that have simultaneously created doubt, wonder and fearlessness in who I am as a Teaching Artist.

Through this project, I aim to provide insight into a specific culture of educators, to examine the perceptions of adults and children about tattoos on those that teach and to share how my dual anxiety/love of being a heavily tattooed Teaching Artist has shaped who I am in the classroom.

Sample Section: **Shifting My/Her Perception**

Lewis: And it's you know- that there's- hopefully change is a-coming where, you know these young people that are coming in to get tattoos will end up having their own kids who they will teach like "hey, it doesn't really matter" ... I mean, you know I imagine, you even in Arizona if you happen to stay there- I don't know if you will- what will the young people that you talk to influence? You know, they will probably associate body modification with something very positive and that'll be great.

“What are you going to do when you are old!?” The air fills with the giggles of ten year old girls all gathered around me as we eat our afternoon snack.

“What do you mean?” I say laughing. “You know, your tattoos!” she responds, “When you are old they are going to be all wrinkly and saggy.”

“Well, I suppose I will be the coolest grandma ever.” They all laugh again, but a new conversation erupts from this. We are sitting cross legged, in the sun, taking a break from day two of the sewing camp I have been teaching. They talk quickly, in all directions about tattoos they've seen, what they thought of them and if they'd ever get one. I am not uncomfortable, just highly aware that they are looking at my body art, my physical being and sharing their thoughts.

One girl begins a story that grabs everyone's attention. "My dad has tattoos on his arms. He is really mad that he got them. He says he that people who get them are stupid because someday they will look at them and not like them anymore. I don't like his tattoos. I would *never* get one."

Eyes from all around the circle look at me, waiting for a response. "That's okay. Tattoos aren't for everyone. I really like my tattoos and I think when I am older I will still like them." I leave it at that and ask everyone to line up to go back inside. It's not that I am frustrated at her, but I can hear her parents' voice inside of hers. I want her to have her own opinion of tattoos, not some verbal repetition of her parents' words.

After this, something shifts between her and I. As the week progresses, I notice her looking at the tattoos on my arms when she thinks I am not looking. I leave it alone, not wanting to push my own opinions on her and have almost forgotten the conversation until the final day of camp.

"Everyone line up, please." I watch them get into a line and ask the Teaching Assistant to take them upstairs. That same girl is at the end of the line and it seems as if she is about to follow everyone when she approaches me.

"I thought about it." She says under her breath, "I would never get a tattoo because I think I wouldn't like it later. But if I did get one, I would get wings on my back. I won't ever get one...but I like yours." She gives me a slight smile and runs out of the room to catch up with the rest of the class. She did not say this to me because I asked her if her opinion had changed. She did not say this to me because the students had asked me more questions about my tattoos. I believe she watched my body, my physical presence in action as a teacher that whole week. As I took on the role of teacher, my body art began to mean something different to her. Interacting with my tattoos shifted her perception.

Years later, I will still tell this story as a moment when I allowed myself to take an unseen breath, to let go of an obnoxious nagging feeling that young people might be put off by my body art. It was not their judgment I was actually seeing, but my own assumption that I would be judged.