

**PADDLING UPSTREAM: STORIES OF  
TEACHERS AND THEIR PROFESSIONAL  
LEARNING JOURNEYS**

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## ABSTRACT

Teachers tell stories. It is how we share, shape and learn from our experiences. As Clandinin and Connelly (1996) described, through the living, telling, and retelling of our stories we can open space for transformation and growth. This study began as a personal inquiry into my story of learning on the professional knowledge landscape (Clandinin & Connelly, 1996). A shift in my role from classroom teacher to professional learning leader surfaced tensions about teacher knowledge and the role of system sponsored professional learning. As I examined the tensions in my own work, I began to think about the stories of my colleagues and started to wonder about which experiences support teachers as they develop a conscious understanding of their personal practical knowledge (Connelly & Clandinin, 1995).

This narrative inquiry highlights my journey and the journeys of two other teachers as we live out our storied lives on the professional knowledge landscape. Examining our narratives through the lens of the three narrative commonplaces, time, space and relationship, allowed us to consider how our storylines were shaped by our experiences in public and private spaces. Our stories reveal an ongoing attempt to achieve coherence between our personal storylines and the expectations in out-of-classroom spaces. Tensions are revealed when our stories conflict and compete with the sacred story of knowledge and teacher learning on the professional knowledge landscape (Carr, 1991; Clandinin & Connelly, 1996; Clandinin & Connelly, 2000).

The voices of classroom teachers should be part of the larger conversation about professional knowledge and teacher learning. As I retold our stories, I discovered that each of us had constructed our personal practical knowledge, and in the process had become conscious practitioners. I began to envision a new perspective on teacher learning; a space where teachers were invited to construct their own knowledge and theorize their experiences. I began to envision how professional learning could open space for teachers to become scholarly decision makers. (Connelly & Clandinin, 1995)

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## **CHAPTER ONE**

### **PADDLING THE RIVER OF PROFESISONAL LEARNING**

#### **The McLeod River**

Careening down the swollen McLeod River seven years ago, navigating my canoe through set after set after set of treacherous rapids, I asked myself, “How on earth did I end up here?” I was in a dangerous situation beyond my control and skill level. I could not negotiate the churning rapids, and like my boat, I was close to cracking. Shivering safely on shore later that day, I vowed that this was my last canoe trip. I love to canoe! It connects me with the people I care about and the land that I treasure. It is part of who I am. Yet, in blindly agreeing to a trip that did not align with my skill level or core reasons I canoe, I almost lost my passion for paddling.

I have been canoeing for many years, taking training courses, supervising trips for students, and paddling with friends and family on leisurely holidays. When another couple invited us to join them on an “easy” trip in the mountains, my husband jumped at the chance. He boasted about my expertise and ensured them I could stern us through anything. Our friends had promised this was just a little float down a shallow river, so although I knew my husband had overestimated my skills, I agreed. How bad could it be? After two days of torrential rain turned our shallow little river into a dangerously swollen waterway, I found my answer!

For two years after that trip, my canoe lay in my back yard, shrouded under a faded grey tarp. Finally, on a crisp September Saturday, to celebrate a friend’s birthday, I planned a leisurely trip down the river. It was a perfect day for paddling. The leaves were changing color and the sky a deep prairie blue. At the launch, I hesitated getting into the boat, doubting my ability to navigate a safe course down the river. But I didn’t want to spoil my friend’s birthday, so, inching away from shore, I tentatively steered our course downstream. Within minutes, my fears were forgotten and we had a glorious day watching sand hill cranes, admiring the vibrant fall shoreline, snacking on birthday cake and laughing until we were near tears. I had found my way back to what I enjoyed most, the land, the water and the sky savored in the company of a good friend.

The trip on the McLeod has served as a catalyst for reflection and new learning. First, I questioned my judgment. Why did I allow my husband's story of my expertise to go unchallenged? I let myself be represented as an expert when, deep inside, I knew I had absolutely no experience with rapids. Instead of being honest with my travel partners, I hid behind a cover of expertise. Why didn't I say anything? Then, I questioned my skills and knowledge. What did I know about paddling? Did I need to improve my technical skills? What other kinds of experiences did I need to ensure I wouldn't get caught in the same situation again? More importantly, I thought about what I valued about canoeing. Why did I choose to get back out on the water? Did I need that provocation from my friend? Why do I paddle? Could I make decisions to ensure that my trips give me what I want from the river? Critically reflecting on my paddling story led to a deeper richer understanding of my identity as a paddler, my knowledge and my practical skills. These insights led to a renewed passion for canoeing, a resolution to make careful, conscious decisions about my future adventures and a humble recognition that learning is a life long journey.

### **My Professional Learning Journey**

Six years ago, I resigned my classroom teaching position and began to live a new story as a literacy leader and staff development professional. Since then, I have been paddling a personal and professional set of rapids that I am only now coming to understand. Stories can become the tool through which people interpret their experience of the world. We live our stories as we navigate the shifting landscapes in our lives. But the educative possibilities of those stories are revealed when they are told and retold. Clandinin and Connelly (1995) suggested that "Storytellers are influenced by the telling of their own stories. Active construction and telling of a story is educative: The story teller learns through the act of storytelling" (p.155). Retelling the story, with an eye for tensions and gaps allows the storyteller an opportunity to imagine a transformative reliving. Telling my story gives me the opportunity to make meaning of the experiences that have shaped my thinking for the past six years. Through retelling, I hope to open a space where I can study my identity, and the tensions about teacher knowledge and learning that have arisen as I have navigated my changing professional landscape. This fall, after five years spent on the out of classroom landscape, I will return to a school

setting. Interpreting and understanding the educative possibilities of my narrative will help me imagine a way to consider reliving my story on this next stage of my learning journey. (Connelly & Clandinin, 2006; Huber & Whelan, 1999)

### **My Story**

In the spring of 2004, I was interviewed by an external consultant for our school division. He dropped a pebble into the pond of my professional understandings by asking the question, “How do you teach children to read?” I was an experienced grade one teacher and had been successfully teaching children to read for about ten years. The ideas that rippled outward from his question are the storyline for my professional learning in the past six years.

I had always viewed classroom instruction as a kind of experiment. I thought about what my students needed to know, tried to find ways to help them learn and studied the effects of my instruction on their learning. I had a very eclectic approach to instruction. I did a lot of ‘stuff’. When I was asked how I taught kids to read I shared all of the ‘stuff’ that I did in my classroom. Although they were evidenced in my practice, I could not articulate my understandings of literacy, curriculum or how students learn. I didn’t actually know how I taught kids to read and this made me very uncomfortable.

Based on an examination of information from a range of studies, standardized test scores, and informal school-based data, my school division determined that a focus on literacy was necessary to raise the reading levels of our students. The administrative council reviewed a range of programs and teaching models and decided to use the work of two external consultants to guide a new initiative. In the fall of 2004, all the grade one teachers in our school division took part in sustained system wide staff development as a tool for improving student achievement. Over the year, we spent ten days being ‘trained’ to use the Picture Word Inductive Model (PWIM). The Picture Word Inductive Model, developed by Emily Calhoun (1999), is a model of instruction that uses an enlarged photograph as the focus for instruction. Using the science or social studies content in the photo as the vehicle, students inquire into the words, sentences and paragraphs that can be generated from the photograph. The PWIM model invites teachers to support students as they work inductively to construct their understandings of language, science and social studies concepts.

The new staff development model created some tensions for me. I had not been part of the group that examined the data that indicated the needs of students in our division. Although I knew from my classroom practice that there were always children who struggled, for the most part I had been successful; my students learned how to read. Although I thought I was open for new learning, I didn't actually believe that I needed to change the way I worked. In the past, I had seen different reading programs come and go. I had always just picked and chosen what I wanted to use and left the rest. When this particular initiative started I assumed it was another new program, but instead of being allowed to adapt and change it, I thought I was being told to replace what I had always done with a new 'program'. I felt my current practice was not being validated and I resented the lack of professional autonomy.

The external consultant assumed we were metacognitive about our instruction, so she invited us to examine our current practice and think about how these new models of instruction fit. I was unsure how to do this. My lack of conscious understanding of literacy and learning prevented me from critically examining the pieces of my practice. What I had been doing worked, but I didn't know why. If I didn't understand why, I couldn't make intentional decisions about what to add and what to leave behind. At an early session, I remember feeling very frustrated about scheduling. I didn't know what to change in my schedule so I could add the new models of instruction. I said, "Just tell me what to leave out and I will do it." It was easier to let someone tell me what to do than figure out the roots of my own theories and connect this new learning to what worked for me. Although she was teaching me a new model, the external consultant would not tell me how to think! This made me uncomfortable and a little angry. Part of me wanted the easy answer while the other part of me knew that I had to do some work to figure out my theories of learning so I could make conscious decisions about how to add this model to my repertoire.

During that first year, although the dissonance made me uncomfortable, I suspended my disbelief and tried to fully implement this new model of instruction. Like any new learning, it felt awkward and uncomfortable but I did what I had always done. I tried it and then assessed how it impacted student learning. I discussed my findings with my colleagues and then went back to the classroom and tried again. What happened

surprised me. My students were learning in ways they hadn't learned before. I didn't understand why there was such a marked difference in their learning. Why did this model work? It made me so curious that I decided to apply for a job as part of the team that would eventually lead the staff development initiative. I was on my way to figuring out how I taught kids to read.

I had two roles during my first two years with the initiative, to use the PWIM model of instruction to teach overage beginning readers at an inner city school and to become part of the staff development team. I felt like a beginning teacher again. I had never taught older students and at first I was intimidated by the students in my new school. Because of the standards that I set for myself and because of this new public role as a literacy leader, I felt pressured to use the model successfully with these students. I continued to experiment with the model and watch my students to help me make decisions about where to go next. I was just learning how to use the model of instruction and still felt uncertain of how it fit with my understandings of reading instruction. I was acting my way into understanding how it worked.

I had many opportunities to construct my understandings of both the PWIM model and literacy learning. An important role of the external consultants was to empower our team to sustain the initiative into the future. They wanted us to develop critical understandings of literacy, this particular model of instruction and staff development. Although their role in the system was to lead the implementation of a particular model of instruction, the external consultants also challenged us to become conscious of and examine our own understandings of literacy learning and instructional models. We were given the opportunity to study the researched based rationale behind the different moves of the model. Reading this research and engaging in discussions with my team mates about the implications for my practice helped me begin to understand and articulate my theories about literacy learning. Preparing to teach teachers about the models of instruction helped me strengthen understandings of how and why different models worked. Our leaders encouraged us to 'write to learn' as part of our work, a process which further consolidated my thinking. My work with my students gave me an opportunity to experiment with instruction and ground my understandings in classroom practice. This intense focus on literacy learning gave me the opportunity to become

thoughtful about my instruction. With my study of one model as a starting point, I was beginning to understand how children learned to read. I began to look at all of the models in my teaching repertoire and consciously choose the ones that best met student needs. I was starting to teach intentionally.

The staff development role was very foreign to me. I did not know how to lead professional learning and actually felt quite uncomfortable because it seemed to set me apart from my peers. I watched the external consultants and modeled my leadership based on their work. The training model we used included sharing the research based rationale, modeling the use of the teaching model, debriefing the model, and having teachers discuss the implications for their practice. The understanding was that we were building a large learning community that was analyzing student data, studying a particular model of instruction, and adding it to our teaching repertoire. Although this theory oriented model of staff development seemed to work for me, for many reasons, it did not meet the needs of all the teachers in the learning community.

At first our team had very little responsibility for the content or the leadership of the staff development sessions. But, by my third year with the initiative, control of the work was being gradually released to our team. After each staff development session, our team had learned to write about and discuss the effectiveness of the work that day. This habit of critically examining the work based on our formative assessment of teacher learning was reminiscent of my work in the classroom. Try something, see how it works and then use my assessment to guide my planning. As we took more control of the staff development work, I became more and more uncomfortable with the training model of instruction. My critical examination of our work and its impact on teachers revealed that our staff development model was not reaching everyone.

My colleagues tease me about my passion for reading outside researchers' work. When I started leading staff development, because of the model we had from our external consultants and my own discomfort with being 'out front', I hid behind the research base. I would lead sessions as though I was an expert, hiding behind the ideas of Allington and McGill-Franzen (2000), Pearson (2007) and Pressley (2006). We were working with 60 teachers at a time in a central office, far away from teachers' classrooms and their space to make meaning. At times the environment felt negative and at one point erupted in

angry discussion. Something was wrong. When we debriefed the sessions we would see that some participants were with us and some were not. At first, I am ashamed to say, I blamed the teachers for not being open to new learning. I knew that some had been disengaged from the beginning of the initiative and I couldn't understand it. It was easier to think they were the problem than to question the staff development practices I was just learning.

**Theorizing my practice.** Four years ago, I started my work in graduate studies. I read and read and read. I found the theorists who could articulate what I was discovering in my practice. In my first class, the professor worked from a constructivist perspective. I found it very frustrating to build my own understandings. I wanted her to tell me what to think so I could 'do well'. But, as the class progressed I began to understand more about myself and what I brought to my teaching work. I continued to develop my own theories about teaching and learning based on what I read, and the discussions with the wide range of people in my grad classes. My perspective was widening and I began to see the lack of congruence between my actions and my beliefs.

At the same time, there was a change in my teaching role. I moved from teaching my own group of struggling readers to an instructional coaching role in two schools. For six to eight week blocks, teachers invited me to work with them in their classrooms on a piece of the literacy initiative. They chose the goal for our time together and we used student data as a guide for our work. We took turns teaching and trying some of the literacy models we had worked on in staff development. We watched the students and we talked about what worked and what didn't. These partnerships reminded me how skillful the teachers in our division were. I was excited to see how they had adapted and changed models and integrated them into their own successful practice. Our inquiry stance, our common understandings and the ensuing discussions generated an energy and passion for our work. I was back in the classroom, figuring out how this all fit and I couldn't have been happier. My question became, how can we encourage that same energy in system mandated staff development? My team and I continued to work with the kindergarten to grade two teachers. We began our long journey of figuring out how to shift to a more learner centered model of professional development.

In my last year of leading the initiative, the teachers divided their time between small group inquiry groups and large group sessions. For the small group inquiry, the teachers chose who to think with, when to meet and what their topic of study will be. The only stipulation was that their topics should be connected to literacy. The large grade-alike groups continued to meet for four half days a year. We tried as much as possible to move the sessions away from the central office space that had earned the name ‘The Box’. The adaptation and use of the Picture Word Inductive Model was an assumption in our division, and our staff development time moved towards surfacing and consolidating teachers understanding of assessment and explicit models of teaching reading and writing. Our approach shifted from training to facilitation. My team moved away from the front of the room and tried to learn how to work alongside of our colleagues. Together we identified and discussed some of their current practices that worked well for them. Our team offered video tapes, articles, lessons and student work samples to generate conversations with teachers and we gave them time to construct their own meanings. Rather than prescribing change, we invited them to examine their practice, think about the underlying principles of a range of models of instruction and consider how to connect their current understandings with new ideas. We tried to find ways to provoke people into critically examining what they do and consider possibilities that would improve student learning. By the middle of last year, teachers started bringing their work to share with the large group. They brought their professional reading, successful lessons, ideas from their professional inquiry half days, and discoveries from their classroom work. We studied assessment and looked at data together. The atmosphere began to change. On grade-alike days, when PWIM was discussed, it was framed as one of the many tools teachers had in their repertoires to meet the needs of students. Adaptations were celebrated.

It took a conscious effort on our part to move away from the training model. Our team spent a long time reading about staff development, reflected critically on our previous work, and carefully examined our session agendas, challenging one another for the beliefs behind the practices. When I left my leadership role last year, there continued to be divisions in our team connected to how we define our role. Are we tellers or facilitators? Is our way the right way? Is it the only way? Our work wasn’t perfect; we



had many questions about how to offer space for thinking within a system wide model. But, I still saw some glimmers of hope in the excitement of teachers when they shared what they have discovered in their work with students. The reflective nature and depth of some of the conversations I was part of ensured me that we were beginning to give people space to construct their own ideas and follow their own wonders. Perhaps we were headed in the right direction.

### **Retelling as a Tool for Reliving**

Just like that ill fated trip on the McLeod, the challenging journey of the past seven years has served as a catalyst for deeper understandings, more questions, and the humble realization that I have so much more to learn. When that first pebble was dropped I began the journey to surface my understandings about literacy. But now, as my story reveals, the ever widening ripples have surfaced new questions about identity and knowledge, within and beyond my own practice. It is difficult to separate the personal and the professional in my story; they seem irrevocably intertwined. Could inquiring into the personal, surface understandings about my professional identity? What are the foundational elements of my identity as a teacher? How do these elements connect with what I know and understand about teaching?

My research wonder concerns the interwoven threads of teacher knowledge and professional learning. I am curious about which experiences have supported me as I have surfaced and constructed my understandings about teaching and learning; the experiences that have led me to become a conscious decision maker. What about other teachers? Which experiences supported them as they developed a conscious understanding of their teaching knowledge? Are there connections within and between our stories that could inform the larger conversation about teacher knowledge and professional learning?

### **Teaching as a Story to Live By**

People lead storied lives. Carr (1991) reminded us that we are the authors of our own lives. Whether or not we are conscious of our role as both the main character and the narrator, we are all actively living and making sense of our life stories. Over time, on the different landscapes we inhabit, we live out different storylines that are a reflection of our narrative histories.

We create understandings of our world through the lenses of these storylines. My narrative reveals storylines bumping up against one another. I am an experienced teacher, with knowledge and an identity shaped by my personal history and experiences in primary classrooms. I am also a learner who spent five years focusing on literacy learning outside the classroom in graduate studies at the university and as part of a learning community at the division office. In my leadership storyline, I have been representing the division perspective for professional learning for the past five years. As my narrative illustrates, the tensions between these storylines have become increasingly evident in my work. My experiences as a teacher, learner, and leader are not in alignment.

Throughout their lives, people strive to make sense of their experiences, seeking what Carr (1991) described as coherence between and within their storylines. He suggested that this is not a natural process, “rather it is a constant task, sometimes a struggle, and when it succeeds it is an achievement” (p. 96). When we connect what we have come to know, with the understandings, beliefs, and values developed over a storied lifetime, the story that guides our life emerges. Connelly and Clandinin (2006) developed the phrase stories to live by to describe how “people shape their daily lives by stories of who they are and others are and as they interpret their past in terms of stories” (p. 477). Stories to live by are revealed in the choices we make and the paths we choose. Since they are shaped by our experiences, our stories to live by are not fixed. The opportunity to step outside my classroom role combined with the experiences of graduate school has offered me a new perspective on my shifting story to live by as a teacher. Six years ago, I was unaware of the connection between my story to live by and the decisions I made as a learner and a teacher (Clandinin & Connelly, 1995; Clandinin, Huber, Murphy, Pearce & Orr, 2006; Connelly & Clandinin, 1999).

### **The Professional Knowledge Landscape**

Teachers live storied lives in fundamentally different spaces. Clandinin and Connelly (1996) described these spaces, where theory, policy, and practice intersect, as the professional knowledge landscape. This landscape has private, in-classroom spaces and public out-of-classroom spaces. Connelly and Clandinin (1999) explained that within the safe, in-classroom space, “free from scrutiny, teachers are free to live stories of

practice” (p.2). They went on to describe the out-of-classroom space as a “place filled with knowledge funneled into the school system for the purpose of altering teachers’ and children’s classroom lives” (p.2). Classroom teachers regularly move between the private world of their classrooms and the public world of the staff room, hallways, and division office meeting rooms. Clandinin and Connelly (1996) explained that we live, tell, retell and relive our life stories, as we negotiate our selves, over time, within and across the in-classroom and out-of-classroom spaces. I have lived my story in mostly out-of-classroom spaces for the past five years. (Clandinin & Connelly, 1996; Clandinin et al., 2006)

Clandinin and Connelly (1996) suggested that the dilemmas and tensions that occur as we move between private and communal spaces can be understood narratively in terms of secret, sacred and cover stories. When I became part of the literacy leadership team, I left my secret story of classroom practice behind. I couldn’t quietly shut the door and do what I wanted. All aspects of my role were public. When I led professional learning it was alongside my peers. If I had the opportunity to teach groups of children, because it was a coaching situation, one of my peers was always present. As a literacy teacher, instead of authoring my own story, I represented the sacred story of my school division.

Seven years ago, the administrative council of my school division started a literacy initiative in order to support student achievement through staff development. As is typical in school divisions across the country, the division consulted the research, studied alternatives, and chose a model of instruction to be used across the division. Their choice became the story of schooling and professional learning in our division. Clandinin and Connelly (1996) described this theory-driven system story as the sacred story. The model of instruction was funneled into classrooms through a series of sustained, mandatory large group professional learning sessions. In my role as a professional learning leader and literacy coach, I have served as the conduit for the school division’s sacred story. Although our staff development practices have begun to shift from a training model to a more practice centered facilitation model, the sacred story that interrupts the secret stories of primary teachers in our division has not changed.

When teachers cross the boundaries between their in-classroom-spaces and the public spaces on their professional landscape, they often create cover stories that help them negotiate between their secret stories of practice and the division's sacred story of school (Clandinin & Connelly, 1996). The focus of our past staff development work has been to *train* teachers to use particular research based models of instruction in their classrooms. The system request for the related student data has held teachers accountable for the implementation of these models. Like other teachers, I responded to this sacred story by adopting cover stories of compliance and competency (Clandinin & Connelly, 1996).

### **Responding to the Sacred Story**

When the literacy initiative started “I was an experienced grade one teacher and had been successfully teaching children to read for about ten years”. I had worked hard to develop my practice and I was proud of what I had constructed. The spring before the initiative started, when, in response to the question of the external consultant, “I could not articulate my understandings of literacy, curriculum or how students learn,” I was pretty uncomfortable. All of a sudden, I started to question my knowledge and my competence. Did I actually know how I taught children to read?

The following fall, when the sacred story was funneled into my classroom, my tensions mounted. I resented the loss of autonomy but my response was more complicated than that. First of all, I wanted to be successful. As long as I can remember, achievement has mattered to me. I set high standards for myself and, although I hate to admit it, the expectations of others matter to me too. So, in my mind, I had no choice. “Although the dissonance made me uncomfortable, I suspended my disbelief and tried to fully implement this new model of instruction”. As an employee of the school division, who wanted to appear competent and compliant in the eyes of her administrators I did what I was asked. It reminds me of that canoe trip down the McLeod. Rather than sharing my lack of confidence with my paddling partners, I complied with their expectations and set off down the river. I didn't want to let them down.

Secondly, I was a little curious. My story to live by has always had an academic component. I am interested in considering alternative perspectives and ideas. Because I had started to question my understandings of literacy instruction, I wanted to know more.

I had always viewed my practice as a kind of experiment, so I suspended my disbelief and, “did what I had always done. I tried it and then assessed how it impacted student learning. I discussed my findings with my colleagues and then went back to the classroom and tried again. What happened surprised me. My students were learning in ways they hadn’t learned before. I didn’t understand why there was such a marked difference in their learning. Why did this model work?” I was intrigued.

My third response was a little more complex. Throughout my 25 years of teaching, I was used to new ideas and programs funneling into my classroom. Programs would be chosen by the division and simplified into what Schwab (1962) labeled a rhetoric of conclusions. I was used to receiving these stripped down knowledge claims but “I had always just picked and chosen what I wanted to use and left the rest. When the initiative started I assumed this was another new program, but instead of being allowed to adapt and change it, I thought I was being told to replace what I had always done.” Clandinin and Connelly (1995) suggested that “nothing comes through the conduit as merely knowledge to be known and understood: it always comes as implied theoretical prescription for teachers’ actions” (p.14). When the new model was introduced, teachers were invited to think about the theoretical underpinnings of the new approaches and consider how they connected to our current practices. But, because of the established learning culture and the way the models were presented, I was unable to hear that message. I felt considerable pressure to replace my current practice with a new, challenging model of instruction. I had been enculturated to look for a program coming down the pipe, so I received the new models as prescriptions and added them to my plate of things to do. I reacted to the strategies as a technician who had been provided a prescription rather than a scholarly inquirer who was considering adaptations. That was the only response I knew.

Looking back I realize that the external consultant assumed we had a conscious understanding of our practice that would enable us to examine our current practice and consider how to adapt and change the models of instruction to fit. She was attempting to offer us more than a prescription. But, “my lack of conscious understanding of literacy and learning prevented me from critically examining the pieces of my practice. What I had been doing worked, but I didn’t know why. If I didn’t understand why, I couldn’t

make intentional decisions about what to add and what to leave behind.” I struggled between wanting the prescription I had been conditioned to expect and resenting the imposition of a sacred story into my classroom.

The tensions in my response to the sacred story from my literacy teacher role were similar. I wanted to appear competent in the eyes of my administrators and colleagues. Although I struggled with both the model and my new role, I papered over my misgivings with a cover story of competence. I did as I was asked and because I had no background knowledge, I modeled my leadership after the example of our external consultants. Based on my years of functioning within the sacred story, I assumed that moving downtown called for me to step into the role of expert. I felt woefully unprepared so I hid behind the research. “I would lead sessions as though I was an expert, hiding behind the ideas of literacy experts.” I knew my colleagues were busy so I worked hard to simplify the content. But, as I read more about professional learning in my downtown role and in graduate studies, I began to develop some ideas of my own. After about three years, when my team took more control over the professional learning “I became more and more uncomfortable with the training model of instruction. My critical examination of our work and its impact on teachers revealed that our staff development model was not reaching everyone.” Perhaps, we needed to change our approach. My response to the sacred story had started to shift. My new perspective was in conflict with the sacred story.

Understanding how my personal and professional storylines are interconnected supports a clearer understanding how my story to live by influenced my response to the sacred story. Finally, after six years of doubts, questions, tensions, and learning I am starting to find some coherence in my understandings about professional leadership, teaching and learning. As I develop a conscious understanding of my professional knowledge, a lesson learned in both my professional and paddling life, I am ready to step away from my cover story, take authority over my actions and make decisions based on my story to live by.

### **Teacher Knowledge**

When I started this learning journey, I viewed my teacher knowledge as a pedagogical bag of tricks. “I did a lot of ‘stuff’”. When I was asked how I taught kids to

read “I shared all of the ‘stuff’ that I did in my classroom. Although they were evidenced in my practice, I could not articulate my understandings of literacy, curriculum or how students learn.” I knew what I did, but I could not explain why.

My story to live by as a teacher has always had two sides: an academic side and a practical side. Academics came easily as a student in high school and university. The safety and certainty of logical thinking has always appealed to me. I read voraciously and have always enjoyed the challenge of scholarly conversations. I had always read professionally as a teacher, but before my recent experiences, my professional reading was usually teacher friendly idea books, where I could search out new activities that might meet the needs of my students. When I was challenged to explain how I taught children to read, and later on when I took on the leadership role, it was only natural that I turned to research.

Historically, on the professional knowledge landscape, there has been an unnatural separation between the work of researchers and the work of classroom teachers. Although this scholarly research may have originated in the study of teaching and learning in classrooms, the findings were simplified into prescriptions and became a rhetoric of conclusions that were funneled into classrooms. Teachers were not privy to the research and were used to receiving these stripped down knowledge claims. Expert knowledge was deferred to and practical understandings generated in classrooms were not considered as knowledge. “Ideas and those who know are given dominant positions over those who do. Better doing comes from more and better knowing” (Clandinin & Connelly, 1995 p. 68).

Schon (1983) stated the dominant view of professional knowledge, technical rationality, “consists in instrumental problem solving made rigorous by the application of scientific theory and technique” (p.21). This is what I had been accustomed to. Scientific logic suggested that if we isolated what children need to know, chose a research based strategy that would support their learning and learned how to teach the strategy, the result would be improved student achievement. I recognize this perspective in my division’s professional learning plan. We worked “with primary teachers as they added new, system-mandated models of instruction into their practice.” As a teacher and then later on as a learning leader, I was seduced by the idea that teaching could be reduced to a linear

process with teachers as the cause and student achievement as the effect. At one point, at an early session, when the external consultant was challenging us to make conscious decisions about our schedules, I remember speaking out in frustration. “Just tell me what to leave out and I will do it. It was easier to let someone tell me what to do than figure out the roots of my own theories and connect this new learning to what worked for me.” It seemed much simpler to choose to be a technician and leave the thinking to the experts. In this response, I recognize my alignment with the sacred story of teacher knowledge; knowledge for teaching comes from the outside. The job of a teacher is to enact what is prescribed.

Yet this caused tension with the practical side of my story to live by. Schon (1983) suggested that “once we put aside the model of technical rationality, which leads us to think of intelligent action as an application of knowledge to instrumental decisions, there is nothing strange that a kind of knowing is inherent in intelligent action” (p.50). My academic stance has always been complemented by my need to construct practical understandings in the classroom. Seven years ago, my classroom thinking occurred at two levels. Like all teachers, I followed my instincts. These automatic, tacit responses, described by Schon (1987) as knowing-in-action, are spontaneous responses delivered without conscious deliberation. The foundation for these judgments is a combination of formal, research based knowledge, experiences, and an intuitive sense of what works. But my thinking didn’t stop there. When our reflexive responses are interrupted by a surprise or problem, Schon (1987) suggested we may look back and reflect on our actions or we may respond by reflecting in the midst of action. Reflection-in-action, as described by Schon (1987) “has a critical function, questioning the assumptional structure of knowing-in-action” (p.28). Life in a classroom is unpredictable. I have always enjoyed those teachable moments in the classroom; moments when thinking on my feet, I was able to make quick adjustments to a lesson. Those magic moments are a result of reflection-in-action. So on one hand, my academic side welcomed the certainty of a scientific solution. But on the other hand, my practical side resisted the prescription and yearned to experiment and innovate. I wanted a technical rational solution, yet I needed to construct my understandings in a classroom setting. I could not find coherence between my storylines.



As a result of three key experiences, my stance on teacher knowledge began to shift. Three years ago, as our team took more responsibility for staff development; it was evident that some teachers were unhappy. “At times the environment felt negative and at one point erupted in angry discussion. Something was wrong.” Some teachers were resisting the technical rational solutions we were prescribing. Ball and Cohen (1999) reminded us that that “teaching occurs in the particulars – particular students interacting with particular teachers over particular ideas in particular circumstances” (p.10). Each classroom context was different; each teacher came to staff development with their own stories of practice, yet we were trying to supply them with the same one-size fits all solution. I started to question our focus on best practices and began to wonder how we could begin to meet the needs of individual teachers.

At the same time, I began to work as an instructional coach, thinking alongside teachers in their classrooms. “These partnerships reminded me how skillful the teachers in our division were. I was excited to see how they had adapted and changed models and integrated them into their own successful practice.” Dewey (1904) urged educators to be both consumers and producers of knowledge. When I was coaching I marveled at the teacher’s ability to reframe what they had learned in professional development sessions, into an approach that worked in their classrooms. It reminded me of my years of experimentation as a classroom teacher. Ball and Cohen (1999) suggested teachers should “become serious learners in and around [our] practices” (p. 4). Rather than amassing strategies and activities, I began to wonder if we could use our ability to reflect-in-action in order to learn in our practices.

My third experience was the most critical. The opportunity to read and think about research with my literacy teacher colleagues renewed my interest in scholarly discussions. At the suggestion of our external consultant, I chose to enter graduate studies four years ago. In my first year of graduate studies my academic storyline started to shift. At first I was only concerned with getting the right answer and *doing well*. But as the first year progressed I started to realize that learning was about constructing my own understandings, not restating the ideas of others. Graduate studies offered me the opportunity to broaden my perspective and reflect on my own practices. “I began to understand more about myself and what I brought to my teaching work.” Our

conversations in class began to push me to think, not only about what I did, but also why I did it. I had begun to develop an answer to the question that the external consultant had posed so long ago; I began to construct a conscious understanding of my teacher knowledge. As “I began to see the lack of congruence between my actions and my beliefs,” I started to question my current practices. The hard work of finding coherence between my storylines started in graduate studies.

It was in graduate school that I began to view the role of theory in practice differently. In the readings for my coursework, “I found the theorists who could articulate what I was discovering in my practice.” I began to find the language and concepts that described my experiences. I came to understand that for me, rather than serving as a prescription for practice, I think theoretical knowledge serves as a lens through which I can critically examine or affirm what I experience. Harste, Leland, Schmidt, Vasquez, and Ociepka (2002), explained that educational theory could be viewed as “an anchor, a self renewing strategy and a point of reflection” (p.170). This perspective aligned with my perspective on the role of theory in practice. Rather than seeing theory as leading into practice, I began to view it as a reflective moment in practice (Pinar, 2003). My story to live by as an academic shifted from a search for finite solutions and best practices, to an ongoing thoughtful examination of how theory and practice work together.

My teacher knowledge, consisting of both theoretical and practical understandings has been constructed over time. The term personal practical knowledge, as defined by Connelly and Clandinin (1995), describes my personal rather than objective conception of knowledge. Knowledge, from this perspective, is socially constructed, and has been shaped and reshaped by both intellectual acts and self-exploration, by experimentation and reflection in different contexts. Everything that I have learned in classrooms with students, in conversations with colleagues, from the work of outside researchers, in staff development, in university classes and through personal reflection is part of my personal practical knowledge. Theory and practice coexist in this conception of knowledge. But, instead of privileging the work of outside researchers, personal practical knowledge foregrounds the personal construction of classroom practice. Instead of a rote application of prescriptions, classroom practice, from this perspective, is interactive work that

requires professional judgment and a disposition for ongoing inquiry into student learning.

My perspective on teacher knowledge has changed dramatically over the past five years. Rather than viewing my knowledge as a pedagogical bag of tricks, or a set of research based certainties, I now conceptualize it as a personally constructed set of understandings based on my experiences. This conception of knowledge enabled me to find coherence between my practical and academic storylines, resulting in a clearer vision of my story to live by as a teacher. But, it has also brought new tensions because this stance conflicts with the sacred story of teacher knowledge that my colleagues and I have been enculturated to believe (Clandinin & Connelly, 1995).

The story of professional learning in our division was based on a technical rational approach to knowledge. It was a model of teacher learning that, as Cochran Smyth and Lytle (1990) described “emphasizes the actions of teachers rather than their professional judgments and attempts to capture the activity of teaching by identifying sets of discrete behaviors reproducible from one teacher and one classroom to the next” (p.2). I began to wonder about the experiences that would support teachers as they constructed their personal practical knowledge. How do we inquire into our practices in order to develop the judgment required to become conscious decision makers?

### **Teacher Learning**

Like many teachers, I have always experimented. When offered a new model, “I tried it and then assessed how it impacted student learning. I discussed my findings with my colleagues and then went back to the classroom and tried again.” Ball and Cohen (1999) reminded us, “neither experience nor inquiry improves teaching” (p.11). We need to find a way to use what we learn from experience to inform and improve teaching. Could a predisposition to experimentation and the ability to reflect-in-action shift to a conscious exploration and development of professional knowledge?

### **Inquiry**

An inquiry stance is a move away from technical rational solutions towards uncertainty. Although it is simpler to reduce effective practice to cause and effect, life in a classroom is more complicated than that. From an inquiry stance, teachers view their practice as continually evolving, recognizing, as Clandinin, Downey, and Huber (2009)

suggested, “what works is always what works ‘for now’. Each ‘for now’ needs to be open to the next configuration” (p. 152). Classrooms become a place for questions; a place for experimentation rather than following prescriptions. Expertise implies certainty and state of the art practice. Conversely, lifelong learning from an inquiry stance implies tentativeness, asking more questions than it answers. A stance of inquiry could support the conscious construction of our personal practical knowledge (Ball & Cohen, 1999; Clandinin & Connelly 1995; Cochran-Smyth & Lytle, 1999).

Shifting towards an inquiry stance for teacher learning was uncomfortable for me at first. As a staff development leader, it was easier to hide behind technical rational certainties. But we knew our approach needed to change so “my team moved away from the front of the room and tried to learn how to work alongside of our colleagues.” As I began to let go of my need for control, and released responsibility to the teachers for the thinking and learning, I began to feel coherence return between my academic and practical storylines. I was inviting teachers to do what had always worked for me in classrooms, try it, see how it works and talk to one another about it.

### **Critical Reflection**

Reflection can support learning. Loughran (2002) described teachers’ lives as a constant flow of experiences, a constant demand of decision making and the conscious and subconscious filtering of actions and responses influence what is apprehended. He wrote, “These demands of practice can be viewed as overcrowding and inhibiting factors or as possibilities for learning that may be grasped in different ways” (p.37). I have come to understand that I use reflection as a tool for achieving coherence in my story to live by and for constructing my personal practical knowledge.

Although I need time alone to write and think about my practice, the time I spend reflecting with others is also critical for my learning. I agree with Harste and Leland’s (2007) assertion that, “Knowledge is socially constituted” (p.10). Throughout my narrative, I consistently cite the conversations with my colleagues and classmates as a key component of my professional learning. Clandinin and Connelly (1995) suggested that “Teachers need others in order to engage in conversations where stories can be told, reflected back, heard in different ways, retold, and relived in new ways in the safety and secrecy of the classroom” (p. 23). Conversations in a safe environment provide me with

the supports I need to construct my personal practical knowledge and imagine ways of reliving my story.

There is a difference between the social conversations in the hallways of schools and the deeper professional conversations that support teachers as they examine practice. When I was a classroom teacher, at the end of a hectic day, I often found myself perched on a desk top in a neighbouring teacher's classroom. We would discuss our days, talk about issues with students, and share successes or concerns. These conversations offered me a lifeline of friendship and support and validated "the stuff" I was trying in my current practice, but they did not often lead to the critical reflection necessary to extend or deepen my professional knowledge. Clandinin and Connelly (1995) warned us that "the classroom can become a place of endless, repetitive living out of stories without possibilities for awakenings and transformations" (p. 13). If our experiences are viewed as an uncontested truth, our conversations may only rationalize or justify current practice. As Ritchie and Wilson (2000) reminded us, experience is not the issue, instead "the problem is that experience is often left untheorized" (p.15). I have learned through my experiences with my central office team, coaching in classrooms and in my graduate studies courses that, in order for conversations with my colleagues to open the door to professional learning, it is necessary for us to move beyond storytelling and work together to critically reflect on our practice. Critical reflection is the tool I am learning to use as I begin to theorize my experiences (Loughran, 2002; Ritchie & Wilson, 2000).

Critical reflection requires both the analysis and evaluation of experiences. Drew and Vaughan (2002) suggested that these two kinds of reflection work together to support teacher learning. They stated analytical reflection "concentrates on particular experiences and also generalizations which can be drawn from similar experiences" (p.185). This is the kind of reflection that I have always used as I searched for coherence between ideas in my classroom practice. But analysis is not enough. For the reflection to be described as critical, analytical reflection needs to be complimented with evaluative reflection situated within a safe learning community. Drew and Vaughan (2002) suggested that this pairing contributes to leads to critical reflection that " helps the learner describe experiences, to analyze what they have learned from those experiences and to offer a process of judgment by which they might frame current or future experiences" (p. 185).

As we began to take control of our staff development sessions, my team moved to a “critical examination of our work and its impact on teachers.” In our safe, supportive environment, we analyzed our sessions and began to evaluate their effectiveness. Our critical reflection opened space for us to work together to construct and consolidate our personal practical knowledge and to develop the judgment necessary to make conscious decisions about our instruction. We had begun to theorize our experiences.

These conversations were very different than the reflecting conversations I had been used to. Instead of looking for definitive answers and scripts, or simplified prescriptions, we found ourselves engaged in an animated narrative of inquiry that surfaced more questions than it answered (Wilson & Berne, 1999). This investigative stance surfaced in my coaching work as well. “Our inquiry stance, our common understandings and the ensuing discussions generated an energy and passion for our work.” We moved from the assumption of one right answer to the consideration of a range of possibilities.

Questioning my practice in conversation with colleagues challenged me to view my understandings from a range of different perspectives. I learned to frame and reframe my thinking and began to confront the gaps in my personal practical knowledge. “My perspective was widening and I began to see the lack of congruence between my actions and my beliefs.” My discussions with colleagues and classmates challenged me to investigate my assumptions and expand the perspectives I had taken for granted. It opened my classroom door to the possibilities of alternative approaches and perspectives, creating more flexibility within my practice while connecting me to the discourse within and beyond my community of practice. With the support of my colleagues, and my foundation of personal practical knowledge, I have begun to theorize my practice. But, this inquiry stance has led to a new tension. What should I attend to as I construct my personal practical knowledge? (Ball & Cohen, 1999)

### **Attention**

The current professional learning model in my division has focused attention on particular strategies that support student learning. A narrow focus can provide the opportunity to construct deep understandings and develop new ideas. Bateson (1995) reminded us that “concentration is too precious to belittle. I know that if I look very

narrowly and hard at anything I am likely to see something new—like the life between the grass stems that only becomes visible after a few moments of staring” (pp. 103-104). I have had the privilege to step outside the classroom and, through my work at the division office and in graduate studies, concentrate my focus on literacy. This narrow, prolonged concentration allowed me to construct new understandings that have both depth and breadth. Yet, this narrow focus created tensions. As Bateson (1995) suggested, “It is simplifying and dangerous to have one overriding concern that makes others unimportant” (p.106). Although a narrow focus on particular strategies supports deep understanding, as Bateson suggested, softening concentration and considering the complexities of classroom life is also important.

Although the teachers in the division and I were both learning research based strategies to support student learning, our perspectives were very different. Maxine Greene (1995) invited us to consider seeing big and seeing small as a way of thinking about perspective in education. In her dissertation, connecting to Greene’s work, Murray-Orr (2005) described seeing small as the view from a distance, with schools as part of a system and the people as a component of that system.

Seeing small, it would be difficult to come to know the detailed worlds of each child or teacher, to see them as unique and complex, because the focus is on the whole system. In contrast, seeing big in education is the up-close involvement with a small number of children, parents or others, the developing of relationships, so one can begin to understand the unique and multiple dimensions of those persons. (p.83)

The tensions I am experiencing in my work are connected to my perspective. From my out-of-classroom space, in my role as a learning leader, I have been seeing teacher learning and particular models of instruction big. As I struggle to find narrative coherence I recognize that I am increasingly uncomfortable with this perspective.

Rather than viewing instruction from the system perspective, and seeing models of instruction big, I am drawn to returning to my story to live by as a teacher. I want to see students big. When I return to the classroom this fall I will not have the luxury of a narrow focus on discrete models of instruction. Instead I will be engaged in the messiness of daily classroom life, complete with hot dog sales, puddles on the playground,

attendance issues, and students who struggle to learn. As Murray-Orr (2005) described, my up-close every day involvement with students and families will shift my focus to seeing children and families big. Will I leave the lessons of the last five years behind, or is it possible to shift my attention back and forth? How will I achieve coherence between my out-of-classroom learning and the learning I will do in my in-classroom space? Is it possible for both perspectives to coexist in my story to live by? What will I attend to as I make conscious decisions in my practice?

### **Consciousness**

In order to achieve coherence between my storylines it has been necessary for me to develop a conscious understanding of both my story to live by as a teacher and my personal practical knowledge. Cochran-Smyth and Lytle (1999) asserted that, “teacher learning begins with identifying one’s own experiences, assumptions and beliefs” (p. 279).

In order to develop the ability to make informed judgments we need to have conscious control of our personal practical knowledge. Fenstermacher (1994) asserted that “the critical objective of teacher knowledge research is not for researchers to know what teachers know but for teachers to know what teachers know” (p.50). My conscious awareness of my personal practical knowledge can help narrow the gap between my out-of-classroom and in-classroom understandings. If I recognize my stance, I can assess it critically based on my experiences in the classroom, my reflecting conversations with my colleagues and the work of outside researchers. Although I continue to use knowing-in-action and reflection-in-action to respond to situations, as I have found coherence in my story to live by and have become more conscious of my personal, practical knowledge I have begun to make conscious decisions about my practice.

This process began in the first year of the initiative when I was a classroom teacher who had tensions with asking for a prescription. “Part of me wanted the easy answer while the other part of me knew that I had to do some work to figure out my theories of learning so I could make conscious decisions about how to add this model to my repertoire.” Although I was uncomfortable, I knew I had to take control. As I moved into my role of literacy teacher “the external consultants challenged us to become conscious of and examine our own understandings of literacy learning.” My team and I



read widely, challenged one another to think deeply and experimented in classrooms. I began to develop a more conscious understanding of my personal practical knowledge.

As I gained new understandings about professional learning, the stance moved to my leadership work as well. “Our team spent a long time reading about staff development, reflected critically on our previous work and carefully examined our session agendas, challenging one another for the beliefs behind the practices.” We moved to a facilitation model that we hoped would support teachers as they constructed their own personal practical knowledge.

### **Searching for Connections**

The opportunity to retell my story has opened space for me to gain a deeper understanding of my personal practical knowledge. It is a personal journey of tensions and dissonance on the road to coherence. I am curious about the stories of other teachers. How have they developed a conscious understanding of their personal practical knowledge? How did they respond to the sacred story of teacher knowledge? Have they grappled with the tensions between theory and practice? How have they navigated their own and the expectations of others on the professional knowledge landscape? Which experiences have supported them as they have developed their vision for classroom practice? Would their stories provide me with another perspective from which to understand my own journey? Could retelling our stories inform the wider conversation about teacher and learning on the professional knowledge landscape?

Though out this work, it is my intention to tell a story of knowledge and learning on the professional knowledge landscape. I will place the stories of two of my participants alongside of my own. As I share their narratives, I will also examine those stories using the language and framework of narrative inquiry. In my next chapter I will outline the narrative inquiry methodology and then, in the following chapters, I will inquire into the stories of my participants. In my final chapter, I will weave together the understandings from our stories that could inform the wider research conversation about teacher knowledge and professional learning on our landscape.

## CHAPTER TWO

### NARRATIVE INQUIRY AS RELATIONAL WORK

#### Understanding Narrative Inquiry

Narrative inquiry is the study of experiences. Understanding my experiences has led to a deeper understanding of my personal practical knowledge. In order to inquire into my story in the previous chapter I used the perspectives, language, and structures of a narrative inquirer. In narrative inquiry, story is both the method and the phenomena. Our actions are an expression of our narrative histories (Clandinin & Connelly 2000). What we do is influenced by who we are, where we have come from, and where we are in the present. People make sense of their experiences by telling stories. Understanding the stories is the role of a narrative inquirer. As Clandinin, Pushor, and Orr (2007) suggested, “narratively inquiring into our teaching practices situates teachers and teacher educators in the known and familiar, while it asks us to make the known and familiar strange and open to new possibility” (p. 33). Understanding that knowledge is personal and shaped by experiences, a narrative inquirer delves deeply into stories in order to surface the meaning in the narratives. Their dialogue with their participants opens space for a new story to be told. (Clandinin & Connelly 1994; Clandinin & Connelly, 2000)

Narrative inquirers understand that stories are constantly shifting and changing. “People live stories, and in the telling of them reaffirm them, modify them, and create new ones. Stories such as these, lived and told, educate the self and others” (Clandinin & Connelly, 1994, p. 415). Searching for significance in the experiences is the work of narrative inquiry. Carr (1991) suggested that “significance emerges primarily through memory, as in retrospect elements of the course of life stand out and make a pattern. Value corresponds to the present and attaches positively and negatively to the realities of the world around us” (p.76). As we identify patterns and trends, new understandings emerge. Carr (1991) suggested that “purpose belongs to the future as the projected realization of our values” (p.76). The reflexive nature of telling and retelling stories opens an educative space. New understandings gleaned from the retelling can invite the storyteller to imagine ways of reliving their story (Clandinin & Connelly 2000). The opportunity to delve deeply into my story invited me to consider the possibility of

changing my future actions and choosing new paths. Inquiring into their own stories and the stories of others allows narrative inquirers to surface and seek to understand the tensions that are present on the professional knowledge landscape (Clandinin & Connelly, 1995).

### **Narrative Commonplaces**

A narrative inquirer enters into the midst of ongoing stories and collaborates with their participants to understand experiences. Actions are understood in the context of an ongoing story (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000). In order to understand this context, a narrative inquirer considers three commonplaces: temporality, sociality and spatiality.

**Temporality.** The commonplace of temporality reminds the inquirer to consider the ongoing, recursive nature of stories. A narrative research text is a temporal text that considers what has been, what is, and what will be. As Polkinghorne (1988) suggested “narratives have the power to configure a sequence of events into a unified happening” (p.18), thus creating a temporal gestalt. Individual events are made comprehensible by identifying the whole to which they contribute. Rather than being timeless, Connelly and Clandinin (2000) explained that for narrative researchers “Any event, or thing, has a past, a present as it appears to us and an implied future” (p.29). Narratives, viewed as becoming rather than being, are continually written and rewritten over time. Looking back supports our understandings of the present. Greene (1995) explained that:

A reflective grasp of our life stories and of our ongoing quests that reaches beyond where we have been, depends on our ability to remember things past. It is against the backdrop of those remembered things and the funded meanings to which they give rise, that we grasp and understand what is now going on around us. p.20

As I retold my story, it was important to consider not only my current experience but also the experiences that went before and the impact of these events on my future. Narrative inquirers seek to understand how experiences evolve over time and attend to possibilities for the future (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000).

**Sociality.** A narrative inquirer reconstructs an experience in “relation to others and to a social milieu” (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000, p. 39). As I sought to understand

my story I inquired into my personal conditions, understanding my storylines and the story to live by I had constructed as a teacher. The conversations I had with my colleagues and professors and my experiences with teachers and children challenged me to move beyond complacency and dig into the roots of my story to live by. It was also important to consider that this story doesn't take place in isolation and the impact of the social milieu influenced the living, telling, and retelling of my story. Developing an understanding of the relational aspects of a story supports narrative inquirers as they develop a deeper understanding of a particular experience. (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000)

**Spatiality.** Stories unfold in physical, social, public, and private spaces on the landscape. In order to understand an experience, a narrative inquirer must consider the impact of the context on the story that is told. Stories of experience only make sense when they are embedded in a meaningful context. A narrative inquirer thinks about the different spaces in which the story has occurred. They also wonder how the spaces shape the experiences. Different stories are told in different spaces. My narrative occurred in my own and other teachers' classrooms, in my office, at the university and in the meeting rooms at the central office of my school division. As I recounted my story, I discovered that I was able to tell one story in private in-classroom spaces and another story in public out-of-classroom spaces. A narrative inquirer needs to attend to both omission and inclusions, considering how space impacts both the experience, and what is shared (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000).

### **The Three Dimensional Inquiry Space**

In the course of an inquiry, narrative inquirers work in a metaphorical three-dimensional inquiry space that invites them to consider the interactions between the temporal, spatial and relational commonplaces. When considering events within this space, narrative inquirers travel in what Clandinin and Connelly (2000) call the four directions of an inquiry: inside, outside, backwards and forwards. In order to "represent people as not taken apart by analytic categories but as people who are composing lives-lives composed over time and full of richness and complexity" (Clandinin, Huber, Huber, Murphy, Murray Orr, Pearce & Steeves, 2006, p. 22), the researcher must travel simultaneously in all four directions and ask questions that travel each pathway. Traveling inward, the researcher and participants surface their feelings, emotions and

hopes, in order to construct meaningful understandings of experiences. Travelling outward, they examine the environment, surroundings, and social conditions that shape the experiences. Experiences occur in context and a narrative inquirer is called to make sense of that context.

### **Choosing Narrative Inquiry**

Clandinin and Connelly (2000) explained that “narrative is the best way of understanding and representing experience” (p.18). Constructing a narrative understanding of my participants’ experiences offers me new perspectives from which I can understand our journeys on the professional knowledge landscape and begin to relive my story of professional learning. But, in order for me to understand our experiences narratively, it was important to shift my research perspective from technical rationality and begin to view the world through a narrative lens. As I related in my narrative, I had always been drawn to certainties and scientific logic as a teacher so it is no surprise that as a researcher I preferred certainty and felt uncomfortable with the tentativeness of narrative inquiry.

Technical rationality is the dominant perspective of knowledge on the professional knowledge landscape. Although the research that supports this knowledge may have complex findings that come out of in-depth studies of classroom learning, the results are often simplified into prescriptive “best practices”. Clandinin and Connelly (2000) used the term “grand narrative” to describe how this perspective has become the unquestioned view of teacher knowledge. In direct opposition to the grand narrative, narrative inquirers insist that the rich whole of professional memory cannot be reduced to formulated rules and a depersonalized set of truths. Instead teaching and teacher knowledge are viewed as “expressions of embodied individual and social stories” (Clandinin and Connelly, 2000, p. 4). Understanding our stories, as I discovered when I surfaced the knowledge embedded in my narrative, can be the path that leads us past prescriptions and programs towards a deeper understanding of teacher knowledge.

Teaching is personal. Ritchie and Wilson (2000) indicated that narrative provides the “most compelling and persuasive form in which to present ideas about teaching, because stories, like teaching are rich with context and peopled with individuals” (p. 19). Each teacher comes to their practice with their own narratives. Our storied lives are set in “the

institutions within which we work, the social narratives of which we are a part, and the landscape on which we live” (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000, p. 62). Teacher stories are not finite. As Carr (1991) suggested, “we are composing and constantly revising our stories as we go along” (p. 76). Narrative inquiry considers stories in terms of an ongoing personal process, with the teacher and the researcher both in the midst of living storied lives on a shifting landscape (Clandinin and Connelly, 2000).

By choosing to focus on the stories of teachers, narrative inquirers choose a personal, rather than a system perspective. Maxine Greene (1995) explained researchers can decide to see people big or small. She stated,

To see things or people small, one chooses to see from a detached point of view, to watch behaviors from the perspective of a system, to be concerned with trends and tendencies rather than the intentionality and concreteness of everyday life. To see things or people big, one must resist viewing other human beings as mere objects or chess pieces and view them in their integrity and particularity instead. One must see from the point of view of the participant in the midst of what is happening if one is to be privy to the plans people make, the initiatives they take and the uncertainties they face. (p.10)

It would be much simpler to subscribe to the grand narrative and see teachers small. This detached perspective allows a researcher to separate scientifically researched based theory from the particularities of teacher’s experiences. Clandinin and Connelly (2000) suggested that

a disembodied mind permits the certainty needed by technical rationalism. To put the body back into the mind wreaks havoc with certainty. Emotion, value, felt experience with the world, memory, and narrative explanations of one’s past do not stand still in a way that allows for certainty. (p. 37)

Although certainty makes me more comfortable, in order to deepen my understanding of teacher knowledge, it has been necessary for me to learn to embrace ambiguity. Bateson (1995) reminded me that “life is not made up of separate pieces” (p.108). She suggested that “we need a broader vision, to match the world in which we act with an image that included the forest and the trees, the babies and bath water” (p. 109-110). It is impossible to reduce the experiences of teachers and students in

classrooms to measurable certainties and statistics. Unlike the grand narrative, where teachers are seen as small, narrative inquiry invites the researcher to see teachers up close, situated in their own narratives (Greene, 1995). Although it is challenging, assuming a stance that defies the grand narrative and embraces uncertainty and questions is the only way to truly to see beyond simplified solutions and begin understand the complexities of the personal experiences that lead to the construction of personal practical knowledge.

As I stand on the threshold, attempting to simultaneously shift my attention back and forth between the forest and the trees, I now understand that my inquiry will not yield new scientific knowledge claims. Instead, as I move away from my previous technical rational stance, I have come to understand that the intent of my narrative inquiry is not to add another prescription to the professional learning conversation. By choosing to see teachers big, I am releasing my search for certainties (Greene, 1995). Through the retelling of my own narrative, and the narratives of my participants, it is my intent, as Clandinin and Connelly suggested (2000), to offer my readers “a chance to imagine their own uses and applications” (p. 42). The purpose of narrative inquiry is to open space for teachers, engaged in the lifelong process of constructing their own stories, to ask questions and draw their own conclusions.

### **My Narrative Inquiry Process**

Since I wrote my story about my professional learning journey, I have been curious about the learning journeys of other teachers. Last spring I invited four experienced teachers to enter into conversations with me. Together we thought about the experiences that supported our conscious understanding of our personal practical knowledge.

My participants offered a range of perspectives on the construction of personal practical knowledge. Two participants, Claire, a classroom teacher and Barb, a curriculum consultant, are employed by an urban, Western Canadian school division. I had previous working relationships with both of these participants so I contacted them personally with an invitation to participate in my research. The other two participants, Joan, a special education teacher and Freda, a principal, work in a neighboring rural school division. I had a previous personal relationship with Freda and, she suggested I

contact Joan. Each participant brought their unique, personally constructed world view to our work.

I held a total of four one-hour conversations with each participant between April and June. We met in locations of their choosing: classrooms, meeting rooms at the school division office, in their homes, and in mine. The conversations were recorded and I took field notes to ensure I attended to the circumstances surrounding our conversations as well as the verbal and nonverbal cues I observed.

At the first conversation, before my participants signed their consent forms, I explained my research project, and outlined how I would work to safeguard the stories that they were going to entrust to me. Narrative inquiry is relational work (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000) and in order to delve deeply into experiences it is important that the researcher and participants have a safe trusting relationship. First of all, I wanted to assure them that I would do my best to protect their anonymity. Their identity would be protected with a pseudonym and their role and location of the study would be reported in generalized terms. Secondly, I wanted to ensure that the stories I presented in my research paper honored their voices and were true to their intentions. I offered to give them access to my notes and transcripts at each step of the process. I also asserted that they owned their stories, were free to constrain my use of any information they shared, and could withdraw from the process at any time. At each subsequent conversation I reminded my participants that the stories they were sharing were their own and they could choose how these experiences would be represented in the final text.

During the first conversations, the participants and I sketched out a time line of their professional learning journeys and a range of important experiences began to emerge. After our first conversation, Claire suggested, that in order for her to prepare for the subsequent conversations, I send her the notes I made and wonders that I would bring the next time. I followed her advice with each participant, sending them my notes and the threads of the conversations I thought it would be useful to resume the next time. Although I offered each participant access to the written transcripts, they preferred the shorter process of looking at the notes I prepared for them. The content of the second and third conversations emerged from the key experiences we identified in the first conversations. After each session I immediately wrote a personal reflection in order to



add detail to my field notes and to record my reactions to our conversations. I took a break of two or three weeks between the third and fourth conversations. During that time, I used the transcripts and my field notes to construct an interim text that I could share with my participants. Taking on the personas of both researcher and participant, I wrote a series of personal, reflective letters back and forth between us to serve as our interim text. The letters were a useful tool for retelling my participants' stories. Before our fourth research conversation, I emailed the letters to my participants asking them to read them critically, thinking about whether or not the story the letters revealed was an accurate representation of the story they intended to tell. I was flooded with anxiety as I waited for my participants' responses to the interim text. Did my interpretations honor the stories they had shared with me? Would my writing deepen or damage the trusting relationships we had developed? Although their responses were different, each of my participants responded positively to the interim texts. Claire described reading the letters as like reading a novel where she was the main character. Joan used the reflections in the letters as a tool for writing her retirement speech. Barb used the stance expressed in her letters as a tool for understanding a current work-related tension. When Freda and I talked about the letters it was after she had experienced a particularly challenging day at work. She said the letters reminded her that she was a good person. The letters opened space for my participants to affirm, alter or change the stories that I had interpreted as well as led to new threads of conversation that had previously been untouched. When I walked away from our fourth and final conversations, my story and the story of my participants had not finished. Our conversations were just one snapshot in the midst of our storied lives.

### **Considering Their Stories in a Three Dimensional Space**

**Time.** The timelines my participants and I constructed together gave us the framework from which we could begin to co-construct understandings of how their pasts informed their current experiences. They looked back over long, rich careers, filled with achievement and disappointments, dissonance and coherence. As we journeyed back over their professional careers, each participant found it necessary to tell stories of growing up, of parental expectations, and of schooling. Their storied histories helped us make sense of their current narratives. Through the retelling past and present experiences, my

participants and I were able to begin to imagine purposefully reliving our stories in our futures. Understanding our stories supported us as we imagined new possibilities.

**Space.** The events that my participants described took place on a personal, political and social landscape. The location of our conversations was the first of two spatial considerations. Claire, the classroom teacher and I, met in her primary classroom. The safe, in-classroom space invited Claire to relax and paved the way for us to develop our research relationship. The environment supported her memory of previous experiences and allowed her to offer concrete examples of her understandings. She viewed her space as a current snapshot of her personal practical knowledge.

Barb, the curriculum consultant, and I met at the end of her work day in a private space in the school division's central office. It was difficult for Barb and I to separate her experiences from the issues she was experiencing in her current context. Although it was a private room, the political nature of this out-of-classroom space filtered into our research conversations.

At her suggestion, rather than meeting at her school, Joan and I met in her home on an acreage, and in my home in the city. Joan was approaching her retirement and had begun the process of stepping away from her classroom life. Our conversations at her dining room table, overlooking the rolling prairie, seemed to open space for her to view her experiences from a slightly removed, reflective stance.

Freda and I met in her home and in mine. As a school principal, she lives her story predominantly in the out-of-classroom space. She wanted to meet outside her school setting because, in her role as a principal, she knew the demands of her school space would interfere with her focus on our conversation. Freda was relaxed in the home settings and enjoyed the opportunity to think and reflect away from her school context.

The second consideration of the spatial dimension that needed to be considered was the context of the experiences my participants described. Rather than the objective truths of the grand narrative, narrative inquirers are concerned the practical experiences of everyday work. The space my participants inhabited changed over time. They worked in different school settings, both rural and urban, took on new grade levels, and new roles. The experiences in these spaces were shaped by their own unique personal, physical and political contexts. In order to understand their experiences, it was necessary

for me to understand their socially constituted space on the professional knowledge landscape. These diverse professional landscapes come alive when we consider the real people inhabiting these diverse spaces and how inevitably the landscapes shaped their professional identities.

**Relationship.** As a researcher, attending to time and space did not create tensions for me. As I review my research texts and field notes, it is apparent to me that my greatest tensions were in the relational dimension.

*Understanding the personal.* Unlike the objective stance of a researcher in the grand narrative, a narrative inquirer is personally engaged in the research process. Clandinin and Connelly (2000) reminded us that “in a narrative inquiry, it is impossible (or if not impossible, then deliberately self deceptive) as researcher to stay silent or to present a kind of perfect, idealized, inquiring, moralizing self” (p.62). The researcher and their stories are fully present in the research conversations. My research journey began with an inquiry into my own story. It was imperative that I understood my own story and how it evolved on the professional knowledge landscape. Narrative inquiry, because it invites the researcher and the participants to participate in the co-construction of knowledge, opened the space I needed to continue to retell and move to reliving my own story. But, in order to understand my participants’ experiences and come to develop an understanding of their unique narratives it was necessary for me to recognize some of the tensions I was bringing to our research relationships.

I have always been drawn to the certainties of the grand narrative. A search for finite, formalistic solutions has always been my default stance. Clandinin and Connelly (2000) warned researchers to “avoid representing storied lives as exemplars of formal categories” (p. 141). In order to construct narrative understandings of experience I needed to heed their advice. On April 3, before I started my research conversations, I reminded myself of my predisposition to formalistic solutions. “It is simplifying to take a stand and have one plan, reduce it and work around it. I want to reduce experiences into something simple, something I can name with certainty”. But, naming my stance did not prevent it from filtering into my work. On May 5, after a conversation with Freda, I noted that “My positivist assumptions are so pervasive they are invisible”. Greene (1995) stated that “without some knowledge of connective details, it is extraordinarily difficult to overcome

abstraction in dealing with other people. A fearful oversimplification takes over” (p. 95). Recognizing my assumptions and quick over simplifications would be a challenging task. Throughout the research process, I have tried to remain attentive to my default stance. In the research conversations, in my reflections, in the writing of the interim text, and in my research texts I have worked to continually assess how my stance informs my understandings.

A second tension emerged through the retelling of my own story. When I began to retell my own story, I started to develop my own theories of professional learning. It was tempting to use the research conversations as an opportunity to affirm my theories, rather than understand the experiences of my participants. Clandinin and Connelly (2000) warned that “The field text is shaped by the selective interest or disinterest of researcher or participant (or both)” (p. 94). I remember feeling uncomfortable with the way the conversations with Freda were unfolding. I wanted to connect her experiences to the theories that I was constructing, but her principal role seemed like a barrier. Finally I realized that instead of understanding her experience, I was trying to get her to give me evidence for my theories. On May 13 after my second interview with Freda I wrote

I got caught trying to get her responses on the things that my other participants responded to –her stance on their issues –but it seemed we were only scratching the surface. There is more to it than that. She isn’t them and I need to understand her experiences – I am going too quickly to summary and conclusions. I am affirming my thinking rather than listening to hers.

In order to understand my participants’ experiences it was imperative that, rather than searching for affirmation of my theories, I developed the ability to view my story and theirs alongside of one another.

Stepping back was a third tension for me. Clandinin and Connelly (2000) described the challenges of relational work. They suggested that narrative inquirers “must become fully involved, must ‘fall in love’ with their participants, yet they must also step back and see their own stories in the inquiry, the stories of participants, as well as the larger landscape on which they live” (p.81). Early on in my process, after my first interview with Claire, I realized that this would not be easy. On March 16 in my

reflections I said, “I want to know the way she views the world. If I want to gather her experiences, it is necessary to step back a bit”. But this wasn’t easy. Throughout the research process, I found it challenging to step away from these conversations and think about the bigger picture. It was challenging to collect field notes when I was passionate about the content of our conversations. In our first conversation, rather than seeking to understand her perspective, I caught myself trying to convince Claire to see things my way. The morning after the interview I realized what I had done. On March 17 I wrote, “I was so wrapped up in my thinking – I knew going in it was about her but once I was in conversation I was about what I knew. I tried to convince her to think differently”. This was an important lesson to learn early in the process. If I wanted to shift away from a stance that privileged my world view, it would be necessary to step back and try to understand the perspectives of my participants. In order to understand their experiences I needed to establish research relationships with my participants that opened up space for the co-construction of new knowledge.

***Working in relationship.*** Establishing a relational connection is the key to narrative inquiry. Commenting on Sartre’s perspective, Bruner (2004) suggested that “tellers and listeners need to share some deep structure about the nature of ‘life’ for if the rules of life-telling are altogether arbitrary, tellers and listeners will surely be alienated by a failure to grasp what the other is saying or what he thinks the other is hearing” (p.699). In order to think together, it was important for my participants and me to find a space where we could connect; a space where we could truly listen and attempt to understand one another. Each of the research relationships I established with my four participants was unique.

Claire and I had worked together as colleagues about ten years ago. More recently, we had worked in a coaching relationship, where I supported her as she experimented with new models of instruction. On March 14, as I prepared to enter the field, and have my first research conversation with Claire, I had a “fear of changing our relationship”. I enjoyed thinking and learning with Claire and worried that the research conversations might impact our connection. Although I explicitly reminded her that we were talking like colleagues, not as instructional coach and teacher, I also worried that my coaching role might influence what she would choose to share in our research

relationship. But, in spite of my concerns, we were able to set our roles aside and establish a safe, honest research relationship where she seemed to feel comfortable to speak freely.

Barb and I had worked together as colleagues in a previous school. This year she moved from a classroom teaching role to a position as a curriculum consultant with the school board. Barb has the ability to step back and consider her experiences objectively, so it was relatively easy to move into a research relationship together. But I still needed to be careful. When we taught together, in the course of our many conversations about our work, Barb and I discovered we shared a common perspective on teaching and learning. Now that she had taken a role at the division office, we also shared the common experience of negotiating our stories on the out-of-classroom landscape. On April 21, after a conversation with Barb, I reflected, “When I talk to Barb I immediately line myself alongside her because of her work in professional development and because of our similar personalities.” It was important to note that I was very engaged in our conversations because her thought processes affirmed my own. I noted, “[It is] interesting how drawn we all are to people who think like us— instead of people who think differently. She doesn’t challenge me— she affirms me —but this is just one learning style, one personality type.” I also had to be careful of my assumption of a common world view. Further on in the same set of reflections I commented that it was “important for me not to assume she is totally like me— I need to keep pursuing differences and be cautious of assumptions.” Barb and I easily established a relationship that felt like we were equal partners. Although I needed to be cautious of my assumptions, our common experiences provided me a framework from which we could begin to construct our understandings of her experiences.

Freda and I met through a mutual friend about four years ago. Until we established this research relationship, we had never spent any time alone together. We are part of a circle of friends who enjoy spending time walking, hiking, camping and canoeing together. Although we are all teachers, in attempt to find some balance in our lives, our group of friends has consciously chosen to steer our conversations away from our work lives. As a result, our research relationship offered us our first extended opportunity to share our teaching and learning experiences. It was difficult not to be

distracted by the opportunity to deepen our friendship. On May 12, after our second conversation, I reflected, “Am I so enamored with everything I am finding out about my friend that I can’t step back and critically examine what I hear.” I was also very distracted by the story of her journey towards administration. This spring, as I was engaged in the research process, I was also making some personal decisions about which step to take next in my career. I was debating between a return to classroom teaching and moving to a role as an administrator. Hearing Freda’s story opened space for me to view the administration role differently. But, that wasn’t the focus of my research. On May 23 I wondered, “Is any of this helping with my research or is it interfering with it? Am I getting to the bottom of how she acts and why she acts?” Although we easily established a caring, open research relationship, with Freda I discovered that I regularly had to consciously pull myself back into my research wonder.

Freda suggested that I invite Joan to become a participant in my research. Joan, who was preparing to retire, viewed this experience as an opportunity to reflect on her career and come to a sense of closure. I was nervous about establishing a relationship with Joan. She was the only participant with whom I had no previous history. On April 8, as I reflected about our first interview in her home, on an acreage outside of the city, I wrote, “I was so nervous driving out – would I find the place, how would I feel with a participant I didn’t know? Could I connect with her in a way that she would actually talk to me?” But, when I arrived, she was outside working in her yard, just like I would have been, if I had been at home. We talked about our gardens and she led me inside to her spacious kitchen. By the time I was settled at her dining room table overlooking the open prairie, I knew it was going to be fine. In my reflection that day, I went on to write, “I felt connected to her right away.” Joan was open right from that first conversation. I wasn’t certain if it was the assurances of our mutual friend Freda, or perhaps her faith in the research process, but she seemed to trust me and my intentions. At the end of our first conversation on April 8, where we discovered so many personal connections, she told me that the process “wasn’t intimidating at all.” We were well on the way to establishing an effective research relationship.

It was my hope that the development of safe, trusting research relationships would open space for my participants and I to mutually construct new understandings.

Hollingsworth and Dybdal (2007) described the stories that unfold from conversations as braided narratives that support, challenge, and increase our understanding of both learning to teach and learning to live. In order to begin to co-construct our braided narratives I needed to begin to see the world from their perspective.

*Alternative Perspectives.* Before I began this narrative inquiry, I assumed that my perspective was the only perspective from which teaching and learning could be understood. As Clandinin and Connelly (2000) described, “the person working within a paradigm, by habit, or within a stable inquiry framework proceeds by and large without needing to take into account alternative frames of reference.”(p.24). I was pretty comfortable within the framework I had constructed. But as I reflected on April 8 after a conversation with Joan, “This methodology gets to the heart of people.” The conversations with colleagues invited me to see the world differently. Greene (1995) stated that

Every one of us inhabits a humanly fabricated world, is mortal and can acknowledge that mortality, and can tell the story of what happens to him or her as she lives. Aware, then, on some level of the integrity and coherence of another, we are called upon to use our imaginations to enter into that world, to discover how it looks and feels from the vantage point of the person whose world it is. That doesn't mean we approve it or even necessarily appreciate it. It does mean that we extend our experience sufficiently to grasp it as a human possibility. (p.4)

As I ventured deeper into the narrative inquiry process, I began to develop a vision that had space for a range of perspectives. Our conversations invited me to begin to see the world through my participants' eyes. Lugones (1987) suggested that

travelling to someone's 'world' is a way of identifying with them ... because by traveling to their 'world' we can understand what it is to be them and what it is to be ourselves in their eyes. Only when we have travelled to each other's worlds are we fully subjects to each other. (p.17)

Although I didn't always agree with the viewpoints that my participants shared, our conversations helped me understand how their vision had developed. On April 27, after a conversation with Claire, I reflected that although I had been uncomfortable with a



difference in our stances on the sacred story, “I feel less uncomfortable about that than I did three weeks ago. I think it is because I know her better and am seeing her big—seeing her personality, temperament and history.” As I began to imagine the world through her eyes, it became easier to understand her perspective. It also became easier to view my perspective as just one viewpoint. On April 8, I noticed that in my conversation with Joan, “I was not making assumptions or judging. I just wanted to understand.”

As I broadened my perspective my technical rational certainties shifted to tentativeness. I began to understand that a broader vision allowed me to see each of us in all our complexities. On April 30, after my conversation with Joan I noticed “What is interesting here is that she is just not one thing or another...she is so many things...The more I know her, the more complicated it is.” Although I wanted to simplify her experiences into something I could define with certainties, it was impossible. By stepping into her shoes and “discovering what happens in people’s heads is so different than what anyone can see outside,” I had begun to do what Sarris (1993) suggested and see beyond what seems to be.

As our conversations began to challenge my assumptions and certainties, I also began to recognize how much I could learn as I traveled alongside my participants. On April 8, after a conversation with Joan I realized “This process of researching is giving me important insights into myself and my own assumptions – people are right. It ends up with both people learning... [my participants] are teaching life lessons without knowing it.” The gifts of learning and new insights that I received in my research relationships came with ethical responsibilities.

### **Ethical Responsibilities**

Although I had read about ethics, had received approval from the Behavioral Ethics Committee on February 25, 2010, I did not truly understand the ethical responsibilities of narrative inquiry until after my first research conversation on March 17. I sat in the car outside Claire’s school and replayed our conversation in my mind. Her perspective on knowledge acquisition had taken me by surprise and I was uncomfortable with how I had reacted. In my notes that day, I wrote, “Rather than just listen, I got lost in the conversation, turned into [an instructional] coach and made it into a teaching mission...instead of gathering her version, with the best of intentions, being her friend and

former coach, I challenged her on it. I came across evaluative or maybe challenging, rather than as an information gatherer.” I was almost physically ill as I drove home worrying that I had irreparably damaged our relationship and skewed our next conversations because of my reaction to her perspective. The following morning, after a sleepless night, I drove to Claire’s school to talk to her. That day, March 18, after our conversation assured me that I hadn’t hurt her, I wrote

It was really important for me to see her and make sure she was OK. I am reminded of the complexity of this work – thinking about a personal stance, an-in-classroom relational stance is very different than looking in from the outside. I have had a very good lesson about ethics-they are looming large before me ... this is not going to be easy.

Witherell and Noddings (1991) suggested that the ethic of caring is the foundation of relational work. They suggested that caring relationships require contributions from the caring-one, or carer and the one who is cared for. The carer focuses their attention on the object of their care, feeling with them and acting on their behalf. The cared for one contributes by recognizing and responding to the caring. My experience that day reminded me that my first responsibility was to care for my participants. This important lesson stayed with me throughout the rest of the research process.

In our conversations, as they described their experiences, my participants honored me with their confidences. On April 30, after an emotional conversation with Joan I wrote about ethical research. “It is a grave responsibility – because no matter how capable and confident they are – when they tell me things it makes them vulnerable. I need to be certain I live up to the ethic of care in my work!” It was imperative that I lived up to their gifts of faith, and responded to their confidences with an ethic of care.

This feeling of responsibility has not changed as I moved from our conversations towards interim and finally towards my research text. Clandinin and Connelly (2000) reminded me that “Ethical matters shift and change as we move through an inquiry. They are never far from the heart of our inquiries no matter where we are in the inquiry process.” (p.171). As I attempt to tell their stories in the following chapters, I will move cautiously. Ritchie and Wilson (2000) suggested “Because stories are not innocent, we also recognize that we cannot afford to rewrite them naively or carelessly” (p.26). I will

strive to remember that the first and most important audience of my work will be my participants and I will attempt to compose a text that sustains their stories.

### **The Intent of My Narrative Research**

I have come to understand that stories can open the space we need to understand the personal and social complexities of classroom life. Witherell and Noddings (1991) reminded us that “stories invite us to come to know the world and our place in it. Whether narratives of history or the imagination, stories call us to consider, what we know, how we know, and what and whom we care about” (p. 13). It is my intent, as I seek to understand my story and the stories of my participants, to defy the grand narrative and invite the stories of teachers back onto the professional knowledge landscape.

Narrative inquiry reveals the educative possibilities of story. In narrative research, stories are viewed as a way of thinking about, interpreting and reshaping experience. In her forward to Ritchie and Wilson’s (2000) book *Bonnie Sunstein* suggested,

We can curb the urge to merely tell our secrets, and let the story unveil itself. We can turn them over and inspect them, understand them in light of who we’ve become, and work hard (yes, the ‘real work’ of school) to recast their meaning. When we take the time to do that, we theorize our stories (and hence ourselves) into our pedagogy, our politics, and our practical lives. . . . Telling our own stories – and then revisiting them to see what they mean – is a courageous and revolutionary act. (xi)

The intent of this work is to turn over and examine stories of teachers.

As my participants and I travel inward, outward and backward and forward (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000) in this research, I will attempt to gain an understanding of the experiences that have supported them as they constructed a conscious understanding of their personal practical knowledge. It is my intent that the research process empowers us as we name and read our worlds.

Retelling stories, allows us to begin to identify themes and issues in our work, leading to a deeper understanding of our beliefs and knowledge. As Ritchie and Wilson (2000) suggested, “our stories can become a critical instrument through which the ideologies that construct our practices can be illuminated” (p. 21). This illumination can open space for new perspectives. Ritchie and Wilson (2000) suggested that the “process

of naming and reading their world gives teachers access to the power of reflection and reinterpretation” (p.23). New stories can be told, based on the insights gleaned from retellings.

Understanding our personal experiences can open the door to reinterpretation. Ritchie and Wilson (2000) reminded us that narrative is “not merely a precursor to revision and change in teachers’ lives; in forcing us to compose, articulate, and reinterpret our lives, it can move us to action” (p.21). Narrative inquiry opens the possibility for growth, change and constant renewal. The process of telling and retelling our stories can open up the educative possibilities of reliving our stories on the professional knowledge landscape. It can also inform our understandings of professional learning on a larger scale.

In the next two chapters of this research text, I will move towards a closer examination of two of my participant’s learning journeys. Although the voices and perspectives of all four of participants have informed my understandings and will continue to weave their way through my narrative, I have chosen to focus on the experiences of Joan and Claire. The voices of Barb, a curriculum consultant and Freda, a principal are more commonly heard on the professional knowledge landscape. Both are positions of relative power and influence. Their voices are attended to. The stories of Joan and Claire deeply embedded in classroom work, offer a perspective that I believe has been missing on the professional knowledge landscape. It is important to our profession that the voices of classroom teachers are attended to. In order to construct coherent understandings of their experiences, it will be necessary to look closely at their stories, and then step back and consider their stories within the larger social and political context. Carr (1991) described the importance of moving back and forth on this landscape.

The meaning of the whole is discernible, if at all only from the perspective of one of its parts; and yet its part is understandable, if at all, only as belonging to the whole. Understanding always hovers between these two points of view. (p.77)

In the balance of this research text, I will hover between the forest and the trees. Looking closely at the unique perspectives Claire and Joan offer and considering the

implications of their journey on the wider landscape will invite me to continue to construct my knowledge about teaching and learning. In chapters three and four I will follow Greene's (1995) advice and attempt to see teachers and their experiences big. In chapter five I will shift my perspective and consider how the insights surfaced through their experiences could be considered in the wider research conversation about teacher knowledge and professional learning.

## **CHAPTER THREE**

### **JOAN: LEARNING OVER TIME**

It is a dark, cold wintry evening. Joan is sitting at her desk in her immaculate classroom. Desks are neatly arranged, stray pieces of paper and worn down pencils have been returned to their marked containers. Her colleagues have long since left and Joan is pouring over her lessons for tomorrow. Her curriculum and the teacher's guide for her reading program are propped open on her desk. Notes from last year's lessons, current assessment documents and reflections are stretched out before her. She carefully considers the questions she will ask, the approaches she will choose and the adaptations she will make to the reading lesson she has chosen from the guide. She knows her students and has built her understanding of the content over the past fifteen years. What would make the most sense for tomorrow? In the back of her mind, Joan worries about the parent teacher conferences that are rapidly approaching. Will she have enough information for the parents? Will she be able to account for the marks on the report cards? Will it be enough? She glances at her watch, dismayed at the time that has slipped away. She vows she will finish in the next half hour so she can spend a little time with her family. She takes a deep breath and returns to her planning. Why does it have to be so hard? (Interim Text, July, 2011)

Joan is a knowledgeable, skilled teacher. How did she end up in that chilly classroom, night after night, planning, wondering, reflecting and worrying? What can we learn about teachers as "knowers" from her story?

#### **Storied Lives: Looking Back**

Like all of us, Joan lives a storied life. Carr (1991) suggested that in the course of their storied lives, people live out different storylines that are a reflection of their narrative histories. Which storylines, both personal and professional, led Joan to that classroom that winter evening? How did her past shape her present and future?

Joan knew, right from her internship, that she had the natural abilities of a teacher. Her mentor helped her develop her confidence and recognize her natural teaching abilities. *She was awesome for my confidence...she always felt that I was a really good teacher, that I had it in me to be a good teacher (excerpt from transcript, April 8).* She

knew she had a strong presence in the classroom, intuitive understandings of students and, given time, could figure out what needed to be done to support student learning.

Joan learned how to teach over time. Joan believes that the opportunity to teach the same grade level in the same school for over fifteen years in her first teaching role gave her the opportunity to develop understandings about children and their capabilities, curriculum content and learning. She wonders about how anyone can learn when they *jump from grade to grade and material to material, and never stick with something long enough to get that deep understanding (excerpt from transcript, April 8)*. She describes herself as a slow processor and the opportunity to develop deep understandings over time was important to her. *I like to practice things I know and use them over several times (excerpt from transcript, May 18)*. The framework of a program also invited Joan to build her knowledge base for teaching.

Throughout the first part of her career, Joan welcomed the use of commercially packaged programs as a starting point for her instruction. Although she felt comfortable immediately in her teaching relationship with children, she knew she had more to learn. *I really felt having [programs] helped me learn things, the details that maybe I didn't know (excerpt from transcript, April 8)*. As Joan built her own knowledge about teaching, programs and manuals gave her a place to start. *I did need that guidebook as a starting place. I did want professionals who have a lot of experience in this area to give me some ideas and then let me go with it (excerpt from transcript, April 30)*. From early in her career she knew she had good instincts. *I had a good sense about what it entailed, what I needed to do. I didn't have to be led through everything, step-by-step, so that I could take a lesson from a teaching guide and ...I would use that I guess as my stepping stone (excerpt from transcript, April 8)*. *I think your first year out there; you probably live by the Bible. I don't think that's a bad thing for a first year teacher. The second year you come back to something that is a little bit familiar and I think if you're good you start bringing yourself to it (excerpt from transcript, April 8)*. Programs supported Joan as she constructed her understandings about teaching and learning.

For Joan, everything served as a provocation for reflection and learning. She would experiment with a lesson, watch the student responses and then try again. She valued the opportunity to inquire into her practice and learn from her mistakes. It was

important to try *something with the group of students and start to reflect on what went well and what didn't go well and [think about] how I would change that (excerpt from transcript, April 8)*. She watched her students carefully, assessed constantly and regularly referred back to her detailed lesson plans from the year before to ensure her plans met the needs of her students. Reflecting and learning deeply over time ensured that Joan could work to the best of her ability.

Joan describes herself as someone *who likes things done right (excerpt from transcript, May 18)*. Right from the beginning of her career she worked hard to have perfect lessons and the perfect classroom. She says *I want everything to be neat and tidy and perfect (excerpt from transcript, April 8)*. She likes predictability and routine and knows she is the kind of person who *likes to walk into situations and know what to expect (excerpt from transcript, April 30)*. In order to meet the high standards she set for herself, Joan worked hard.

Joan and her four younger brothers were raised to believe in the value of hard work. She describes herself as an overachiever remembering that

*We were always taught that if we dug deep enough we could be A students, yes it was instilled in us from an early age that if we were going to take the time to do something it was important to do it well. So as I look back I can see those values come through in my teaching work, at times.*

*(Excerpt from transcript, May 18)*

She set high expectations for herself both at home and in her career. As an adult, she believes societal expectations for women changed, describing our generation as the first generation of career oriented working Moms. Our Moms may have worked, but it was our generation that was expected to have a career and family life. We were expected to *work fulltime, keep a nice home, be on the figure skating club, sew the costumes, drive them to all the ball practices and be there for them (excerpt from transcript, April 8)*. *Our generation of women wants to be the perfect parent, the perfect working person and to do it all (excerpt from transcript, May 18)*. She says she *always had a hard time drawing that line (excerpt from transcript, April 8)* between the expectations of her work life and her home life and confides that



*I've often felt that sometimes I've put work ahead of my family and so in my honesty I have to say that that's the thing I guess now that I work really hard not to do anymore...In retrospect I know I was a good Mom...I was still devoted to my family but I was always trying to find that balance between [providing for them] and being with them. (Excerpt from transcript, April 30).*

Joan knows the value of hard work.

As Joan made sense of her varied storylines, her story to live by as a teacher emerged. Carr (1991) suggested that throughout our lives, people struggle to find coherence between and within our storylines. By connecting the storylines of hard work and perfectionism from her past, her storyline of being a natural teacher who learns slowly and deeply over time and her faith in programs to provide a framework for thinking about teaching, Joan's story to live by as a knowledgeable, competent teacher is surfaced.

Stories to live by are not fixed. Instead people live, tell, retell, and relive their stories over time (Clandinin & Connelly 1996). Whether we are aware of it or not, we are living storied lives and regularly we tell these stories to ourselves or others. Joan lived and told stories of competence, hard work, perfectionism, and a dedication to her craft. Retelling stories with an eye to reflection opens up space for reframing and learning from these stories. In turn, retelling opens the possibility of transforming future actions and reliving our stories. As Joan and I pondered her stories of practice, some new threads emerged.

Joan did not work in isolation. She lived out her professional life on a professional knowledge landscape, a place where competing stories (Clandinin & Connelly, 1995) may interrupt her search for narrative coherence. How did Joan's expectations of herself and her perception of the expectations of others impact the way she lived on the knowledge landscape? Did her classroom story compete with the story of teacher knowledge already present on her landscape? How did Joan respond to this?

### **Stories on the Professional Knowledge Landscape**

Joan lived her professional life in public and private spaces on her landscape. These spaces, where theory, policy and practice intersect are described by Clandinin and

Connelly (1996) as the professional knowledge landscape. In 1999, Connelly and Clandinin described the in-classroom space as a space “free from scrutiny” where teachers can live out their stories of practice and the out-of-classroom space as a “place filled with knowledge funneled into the school system for the purpose of altering teachers’ and children’s lives” (p.2). In order to find coherence in her storylines, Joan had to navigate the tensions found in the boundaries between her safe, carefully constructed in-classroom space and the expectations and prescriptions found in the out-of-classroom spaces on her landscape.

The dilemmas and tensions Joan faced as she moved navigated her own and the expectations of others can be understood narratively in terms of what Clandinin and Connelly (1996) described as secret, sacred and cover stories. In her classroom, Joan was living out her secret story of practice. Using commercially packaged programs to frame her thinking, studying students and curriculum, she was constructing her knowledge as a teacher over time. Although she didn’t recognize it, Joan’s view of knowledge was clearly aligned with the sacred story of teacher knowledge that is omnipresent on the professional knowledge landscape.

The sacred story is connected to a technical rational view of knowledge. Schon (1983) described this dominant story as knowledge that “consists in instrumental problem solving made rigorous by the application of scientific theory and technique” (p.21). This perspective which reduces teaching and learning to a linear, scientific approach, assumes knowledge for teaching comes from out-of-classroom spaces. “Ideas and those who know are given dominant positions over those who do. Better doing comes from more and better knowing” (Clandinin & Connelly, 1995 p. 68) Coming through what Clandinin and Connelly (1995) describe as a conduit, knowledge is “received, expert and hierarchical” (p. 114). Outside researchers consider the theory and create programs and initiatives. School divisions funnel these simplified knowledge claims into classrooms.

Joan was very comfortable receiving programs and knowledge this way. She relied on these programs as a frame for her classroom instruction. Her job was to take what she was given and find a way to interpret these prescriptions in her classroom. Although within her in-classroom space, she was innovating and adapting, she deferred to the knowledge present in prescribed programs.

Joan also felt it was her job to follow the program she had been prescribed. If the program came through the conduit, she considered it a prescription. She complied with the expectations of her division because *they're my boss... I was brought up with that idea of respecting the authority figure and they were my bread and butter and they gave me my pay check, and I'm not a real big rebel (excerpt from transcript, May 18)*. Joan felt obligated to meet the expectations of her division.

She was also guided by her perception of parent expectations. Joan took her responsibilities as a teacher very seriously. She knew the public was *expecting us to have all the answers, they are expecting us to fix the problems that their children have; they're expecting us to do a darn good job (excerpt from transcript, April 30)*. What the community thought mattered to her. *Their impression of me was important. For some people it just doesn't matter what others think, but for me the opinions of other people matters (excerpt from transcript, May 18)*. She said that *like so many young teachers I lacked confidence early in my career and when I felt the weight of responsibility in my role I knew that hard work would pay off (excerpt from transcript, May 18)*. So, as one can predict from her storylines, in order to meet her own and the expectations of others Joan worked hard and strived for perfection.

To navigate between their secret stories of practice and the sacred stories on their landscapes, Clandinin and Connelly (1996) suggested that teachers create cover stories. Joan's cover story depicted an excellent, innovative teacher who worked hard to meet the demands of programs and curriculum funneled into her classroom. Joan's storylines of high expectations and perfectionism, coupled with her strong work ethic ensured she would do her best to rise to the expectations of her students' families and the division in order to deliver programs to the best of her ability.

Looking back, Joan reflects that maintaining her cover story was exhausting. No matter how hard she worked, she seemed to feel she needed to do just a little bit more. Her detailed planning took a lot of time, yet she could not bring herself to just write jot notes like she saw her colleagues doing. She felt compelled to rise to her own expectations and to plan thoroughly every day. In her opinion, good teachers were well planned and reflected deeply about their students as they skillfully actualized the programs they were prescribed.

Joan knew she was highly respected by her administration, her colleagues and the community. She worked hard to maintain her cover story of confidence, competence, and perfection. She felt a strong sense of responsibility to her students, their families, and her school division. In order to be accountable to children and parents, she developed a detailed assessment system that provided the proof for each mark on her report cards. Although she admits she may have been overanalyzing her students' work, she felt compelled to prepare detailed documentation in case she was challenged. The more she learned about the curriculum and student learning, the more she felt compelled to assess. Joan worked very hard in order to meet the perceived expectations of others. In retrospect she realizes that although the analysis of student work improved her instruction, she developed the assessment rubrics and documentation in order to be accountable to parents. Striving to maintain her cover story and achieve coherence in her storylines took a physical toll on Joan.

### **A Shift in the Sacred Story**

About fifteen years into her career, her school division shifted their stance on reading instruction and a whole language program was funneled into her classroom. The whole language movement represented a theoretical and philosophical shift in reading instruction. But, since it was funneled into Joan's classroom in simplified form, Joan was not privy to the research and understandings. The program she received did not provide the linear structure she was comfortable with. The responsibility for the content knowledge and program shifted from the manual to the teacher. This change in the traditional sacred story of knowledge competed with Joan's perception of her role as a teacher. She resented the amount of time it would take to *write the program and deliver it (excerpt from transcript, April 8). I trusted that I had the knowledge, what I used to say though, is that they paid somebody to work fulltime, to develop those manuals and that framework, and now I had to do that on my time off (excerpt from transcript, April 8).* Rather than implementing the linear program that came through the conduit, she found herself having to take responsibility for her teacher knowledge and make programming decisions. Although she readily admits it was a time of learning for her, Joan resented the change in the sacred story. Joan was uncomfortable with the shift in the dominant story of teacher knowledge. It competed with the sacred story she was comfortable with. She

wanted the knowers on the outside to provide her with a framework so she could do what she did best, adapt and innovate within an established framework. As can be predicted by her storylines, In order to maintain her cover story and attempt to maintain coherence in her story to live by as a competent, knowledgeable teacher Joan worked harder and harder to rise to her own expectations and her perception of the expectations of parents, colleagues and the school division. Joan was overwhelmed and at this point, halfway through her career, her cover story became too difficult to maintain. She wondered if she should leave teaching.

### **Considering Teacher Knowledge**

Joan's dilemma highlights the tensions between the kinds of knowledge on the professional knowledge landscape. What constitutes teacher knowledge? Is it in outside theory or is it in our practice? Who creates teacher knowledge? Does teacher knowledge come from outside researchers or is it constructed in classrooms? For Joan, which knowledge was more valuable: theoretical knowledge from outside researchers, the stripped down knowledge claims that were funneled into her classroom, or the knowledge Joan constructed as she innovated in her classroom? When do teachers begin to recognize themselves as knowers on the professional knowledge landscape?

### **Knowledge From Outside the Classroom**

Joan was comfortably aligned with the sacred story of teacher knowledge coming down the conduit into her classroom. She assumed that the programs that she received were well grounded in current research theory and saw her role as interpreting and implementing that theory in the classroom.

*You trusted that somebody out there knew what they were doing when they compiled it and you went through it. You tested [it with students], you went through it again and you noticed things the second time around that you didn't even notice the first time, right? And then you started saying that didn't work really well or well, I have an idea for that... So without that guide who was going to tell me why we did so much work with rhyming words, what we call phonemic awareness. I had no idea why we were doing that, I just assumed it was good. (Excerpt from transcript, May 18)*

She also trusted that the division sponsored staff development workshops are grounded in research theory. *When I go to an in-service, ultimately there will be some theory behind the methods they present...research says this... (Excerpt from transcript, May 18).* But, when she attends an in-service she prefers the conversation about theory to be short.

*If you can give me in three or four sentences why this is valuable and works... I'm going to listen, but I hated going to in-services where you sat for an hour and half and listened to theory and then in the last 20 minutes they tried to give you what you really wanted to walk away with. That used to bother me...I want the short version because I've got work to do.*

*(Excerpt from transcript, May 18)*

From my experience, Joan's perspective mirrors a common perspective of teachers on the professional knowledge landscape. Although it can be related to our work, in Joan's opinion, theory belongs outside the classroom, in universities and staff development sessions. Joan, like many teachers prefers to place her attention on the practicalities of classroom instruction. Bateson (1995) reminded us that "concentration is too precious to belittle" and only by looking hard at anything is it likely we are able to see something new like "life between the grass stems that only becomes visible after a few moments of staring"(p. 106). Joan learned about children, teaching and curriculum by focusing her attention on learning within the four walls of her classroom.

### **Constructing Knowledge in the Classroom**

Technical rationality is a seductive perspective for educators. Viewing teaching and learning as a simple, linear process simplifies our work. But teaching is a wonderfully complex, human endeavour only understood by attending closely to the particulars of classroom life. Ball and Cohen (1999) reminded us that that "Teaching occurs in the particulars –particular students interacting with particular teachers over particular ideas in particular circumstances" (p.10). We create curriculum in our classrooms when the content, skills and strategies we are expected to teach intersect with our own storylines and the storylines of our students. Joan revealed her close attention to the particulars in the way she tirelessly worked to understand her students and

curriculum, her thoughtful reflection, and the way she consciously modified and adapted programs to meet the needs of her students.

Joan learned from and with her children. Using programs as a framework, over time she constructed her knowledge of content, teaching and learning. She chose to reflect deeply on the needs of her children, the content of the curriculum and evaluated the approaches that worked best to meet the needs of her students. Over time, as she developed a deeper understanding of the content, children and teaching, Joan shifted her instruction from covering content to teaching for understanding.

*I mean you start out teaching and you're expected to teach them to tell time. After you've taught for 15 years you say OK, they don't even have a concept of time. If I'm going to teach anything, I'm going to have to try and teach that concept of time first. So it wasn't about a clock anymore. It was about a timeline or rope, and looking at what we did at different stages of the day and considering how that timeline was made into a circle. You know, so all of a sudden I was proud of that, because it wasn't about the rote telling time to the hour/ It was about, the importance of spending far more time teaching the concept (Excerpt from transcript, April 8)*

She had become someone who Ball and Cohen (1999) would have described as a serious learner in and around her practice.

Yet, Joan did not trust that she could spontaneously act on her knowledge of teaching and learning. Schon (1987) described the automatic, tacit responses teachers make without conscious deliberation throughout the course of their day as knowing-in-action. These judgments are grounded in the knowledge that teachers have constructed over time. Unconsciously, Joan responded calmly and effectively to a myriad of issues every day. When reflexive responses are interrupted by a surprise or problem, Schon (1987) labeled that spontaneous response in the midst of action as reflection-in-action. For some reason, Joan did not trust herself to think on her feet. Her detailed day plan, complete with well thought out questions, served as a security blanket that she took with her as she moved around her classroom throughout the day. *I needed to have it written down because I couldn't trust that at the spur of the moment with that group of 25 kids I*

*was just going come up with what I needed to do. And I like to feel comfortable. I like to know what I'm walking into, so that planning enabled me to know what my day was going to look like (excerpt from transcript, April 30).* It was easier to respond flexibly to classroom events when she had done her thinking in advance. Although her colleagues teased her about being able to go in her room and teach without a plan, she continued to write detailed lesson plans until late in her career. Why didn't Joan have faith in her ability to think on her feet? Was it her linear preferences and perfectionist storyline shining through? Did she trust that the knowledge she had constructed over time was enough, or did her overly detailed planning signify her belief that the real teacher knowledge was in the books and programs she laid out on her desk every night when she planned?

### **A New Perspective on Professional Knowledge**

Although Bateson (1995) recommended narrowly focused concentration, she also warned, "It is simplifying and dangerous to have one overriding concern that makes others unimportant" (p.106). A focus on the particularities of classroom instruction is invaluable, but softening concentration and inviting alternative perspectives is also important. Joan values the understandings she constructed in practice, but also acknowledges that sometimes they need to be challenged. Although she readily admits she is not comfortable with change, she knows that it is good for her, stating that *you have to give yourself a little shake every once in awhile (excerpt from transcript, April 8).* Provocations from research, collegial conversations, new programs, university courses and professional development sessions ensured that Joan's practice evolved and changed over the years. Rather than viewing as knowledge as solely constructed inside or outside of the classroom, Joan reminds us that a broader view of knowledge should be supported.

Theory and practice coexist in teacher knowledge. Connelly and Clandinin (1995) conceptualize teacher knowledge as personal practical knowledge. Unlike a technical rational view of teacher knowledge where knowledge is constructed outside the classroom by researchers, their conception of knowledge foregrounds the personal construction of classroom practice. Knowledge, from their perspective, is socially constructed and has been shaped and reshaped by intellectual acts, self-exploration, experimentation and reflection. Outside theorists offer one of many perspectives teachers



consider as they construct their personal practical knowledge. Constructing personal practical knowledge is interactive work that requires professional judgment and ongoing inquiry into student learning. Throughout her career as she consulted programs, talked to her colleagues, reflected on student performance, adapted lessons based on the needs of her students, attended university classes and staff development sessions, Joan was constructing her personal practical knowledge. Her experiences in her classroom invited her to consolidate and continually shape and reshape her understandings (Connelly & Clandinin, 1995).

Dewey (1904) urged teachers to be both consumers and producers of knowledge. Joan consciously consumed knowledge all of the time. This perspective of knowledge allowed her to find coherence between and within her storylines. Joan also regularly produced knowledge in her classroom, but she was uncomfortable when I labeled her adaptations and innovations as knowledge. This story was in direct competition with the sacred story of knowledge that she had experienced throughout her career. Although she had constructed a rich, dynamic practice, she did not consider her doing as knowledge.

The construction of personal practical knowledge acknowledges that knowledge resides in teachers. Finite solutions and prescriptions funneled through the conduit are replaced with an expectation for teachers to consider multiple perspectives as they inquire into their practice and make informed conscious decisions based on their own judgment. This story of knowledge competes with the sacred story of knowledge that, like many teachers, Joan was comfortable with. Rather than viewing teaching as solely doing, teaching from this perspective is a constant shifting of attention between knowing, doing and wondering!

Joan's tension with the shift in responsibility for knowledge, as highlighted by her response to whole language, mirrors the response of many teachers I have encountered in my staff development work. Over time teachers have become enculturated to expect knowledge to be funneled down the pipe. Like many teachers, Joan's story to live by as a competent knowledgeable teacher was closely tied to her ability to enact, adapt and apply the knowledge she received through the conduit. Her job was to enact, not create curriculum. In order to construct personal practical knowledge, a new story of a teacher as a conscious inquirer and decision maker needed to emerge.

### A Shift in Joan's Perspective

Over a decade after her tensions with the implementation of whole language, a new program was funneled down the pipe. Since her previous experience, she had changed grade levels and schools and had recently returned to her first school. This time, when a new program was funneled into her classroom her response was different. She was confident with her instruction and trusted the professional knowledge she had constructed over time. *I have the knowledge. I have taught lots of children to read. I was at that point [in my career] where I knew what my students needed (excerpt from transcript, April 30).*

Rather than unconsciously replacing her current practice with a new program she made a conscious choice to follow her own instincts. *I didn't want to go nuts; I was stubborn enough to say I am not going to keep jumping from one thing to the next (excerpt from transcript, April 30).* Over time she had carefully woven her understandings about instruction into themes and she wanted to hang on to her theme boxes. *I had to make it work for me and there was something in those boxes, whatever it was, there was something that I valued be it my time, my energy, that I wasn't willing to part with and just start all over (excerpt from transcript, April 30).* She trusted her experience enough to think about adapting rather than adopting. *I was old enough to say it doesn't have to look exactly like what they say it's going to look like. I need to always look at those things and say in the way I run my room, in what I do and what I know, how is it going look for me, how can I use that? (Excerpt from transcript, April 30)* Rather than consuming what was presented to her, she made a critical, conscious decision to use her own knowledge and make intentional decisions, based on her personal practical knowledge about what she would keep and what she would let go.

Joan was still drawn to a linear approach for instruction, but instead of adopting the linear approach of a program, she created one of her own. In order to keep track of her adaptations she began to compile a binder. *I was smart enough by this point in time that I got out a binder right at the start and said...you know that you need something to refer back to, you know you don't want to rethink everything every year, so you're going to do this the right way (excerpt from transcript, April 30).* She organized her binder in a

logical way that made sense to her. When new initiatives came along, she critically assessed them, found them a place in her binder or dismissed them.

Joan had become a critical practitioner. Drew and Vaughan (2002) suggested that analytical and evaluative reflections are both required for critical reflection. They stated analytical reflection “concentrates on particular experiences and also generalizations which can be drawn from similar experiences” (p.185). Joan had always carefully scrutinized and analyzed her instruction. But analysis is not enough. For the reflection to be described as critical, analytical reflection needs to be complemented with evaluative reflection. Drew and Vaughan (2002) suggested that this pairing leads to critical reflection that “ helps the learner describe experiences, to analyze what they have learned from those experiences and to offer a process of judgment by which they might frame current or future experiences” (p. 185). By evaluating what she knew and what was coming through the conduit, Joan had developed the ability to consciously construct her personal practical knowledge.

Her binder, created with her own knowledge, made sense for her and was well received when she shared it with other teachers. She knew *it was useful for them but I would never guess that they would use it the same way I did (excerpt from transcript, April 30)*. She knew that teachers would want to make their own adaptations as they constructed their own knowledge. Throughout her career, Joan was constantly learning, reflecting and adapting. Her binder became a dynamic physical representation of the personal practical knowledge she had constructed over time.

Joan’s story to live by as a knowledgeable and competent teacher hadn’t changed. Her storylines of hard work and perfectionism were still present. Instead, the shift that allowed her to achieve coherence came in the way she viewed teacher knowledge. Fenstermacher (1994) asserted that “the critical objective of teacher knowledge research is not for researchers to know what teachers know but for teachers to know what teachers know” (p.50). Joan consciously recognized the personal practical knowledge she had constructed in her practice. She trusted what she knew, what she did, and opened up space for wonders.

### **Retelling Leads to a Transformative Reliving**

Joan and I are sitting at her dining room table, drinking coffee, gazing out the window at the rolling prairie and the grey sky stretching out before us. It is April and if we look closely we can see the promise of spring tucked into the landscape. In June, Joan will retire from her teaching position in her rural school division. Our recent conversations have had a reflective tone. With the benefit of hindsight, Joan considers the choices and decisions she has made throughout her career and together we wonder about the lessons that could be learned from her experiences. As she considers the many evenings spent poring over books in her carefully ordered classroom she wonders why it took so long to learn to trust in her teacher knowledge enough to let some of the detailed planning go. Why did it take so long to achieve that balance? Could my daughter learn any lessons from me?" (Interim Text, May 18)

## CHAPTER FOUR

### CLAIRE: ASKING QUESTIONS

In a sunny room, tucked away in her School Division's downtown offices, Claire and three colleagues are engaged in a spirited discussion about a recent division professional development session that had challenged kindergarten teachers to consider reading comprehension instruction. Since the workshop, Claire and her colleagues have been experimenting with the ideas in their classrooms. As part of their system sponsored professional learning plan, this afternoon has been set aside for them to think, question and learn together. Scattered over the table in front of them are lesson plans they have tried, student work samples and a range of professional resources they have been consulting. Their initial attempts to teach reading comprehension to their Kindergarten students have been interesting. There just might be something to this... (Interim Text, July 2011)

Claire's practice has been evolving for over 20 years. Which experiences have led her to this learning conversation? What can we learn about teachers as knowers from her story?

#### **Storylines Leading to a Story to Live By**

Like Joan, throughout her storied life, Claire has lived out storylines that reflect her narrative history. Although there are many similarities in their storylines, Joan and Claire's stories to live by as a teacher are markedly different.

Claire and her brothers were raised with the expectation that they would achieve. In both their school work and out of school activities their parents told them *you're going to do it and do well (excerpt from transcript, April 21)*. To this day, Claire works hard to achieve the high standards that she sets for herself. When we were discussing some of her early experiences in the classroom she plainly stated *I don't like to flounder (excerpt from transcript, April 21)*. The expectations of other people, especially those in authority, matter to her too. She describes herself as someone who liked to follow the rules and do what she was asked from an early age. She recalled the impact of her first rule breaking experience in kindergarten.

*Claire: I got in trouble for not doing what I was supposed to be doing.*

*Sharon: and that scarred you?*

*Claire: Scarred me for life. It was [about the new] flag. It came out sometime around there and I colored the middle part blue. I didn't want to leave it blank. I colored it blue. (Excerpt from transcript, April 21)*

She says she always knew that the last thing she wanted to be was *in trouble* (excerpt from transcript, April 21). Instead she describes herself as a team player; someone who has always preferred to color in the lines and like Joan, her storyline reveals a woman who strives to meet her own and the expectations of others.

Claire is a problem solver. Growing up in a family of five brothers, she attributes her ability to cut to the chase when considering problems to her tendency *to think more like a male. You talk about how females communicate and how males communicate; females do a lot of body language, they do a lot of hiding and not saying what they really want, where as a boy will just punch you and it's done* (excerpt from transcript, April 21). Claire knows how to set emotions aside, focus on a problem, take the information she has and make decisions so she can focus on the task at hand. As the youngest child, in a house full of brothers, she learned how to think objectively about a problem and work towards a clear cut solution. Claire stories herself as the kind of woman who gets things done.

As Claire searched for coherence within and between her storylines, her story to live by as a teacher emerged. Like Joan, the storylines of achievement and living up to her own and the high standards set by others were part of her story to live by as a knowledgeable, competent teacher. But, in her first year of teaching, Claire had an experience that highlights where Joan and Claire's stories to live by begin to diverge.

### **A First Year Teaching Story**

Claire's first job was teaching a class of 35 Grade 7 students in a suburban school. The class had a reputation for being difficult. Claire explained that the students *had come from a very relaxed style of teaching the year before, so they were kind of were running the show— they were out of the room a lot. [There were] bulletin boards broken and there was dancing on desks and, you know, this is what I was told. They were nice kids, really nice kids but*

*they kind of thought they were in charge and didn't like to be told no.*

*(Excerpt from transcript, April 21)*

She explained that she tried a few strategies to get them to sit and listen but they didn't work so she was pretty frustrated. She was raising her voice too often and described that it felt as if the *veins were popping out of my neck (excerpt from transcript, March 16)*. It was October or November of that first year and she was already considering a career change. She explained, *I like to do well, I'm a control freak and I wasn't in control (excerpt from transcript, April 21)*. She was also worried about her students. *They were bright kids and they could learn and I wanted them to, but I didn't think they were getting there (excerpt from transcript, April 21)*.

Claire explained that in the teaching culture of the time, it was assumed that the teacher portrayed themselves as an expert. *I came from where teachers knew everything, whether they did or not (excerpt from transcript, April 27)*. But, she knew she needed help. Her storyline of looking objectively at problems and looking for solutions ensured she would look for an answer. At a fall orientation meeting for new teachers, she remembers the superintendent of education telling them:

*If you are having troubles, we will workshop you to death. We will help you. Our last resort is to fire [you]. He didn't say it quite like that, but the idea was we will kill you with kindness before we fire you, so I figured I'd take him at his word. (Excerpt from transcript, March 16)*

She went to her principal and asked him to come in and observe and of course, because of his presence, the students were perfectly behaved. So, the next day, since she had a tape recorder in the room, she turned it on and taped her lesson, and then took the tape to the principal. When I commented that asking for help took courage she said that she may have been naïve or perhaps too confident, but no one would have described her as meek. Her principal gave her some very practical advice about waiting for the students' attention before starting a lesson and his suggestions worked.

In that first year of teaching, two important lessons were surfaced for Claire. First of all, she learned that effective teachers focus on their students. Although she was inexperienced, she knew her *bright kids* were not achieving what they were capable of. Her students weren't living up to their potential so something had to change. Claire

learned that effective teachers pay close attention to their students in order to make instructional decisions.

Secondly, knowing that she was going to make mistakes, she learned the power of asking questions. *I made a conscious decision, as a first year teacher, to ask when I didn't know (excerpt from transcript, April 21)*. Since then, she has assumed a questioning or inquiry stance towards her practice. She thinks some of her colleagues continue to assume the role of expert. She wonders if *some people are worried that they're wrong or that they should know and they don't (excerpt from transcript, April 21)*. But she has no problem with not knowing. *It doesn't bother me much. I figure it's better to come from this way than to not find out what's best (excerpt from transcript, April 21)*. Now, many years later, so she can do her best work, she continues to ask questions for clarification, affirmation or because she just needs to know. The experiences in her first year helped Claire develop her storyline as someone who watches her students and wonders. At this early point in her career, Claire's perception of teacher knowledge was shifting. The addition of teacher as inquirer, to her story to live by opened space for Claire to live a different story on the professional knowledge landscape.

### **Authoring a New Story on the Professional Knowledge Landscape**

Claire experienced tensions in the boundaries between her in-classroom space and out-of-classroom space early in that first year of teaching. In the out-of-classroom space the expectation was for teachers to assume the role of expert, but Claire discovered that in her in-classroom space she did not feel like an expert. Claire stories herself as a person who feels compelled to comply with the expectations of others, especially those in authority. So, the perceived permission from the superintendent to ask for help offered her a way to resolve her tensions. He expected that she would struggle and she was supposed to ask for help. His speech at the new teacher workshop invited her to cross the boundary between her safe in-classroom space and the public out-of-classroom space. Her principal rewarded her initiative by offering support and advice. Asking questions in the out-of-classroom landscape supported her as she composed her story as a successful, competent teacher who worked hard to meet the expectations she set for herself and the expectations of others.



Clandinin and Connelly (1996) explained that as teachers navigate the different spaces on the professional knowledge landscape their experiences can be understood narratively in terms of secret, sacred and cover stories. When Claire's secret story of classroom practice conflicted with the sacred story of teacher as expert, rather than donning a cover story where she pretended expertise, Claire asked questions. Her storyline of problem solver combined with the permission she felt she had been given to ask questions, opened space for Claire, at an early point in her career, to retell her story on the professional knowledge landscape.

Throughout our careers, teachers live, tell, retell, and relive their stories. Claire's story to live by as a teacher shifted in that first year. She struggled to find coherence between her need to achieve to a high standard and her day to day experiences. The sacred story of teacher as expert in the out-of-classroom space did not connect with the realities she was experiencing in her classroom. She certainly didn't feel like an expert. Her ability to look critically at a situation and solve problems opened space for a new story to emerge.

Claire was able to find coherence between her storylines by shifting her definition of successful teaching from the stereotype of teacher as expert towards a vision of teacher as inquirer. This shift invited Claire to release her cover story of expertise. Claire began to compose and live a new story to live by on the professional knowledge landscape; a story where competency and professionalism are defined by a willingness to ask questions and to make mistakes. Rather than pretending an expertise she didn't feel, she retold her story of a knowledgeable teacher as someone who studies children, looks critically at her own practice and asks questions when she is uncertain. Acknowledging herself as a lifelong learner, rather than attempting to create a cover story of teacher as expert, she chose to author a teacher story where expertise is defined by inquiry.

### **Constructing Personal Practical Knowledge as a Kindergarten Teacher**

In order to accommodate the needs of her young family, after a few years working with senior elementary students, Claire changed roles and became a part time kindergarten teacher. Would her story to live by as a knowledgeable inquirer support the shift to a new grade level? How would she maintain coherence in her storylines as she assumed her new role?

From early in her career, Claire constructed her understandings about teaching in her practice. Like many young teachers for the first few years of her career, Claire was focused on survival. *You are just trying to get through the day when you start out.*” *But as she gained experience, the focus on survival diminished and she was able to begin “to figure out what [she] needed to do for kids (excerpt from transcript, April 21).* When asked how she developed her professional knowledge, Claire shrugged and said *I don’t think you can help but learn from experience (excerpt from transcript, April 27).* As Ball and Cohen (1999) described, teaching occurs in the particulars of classroom life. As could be predicted from her storyline of attending to children, Claire began to construct her knowledge by paying close attention to her particular experiences with children.

From the earliest stages of her career, Claire was constructing her personal practical knowledge. As she prepared for the move to kindergarten, she knew she had already developed some of the tools necessary to be a good teacher. Her story to live by as a knowledgeable teacher who isn’t afraid to ask questions supported her as she changed grade levels.

Claire describes herself as someone who likes to work within a defined framework. She welcomed the structure commercially designed programs provided, viewing her role as someone who could use a prescription as a starting point as she constructed her personal practical knowledge. In her middle years experience, she was used to consulting the frameworks provided by the curriculum and commercial programs to plan her instruction. She remembers happily following a framework in Grade 7 math that, in a few pages, outlined a unit, offered a time frame for completion and gave *possibilities [for lessons] from the text books that you may have in your school. You turn the page [and it tells you] at the end of this unit you’re students should be able to answer these questions. ...I said, wow, love that (excerpt from transcript, March 16).* Understanding the end goal helped her focus her instruction and she welcomed the opportunity to use her own “bells and whistles” to get there. She believed her role as a teacher was to actualize what was prescribed.

When she moved to kindergarten there wasn’t an established provincial curriculum or system sponsored commercial program. Staying true to her storyline as someone who solved problems by asking questions, Claire started to look for answers. As

would become her consistent response to challenges throughout her career, Claire contacted some experienced kindergarten teachers and asked for advice. She knew she needed some kind of framework as a starting point. Someone gave her curriculums from other provinces to look over but they were quite dated. She spoke to the other kindergarten teachers about their programs and found out they were all doing it their own way. Someone used a commercially produced alphabet puppet kit and structured their teaching around that. So Claire bought the book and she and her Mom spent the summer sewing puppets. Now she had a framework to *hang her hat on* while she learned more about what kindergarten children knew and were capable of. Another teacher explained how she had students, in small groups, cycle their way through a series of centers and work jobs. This appealed to Claire, who began to use the small groups to target specific skills and as an opportunity to assess the kids and find out what they needed to know. Claire relied on the perspectives of others as she began to construct her personal practical knowledge.

Slowly but surely, by relying on commercial frameworks as a structure and through experimentation, watching students and talking to her colleagues, Claire began to construct her personal practical knowledge of kindergarten instruction. Connelly and Clandinin (1995) explained that constructing personal practical knowledge is an intellectual act. Teacher knowledge, from this perspective, is shaped and reshaped by self-exploration, experimentation and reflection. Clandinin, Downey, and Huber (2009) suggested that when teachers assume an inquiry stance, “what works is always what works ‘for now’”. Each ‘for now’ needs to be open to the next configuration” (p. 152). Rather than viewing her teacher knowledge as finite, Claire’s story to live by of teacher as questioner opened space for the uncertainty and tentativeness that Clandinin, Downey and Huber described.

As she began to construct her personal practical knowledge Claire began to develop her own approaches. When asked how she developed these strategies, Claire shrugged and said *I don’t think you can help but learn from experience (excerpt from transcript, April 27)*. Schon (1987) described the automatic, tacit responses teachers make throughout the day as knowing-in-action. Claire’s ability to learn from experience helped her construct her personal practical knowledge which in turn supported her as she

made instinctual decisions throughout the day. But, classrooms are wonderfully unpredictable places, and effective instruction requires more than just intuitive, reflexive responses. Schon (1987) suggested that when reflexive responses are interrupted by a surprise or problem, we may look back and reflect on our actions or we may respond by reflecting in the midst of action. Reflection-in-action, as described by Schon (1987) “has a critical function, questioning the assumptional structure of knowing-in-action” (p.28). Unlike Joan, who was uncomfortable relying on her ability to reflect-in-action, Claire’s inquiry stance opened space for her to live with uncertainty and trust in her ability to figure things out.

Although Claire had a clearly stated preference for using a program or framework as a starting point for instruction, her early experiences in kindergarten, where there was no specific prescribed commercial program or provincially mandated curriculum, invited her to develop her own vision for kindergarten instruction. Duffy (2002) reminded us that successful teachers have a clearly articulated vision that they use as a compass as they make instructional decisions. Learning from colleagues, experimenting with a range of commercially available programs and reflecting on her experiences supported Claire as she constructed her personal practical knowledge for instruction. Claire was becoming comfortable using her vision as the touchstone for her instructional decisions. But then, a provincially mandated curriculum arrived on the professional knowledge landscape.

### **The Arrival of the Kindergarten Curriculum**

Claire stories herself as a team player and knew when the new curriculum was released she would try to implement it. She trusted that it was a well researched document. *I mean, obviously greater minds than mine think about these things, and so I have to think the greater minds have done the research for me and done all this so they must know and ... they’re not thinking it [is] bad for kids (excerpt from transcript, March 16).* But, when she listened to her colleagues, some weren’t happy. *No one really liked the curriculum because they called it glorified preschool. Where’s the teaching? That was kind of the comment I heard when we met. [But I told them that] I really had to give it a go (excerpt from transcript, March 16).* A few colleagues did like the document. One suggested it was *vague enough so I can do what I want.* Another said she was *just going to do what [she] had always done.* Claire described her reaction to these colleagues.

There were *real extremes of how they viewed it so I'm listening. I'm always listening because these were two pretty smart ladies (excerpt from transcript, March 16)*. When I asked her how she resolved it she said, because of an upcoming maternity leave, *I was only there doing it the half year and I just gave it a go as best I could. I don't think I ever resolved it that [first] year (excerpt from transcript, March 16)*.

When she returned from her maternity leave, Claire began to make decisions about what to keep and what to leave out of the new curriculum. Her decisions were based on her growing knowledge of kindergarten children. Whereas the curriculum suggested she control which centers spent their time in, she came to her own conclusion. *I'm getting old and ornery, but, I think they need to do what they need to do...If Billy needs to play in the sand, then Billy plays in the sand (excerpt from transcript, April 21)*. She wasn't comfortable with the incidental instruction recommended by the curriculum either. *Everything was incidental, like you're not supposed to teach the letters. You do the writing and they'll just get it by osmosis, and I'm thinking it needs to be more purposeful than that (excerpt from transcript, April 27)*. When I commented on her choosing to move away from the prescribed curriculum Claire responded, *Yes but I tried all that other stuff first because I wanted to do the right thing (excerpt from transcript, March 16)*. She concluded by stating that, after experimenting with the new curriculum for a while she began to make her own decisions based on *the curriculum, what information I had before and other teachers (excerpt from transcript, March 16)*.

Claire experienced tensions when the new curriculum was funneled into her classroom. Her practice was interrupted and she struggled to find coherence between her storylines. When the new curriculum arrived she took the implied prescription to heart and felt, as a team player, she just had to give it a try. Her storyline of living up to the expectations of others ensured this response. But, as she experimented with the document, her tensions about knowledge surfaced.

Claire's continued alignment with the sacred story of teacher knowledge on the professional knowledge landscape is revealed in her reflexive response to curriculum. At first, she privileged the knowledge prescribed by the *greater minds* of outside researchers over the knowledge she was constructing in her classroom. As she had acknowledged earlier in her career, she saw herself as someone who actualized what was prescribed, She

considered herself a consumer rather than a producer of knowledge. She wanted to defer to the prescription and consume what had been funneled into her classroom but, it conflicted to the knowledge she had been producing in her practice. She had tensions with the sacred story of teacher knowledge. So, as can be predicted from her storyline, she responded to these tensions by asking questions.

First, she turned to her colleagues. Her belief in the social constitution of knowledge was revealed in her reliance on her colleagues for ideas, insights and direction. Many of her colleagues did not support the document and responded by adopting a cover story of compliance. She listened carefully to the voices of teachers she trusted as she developed her own stance.

Secondly, Claire began to evaluate the prescription in relation to the knowledge she had constructed in her own practice. Greene (1995) used the terms seeing big and small as a way of describing perspective in education. The sacred story of knowledge, funneled into classrooms by policy makers asserts that mandated curriculum is viewed as big on the knowledge landscape and classrooms and teachers and classrooms are small. But, Claire's understandings about kindergarten children and their learning goals had developed during her time in a kindergarten classroom. Rather than seeing the curriculum big, Claire saw children and classroom learning big. Her story competed with the sacred story of teacher knowledge.

In order to critically reflect, Drew and Vaughan (2002) encouraged teachers to analyze and evaluate their practice. Not only was Claire analyzing the prescription, she was evaluating it in relation to the knowledge she had constructed in practice. Rather than deferring to the sacred story of teacher knowledge where knowledge for teaching is located outside the classroom, Claire discovered that the knowledge she needed to teach kindergarten was embodied in her own story and the stories of the teachers she consulted. Although she clearly articulated a stance of privileging the knowledge that comes through the conduit, rather than receiving the information as a technician, Claire made decisions for instruction based on her own vision for teaching. She achieved coherence in her story to live by choosing to author a story that competed with the sacred story of teacher knowledge present on the professional knowledge landscape. Tucked inside her safe, in-classroom space she lived a story of inquiry and experimentation where system

expectations were just one of the perspectives she considered as she constructed her personal practical knowledge of instruction.

### **Responding to a Sacred Story**

Over the next decade, Claire deepened her understandings about kindergarten children and instruction. She had become a serious learner in and around her practice. With an eye on her clearly defined targets, she continued to experiment with instructional strategies and talk to her colleagues. The kindergarten teachers in the division met regularly and she recalls how effective these meetings were. *I have always thought that teachers were the best thieves - steering committees would meet in different schools all the time and we would [sit in their] room, writing stuff down and sucking it up (excerpt from transcript, April 27).* She attended after school workshops where she would get *one or two ideas out of it and maybe you'll try it or maybe by the time you get back on Monday your notes don't make any sense anymore (excerpt from transcript, April 27).* She says she also responded to the gentle nudges of her division that expected an annual growth plan and her principals when they suggested she try something to add to her practice. As she engaged in these learning opportunities, as one could predict from her storyline as an inquirer, she adopted an open stance. *Well, everyone has got to know more than me, so I'm going to learn something that's going to make a better teacher (excerpt from transcript, April 27).* This open stance, where she softened her concentration on her own viewpoint and considered alternative perspectives served her well when a new model was funneled into her classroom (Bateson, 1995).

Claire and I work in the same school division and her classroom practice and her professional learning were interrupted by the same initiative that I described in my narrative. When this sacred story was funneled into her classroom six years ago, she was an experienced teacher who had constructed her personal practical knowledge (Connelly & Clandinin, 1995) of kindergarten instruction over time. She had continued to learn in her practice through experimentation, conversations with colleagues and reflection. Although she was pleased with most aspects of her instruction at the time, like always, she was in the process of refining her practice. She wasn't happy with how her writing instruction was going. *I had reached the wall with the framework that we had (excerpt from transcript, April 27).* Some of her colleagues had found ways to connect instruction

about letters and sounds to writing, but nothing that she had tried was working for her. Her knowledge was not fixed, and as always, in response to student needs she was open to considering an alternative.

Before the literacy initiative was funnelled into her practice, like me, Claire had become comfortable picking and choosing from commercially produced materials and the curriculum in order to create her own curriculum with her kindergarten students. The new model of instruction was mandatory and because the division was going to collect data, teachers were going to be held accountable for its implementation. When it started Claire says she was *somewhat aghast, somewhat worried, but tried to be open because I knew it was coming and what am I going to do about it, right?* (Excerpt from transcript, April 27) She didn't question the choice of that particular model because she *assumed they chose the one that was best* (excerpt from transcript, April 27). Similar to her response to the new curriculum ten years before, she said *it comes back to some other mind greater than mine has done the research and figures out what's good, that filters down to me and says thou shalt do this* (excerpt from transcript, April 21). She also knew that *if you're going through the motions and doing what you're supposed to be doing, you should get to make mistakes* (excerpt from transcript, April 21). If she did what she was asked she wouldn't get into trouble. So, although she was feeling tentative, as a team player, she attempted to embrace the new model of instruction, watching her students closely to see the impact. She explained, *There's no doubt that I vented like everybody else, because it was new. But it doesn't take long before you go holy smack, look at the students go. It must work. So those greater minds than mine did know something* (excerpt from transcript, March 16).

Rather than question the rationale, she thought since the model had been chosen by the division, it connected to the curriculum and had a solid research base, allowing her to focus on how to make it work in the classroom. She assumed *I don't have to worry about what objectives are being met, somebody else has done that and I just then have to worry about which [objectives] I'm doing that day* (excerpt from transcript, March 16). She appreciated the structure that the model's framework offered her, knowing that the framework would be the starting point and she would figure out how to make the model part of her practice over time.



### **A Narrative Understanding of Claire's Initial Response**

As one could predict from her storyline of compliance and living up to the expectations of others, although it made her uncomfortable, Claire felt compelled to comply with the expectations funneled into her classroom. Again, her instinctual response was to defer to the knowledge claims from outside her practice. She assumed that the school division knew best and it was her job to actualize the framework that had been prescribed. As she had been throughout her career, Claire was drawn to using the linear structure of a prescribed framework for her instruction. Viewing herself as a “doer” she set about making sense of the prescription she assumed she was receiving. She believed that if she colored in the lines, and did what she was asked to do, she would be allowed to experiment and make mistakes as she constructed her knowledge. By experimenting within the division's prescribed framework, she was able to find coherence between her storylines of living up to expectations and constructing her own knowledge in her practice.

A second facet to her response was Claire's inquiry stance. She did not see her knowledge as fixed and was searching for new ways to teach writing. Rather than dismissing the new instructional model, her stance opened space for her to experiment with the prescription. So, as she had with the new provincial kindergarten curriculum, Claire tested the ideas she had been prescribed and studied the impact the changes made on her students. She was used to making judgments based on the knowledge constructed in her practice and if the system story had not improved her practice she would have been *very conflicted*. At this point in her career, rather than deferring to the outside knowledge base, Claire may have chosen to defer to her personal practical knowledge. For someone who likes coloring within the lines, this would have been very uncomfortable. No wonder she was relieved when the results of her experimentation indicated that the new model worked for her students. Claire was able to maintain coherence in her storylines and she openly embraced the system initiative, setting out to construct her understandings within the learning framework provided by her division.

## Learning on the Professional Knowledge Landscape

The staff development initiative supported rather than challenged Claire's story to live by as a teacher. Claire describes herself as someone who needs the opportunity to learn over time. *I need time to think; I need time to process (excerpt from transcript, April 27)*. In the first year of the initiative, teachers were given a reflection log to fill out and send in to the division office. On the last page of the log it asked teachers what they noticed about their students' alphabet and vocabulary learning. She was unsure what to write. *I'm saying to myself ... There is nothing. It was blank. Well the next year, I had all kinds of things to say about it because I said OK, I get that now... I had a year to compare, first of all, and I was getting it more now that I could say ah-ha that's what I'm noticing (excerpt from transcript, April 21)*. With experience in her classroom, guidance at the large group professional development sessions and a chance to compare results with her colleagues, she began to understand the model more fully. Acknowledging her learning style, she gave herself time to experiment. *You have to live it and do it in order to understand it (excerpt from transcript, March 16)*. Rather than viewing herself as an expert, as she had learned that very first year of teaching, she opened herself up to wondering. She was comfortable learning over time.

The system sponsored staff development Claire was experiencing represented a dramatic shift in approach to professional learning. The varied menu of after school workshops were replaced with a system mandated sustained focus over time. Claire remembers an all day science workshop she attended before the literacy initiative where an enthusiastic, skilled science teacher shared her approach. She recalls thinking, *this is great, and just went back [to my classroom] and [realized] I don't know how to do anything (excerpt from transcript, April 27)*. As someone who needs time to process, the *one shot workshop* was challenging for her. She also readily admits, that since she was not held accountable to try any of the strategies she learned, or hand in any results, it was pretty easy to set them aside on Monday morning when she returned to her classroom.

*I mean there's no doubt that for me [the learning within the initiative] is more specific and more thoughtful. When you have to do it, and I don't think there's any doubt for most people, and I would fall in that category,*

*yes, it makes a difference. But it also means because you have to, they also give you time for it, and you know it is coming, so it keeps you going.*

*(Excerpt from transcript, April 27)*

She recognizes that the shift in approach to professional learning was separate from the model of instruction, The Picture Word Inductive Model (PWIM) that was chosen to be the focus of the learning.

*I try to keep that separate in my mind. People always talked about when PWIM came, I'm out of my classroom all the time, but it was more than that. PWIM was the vehicle they chose to first use for the change in structure of the professional development...and people were blaming the PWIM, but I said no, no, this is PD. [PWIM] is what we happened [to choose]. We could have been using something else, but this is what they've chosen to use. (Excerpt from transcript, April 27)*

The opportunity to learn specific content over time suited Claire's story to live by as a teacher. She asserts that *you don't read the book once and expect to know it all (excerpt from transcript, April 27)*. At a staff development session, a facilitator asked her small group to describe themselves as learners and Claire says she described herself as slow. She feels the sustained learning over time, with a narrow focus, gave her the freedom to be slow and deliberate about her learning.

### **Socially Constructing Knowledge within the System Framework**

In alignment with Harste and Leland's (2007) assertion that "knowledge is socially constituted"(p. 10), in order to make sense of the new model of instruction, as had become part of her story to live by as a teacher, Claire welcomed the opportunity to seek out like minded colleagues to think with. Since her early days in Kindergarten, Claire had consciously chosen to develop a working relationship with other kindergarten teachers. She has been fortunate, in her last two schools to have a kindergarten colleague in the school to think and plan with. The relationship she nurtures with them opens space for her to feel safe to ask questions and experiment. She enjoys the opportunities to plan units and try some team teaching together. *You can lower barriers when you've got a partner that you trust.* At this point in her career, she is often the more experienced of the two kindergarten teachers in her school. To support their relationship and establish an

equal partnership, in keeping with her storyline of teacher as an inquirer, she asks questions and doesn't pretend to be an expert.

Claire has two groups that she uses to support her thinking and learning. Over time, she has found a group of trusted individuals that she calls her small posse. These are the people she consults when she has questions or chooses to meet with on school division sponsored inquiry days. This small group of teachers made up with former and current teaching partners and other like minded individuals have been a key factor in Claire's learning journey. Her posse needs certain attributes.

*I usually try to carefully pick my posse...What I have learned is I don't want my posse to drag me to the negative, because it's very easy depending on who you start to hang with. All of a sudden you find yourself, you know, stuck in the negative... I work hard to keep it positive...People like to vent...I don't have a problem with venting, but let's move on. How can we make it work? I want to know that they are somewhat like minded of giving it a fair shot. (Excerpt from transcript, April 27)*

In order to maintain her story to live by as an inquirer who colors within the lines provided by her school division, and to support herself as a learner, Claire chooses a small posse whose stance mirrors her own.

Claire considers the large group staff development meetings at the division office a meeting of her large posse. The large posse, led by people she considers to have expertise, offers her the division's perspective and also allows her to get a feeling for the perspectives of a wider group of colleagues.

Claire's posses offer support when she is experimenting with her practice or learning something new. When she has questions or needs alternative perspectives, she will consult one of her posses. Sometimes *my road is only here so I go to my posse...and then we get greater minds than mine thinking together and all of a sudden...this could be this and this could be this or this or this or this (excerpt from transcript, April 27)*. Consulting others broadens her perspective. She likes to affirm her thinking with her posse too. *I'm much more comfortable knowing that I'm on the right track, and so my [small] posse and my big posse will help me do that (excerpt from transcript, April 27)*.

As she constructed her personal practical knowledge in response to the division expectations, like earlier in her career, Claire demonstrated a preference for the knowledge embodied in her own stories and the stories of her colleagues.

Claire's story to live by as a teacher supported her as she attempted to implement a new model of instruction prescribed by her school division. After testing the model in her classroom and realizing that it made a positive impact on student achievement, she was able to find coherence between her storylines of achievement and rising to her own and the expectations of others. As a problem solver, with an open inquiry stance, rather than resisting the sacred story or adopting the model without question, Claire approached it as a learner. She gave herself permission to learn over time in the company of colleagues. This response enabled Claire to achieve coherence in her storylines and maintain her story to live by as a teacher.

#### **Theorizing Experiences: A Shift from “Doer” to “Knower”**

As Claire constructed her personal practical knowledge over time, she drew on the perspectives of system sponsored programs, provincial curricula, the experiences of her colleagues and the knowledge she constructed while working with her own students. Although she instinctively deferred to the knowledge created outside of her classroom, describing herself as a consumer of knowledge, in reality, she made her decisions based on the knowledge she was producing.

The work of outside researchers was a cornerstone for the school division's learning initiative. Unlike the activity focused workshop experiences of the past, the teachers were invited to think about the research based rationale of the models of instruction. Rather than the sacred story of teacher knowledge that Claire was accustomed to, this initiative was supposed to open space for teachers to understand the theory behind the models of instruction. Like many teachers, who had been enculturated to receive a rhetoric of conclusions from outside their practice, Claire experienced a lack of connection between outside theory and classroom practice, naming herself as a doer not a knower. Yet she does acknowledge there is a place for theory in practice. Claire suggests that although theorists and teachers work separately, they need each other.

*I think if we didn't have those people doing the research, you would just go with your curriculum. You would stumble on the best you could... and*

*these [researchers] are working over here in isolation. They need to meet at some point to see if it works, to test their theory... and the teaching people have to come out and dabble their foot in all these ponds to see what is going to fly. I do think they start separately, I guess, but the only reason they do that is because they hope it's going to make it better.*  
(Excerpt from transcript, April 27)

Although she valued the results of research, Claire's focus was practical; she wanted to be the best teacher she can be. Rather than delving into theory herself, she preferred that someone else sift through the research and present her with outcomes she can move towards.

*I know now that greater minds than mine can ask questions, the what ifs and whatever, and study, because we can study the results. I still don't think all of us need to reinvent the wheel. That's where it comes down to the combination, like it's OK for somebody's research to be presented and to learn from that, I don't think we all have to do that. If it's important to my board, they'll teach me.* (Excerpt from transcript, April 27)

Yet, Claire also felt it was important to understand the research in order to be able to explain the rationale for her classroom instruction to parents. *I should know and I think as I'm learning more, I do know more* (excerpt from transcript, April 27). She made a point of understanding the rationale behind the *ones I think the parents are going to ask me about, or ones that I think I might have to explain* (excerpt from transcript, April 27). But, in order to construct those understandings, rather than seeing it as separate, the theory needs to be anchored with experiences in her daily teaching life. *I'm OK with rationale, but I'm not going to remember it unless I use it. That's the thing* (excerpt from transcript, April 27). *The things that I teach them stick with me* (excerpt from transcript, March 16). Claire makes sense of outside theory by experimenting in her classroom.

Over time, as Claire gained a deeper understanding of the models of instruction she was experimenting with she began to shift from doing to conscious knowing. I was fortunate to be an instructional coach in her classroom about three years into the system literacy initiative. She valued the teaching models I offered, indicating that seeing it in

action helped her make sense of what she was learning. But, more important to her were the conversations we would have after the lessons, conversations where we reflected on the lessons and theorized together on why the models worked the way they did. These conversations were different than those she had with her posse. *You tended to ask the right questions. [You would ask] why did you do that? Where do I go from here? What would you do next? Because that is what you used to say to me, I tend to ask myself that more now than I would ever have before (excerpt from transcript, April 27).* As Ritchie and Wilson (2000) reminded us, the ability to theorize experiences opens space for teachers to take ownership of their own knowledge. Rather than simply being consumers, theorizing practice invites teacher to become conscious producers of their own knowledge. These new conversations highlighted a shift in Claire's thinking; a shift away from deferring to the knowledge funnelled into her practice towards theorizing her own practice. Just like Fenstermacher (1994) asserted, rather than only researchers knowing what teachers know, Claire also had a conscious understanding of what she knew. Claire's conscious recognition of her personal practical knowledge, opened space for a new definition of teacher as knower; a definition that encompassed the knowledge she constructed inside the classroom as well as considered the perspectives of colleagues and researchers outside her classroom; a definition that conflicted with the sacred story of teacher knowledge on the professional knowledge landscape. Rather than being uncomfortable with this conflicting story, Claire's storylines of problem solving and inquiry enabled her to embrace this new vision and retell her story to live by as a teacher. Teacher knowledge could be both knowing and doing.

### **Becoming a Conscious Practitioner**

Claire believes that she and her colleagues think differently now than they did five years ago.

*What I would have learned before...certainly because of the PD that we had, was little snippets, little chunks, ideas...something to help [students] learn. It was very, very concrete. [Ideas] that I can take and try and do and it's going to make them better, and they're not bad, that's not bad.... But it wasn't so much learning as adding to my bag of tricks. So I had the bag of tricks, and they were all good tricks...But then you listen to that*

*research [at staff development] and you can see how it makes sense to do all that. [The learning changed to] now how do we use those tricks to really make your teaching purposeful. (Excerpt from transcript, April 27)*

The opportunity to focus on understanding the rationale rather than just adding ideas to her bag of tricks supported her on her journey to becoming a conscious practitioner. As she described her learning over the past five years she states *there's no doubt, I am a better teacher now than I was before (excerpt from transcript, April 27).*

*I think [my learning is] more purposeful. ...part of it is that you have the same professional development, you've been given time to learn, lots of practice yourself, just like anybody learning something, and then you can see the product. You can see that it pays off, and then I think it does make you more thoughtful and specifically picking out what you're going to do as you run into things... (Excerpt from transcript, April 27).*

She believes the sustained professional learning has allowed her to deepen her understandings, and make conscious decisions about her teaching and learning.

In order to become a conscious decision maker, Claire says, for her, it is important to build the knowledge first. Once she had a clear understanding of students, curriculum and management and had her *ducks in a row* she was able to develop a big picture of classroom instruction; a picture that had space for new learning. She realized *that it's all there and [told herself] you can do all that and juggle all those balls and now there's one more (excerpt from transcript, March 16).* She suggested that once you get a new piece of learning *under your belt...it is important to realize that you're making those decisions...and that's what you need to do all the time. But now you just have another thing to make your decisions with (excerpt from transcript, April 27).* Claire believes teachers need to be conscious decision makers.

Claire knows that she has to *pick and choose, because you can't do it all (excerpt from transcript, March 16).* She says she has to be really *vigilant and protective of the time she has with her students in her half day program (excerpt from transcript, April 21).* She critically assesses activities to determine if they are an effective use of time because *there comes a point when the bang for your buck, literally and time wise, is not necessarily what they're getting out of you (excerpt from transcript, March 16).* In order



to decide which activities to choose she says *she goes through her bag of tricks and asks how much time will they spend on it and what are the students going to get out of it?* (Excerpt from transcript, April 21)

When planning, she thinks about what her students need and decides on the most efficient path. She tries to *combine as many things as [she] can in an activity even if it is letter sounds and cutting* (excerpt from transcript, April 21). When the students are lining for a drink after gym, *we'd line up the girls on one side and we'd count and how many more boys are here* (excerpt from transcript, April 21). Claire makes conscious decisions based on which activities will make the best use of her instructional time.

When she makes big decisions, Claire often seeks input from her posse. *I want to know what they all have to say... I can have people turn me totally around once I talk to them and [I may] say well, that's better. What was I thinking?* (Excerpt from transcript, April 27). But, in the end she makes her own decision based on her experiences. *I'm older than most people, so I have lots of experience. When someone says we should try this, or this is good, I often have not [been] comfortable with that* (excerpt from transcript, April 21). Claire makes decisions based on the input of others and the judgment she has developed over time.

Claire tries to make decisions that align with the expectations of her administrators or school division. But, although she wants to do what she is asked, her judgment is the bottom line for her decision making. When she disagreed with the new curriculum, she spoke to her posse, considered her own experiences and then made her own decision. When I asked her what she would have done if she didn't think the models being funneled into her classroom in as part of the literacy initiative were good for her students. She says *I would have been very conflicted* (excerpt from transcript, April 21). I wonder how she would respond to that conflict. Would she have followed her own experience and judgment or would she have fulfilled the expectations of her school division?

### **A Shifting Story**

Claire's story to live by of teacher as knower has evolved over time. From early in her career, her storylines of questioning and problem solving opened space for her to construct her understandings of teaching and learning in her classroom. The opportunity

to work without a prescribed program in her early days in kindergarten invited her to construct her own understandings about kindergarten instruction. She carefully attended to children, considered the perspectives of others and constructed her own vision. Although she has a clearly stated preference for coloring in the lines, from early in her career, as she constructed her personal practical knowledge, she became a conscious decision maker who used her vision as a touchstone. The perceived permission she felt to ask questions and experiment allowed her to find coherence between her storylines of living up to expectations and attending to children and learning in her own classroom. Claire was able to find coherence in her storylines by inquiring and growing within a system framework. In the past six years, Claire has begun to tell a story that is in conflict with the sacred story of knowledge on the professional knowledge landscape, where knowledge is outside the classroom and teachers are technicians who apply prescriptions. Rather than storying herself as only a doer, she has begun to theorize her practice, thus acknowledging that her conscious doing is a part of her knowing.

As Claire sat with her colleagues in that sunny space at her school division's central office that day, she was doing what she did best. She was considering a provocation from the outside, thinking about how it connected to her classroom experience and, in a spirited conversation with her colleagues, she was connecting what she knew with what she did and as always, she was asking questions!

## **CHAPTER FIVE**

### **RELIVING OUR STORIES**

Last fall, after having had the privilege to step outside of classroom work and think deeply about teaching and learning in my role as a staff development leader in my school division, I returned to a school setting as a grade two teacher. I set out to weave a new story as a classroom teacher, using threads of understandings from my conversations with my research participants, colleagues, mentors and classmates, threads of knowledge from in-depth theoretical study of instructional practices, and threads of insight from the opportunities I had to work with groups of teachers and students. I thought I was prepared to begin to relive my story as a classroom teacher. Yet, as I sat in my silent classroom, before my students arrived on the first day of school, I was filled with doubt. Would I remember how to teach? Was the knowledge I had constructed over time enough? Once our hectic life together began, would I be able to use my vision and understandings as a touchstone as I made conscious day to day decisions? Could I find a way to continue to construct my personal practical knowledge, moving back and forth between the theoretical and the practical, guided by my students, trusting in the curriculum we constructed together? It was time to put my theories and my beliefs into practice and I was terrified!

#### **The Sacred Story of Knowledge on Landscape**

There I was, a teacher with years of classroom experience and a solid theoretical knowledge base yet, I still doubted what I knew. I think about Joan spending years learning how to trust and act on her own knowledge and Claire regularly deferring to “greater minds” than hers and I wonder, why is it so difficult for teachers to trust and act on their own knowledge?

Joan, Claire and I have been immersed in the sacred story of teacher knowledge on the professional knowledge landscape. Knowledge, in the form of programs, models of teaching and teaching strategies have been funneled into our classrooms throughout our careers. As described by Clandinin and Connelly (1995), these knowledge claims are “received, expert and hierarchical” (p.114).

Paired with the arrival of the programs is a very real pressure to conform. Sometimes, compliance is mandatory. Joan did not have the choice to continue teaching with the old program she preferred when whole language was introduced. It was an expectation. New materials were purchased and she was expected to use them. Although she resented the invasion of her practice, Joan was compelled to change her program. Claire and I had a similar experience. When the new model of literacy instruction arrived in our division seven years ago, teachers had no choice but to conform. Data was expected and administrators were invited to monitor classroom instruction. This has become the culture of our profession. Stripped down knowledge claims have been funneled into our classrooms for years. Experienced teachers cynically comment on the new, improved models that are cycled and recycled into our classrooms. Yet, with those programs comes the underlying message, the real knowledge for teaching is outside your classroom. It is our job to actualize what arrives through the conduit.

Sometimes, compliance is not closely monitored and cover stories emerge. When a new kindergarten curriculum was funneled into their classrooms Claire and her colleagues responded differently. Since their practices were not going to be closely scrutinized, some of Claire's colleagues found ways to create a cover story of compliance and live out a different story behind their classroom doors. Claire felt compelled to attempt to use the knowledge she was presented but, in the end, she followed her own path. In order to survive on the professional knowledge landscape, in the face of the never ending cycles of new knowledge claims arriving in classrooms teachers have learned to tell one story in out-of-classroom spaces and live a completely different one in their classrooms. Our classroom constructed knowledge is rarely validated publically. When we are in out-of-classroom spaces we often feel the need to hide or dismiss what we know when it doesn't align with outside expectations. Yet, there is more to this story than outside expectations.

For many of us compliance with the sacred story has become a reflexive response. As I considered my own story, and my conversations with Joan and Claire, it became clear to me that each of us, for a portion of our careers, had unconsciously aligned ourselves with the sacred story of teacher knowledge, storying ourselves as doers rather than knowers. We had become enculturated to believe the sacred story. We relied on the

prescription that was funneled into our classrooms as a framework for our instruction. We did not expect to be included in the conversations about program choices or theoretical understandings. Instead, we assumed that decision makers outside the classroom would consult the theory and funnel what we needed into our classrooms. When talking about programs, Joan said she *trusted that somebody out there knew what they were doing when they compiled it*. Claire demonstrated her deference to knowledge created outside her classroom when she stated *I have to think the greater minds have done the research for me so they must know*. In my story, in chapter one, I shared how, when I was asked how I taught children to read I shared all of the *stuff* I did. I talked about what I did, not what I knew. I described the programs I used, not the understandings I had developed. We all accepted the stripped down knowledge claims at face value, because we had been enculturated to believe it was our job to enact what was prescribed. We believed the knowledge was in the prescriptions not in the teacher.

Our conversations about the role of commercially provided programs in our teaching highlight our alignment with the sacred story of teacher knowledge. Each of us, in our own way described ourselves as consuming what was produced outside the classroom as a starting point for our instruction. Joan used commercially produced programs and manuals to help her construct her personal practical knowledge. She felt that the programs helped her *learn things, the details that I didn't know (excerpt from transcript, April 8)*. She wanted *professionals who have a lot of experience to give her some ideas and then let her go*. Claire welcomed the structured framework that commercially written programs provided. She used the structures as a starting point for her classroom instruction knowing that she would add her own *bells and whistles* along the way. As I look back on my story, I recognize that I was also comfortable waiting for a prescription to arrive in my classroom. During the first year of the staff development initiative, when I felt the new model of instruction was being funneled into my classroom and I couldn't figure out how to develop a schedule that included these new pieces of the puzzle, my first reaction was to say just tell me what to leave out and I will do it. I was uncomfortable with the dissonance that the literacy initiative surfaced and my first reaction was to align myself with the sacred story of teacher knowledge. Just tell me what to do and I will do it! We were all used to the safety and structure that commercially

created programs and system mandated models of instruction provided. We expected that structure and, as Joan described in her story about the whole language movement, we were very uncomfortable when it wasn't there.

Yet, although we didn't validate this as knowledge, we also described the creative adaptations and changes we made to the prescriptions we received. Since we were so entrenched in the sacred story of teacher knowledge, we struggled to recognize that our doing was also a kind of knowledge creation. Each of us described ways that we adapted and changed the models and programs that were prescribed in order to meet the needs of our students. Joan described that early in her career, she knew that the commercial programs were just a stepping stone and knew she was bringing herself to the work. Claire sought out structures to support her early work in Kindergarten but took pride in using what she described as her *own bells and whistles* to ensure she met the needs of her students. Over time, we had constructed a body of knowledge in our classrooms, knowledge that supported our daily decision making, what Schon (1987) described as knowing-in-action, but, like many teachers, because we had been enculturated to believe the sacred story of teacher knowledge, we resisted calling our actions knowledge and deferred to the "real" knowledge that was funneled into our classrooms.

### **Shifting our Perspective on Teacher Knowledge**

At different points in our careers, although we may not have been conscious of the change, each of us began shift away from the sacred story towards a more personal conception of knowledge. Connelly and Clandinin (1995) conceptualize teacher knowledge as personal practical knowledge. From their perspective, teacher knowledge is socially constructed and shaped and reshaped by intellectual acts, self-exploration, experimentation and reflection. This conception opens space for the conscious use of the knowledge from outside our practices as well as the validation for the knowledge constructed in our classrooms. From this perspective, rather than privileging one over the other, teacher knowledge is both knowing and doing. We are, as Dewey (1904) reminded us, both producers and consumers of knowledge.

For Joan, after years of actualizing prescriptions and changing her practice based on the commercial programs that were funneled into her classroom, creating her own teaching binder was a symbol of a shift away from the sacred story of teacher knowledge

towards a belief and trust in her personal practical knowledge. She sorted through what she knew about teaching, students and curriculum, considered what was being prescribed from the outside and made a conscious decision of what to keep and what to let go.

When Claire moved to teaching Kindergarten a decade into her career, because there was not a formal curriculum or defined program, she was unable to rely on knowledge from the outside to guide her practice. So she searched for a structure that made her comfortable, considered the opinions of her colleagues, watched her students, asked questions and slowly began to construct her personal practical knowledge for kindergarten instruction. When a new curriculum was prescribed a couple of years later, she immediately began to consider its effectiveness, measuring it against the knowledge she had constructed in her practice.

Before the literacy initiative, like Claire and Joan, I had been unconsciously constructing my own personal practical knowledge over time. I had been experimenting with the programs and curricula that had been prescribed. I was adapting and using the commercially prepared materials I was given. I was watching children and learning in my practice. I had the practical part of teaching all figured out. I knew what to do. I will never forget the day I was challenged to explain how I taught grade one. I talked about the stuff I did but could not explain why. I had never been asked that question before. I thought my job was the doing and was incredibly uncomfortable when I realized I might also be responsible for the why. This new story conflicted with the sacred story I was comfortable with. But, it also challenged me to think beyond my doing and, in the past six years I have begun to gain conscious control of my personal practical knowledge. Fenstermacher (1994) asserted “the critical objective of teacher knowledge research is not for researchers to know what teachers know but for teachers to know what teachers know” (p.50). At a different point in our careers, consciously or unconsciously, each of us began to act on what we knew.

### **The Challenge of Taking Responsibility for our Knowledge**

The shift to trusting the knowledge we have constructed in practice as our tool for decision making comes with a challenge. In order to move past accepting prescriptions at face value we need to acknowledge that expert teaching is the not act of applying technical rational solutions to classroom problems. There are no easy answers. Each

teaching situation is unique and requires adaptations and innovations. Instead of a one-size fits all solution we have to embrace a tentative stance, trusting in our knowledge and our ability to make sense of our experiences. As Clandinin, Downey, and Huber (2009) suggested when teachers assume an inquiry stance, “what works is always what works ‘for now. Each ‘for now’ needs to be open to the next configuration” (p. 152). But, as evidenced in our stories, moving past the sacred story of teacher knowledge is not easy. There are personal and social barriers to a tentative stance.

**Achievement.** Storylines of achievement and the need for approval by parents and administration are woven through our narratives. Like many teachers, moving in the boundaries between in-classroom and out-of-classroom spaces we feel pressured to do what is expected. As evidenced by the stories of our experiences, this pressure can be a personal desire to achieve and rise to high standards we set for ourselves. We want to do well, so publically we align ourselves with the simplified solutions provided. When we are tentative, it means we have to trust our knowledge and ability to figure things out. There is a level of discomfort in not knowing and a concern that we will be thought of as less than competent. It is simpler and safer to be a consumer rather than taking responsibility for being a producer. Questions, innovations and tentativeness are hidden in classrooms. Certainties provide us with a clear path for achievement.

**Expectations.** We also have storylines of rising to meet the expectations of others. We want to do what we are asked by our administration. As Claire reminded us, we get to make mistakes if we are doing what we are told. Historically, working within the sacred story of teacher knowledge, our school divisions have provided us with certainties, in the form of prescribed programs and models of instruction. In order to meet real and perceived expectations we often choose to work within the framework of the certainties that have been provided for us. It is simpler to color in the lines. We want our administration to recognize our expertise.

**Teacher as Expert.** Personal and social influences have led to a definition of teacher as expert. Joan reminded us of the public expectation that expert teachers are in control and have an answer for each problem that arises. Aligned with the sacred story of knowledge, this definition asserts there is a simple scientific solution for every classroom situation. Tentativeness can be perceived as a lack of expertise. Within this definition,



teachers are rewarded for being doers, people who enact what is prescribed. We have not been invited to be knowers and struggle when asked to consider ourselves this way. If we take responsibility for our teacher knowledge, then we move away from the certainties of a prescription and towards the unscientific, less predictable world of emerging understandings and questions. Would we still be considered an expert teacher if we admitted we were uncertain? Tentativeness would signal a dramatic change in the culture of our profession.

**Ownership.** This year, as I returned to the classroom, armed with a conscious understanding of my personal practical knowledge, determined to construct curriculum with my students, I too felt the pressure to live up to expectations. It was easy to slip back into alignment with the sacred story of teacher knowledge, the story that tells teachers that real knowledge comes from outside their classrooms. I hadn't taught math for five years and I was feeling very uncomfortable with my lack of expertise. The curriculum and programs had changed and although I believed in the philosophical stance of the new direction, I felt unprepared to bring this to life with my students. I didn't like the feeling of not knowing. I didn't want to be tentative and figure it out as I went along. I wanted simplified solutions so I could be certain. My instinctual response was to shut my door and hide behind a cover story of expertise, pretending that I had everything under control, denying my questions, following the prescribed program lesson by lesson, pretending an expertise I did not feel inside. I didn't want my colleagues or administrator to know I was struggling. But, lessons from Claire and Joan resonated at the back of my mind.

Claire's experiences reminded me that there is no shame in not knowing. I needed to embrace my tentative understandings and be open to new perspectives. So, like Claire, I started asking questions, lots of questions. I spoke to my colleagues and mentors, I consulted professional literature and I chose to attend a series of professional development sessions. After each conversation I experimented in my classroom and reflected on my students' learning.

Joan's experiences reminded me that it was acceptable to start with a program, drawing knowledge and ideas from the framework until I could, as she suggested, "bring myself to it". So I allowed myself to relax, follow the program and sure enough, as I began to work through the lessons, my professional judgment and past experiences began

to inform my work within the prescribed framework. I began to trust what I knew and by the end of the year, used the program as a reference not a guide. Joan had also taught me the value of watching my students closely, reflecting deeply and planning carefully. Patiently watching my students, opening space for them to lead the learning, trusting my ability to reflect and respond allowed us to begin to construct understandings of mathematics together. Rather than relying on certainties from the outside, I embraced the tentativeness of my understandings, which in turn opened space for new learning.

As Joan, Claire and I found coherence between and within our storylines, in spite of the expectations on the professional knowledge landscape, each of us discovered a way to become comfortable with uncertainty. Our tentativeness opened space for us to continue to grow and learn. The lessons from our experiences highlight the need for a new definition of teacher expertise. Instead of storying expert teachers as those who are certain, we need to redefine expertise as tentativeness. With this perspective comes a new conception of teacher knowledge.

### **A New Conception of Teacher Knowledge**

Rather than separating theoretical and practical knowledge and deferring to one or the other, we need to think about knowledge differently. As evidenced in our stories, teachers are regularly consuming and producing knowledge behind closed doors. We need to shift our culture, remove the need for a cover story of compliance and instead embrace classroom experimentation and questions. Clandinin and Connelly's (1995) conceptualization of personal practical knowledge invites us to consider theoretical and practical knowledge as parts of a socially constructed whole. Within this framework expert teachers construct their knowledge based on a range of perspectives and experiences both in their classrooms and from the outside. The knowledge we construct as doers needs to serve as the lens through which we critically examine the knowledge produced in out-of-classroom spaces. As Pinar (2003) suggested, theory can serve as the reflective moment in practice. Examining our 'doing' can lead to conscious knowing.

Teacher knowledge is not a finite technical rational solution to a scientific problem. Teaching is a wonderfully human profession that requires a constantly changing, shifting body of knowledge. We cannot be technicians. We need to have conscious control of possible solutions and adaptations that could support the unique

learners in our classrooms. Knowing why particular approaches work allows us to use intentionally choose the best tool for each circumstance. Rather than actualizing the certainties that have been funneled into their classrooms, teachers need to be invited to the table as flexible, creative thinkers. Instead of being enculturated to expect and accept the certainties of a finite prescription, teachers should be invited to develop their judgment and encouraged to make decisions based on their experiences. Achievement as a teacher should be aligned with an inquiry stance. An expert, knowledgeable teacher should be someone who wonders!

This shift in the conception of teacher knowledge represents a dramatic change on the professional knowledge landscape, a change that requires new perspectives for both system leaders and classroom teachers. In order to shift our culture we need to learn to think about knowledge differently. A natural first step would be changing how we think about professional learning for teachers.

### **Professional Learning**

In the past, the story for professional learning has been directly connected to the technical rational approach to teacher knowledge. This model, as Cochran Smyth and Lytle (1990) described “emphasizes the actions of teachers rather than their professional judgments and attempts to capture the activity of teaching by identifying sets of discrete behaviors reproducible from one teacher and one classroom to the next” (p.2). At system sponsored professional development sessions and at conferences, we all expected to receive the next, best teaching ideas. As Joan so frankly explained, teachers preferred the theory to be kept short, perhaps just a few sentences at the most, because they had work to do. Teacher learning was about gathering ideas and activities from outside sources. If we didn’t want to add to or change our practice we quietly put the idea on the shelf and ignored it.

When new curricula or programs were prescribed there was an assumption from both the system and teachers’ perspectives that the new prescriptions would replace current methods. The assumption was, and in many cases continues to be, knowledge for teaching is in the programs not the teachers. Different administrations demanded more or less evidence of compliance so many teachers quietly lived one story in their classroom

while navigating out-of-classroom spaces by adopting cover stories of compliance. Teacher learning was about prescriptions not conversations. It was about how, not why.

Yet, at the same time, in the privacy of our classrooms another kind of teacher learning was taking place. Each of us described how we learned through our day-to-day experiences over time with children. Joan described how reflection, detailed planning and assessment and careful study of her students supported her as she developed a rich understanding of students, teaching and curriculum. Claire described a similar experience and highlighted how conversations with colleagues allowed her to construct her knowledge for teaching. In private teachers acknowledge the value of this learning, but, in formal professional development, classroom knowledge construction is rarely considered. Directly related to the sacred story of teacher knowledge, the story for teacher learning perpetuates the division of theory and practice.

The opportunity to work as a facilitator for staff development has given me a unique perspective on professional learning. When I first begin to lead sessions, I assumed I was training people to learn how to use a new model of instruction. My leadership directly aligned with the sacred story of teacher knowledge. The knowledge was in the program and teacher learning was actually training in how to use the program. I thought my job was to transmit knowledge and assumed the teachers planned to receive it.

As my story reveals, over time my beliefs about professional learning shifted towards an approach that attempted to empower the teacher as a learner. At our sessions we started inviting teachers to share classroom based learning and opened space for them to analyze and question their classroom practice. But, what is interesting to me is how the teachers responded to this shift in professional learning. Although for many valid reasons there was a strong emotional response to the initiative when it started, the training model was a model of instruction that teachers were familiar with. It was another chapter of the sacred story they recognized. When my team shifted the professional development model some teachers were very uncomfortable. The teachers enjoyed the opportunity to share ideas and activities. They felt safe sharing the how. It was when we began to invite them to talk about why specific lessons were successful, inviting them to theorize their practice that many people became uncomfortable. When we read journal articles together and

asked people to consider if and how the approach might connect with their practice people were frustrated. This was a conversation they weren't used to having at staff development sessions. They wanted certainties not tentativeness. Some teachers assumed the article was another prescription. Others didn't want to spend their valuable time unpacking the teaching strategy. They just wanted to be told how. One teacher told us that next time, we should skip the article and just give her the black line master she needed to implement the article's suggestions. We had changed the rules and people were uncomfortable. As a leader, I had changed my beliefs about the construction of teacher knowledge, but, the teachers in my sessions had not had the opportunity to do the same. Their discomfort raised new questions about professional learning for me. Could professional learning inside and outside the classroom support and inform one another? Which experiences could support teachers as knowers? If we view professional learning as teachers constructing their personal practical knowledge, what is the role of system sponsored professional development?

### **Theorizing our Practice**

In order to begin to bridge the gap between theory and practice teachers must become what Ball and Cohen (1999) described as serious learners in and around their practices. Joan, Claire and I all valued the opportunity to learn from our experiences over time in our classrooms. But, does knowing what works mean we understand why? Is learning from our experiences the same as theorizing our practice? As Ritchie and Wilson (2000) reminded us, experience is not the issue, instead "the problem is that experience is often left untheorized" (p.15). I suggest that we take learning in our practices one step further and develop the habits and skills necessary to intentionally learn from and theorize our experiences. We need to consciously construct knowledge in our classroom based on critical reflection on our experiences.

### **Moving Beyond Telling Towards Critical Reflection**

Teachers love to tell stories of our experiences in the classroom. As evidenced at the staff development sessions I facilitated, teachers welcome the opportunity to share ideas and activities. These opportunities are not without value but, this isn't critical reflection. Sharing conversations often involve what Loughran (2002) described as rationalizations and justifications for a dogged adherence to the status quo. When

teachers do not feel any ownership or control of their direction or knowledge, it is simpler to avoid those discussions. If we can't change it why should we talk about it? We need to begin to empower teachers to actively inquire into their experiences and allow them to control the direction their inquiry takes them.

Critical reflection offers teachers an opportunity to move past rationalizations and justifications, uncover the beliefs that color their perspective and begin to build a conscious awareness of their knowledge of practice. Drew and Vaughan (2002) suggested that analysis and evaluation are both required for critical reflection. We need to become comfortable analyzing our classroom experiences, both our successes and failures to understand what works and why it works. Schon (1987) described our knowing-in-action as the instinctual responses we make all of the time and our reflection-in-action as our ability to reflect in the midst of action. We unconsciously shift our practices based on these experiences and I believe this is how Claire, Joan and I constructed our knowledge for teaching in our classrooms. But I propose that deeper analysis of these responses could support us as we construct a conscious understanding of our personal practical knowledge. Surfacing the beliefs and theories that underpin our actions would help us understand why we do what we do. If we purposefully analyzed our responses and began to evaluate which response worked and why it worked, we would have begun to theorize our practice, shifting from simply doing what feels right to intentionally choosing based on our current knowledge and understandings. Inviting teachers to recognize, develop, and articulate their own theories of instruction would validate the knowledge they construct in their classrooms and help narrow the gap between theory and practice.

Opening space for teachers to theorize their practices involves a dramatic shift in the culture for professional learning. Instead of training people to implement programs like technicians, the shift would be towards supporting teachers to think like scholars. Knowledge resides in teachers and can be consciously constructed in classrooms.

### **Softening our Concentration**

Teacher knowledge is not constructed in a vacuum. Once we have developed a conscious understanding of our own beliefs and theories, it is imperative that we consider the perspectives of others. Bateson (1995) reminds us that “It is simplifying and dangerous to have one overriding concern that makes others unimportant” (p.106).

Narrowly focusing on the classroom supports us as we develop a deep conscious understanding of what we know. But we need to remember that this knowledge is tentative and by, as Bateson (1995) suggested, softening our concentration, we can open ourselves to growth and new understandings.

### **Alternative Perspectives**

In order to soften our concentration it is important to rethink how we approach alternative perspectives. Teachers are constantly bombarded with new ideas, approaches and programs. Claire shared that she used to view learning as adding these new ideas and activities to her *bag of tricks*. But, as she shifted her understanding of professional learning, she began to see that instead of unconsciously adding to her repertoire, by critically examining the new perspectives, she could make decisions about what she would add and why. If we believe that the knowledge is in the teacher, it is important that teachers use their own judgment in order to evaluate and decide which approaches work best for them.

In the past when a new program was funneled into our classrooms we assumed we were supposed to replace our current practice with the new prescription. We received the knowledge as technicians. That story needs to change. Instead of offering prescriptions school divisions need to offer alternative perspectives. In turn teachers need to be empowered to analyze and evaluate these perspectives through the lens of the personal practical knowledge they have constructed in their classrooms. They need the opportunity to decide which model makes the most sense for their current class of students. Would it be possible to shift our learning culture away from prescriptions towards critical conversations? Could teachers learn to shift their attention back and forth and between theories from the outside, theories constructed in classrooms through daily experiences with children?

Critical conversations with colleagues we trust can support us as we analyze new perspectives. If we believe Harste and Leland's (2007) assertion that "knowledge is socially constituted" (p.10), it is necessary to open space for teachers to learn from one another. Claire relied on a trusted, carefully chosen group of colleagues she called her posse to think with. Her posse met regularly to analyze and evaluate their teaching, theorize their practices and examine alternative perspectives. I had the honor of attending

one of their meetings and was energized by the honesty of the critical reflections of their practices, their seamless movement between theoretical puzzles and practical examples and their openness to different perspectives. Talking to one another opens space for teachers to consider a wide range of perspectives as they construct their personal practical knowledge. I think everyone needs a posse!

### **Moving Towards a New Model for Teacher Learning**

A shift in the culture for teacher learning needs to start at the system level. Like Feiman-Nemser (2001) who stated that “in place of superficial, episodic sessions, teachers need sustained and substantive learning opportunities” (p. 1042), I believe it is imperative that ongoing professional learning be a standard practice for school divisions. The classroom experiences of teachers should be the focus of this sustained work. As Feiman-Nemser (2001) suggested “professional development should be built into the ongoing work of teaching and relate to questions and concerns” (p. 1042). If knowledge for teaching resides in teachers not programs, teachers need to be supported as they learn. But, in order to embrace a new conception of teacher knowledge and expertise, system level professional learning needs to change dramatically. Instead of prescriptions it needs to open space for teachers.

### **Space for Teacher Knowledge**

The system needs to take responsibility for shifting the sacred story of teacher knowledge. Instead of prescribing mandatory new programs and models that invite teachers to create a cover story of compliance, they should open space for teachers to develop conscious control of their personal practical knowledge. In a safe space, small groups of teachers could work together to surface the beliefs and theories that underpin their personal practical knowledge. Nieto, as cited by Clandinin, Downey, and Huber (2009) asserted that teachers “need to continually rediscover who they are and what they stand for through their dialogue with peers, through ongoing and consistent study and through need reflection about their craft” (p.151). When beliefs are recognized and addressed, possibilities for shifts and changes in practice are more likely.

Classroom experiences and understandings should be the lens through which all new perspectives are analyzed. Conscious understanding of what teachers know could support them as they consider a wide range of perspectives in order to solve authentic classroom



based problems. Professional learning should open space for teachers to construct their teacher knowledge. In order for teachers to take responsibility for the construction of their own knowledge they need to be encouraged to do so by their division. If we want to shift the culture from teachers as technicians to teachers as scholars, the development of their knowledge and critical thinking need to be at the center of system sponsored professional learning.

### **Space for Questions**

If knowledge for teaching is tentative and not certain, an inquiry stance towards instruction should be supported. Like Ball & Cohen (1999), I believe “a stance of inquiry should be central to the role of a teacher. Teachers must be actively learning as they teach” (p. 11). The school division, learning leaders and administrative teams need to create opportunities for professional inquiry. Rather than prescribing specific solutions they need to foster a culture of inquiry. Ideas should be considered and space should be opened for questions, analysis, and evaluation.

Certainty closes doors but tentativeness opens space for new understanding. As Short and Burke stated (1996) “To continue our learning as educators we had to interrogate our beliefs and practices and not assume we would ever have *the* answer” (p. 98). Teaching is a complex profession and teachers need the ability to think flexibly in order to solve problems in their classrooms. Ball and Forzani (2009) suggested that being able to succeed in teaching requires “a flexible repertoire of high-leverage strategies and techniques that can be deployed with good judgment depending on the specific situations and context” (p.503). We don’t need one answer; we need the ability to assess multiple perspectives and the judgment to choose a solution for a specific classroom based situations. Shifting system expectations from compliance with a prescription towards critical analysis of multiple perspectives supports teachers as they develop new understandings. It is imperative that the system remove the need for a cover story of compliance in order to open space for teachers to ask questions and learn from one another.

### **Space for Conversations**

If teachers are going to deepen their understanding of their personal practical knowledge the system needs to ensure space is provided for different kinds of

conversations. First and foremost teachers need to be part of the conversation that determines what and how they learn. There is no one size-fits-all model of learning for teachers; instead space should be opened for teachers to inquire. As Ball and Cohen (1999) explained:

Rather than focusing on a rhetoric of conclusions the discourse would emphasize the narrative of inquiry. Instead of a definiteness of answers and fixes, the focus would be on possibilities, methods of reasoning, alternative conjectures and supporting evidence and arguments. (p. 17)

Secondly, space needs to be open for teachers to learn through conversations with one another. Harste and Leland (2007) reminded us that “as professionals, we have an obligation not only to share, but to question and confront as well. This entails actively adding our voices to the conversation” (p. 10). Thirdly, teachers need to invite alternative perspectives, from both colleagues and outside researchers into their conversations. As Feiman-Nemser (2001) suggested, “although teachers need access to knowledgeable sources outside their immediate circle, professional development should also tap local expertise and the collective wisdom that thoughtful teachers can generate working together” (p.1042). For example, when talking about assessment, the conversation could include trusted colleagues sharing classroom experiences, a mentor bringing in new ideas and perspectives and perhaps a sampling of opinions from outside researchers or practitioners. These kinds of conversations, with their focus clearly placed on classroom learning, open space for the critical assessment of new ideas through the lens of classroom experiences. Critical examination of all the perspectives opens space for the development of teacher judgment and ultimately teacher ownership of their knowledge. School divisions need to open space for the critical examination of multiple perspectives.

### **A Shift in Responsibility**

By changing the system stance on teacher knowledge, questions and conversations, space is opened for teachers to be viewed as scholars not technicians. But, with this space comes the responsibility for teachers to move past viewing themselves as a doer and develop a conscious understanding of their personal practical knowledge. If knowledge resides in the teacher then the teacher is responsible for inquiring into their practice. It is up to the teacher to critically analyze their work and seek out alternative

perspectives as they seek to find ways to better meet the needs of their students. A new kind of expert can emerge from this work; an expert who understands that what they know is tentative; an expert who wonders, questions and continues to investigate their knowledge; an expert who uses their knowledge to be a conscious decision maker.

### **Teacher as Decision Maker**

Claire, Joan, and I took different paths on our journeys to become conscious decision makers. For each of us, it took years of building our personal practical knowledge before we began to consciously step away from the knowledge that had been funneled into our classrooms and publically defer to our own judgment. For Joan, the ability to reflect, analyze, and learn deeply over time opened space for her to construct her understandings. It was late in her career when she finally stopped replacing what she knew to be good practice with the next best model that came down the pipe. Claire's inquiry stance and ability to think and learn with her colleagues supported her as she developed her teaching knowledge. Although Claire continues to prefer to work within the boundaries of outside expectations, early in her career she began to develop her own vision that she confidently uses as a touchstone for evaluating new prescriptions. For me, each stop on my journey of the past seven years has supported me as I developed a conscious understanding of my personal practical knowledge. When I returned to the classroom this year, it was as a conscious decision maker.

In my very first education class, more years ago than I prefer to remember, my professor told us that teachers are decision makers. Now, finally, I think I understand what she meant. I have discovered that there are four characteristics that define a teacher as a conscious decision maker: ownership for teacher knowledge, an understanding of the theories and principles that underpin their practice, an inquiry stance and a vision for teaching that they use for decision making.

Conscious decision makers acknowledge that knowledge for teaching is in the teacher not the program. They confidently use their knowledge of curriculum, teaching, and learning to make intentional, strategic decisions for instruction. They acknowledge that a range of programs, activities, instructional models, and tools may inform and support their instruction but also know, that it is up to them to decide how best to use their repertoire.

Teaching is not linear and quality instruction needs to move beyond technical rational solutions. Conscious decision makers have the ability to theorize their practice and have developed an understanding of why and how a wide range of instructional models work with students. This understanding supports them as they make decisions on how to adapt, innovate and create solutions for the complex problems that characterize classroom work. They accept the challenge of teaching as scholarly work.

Conscious decision makers approach their practice from an inquiry stance. Rather than choosing to adopt the definition of teacher as expert, they view expertise as the ability to ask questions and inquire. Current knowledge is considered tentative and they constantly search for new ways to better support student learning. They know they do not need to have all the answers and trust in their ability to figure things out. A conscious decision maker chooses to wonder.

A teacher who consciously makes decisions is a scholar not a technician. They have a well articulated vision for teaching and use this vision as a touchstone to guide their decision making. A conscious decision maker trusts their judgment, believing they have the right and skill to make decisions. They accept the responsibility to ensure that their decisions are well-informed. They are a professional who should be empowered to think, reflect and make decisions.

### **Moving Back and Forth**

#### **Lessons from My Journey as a Narrative Inquirer**

I am a person who has always dwelled in certainties. My journey as a narrative inquirer has been challenging. Abandoning my technical rational perspective and opening space for the telling and retelling of my story and the stories of my participants has been difficult. In order to understand my participants' experiences I have had to move beyond my scientific default stance and come to understand the ways time, space and relationship shape our experiences. Teaching is a wonderfully human profession that cannot and should not be limited by certainties.

This research has opened space for me to view my work and the work of my colleagues' differently. Narrative inquiry has taught me to move beyond the scientific and attend to the personal. We are all in the process of living, telling, retelling our stories (Clandinin and Connelly, 1996). I have a renewed respect for the skills and talents of my

colleagues. Each unique individual has a different story to tell, personally constructed through their experiences. Uncertainty leads to change, challenge and creativity. Retelling opens space for growth and new learning.

### **A Renewed Vision**

Unlike seven years ago, when my lack of conscious understanding of literacy and learning prevented me from critically examining the pieces of my practice, I now have a clear vision of who I am and what I know. Duffy (2002) stated that successful teachers have a clearly articulated vision that serves as their compass as they make instructional decisions throughout the school day. He described this vision as “a teacher’s conscious sense of self, of one’s work and of one’s mission. By ‘vision’ I [Duffy] mean a personal stance on teaching that rises from deep within the inner teacher and fuels independent thinking... When teachers have a vision they assume control over instructional decision making in order to achieve their mission” (p. 334). By retelling my story, I have uncovered the story I live by as a teacher, the vision that guides my practice. I consider myself a lifelong learner who works with my colleagues to actively inquire into my practice. My knowledge of practice is not fixed; it is changing and evolving over time. I am a theorizer. I have begun to view theoretical and practical knowledge as important parts of a flexible, interconnected, personally constructed whole. I use critical reflection to construct my own theories of practice, using the work of outside theorists as a reflective moment within my process. I have a repertoire of strategies and theories that I can choose from when I design instruction in my classroom. I am conscious of the compass that guides my journey. Retelling my story has allowed me to surface my professional identity, my personal practical knowledge and my stance on professional learning.

This fall when I return to my grade two classroom and assume the responsibilities of a vice-principal I need to consider how these lessons can continue to inform my work. In my classroom work I will trust in my judgment and open space for my students and me to construct knowledge together. I will use the knowledge I have constructed about teaching and learning to make conscious instructional decisions. As I consider my developing math understandings I will establish a group of colleagues and work with them explore ways to improve our understandings and instruction. I will accept the challenge to inquire

into my practice knowing that this is difficult work filled with uncertainties, doubt, curiosity and excitement. I will be a scholarly professional.

As a vice-principal I have the opportunity to work with my administrative partner to empower our staff to construct a conscious understanding of their personal practical knowledge. I will intentionally model in order to foster a culture of curiosity, questioning, and the inclusion of multiple perspectives. I will listen to and honor the stories of our teachers. This spring our staff identified math instruction as a focus for our professional learning next year. At our fall school opening we plan to invite teachers to talk about and share their beliefs about math instruction. Teachers will be invited to examine student work and begin a conversation that will support their inquiry into the best approaches to support improved student learning. My partner and I will work hard to invite teachers to take responsibility for instructional decision making in our school. As the year unfolds we will make space for formal and informal conversations about student learning. We will follow their lead and help them find the resources of time and materials to support their investigation into student learning. We will encourage our teachers to study their students, critically reflect on their practice together, take risks, and trust their own judgment. We will honor them as scholarly professionals.

### **Looking Back**

It is almost eight years since I took that ill-conceived journey on the McLeod River. I realize now that I did not make a conscious, informed decision when I headed out on that river. First of all, although I knew I enjoyed paddling, I did not have a conscious understanding of what I needed from the river or of the skills that I would bring to our trip. Why did I choose a trip with rapids when, with the benefit of hindsight I realize, it is the peacefulness on the river not the adrenalin of rapids that feeds my soul? Why didn't I critically examine what I knew and whether or not my skills matched the challenges of the water? Although I knew deep inside that I was not an expert and felt unprepared for the dangers that could arise, I chose to let the others believe my cover story of expertise. It was more important for me to appear competent than it was for me to admit my skill level. I allowed myself to be storied as an expert and it could have been a fatal mistake.

Looking back I know I have to forgive myself for my mistakes. If all learning is tentative, I can use these experiences to inform my future decisions. Next time, rather

than choosing to don a cover story of expertise I will carefully consider what I know, what I need and what I believe in order to make a conscious decision. At this moment, I see clear paddling, some obstacles I feel prepared to handle and the freedom of believing that I have the skills I need to paddle the course I choose.

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