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Teaching English Language Arts in a Northern Canadian Community: Four Teachers' Voices

by

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To my mother,

who so wanted to see me graduate.

Sadly, she passed away before I finished.

for Mum, with love.

Abstract

This qualitative case study helps fulfill the need for research into the influence of the Northern Canadian contexts. It explores, through the eyes of four participating language arts teachers who teach in the same northern community, how the northern contexts influence their personal practical knowledge (Connelly & Clandinin, 1988, 1992) and their language arts classroom curriculum.

My study is situated in an area of inquiry that involves questions about what teachers know, how they know, and how they continue to develop their practice over time. This study determines that the classroom language arts curricula of participating teachers have several key elements in common and that teachers in this study view themselves as curriculum makers who enact a classroom language arts curriculum that is primarily based on social constructivist principles. These northern teachers view language arts as more than just reading and writing and consider that the power of language extends into the arts and technology as well.

Living and teaching in this northern community presents opportunities and challenges for these teachers. Relationships both inside and outside of the classroom are important considerations for them. Their knowledge of and connections to the school and the community are particularly important in developing these relationships. Finally, this study reveals that part of the teachers' understanding of self is influenced by their sense of belonging or not belonging in the community.

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Chapter 1. Introduction

I hold a deep respect for teachers, what they do every day, how they continue to develop their teaching knowledge, and how they shape the lives of those whom they teach. This study is inspired by my profound desire to know more about how teachers in Northern Canadian communities experience the teaching of language arts and how that northern context influences their classroom language arts curriculum.

There is a body of research suggesting that the teacher plays an important role in the development of classroom curriculum and the achievement of students (Butt, Raymond, McCue, &Yamagishi, 1992; Connelly & Clandinin, 1988; Day & Sachs, 2004; Nieto, 2010a; Portelli & Vibert, 2001). Existing research also suggests that the social and cultural contexts of communities are important considerations for teachers as they construct the classroom curriculum and aim to support student achievement (Dyson, 1997; Heath, 1983; Kelly, 2010; Lensmire, 1994; Nieto, 2010a; Ward, 2001). Feiman-Nemser (2008) suggested there is a need for further research relating to the influence of the social and cultural contexts on teaching, particularly for teachers who work and live in different cultural and educational settings than the mainstream urban centres. This research is necessary in order to understand the best ways to support the teachers.

Currently, there is a lack of specific research into the influence of the context on the teaching practices and the development of classroom language arts curriculum in Northern Canadian communities. This study helps fulfill the need for this research as it looks at the influence of the Northern Canadian contexts through the eyes of four language arts teachers who teach in the same northern community. The purpose of this case study is to explore, from the point of view of the participating teachers, how they experience teaching in a northern context and how the northern contexts influence their personal practical knowledge (Connelly & Clandinin, 1988, 1992) and their language arts classroom curriculum.

By examining the influences on teachers through their own eyes, this study will provide insights that will facilitate better support to existing and future teachers in northern communities. By understanding the opportunities and challenges that the northern contexts offer, the experiences that teachers bring to the language arts curriculum, their understanding of the mandated language arts framework, and their knowledge of the students' lived experiences, this study will provide information to teachers, schools, school divisions, and others interested in supporting language arts teachers in northern communities. This study may also have implications for university faculties that provide teacher education programs for preservice and practising teachers in northern contexts.

In Chapter 1, I describe the personal journey that inspired me to complete this study. I provide an explanation of *northern contexts*, share personal examples that illustrate opportunities and challenges associated with the northern contexts, and conclude with a synopsis of the remaining chapters.

Personal Background Leading to This Study

This study is part of my ongoing learning journey, first informed by my experiences as a classroom teacher and then as an educational consultant. My interest in teachers' practices, classroom curriculum, and professional development began many years ago with my first teaching position. I quickly realized that the knowledge and skills that I brought from the university classroom to the school classroom were not all that I needed to know to be a good teacher, able to respond to my students' needs. Even after many years of teaching and many years of working alongside teachers, I realized there was still so much more to know and understand about teaching and learning.

During my 20 years as a classroom teacher, I was constantly making many different kinds of decisions about my teaching practice: curriculum decisions, evaluation decisions, decisions regarding personal and emotional aspects of students and parents, policy-related decisions, and career decisions. Daily

decision making for me, as a teacher, required me to reflect on my knowledge of the students, the subject areas, curriculum making, pedagogy, my teaching beliefs, and the teaching context. I continued to make new meaning about teaching and learning. My teaching practices changed over time, as I moved from school to school, community to community, and grade to grade. My continually evolving teaching knowledge was shaped by experiences: experiences both inside and outside of the classroom, formal professional development experiences, and more informal interactions and experiences with colleagues, parents, and students. It was also shaped by the local and provincial contexts in which I was teaching. I experienced many learning opportunities, some more valuable than others, in my quest to become an effective, knowledgeable, and understanding teacher.

My interest in teachers' practices, the language arts classroom curriculum, and the influence of the context became the focus of my professional life when I became an English language arts consultant, first with the provincial government in Manitoba and then with a school division serving Northern Manitoba.

As an English language arts consultant, I travelled regularly to 10 northern communities. These schools ranged in size from a one-room school with six students to a large school with a student population of approximately 400. Of the 10 schools, five were accessible by road and five were fly-in only. Some of these remote schools were accessible in the winter by a road constructed over the ice that forms on lakes and rivers. When the ice melted and the roads disappeared into lakes and rivers, the only means of transportation to these communities was by air or boat. Travelling to and working in remote and northern communities were new experiences that made me aware of the many rewards and challenges of teaching in such locations.

As a consultant, I was privileged to have an inside view of teaching practices in a variety of classrooms and to know many extraordinary teachers who lived and worked in interesting and challenging environments. Some of the challenges teachers faced were due in part to the northern location, isolation, and

remoteness. Other challenges were due to cultural and language differences among teachers and students. Additional challenges included the tensions between mandated expectations from governmental bodies and the personal, cultural, and educational needs of the children. I was able to interact with many teachers and to hear their stories: stories of success, hardships, challenges, rewards, issues, concerns, and triumphs. I became concerned about the lack of understanding in the broader educational community regarding the challenges encountered by these teachers.

I realized that to even begin to be a support to teachers and their classroom language arts curriculum, it was necessary for me to understand the cultural and socioeconomic aspects of each community and school, and most importantly, to establish relationships with the people: teachers, administrators, parents, students, and others in the community. My work with teachers generated many questions about teachers' practices, language arts curriculum, and the influence of contexts: questions about how teachers experience the tensions and challenges of implementing a mandated curriculum while honouring the lived experiences of the children in their classrooms.

As a result of my interest in teachers' practices, the language arts curriculum, and professional development, I examined the role of the curriculum consultant in facilitating teacher professional learning as part of my Master of Education degree (McKay, 2004). This action research explored the influence that I, as an English language arts consultant, had on the teaching practices of 12 early elementary language arts teachers from the various schools in a northern school division. The findings from this study led me to develop a model of professional learning that suggests that the development of a teacher's knowledge is ongoing and complex. I also found that professional learning that offers teachers opportunities to construct and reconstruct their teaching knowledge is more likely to be meaningful than many of the traditional professional development approaches in which teachers are treated as passive recipients of knowledge.

My previous study was only a beginning. It led to more questions about how language arts teachers experience teaching, curriculum making, and support for their teaching practices in the complex northern context. I wanted to understand how to better support teachers in northern locations, and I came to realize that many of the resources and much of the research and literature is based on work with teachers in mainstream urban teaching contexts. I needed to know, from the teachers' perspectives, how they experienced language arts teaching in northern contexts. I came to understand that the voices of a few northern teachers might help me and others to appreciate the influences of their teaching contexts as well as the role of the mandated provincial curriculum in their classroom practice. As Ayers (1992) said,

> The secret of teaching is to be found in the local detail and the everyday life of teachers; teachers can be the richest and most useful source of knowledge about teaching; those who hope to understand teaching must turn at some point to teachers themselves. (p. v)

I also realized that it is important to share the experiences of northern language arts teachers with others in the educational and scholarly communities. Once we begin to understand the experiences and the influences of the northern contexts on teachers' practice, we can find ways to provide northern teachers with support that is relevant and congruent to the opportunities and challenges that these northern contexts present.

Northern Contexts

It is important to define what is meant by *northern contexts* and to provide some background regarding northern contexts as I know them. In this section, I describe northern contexts and share some personal experiences that illustrate the diversity of northern contexts and some of the opportunities and challenges they provide for teaching. I use the term northern contexts to include the interplay of

the geographical location, socioeconomic conditions, cultural traditions and background, and the home language.

The term *northern* is relative and requires clarification for purposes of this study. People living in the far northern regions of Canada, in the Northwest Territories, Nunavut, and the Yukon, consider their communities to be *northern*. However, south of the territories, but as one travels north of the major urban centres, cities and towns are farther apart, the surrounding countryside is less populated, and urban amenities are harder to access. Accordingly, communities in the northern parts of the prairie provinces are considered to be part of the North because they experience many of the same opportunities and challenges as those in far northern communities.

The recognition that northern schools have unique needs is implicit in the fact that each prairie province has at least one provincial school division that is designated as a northern one. In Manitoba, Frontier School Division services over 6,000 students in approximately 40 schools scattered around the northern regions of the province and ranging in size from one-room schools in communities without road access to large schools with populations of over 1,000 students. In Alberta, Northlands School Division has 23 schools, most of which are located in rural, northern, and sometimes remote areas. Saskatchewan's Northern Lights Division has a similar distribution of small and larger schools in the northern portions of the province. Many of the schools in these divisions are located on or adjacent to First Nation and Métis communities.

To illustrate what some of the northern contexts are like, I share some of my own experiences as an educational consultant supporting teachers in Northern Manitoba where I regularly visited 10 schools. Each of these schools was unique in its own way and was culturally diverse. Many had large Aboriginal[1] populations with varying degrees of adherence to cultural traditions or use of

[1] In Canada, Aboriginal includes First Nations, Inuit, and Métis people.

Aboriginal languages. There were often students for whom English was a second language.

In many communities the geographical location created challenges for travel, access to internet, cell phone coverage, newspapers and magazines, as well as social interaction with other communities. Weather and travel conditions affected all aspects of life. Availability of fresh food and water, medical assistance, and access to educational resources was often limited. In many of the communities, the teachers said they experienced a sense of isolation. As a result, in some communities there was high teacher turnover. In small schools a high teacher turnover means that the students cannot develop long-term relationships with their teacher. In large communities, a high teacher turnover has the same result plus it creates challenges for staff relationships. There were often tensions between the local staff who grew up in and around the community and those who arrived new to the community from various other locations with different cultural and social backgrounds.

The unique nature of school—community relations.

To illustrate the unique nature of northern schools, I share my experiences with two small schools that are similar in some ways but different in others. These two communities are situated in close proximity to one another, less than 20 minutes by air and about 45 minutes by snowmobile in the winter or boat in the summer. Both communities are surrounded by a number of islands and both house a two-room school with two teachers and approximately 20 to 30 students, ranging from prekindergarten to Grade 9.

In Community A, the two teachers in the school had been teaching together for a number of years. Although neither grew up in the community, these two teachers knew the students and families well and were considered very much a part of the community. The teachers planned together and the students often worked together on whole school units and activities.

Some of the families in this community were hunters or trappers and the children travelled the trap line with their parents for periods of time during the school year. However, the teachers and the parents worked together to ensure that the students continued their schooling while on the trap line.

The community supported the school and the teachers in many ways. Often a police officer from the local detachment or the manager of the general store would accept responsibility for picking up school visitors at the local airport. Parents were often visible in the school, working with students, answering the phone, or doing other jobs to help out. Parents and grandparents often volunteered to help with regular school sports activities such as soccer, basketball, or running. The school regularly hosted events to celebrate the students' learning. These events were sometimes as simple as inviting parents to the school during an afternoon to listen as students shared some of their writing. Such events were well attended by the parents. The school did not have a gymnasium, so the community centre was used for regular physical activity as well as family events such as dinners, family fun nights, and concerts.

In the other community, Community B, there were also two teachers, both new to the community. In contrast to what I saw in Community A, social issues like alcohol and drug abuse and poverty abounded. Few parents or grandparents came to the school and it was difficult to find people in the community to help with school activities. The teachers organized special events to encourage family participation in the school, but these events were not well attended. The teachers in this community seldom stayed for more than 2 or 3 years, making it difficult for the students and the community to develop relationships with the teachers. The high teacher turnover seemed to create a general distrust of teachers, making it difficult for new teachers to feel like they were part of the community. It was as though a vicious cycle had been set up in which the community and the teachers found it difficult to establish the strong relationships that were necessary to support children's learning.

Experiences as opportunities.

Living in northern contexts often provided opportunities for experiences that could be drawn upon to support teaching and learning. The following stories from my own experiences illustrate some of these opportunities.

Churchill, a community situated on Hudson Bay, was the most northerly community to which I traveled. During a period of several months, the school was under construction and part of it was sectioned off. This was during the part of the year when polar bears could sometimes be found roaming through town. The local town people were generally very vigilant, took precautions, and had safely systems in place to cope with these potentially dangerous animals when they arrived in the town limits.

One evening, a young polar bear managed to find his way into the school construction site and into the classrooms that were under construction. The next morning, little bear footprints revealed that the young cub had wandered from classroom to classroom until he was able to find a way out of the building. The next morning, the teachers were worried and anxious but the students were buzzing with excitement and stories about polar bears. Although this event was laced with elements of potential danger, it was also laced with elements of curiosity and intrigue, an ideal combination for children's learning. As one teacher told me, when animals and children share a common space, it is an inquiry project waiting to happen. As time went on, teachers and students in this school used this incident to generate inquiries into a variety of topics such as bears, habitat, safety around animals, and how the changing climate affects polar bears. The incident also inspired the sharing of personal experiences as well as fictional writing about polar bears and other northern animals.

On another occasion during bear season, the same community was flooded with tourists who had come from all over the world to see the polar bears. At the time, there was not a hotel, motel, or bed and breakfast room available. During

bear season, the town was like a carnival, with people roaming the streets late at night and visiting local restaurants and shops. As the first snow of the season was falling, the town was alerted to the fact that an airliner would be making an emergency landing at the airport. The hospital, which is attached to the school, was placed on alert.

It turned out that a large passenger jet travelling the polar route from France to California had experienced a fire in the cockpit and fortunately was near enough to Churchill to make an emergency landing at the former Air Force base. Once the plane was on the ground, the passengers exited via the emergency chutes. However, since no one had anticipated a landing in Churchill during a snowfall, most passengers wore only light summer clothing and were ill prepared for the winter environment.

The community quickly arranged to have the passengers transported to the school as the school gymnasium was the only place capable of accommodating such a large group of people. One of the passengers was travelling with a pet monkey and brought the monkey with him to the school. The passengers remained in the school until arrangements were made to bring in two aircraft to transport them to Winnipeg.

The community rose to the occasion. They arranged for blankets and warm clothes and organized a feast at the school for the hungry passengers. In return the children were entertained by the monkey and most importantly were provided with an exciting experience that was valuable for future learning opportunities. Following this incident, some classes of students engaged in learning about airplane disasters and near disasters; some wanted to know more about where the passengers had come from and so they studied France. Another class spent several weeks investigating ways that animals are transported to ensure their safety. The teachers were thus able to take a potentially disruptive event and use it to enhance their language arts curriculum.

Challenges associated with location and travel.

Although teaching in the north can be exciting, there are also challenges associated with living and working there. On many occasions and in many communities water supply was an issue, such as when a water treatment facility was not working. Repair parts and repair personnel can be hard to find and often have to be flown in or brought in by barge. Repairs to essential equipment can take several days. Water can be a scarce commodity, and as a result I always brought water with me when I travelled to these communities.

During one of my visits to a community there was a problem with the local water station and there was no water available. Not only was there no water, but the airport had been shut down due to poor weather conditions and there were no flights arriving or departing. Fortunately for me, I had two 700ml bottles of water left. The next morning, I used one bottle to bathe, brush my teeth, and wash my hair and I reserved the other one for drinking.

Weather, road, and travel conditions affect much of life in these northern communities. Weather-dependent travel requires flexibility in planning, scheduling, and daily activities. There are many occasions when air travel is restricted due to weather conditions. As a consultant, I was often unable to fly into a community when scheduled or I was stranded in a community unable to return to the city as planned. Teachers in these communities were often disappointed by travel restrictions, either because they could not go where or when they had planned or because the supplies they required did not arrive.

Even those communities with road access were affected by storms and poor road conditions. There were numerous occasions when teachers could not access resources or leave the community due to poor driving conditions. As a consultant, there were many times I would get caught in poor weather and find myself on unsafe and unpredictable roads. I once traveled illegally over a short winter road to an island school because the wind was so bad I did not see the signs indicating that the road was not yet ready for safe travel. Another time, I slid

into the ditch due to the icy road conditions and found myself in a snow bank, unable to get myself out of the deep snow. It was late at night, in an area with no cell phone coverage, on a road that is not well travelled. Fortunately, a truck came along within a half hour and was able to pull me out.

Travel to northern communities is expensive. Because of budget concerns, high travel costs restrict opportunities for teachers to participate in external professional development. The teachers from the 10 schools I served were brought to Winnipeg for 2 days of interaction, celebration, and professional development each year. The associated transportation and accommodation costs alone were far more than some, much larger urban divisions would spend on professional development in an entire year.

Weather and travel also directly affected the students. In one community, children came to the school from surrounding islands. These students were transported by boat in the summer and by a sled pulled by a snowmobile in the winter. Unfortunately, each year there were a few weeks during fall freeze-up and spring thaw when these children could not get to the school.

Local resources.

In many communities, teachers use local people, activities, and cultures as part of their language arts curriculum. Aboriginal Elders, hunters, and artisans are a very valuable resource to many of the school programs. In one community, a ceremonial tepee was set up on the school playground, and teachers and students visited this tepee for various ceremonies and teachings over a period of several days. Trapping, snowshoeing, hunting, and fishing were often a regular part of classroom curriculum. My former school division also established a fiddling program to promote the tradition of Métis music.

My last story captures a number of the special circumstances associated with northern schools. One of the schools I supported was located on an island. The population of the community was about 130 people, mostly Métis, many of

whom were fishers and hunters. The students were engaged in a collaborative, whole school, month-long study of Métis traditions. As part of their many learning experiences, the students were delighted to have a local hunter teach them how to prepare and cook muskrat. The study culminated in a celebration complete with a traditional feast including cooked muskrat and baked bannock.

I had been invited to the celebration. On the evening I was to arrive, I had travelled for 3 hours by road, then had to stay in a lodge on the mainland as the ferry to the island was no longer running for the day. The next morning the weather was stormy, the winds were very strong, and the ferry was unable to operate. I was delayed on the mainland for several hours until the winds subsided enough to allow the ferry to navigate the channel. I was late for the celebration but managed to arrive in time to catch the excitement and some of the festivities. The children were proud to display their learning projects as well as their freshly cooked muskrat and freshly baked bannock. The two teachers in the school, who were not originally from the community, had recognized the importance of the local context and integrated it into the classroom language arts curriculum.

These few experiences provide a small window into the diversity and complexity of northern contexts as well as the opportunities and challenges language arts teachers and consultants encounter in these northern communities. The challenges include the weather, the hazards of travel, and the unpredictable availability of resources. The main opportunity is the chance to embrace local events and local cultures and to use these in one's teaching.

An Overview of the Remaining Chapters

Chapter 2 describes the background research and literature informing this study. It explains my social constructivist research stance and how I came to that stance. Then it describes how curriculum is viewed in this study and examines teachers as central to the classroom curriculum. I outline the concept of teacher personal practical knowledge as the theoretical framework for this study. I also

describe the provincially mandated English language arts curriculum framework and supporting documents. Finally, I describe existing research that contributes to my understanding of some of the challenges associated with language arts classroom instruction and the building of a classroom curriculum in nonmainstream settings.

Chapter 3 describes the research methodology, documenting how the current qualitative case study was conducted and how the data were collected and analyzed. In Chapter 4, I detail the research findings by describing the community, introducing each of the participating teachers, and describing their language arts classroom practices. Chapter 5 provides a discussion of the influence that the provincially mandated ELA curriculum has on the professional knowledge landscape of the teachers in Wagana.

In Chapter 6, I discuss what I have learned from my findings and provide some recommendations for further research and investigation. The final chapter, Chapter 7, deals with my reflections on this research journey.

Chapter 2. Background Research and Literature Informing This Study

As stated in Chapter 1, this study examines the language arts teaching practices of four teachers in one Northern Canadian community. It explores the influence of the northern contexts as these teachers construct the language arts classroom curriculum. This chapter reviews some of the research and literature relevant to this study.

In the first section of the chapter, I explain my research stance and how I came to that stance. "All research is interpretive and is guided by the researcher's set of beliefs and feelings about the world and how it should be understood and studied" (Denzin & Lincoln, 2005, p. 31). My research is guided by a social constructivist theory of learning.

The second section examines the way *curriculum* is viewed in this study. I examine research that led me to consider teachers as central to the construction of the classroom language arts curriculum.

In the third section, I describe the theory of teacher personal practical knowledge and professional knowledge landscapes that is used in this study to examine the teaching practices of the participating teachers. Applying the theory of personal practical knowledge to this study allows me to examine the teaching practices through the eyes of the participating teachers.

Teachers in Western Canada must consider the provincially mandated curriculum framework for English language arts, *The Common Curriculum Framework for English Language Arts Kindergarten to Grade 12: Western Canadian Protocol for Collaboration in Education* (Crown Right of Manitoba, 1996) as they shape their classroom curriculum, Therefore, in the fourth section of this chapter, I examine the social constructivist theoretical background of this provincial document, the underlying implications of teacher as central to the classroom curriculum, and other underlying concepts regarding the teaching of language arts.

In the final section of the chapter, I review some of the existing research that contributes to an understanding of the challenges associated with language arts classroom instruction and the building of a classroom curriculum in nonmainstream settings.

A Social Constructivist Research Stance

Every researcher works from a particular set of theoretical understandings, a set of beliefs about how the world works, or a paradigm. My view of how teachers continually make sense of teaching and learning and how the context influences teaching practice situates me in a constructivist paradigm, particularly a social constructivist paradigm. This is the paradigm that guides my research.

My study is situated in an area of inquiry that involves questions about what teachers know, how they know, and how they continue to develop their practice over time. It also involves questions about the contexts in which they teach and learn, as well as the experiences they bring to their profession. Learning is a dynamic process, and the ongoing development of the complex knowledge that teachers use to guide their practice is constantly changing and evolving. In other words, research about teaching requires an exploration of not only what teachers know and do but also about how teachers continue to make meaning of teaching and learning.

> Educational researchers who study classrooms or the realities of supervision must take into account the meanings of what happens as articulated by the students, teachers, administrators, and all who are involved. All this connects not only with what we value as qualitative research but with what we recognize as constructed reality. (Greene, 1994, p. 435)

In preparing for this research study, I considered my epistemological and ontological stance, my background knowledge, my beliefs and biases, and my research skills. My previous experience and knowledge first as a teacher, then as a

consultant, and finally as a researcher and graduate student led me to believe in learning as participatory, involving the ongoing construction and reconstruction of knowledge.

My understanding of social constructivism is thus shaped by my experiences. As a person, and later as a teacher, I began to understand that children learned through social interaction with others. These interactions take place not only at school but also in the home and other group settings. I learned that social interaction and rich environments are important in a child's development. In my work as a teacher, and as a consultant, I learned that social interactions and rich environments are also important for teachers' knowledge.

My social constructivist view of teaching and learning was furthered by my work as a language arts consultant when the Manitoba language arts curriculum framework was introduced to teachers throughout the province in 1996. This curriculum framework, which is currently in use in Western Canadian schools, is based on a social constructivist view of learning (see section on *The Provincially Mandated Curriculum* later in this chapter). According to Vygotsky (1978), knowledge is not merely transmitted; it also is constructed in the mind of the learner through social interaction and the use of language in dialogue with the culture in which the learner is immersed. It allows for the negotiation of learning and the opportunities for learners to build their knowledge in a social and contextual setting. The social and cultural aspects of the learner's daily life are thus considered to be crucial to learning.

As a consultant in Manitoba, I was privileged to work alongside many excellent language arts teachers as they made meaning of the Manitoba English Language Arts curriculum framework in relation to their northern context. As one might expect, I found that teachers who worked from a social constructivist perspective found it easier to understand and implement the Manitoba English Language Arts curriculum in consideration of the cultural, social, and academic characteristics of the students.

As I worked alongside teachers, I was able to observe and participate in many situations in which they expressed new meaning about teaching and learning. The most successful situations were those that allowed teachers opportunities to construct their own understandings in a variety of ways, often including problem solving, conversations and negotiations with others, and active participation in learning situations. "Knowledge is created and recreated between people, as they bring their personal experience and information derived from other sources to bear on solving some particular problem" (Wells, 2000, p. 13). I found this idea of Wells to be true on many occasions as I participated with teachers, working together to understand the provincial language arts curriculum documents. It was challenging for us to understand these documents and to make sense of them in particular teaching contexts. Each of us considered our own experiences and information as we constructed and reconstructed our understanding of these documents and our teaching situations.

Nieto (2005) suggested that "teaching is fundamentally a social activity . . . it is first and foremost about relationships. It is these relationships that are at the heart of teaching, and it is through them that teachers find out who they are" (p. 59). In working with teachers, I saw the importance of relationships in learning. I watched teachers build relationships with each other as well as with me. I participated with teachers in many interactive group learning situations and thus I recognized the importance of the social context in learning. This continual development of teaching practices and teacher identity is congruent with Packer and Goicoechea's (2000) claim that social constructivism involves the construction of the person in a social context, through practical activity and relationships. The authors go on to say that involvement in these activities and relationships motivates a continual search for identity. It was these experiences, working with teachers who were continually shaping their knowledge of teaching and learning and their identity that furthered my understanding of a social constructivist theory.

Social constructivists believe that humans, as social beings, interact with two realities: a physical and temporal reality and a constructed reality. Teacher knowledge and practice are not predetermined. Knowledge is created by acting in the world. Teachers continue to learn as each new experience or situation makes new demands and provides opportunities for further development (Wells, 2000).

Schwandt (2000) contributed to my understanding of constructivism and thus to my understanding of social constructivism, particularly in view of my work with teachers and this research study. He stated that

> constructivism means that human beings do not find or discover knowledge so much as we construct or make it. We invent concepts, models, and schemes to make sense of experiences, and we continually test and modify these constructions in the light of new experience. (p. 197)

He further stated that there is a sociocultural dimension to this construction of knowledge: "We do not construct our interpretations in isolation but against a backdrop of shared understandings, practices, language, and so forth" (p. 197).

Through my work with teachers, I saw first-hand the negotiation and construction of ideas and realities, and I came to believe that there are multiple realities. As a social constructivist, Bruner (1986) wrote about multiple realities. "We know the world in different ways, from different stances, and each of the ways in which we know it produces different structures or representations, or, indeed, 'realities'" (Bruner, 1986, p. 109). According to Guba and Lincoln (1994), constructivist researchers posit that there are multiple realities and that knowledge is negotiated and constructed. "Realities are apprehensible in the form of multiple, intangible mental constructions, socially and experientially based, local and specific in nature . . . and dependent for their form and content on individual persons or groups holding the constructions" (Guba & Lincoln 1994, p. 110).

Research based in a social constructivist paradigm seeks to understand multiple realities by examining situations as experienced by the research

participants. In defining a social constructivist approach to research, Crotty (1998) stated, "meanings are constructed by human beings as they engage in the world they are interpreting" (p. 43). Consistent with Crotty's view, in completing this case study, I seek to understand the multiple realties of four language arts teachers in a northern community.

Curriculum

> "The teacher is an integral part of the curriculum constructed and enacted in the classroom." (Clandinin & Connelly, 1992, p. 363)

The concept of curriculum used in this study is based on the work of Dewey (1938), Schwab (1962, 1970), and Connelly and Clandinin (1988, 1992). Based on Dewey's (1938) concept of experience and situations, curriculum, according to Connelly and Clandinin (1988), is "something experienced in situations" (p. 6). They went on to say, "People have experiences. Situations are made up of people and their surrounding environments" (p. 6). The classroom curriculum is made up of a "dynamic interaction among persons, things, and processes" (Connelly & Clandinin, 1988, p. 7). Aoki (1993) referred to this experiential kind of classroom curriculum as "lived curriculum" and said it is an interplay of the lived experiences of the students and the teacher.

Schwab (1962, 1970) viewed curriculum as attending to four commonplaces: the students, the teacher, the subject matter, and the milieu. These four commonplaces, according to Connelly and Clandinin (1988), are "a set of factors or determinants that occur in statements about aims, content, and methods of curriculum. Taken as a whole they serve to bound the set of statements identified as being curricular" (p. 84). My study considers curriculum as composed at the intersection of the four commonplaces as they are experienced in the classroom.

Teachers play a significant role in the construction of the classroom curriculum. This study considers the metaphor introduced by Clandinin and

Connelly in 1992, “teacher as curriculum maker” (p. 393). “In our work as curriculum professors, we propose a new agenda based on a new metaphor – teacher as curriculum maker” (Clandinin & Connelly, 1992, p. 393). Clandinin and Connelly also stated,

> Teachers and students live out a curriculum; teachers do not transmit, implement or teach a curriculum and objectives, nor are they and their students carried forward in their work and studies by a curriculum of textbooks and content, instructional methodologies, and intentions. An account of teachers’ and students’ lives over time is the curriculum, although intentionality, objectives, and curriculum materials do play a part in it all. (1992, p. 365)

Clandinin and Connelly’s (1992) concept of teacher as curriculum maker was influenced by the work of Schwab (1983), who viewed teachers as important agents in any curriculum discussion. In his 1983 paper, Schwab wrote about curriculum planning as collaborative and says that the first members chosen for this collaborative group should be teachers. He gave two reasons for choosing teachers first. He said they are in the best position to understand children as learners, and

> what rouses hopes, fears, and despairs with respect to learning what children are inclined to learn: what they disdain and what they see as relevant to their present and future lives are better known by no one than the teacher. . . . It is she who lives with them for the better part of the day and the better part of the year. (1983, p. 245)

Schwab went on to provide a second reason:

> Teachers will not and cannot be told what to do. Subject specialists have tried. . . . Administrators have tried it. Legislators have tried it. Teachers are not however, assembly line operators, and will not so behave. . . . Moments of choice of what to do, how to do it, with whom, and at what

> pace, arise hundreds of times a school day, and arise differently every day with every group of students. (1983, p. 245)

Paley (1997) also contributed to my understanding of teacher as curriculum maker through the writing of her experiences in classrooms where she and her students negotiate and construct a classroom curriculum that values the shared lived experiences of the students and the teacher. Although Paley has written many books that exemplify teacher as curriculum maker, I make reference to one in particular. In her 1997 book, *The Girl with the Brown Crayon,* Paley described how she and her students negotiate the curriculum based on the experiences that the students bring to the class as well as their experiences in the classroom. Paley described some of the outside influences on the classroom community, such as the diverse cultural and social background of the students, the tensions of gender differences in the classroom, the fragmented nature of the mandated kindergarten curriculum, and the influences of the school and state expectations for student achievement and teacher accountability. She told how these outside influences create conflict and tension in the classroom and how she and the children navigate through and around these tensions to construct a classroom curriculum. In Paley's classroom, this curriculum requires relationship building whereby the teacher listens, observes, creates learning spaces and opportunities, and negotiates with children as they work together. Paley, as a curriculum maker, also empowered the children to be curriculum makers and allowed them to negotiate with one another as they built relationships with others in the class. In this 1997 publication, Paley told, through specific stories of the classroom, what it is like to be a curriculum maker in kindergarten. She shared the challenges that she faces as she constructs the classroom curriculum based on the children, her own experiences, and the classroom contexts.

Other researchers also examined the importance of the teacher in the classroom curriculum. In the United States, The National Academy of Education sponsored a review of research about effective teaching (Darling-Hammond &

Baratz-Snowden, 2005). The subsequent report indicated that the teaching context, the subject matter, and the individual students are important considerations for teachers' practices, and that teachers play a central role in shaping a classroom curriculum that integrates these considerations. In other words, they are suggesting that curriculum is an integration of the four commonplaces outlined earlier, and that the teacher is central to the successful integration of these curriculum considerations.

Miller (1998), writing from her previous experiences as a high school English teacher, noted that after encountering the work of Maxine Greene, she realized that curriculum was much more than content to be taught. As a result of her subsequent graduate work and ongoing research, Miller suggested that teachers can integrate the content with the lived experiences of the students to explore issues relevant to those students' lives. Miller said that the teacher can find ways to construct a classroom curriculum that is an integration of the lives of the students, the teaching context, and the subject content. Miller viewed curriculum as evolving and changing and said that teachers are continually evolving and changing to meet the challenges of their teaching context and the students in the class.

Portelli and Vibert (2001), working from a critical stance regarding the standards movement associated with provincial testing in certain subjects, including language arts, suggested that the issues and experiences of the children create the content for the curriculum but that teachers are central in shaping such a classroom curriculum that values and builds on the learners' experiences and on the contexts of their lives. Portelli and Vibert stated that regardless of the mandates set out by various governmental groups, teachers remain central to the curriculum that is enacted and constructed in the classroom. Portelli and Vibert called for a "curriculum of life" (p. 63) that "breaks down the walls between the school and the world" (p. 78) and suggested that the shaping of this kind of curriculum rests with teachers.

Allington and McGill-Franzen (2004) stated, based on extensive research in language arts classrooms, that teachers who see themselves as teaching students and not following particular programs are the most effective teachers. They suggested that student experiences need to be reflected in the language arts activities of the classroom and that teachers hold the responsibility for integrating language arts approaches and content with the lived experiences of the children. This study recognizes that the teacher is central to the shaping of a classroom curriculum that is the dynamic interaction of the students, the teacher, the subject matter, and the milieu as they are experienced in the classroom.

Teacher Personal Practical Knowledge

This study looks at teachers' practices from the perspective of the teacher and views teachers as central to constructing and enacting the classroom curriculum. This study is focussed on examining what teachers know and how their knowledge is expressed in their practices as opposed to producing knowledge for teachers to use. Thus, it explores teacher knowledge as that which is considered practical knowledge. The theory of teacher personal practical knowledge is the theoretical framework for this study.

As a starting point for the discussion regarding teacher knowledge, I draw on the work of Fenstermacher (1994). In a review of research regarding teacher knowledge, Fenstermacher categorized research on teacher knowledge into two main categories. He described the first category as teacher knowledge, formal (or TK/F) (p. 6), or the knowledge that is primarily known and produced by researchers for teachers. This formal teacher knowledge category includes the research that produces knowledge for teachers to use. He refers to the second category as teacher knowledge, practical (TK/P). Teacher practical knowledge is a result of teachers' experiences and their reflections on those experiences. Fenstermacher (1994) went on to say that those who research teacher practical knowledge "seek a better understanding of the knowledge teachers bring to their

work and the understandings they have of it" (p. 9). Major contributors to the concept of teacher practical knowledge, according to Fenstermacher, are Elbaz (1983, 1991), Connelly and Clandinin (1988, 1992), and Schon (1983).

Much of the research regarding teacher practical knowledge stems from the work of Dewey, who, as early as 1938, highlighted the importance of teachers' personal and practical experience. Dewey (1938) stated that "all genuine education comes about through experience" (p. 25). Dewey argued that the reconstruction and reorganization of experiences is an important part of learning. Dewey (1938) stated that "there is not intellectual growth without some reconstruction, some remaking, of impulses and desires in the form in which they first show themselves" (p. 64). When teachers reflect on or share their experiences, they reconstruct their teaching knowledge. Dewey emphasised the social aspects of experiences, stating, "experience does not occur in a vacuum" (p. 40). He posited that social and contextual factors shape our understanding of our experiences at the time they occur but also shape our understanding of those experiences after they occur. He also indicated that previous experiences help us understand new experiences. What is known is influenced by the context and the experiences, past and present, of the learners.

In spite of Dewey's (1938) early work, research regarding teachers' knowledge focussed on teacher skills, attitudes, characteristics, and methods until Schwab (1962, 1970) began writing about curriculum. Schwab (1962, 1970) contended that teachers conceptualize their work in a practical manner, in a way that suits the realities of their classroom and their students.

Drawing from his own experiences in education and in the natural sciences, Schwab (1962, 1970) opened up conversations about practical ways of knowing by writing about the differences between the theoretical and practical modes. His work provided a basis for further thinking about practical kinds of knowledge. In an essay on curriculum building, Schwab (1970) posited that the

local context, the teachers, and the students are important considerations in building curriculum. He stated:

> The curriculum constructed of these particulars will be brought to bear, not in some archetypical classroom, but in a particular locus in time and space with smells, shadows, seats, and conditions outside its walls which may have much to do with what is achieved inside. The beneficiary will consist of very local kinds of children . . . the same diversity holds with respect to teachers and what they do. (p. 310)

At about this same time, Polanyi (1962, 1966), a scientist who turned to philosophy, published work regarding personal knowledge and tacit knowing. Many of his ideas regarding tacit knowing are considered in understanding teacher practical knowledge. Polanyi (1966) described tacit knowing as

> The outcome of an active shaping of experience performed in the pursuit of knowledge. This shaping or integrating I hold to be the great and indispensible tacit power by which all knowledge is discovered and, once discovered, is held to be true. (p. 6)

In 1983, Elbaz introduced the concept of the practical knowledge of teachers. Her work was conducted at a time when there was an initial effort to involve teachers in the process of curriculum development. However, according to Elbaz (1983), those in charge of curriculum development did not fully recognize the important practical knowledge that teachers have. She stated, "Too frequently the emphasis was on diagnosing teacher failings and on prescribing improvements" (p. 4). Elbaz said that her work on teacher practical knowledge "makes the assumption that teachers hold a complex, practically-oriented set of understandings which they use to shape and direct the work of teaching" (p. 3). Elbaz grounded her work in that of Schwab (1970) and chose the term *practical knowledge* "because it focuses attention on the action and decision-oriented nature of the teacher's situation, and construes her knowledge as a function, in part, of her response to that situation" (p. 4).

Elbaz (1983) contended that the experiential world of the teacher, both past and present, shapes the teacher's understanding of teaching and learning. Conversely, the teacher's world is shaped by his or her experiences, knowledge, and reflections on those experiences and that knowledge (p. 33). She also posited that teacher learning is socially constructed through encounters and various relationships, both personal and professional, and is influenced by theoretical beliefs that guide decision-making processes in the classroom. Elbaz described teacher knowledge in terms of the following five categories:

- Knowledge of self as a teacher
- Knowledge of the milieu in which the teacher works
- Knowledge of subject matter
- Knowledge of instruction
- Knowledge of curriculum development

Elbaz (1983) stated that knowledge of self refers to knowledge of self as a resource in the classroom and in the school, self as an individual, and self as in relation to others. Knowledge of milieu includes the classroom, the school, relationships with others in the school, including the administration, as well as the political context of the teaching situation. Subject matter knowledge is knowledge of the subject content that teachers draw upon to teach that subject. Knowledge of curriculum development refers to the knowledge that teachers have of how particular programs are developed. This knowledge influences the impact of that curriculum on classroom practice. It also encompasses knowledge of materials and resources for teaching. Instructional knowledge refers to the knowledge and understanding that teachers have of theoretical approaches to teaching and learning and the methods of instruction from which teachers choose (Elbaz, 1983).

In 1983, Schon, also influenced by Dewey's (1938) work on experience and practice, set out what he referred to as the "epistemology of practice," which separates theoretical formal knowledge from practical knowledge (p. 42). Schon

described knowing as "ordinarily tacit, implicit in our patterns of actions and in our feel for the stuff with which we are dealing" (p. 49). He claimed that a person's knowing is in their actions. Reflection-in-action and reflection-on-action are terms Schon employed to describe the process practitioners and professionals use as they think about and reflect on what they are doing and what they know as they are doing or as they are in action. Schon recommended reflective practice as a way to help teachers understand their current knowledge and to inquire into ways to shift their understandings and become more responsive to the children, the subject, and the context.

Connelly and Clandinin (1988), influenced by the work of Dewey (1938) and Schwab (1962, 1970), and building from Elbaz's (1983) doctoral dissertation, explored the idea that teachers hold knowledge based on their emotional, moral, experiential, embodied, and contextual understandings and experiences. This type of knowledge includes knowledge of children, subject matter, teaching, learning, and context and is expressed in teachers' practices. To explain the knowledge that teachers use to shape their teaching practices, Connelly and Clandinin (1988) coined the term "personal practical knowledge" (p. 25). They defined it as

> a term designed to capture the idea of experience in a way that allows us to talk about teachers as knowledgeable and knowing persons. Personal practical knowledge is in the teacher's past experiences, in the teacher's present mind and body, and in the future plans and actions. Personal practical knowledge is found in the teacher's practice. It is, for any teacher, a particular way of reconstructing the past and the intentions of the future to deal with the exigencies of a present situation. (p. 25)

Although this type of knowledge is personal, Connelly and Clandinin (1995) noted that it is also social because it is influenced by the context in which teachers work. The identity of each teacher is, in part, influenced and shaped by the context and their experiences in that context.

To further understand teacher personal practical knowledge, it is important to understand the term *professional knowledge landscapes* (Clandinin & Connelly, 1995, p. 5). The professional knowledge landscape is a metaphor for the knowledge contexts that teachers inhabit both inside and outside of the classroom. "The landscape metaphor is important to us because it captures the exceedingly complex intellectual, personal, and physical environment for teachers' work" (Clandinin, Connelly, & He, 1997, p. 673). Teachers are part of the classroom community as well as part of larger communities such as the school, the local community, and the provincial community of educators. Professional knowledge landscapes are also relational (Clandinin & Connelly, 1995, p. 4). The teaching context is composed of relationships among people, places, and things. Professional knowledge landscapes are shaped by curricular programs, administrative policies, theoretical perspectives, personal and experiential perspectives, and institutional contexts. The complexity of the various relationships and the various contexts in which teachers work sometimes creates tensions and challenges for teachers in their constructions and reconstructions of teaching and learning.

Craig (1995), making use of Clandinin and Connelly's (1995) distinction between in and out of classroom places on professional knowledge landscapes, described her professional knowledge landscape.

> As a teacher, I live in two different professional places. One is the relational world inside the classroom where I co-construct meaning with my students. The other is the abstract world where I live with everyone outside my classroom, a world where I meet all the other aspects of the educational enterprise such as the philosophies, the techniques, the materials, and the expectations that I will enact certain educational practices. While each of these places is distinctive, neither is totally self-contained. Together these places form the professional knowledge landscape that frames my work as educator. (Craig, 1995, p. 16)

Teachers' professional knowledge landscapes exist inside the classroom with the students as well as outside the classroom through interaction with many others. Part of teacher knowledge is the ongoing teacher learning regarding understanding of the complexities of both aspects of the professional knowledge landscape (Clandinin & Connelly, 1995). The professional knowledge landscape outside the classroom consists of knowledge of and interaction with other professionals, approaches to teaching and learning, mandated programs, an enormous variety of educational programs, materials, policies, school, community, provincial expectations, and vast amounts of educational literature and research.

The in-classroom places on the professional knowledge landscape are "places of action where teachers teach and where curriculum is made" (Clandinin & Connelly, 1995, p. 12). This is the place where teachers interact with the realities of the teaching contexts, the students, and the subject matter.

Part of the challenge for teachers is combining the expectations of the outside divisional programs, school policies, and provincial mandates such as the curriculum framework with the inside concerns and realities of the classroom: students, classroom context, and teacher. Whelan (1999) shared her journeys as a teacher, describing the tensions between the realities inside the classroom and the demands of the outside classroom places on her teaching landscape. She described the tensions she encountered when her own intuitive, personal feelings and knowledge bumped against suggestions from other professionals and mandated professional development experiences. Whelan's challenge is similar for all teachers—how to express their personal practical knowledge (Clandinin & Connelly, 1995) and at the same time attend to the lives and experiences of the students, a mandated curriculum, as well as suggestions from other educators and other mandates from outside sources.

More recently, Olson and Craig (2005) illustrated the importance of the tensions that teachers experience in their professional knowledge landscapes.

They found that teachers often downplay what they know in favour of appearing to conform to expectations *outside* their classroom. Olson and Craig suggested that teachers need safe opportunities to share the experiences that contribute to their personal practical knowledge of teaching.

Butt, Raymond, McCue, and Yamagishi (1992), influenced by the work of Dewey, Elbaz, and Connelly and Clandinin, also contributed to my understanding of teacher personal practical knowledge. They used the term personal professional knowledge and posited that this type of knowledge results from both personal and professional experiences and reflection on those experiences. "Knowledge that results from these personal experiences, and reflection in and on them, is what we see as personal knowledge" (Butt, Raymond, McCue, & Yamagishi, 1992, p. 59). Butt et al. further stated that teacher knowledge is personal, practical, and professional knowledge that "evolves through the teachers' interactions with and experience of the classroom, school, and broader educational context" (p. 59).

Meijer, Verloop, and Beijaard (1999) conducted an in-depth study of teacher knowledge regarding the teaching of reading comprehension to high school students in The Netherlands. The purpose of their study was "to explore the content of teachers' practical knowledge concerning the teaching of reading comprehension" (p. 63). They identified the following six categories of teacher knowledge, which include knowledge of subject matter, student knowledge, knowledge of how students learn, knowledge of teacher purposes, knowledge of curriculum, and knowledge of instructional techniques.

Meijer et al. (1999) also found strong relationships between the categories, although the teachers differed with respect to the categories they emphasized. The researchers found "clusters of patterns" and further identified three types of practical knowledge: (a) practical knowledge with a focus on subject matter knowledge, (b) practical knowledge with a focus on student knowledge, and (c) practical knowledge with a focus on knowledge of student learning and understanding. They concluded that understanding teachers' practical knowledge

is important to any discussion regarding teachers and teacher ongoing learning because of "the deep insights it provides into the details of what teachers know and how they deal with the complexity of their work. It helps teachers to understand practice rather than dictate practice to them" (p. 81).

Recently, several researchers have examined teacher practical knowledge from the perspective of professional development that will sustain teachers. This body of research was successful in gaining further insight into understanding teachers' practice in an effort to provide support for teaching that is more likely to sustain them. Van Driel, Beijaard and Verloop (2000) argued that, to be successful, professional development activities must take into consideration teachers' practical knowledge. Teacher practical knowledge is "constructed by teachers in the context of their work . . . and integrates experiential knowledge, formal knowledge, and personal beliefs" (Van Driel, Beijaard, & Verloop, 2000, p. 137). Korthagen (2009) suggested that teachers' knowledge develops from within and that in order to sustain teachers, it is important to support them by helping them to understand their inner, personal practical knowledge.

Ben-Peretz (2010) recently conducted an analysis of several articles regarding teacher knowledge that had been published over the last twenty years in the same educational journal, *Teaching and Teacher Education*. As she examined these articles, she looked specifically at how teacher knowledge is defined in each study and therefore how the definition of teacher knowledge has changed over the time frame examined. What she found out was that from 1988 to recently, the definition of teacher knowledge has broadened and expanded. It includes aspects of personal, practical, and professional knowledge and recently has also come to include knowledge of societal issues such as "multiculturalism" as well as global issues. "Teacher knowledge has been extended from knowledge of subject matter, curriculum and pedagogical content knowledge, to include general themes like global issues and multiculturalism (Ben-Peretz, p. 11). Ben-Peretz confirmed that educational contexts, particularly in-school contexts, play an increasingly

important part in research on teacher knowledge. Ben-Peretz also noted that personal knowledge continues to be a crucial aspect of teacher knowledge. She also indicated that researchers continue to examine teacher knowledge through qualitative methods, by talking to and observing teachers.

As indicated in this section, research regarding teacher knowledge has been conducted by many scholars in a variety of ways. My study adds to this exploration of teacher knowledge through an investigation of the teachers' perspectives regarding the influence of the northern contexts on their language arts teaching practices.

My study looks at teacher knowledge in relation to language arts teaching in the contexts of one Northern Canadian community. For purposes of this study, I view teacher knowledge as the personal practical knowledge teachers hold based on their emotional, moral, experiential, embodied, and contextual understandings and experiences. This type of knowledge includes knowledge of students, subject matter, teaching and learning, and contexts and is expressed in teachers' practices. This knowledge is constructed by teachers in the contexts of their work. It is a dynamic integration of personal, experiential, and formal knowledge. Teacher practical knowledge is personal, which suggests that each teacher's knowledge is, to some extent, unique. Teacher practical knowledge is contextual and adapted to the classroom situation. It is also based on experience and reflection on that experience. It guides teaching practice. It is often tacit and therefore difficult to articulate completely, and finally, it is related to the subject being taught (Meijer et al., 1999, p. 60).

The Provincially Mandated Curriculum Framework for English Language Arts

Education is a provincial jurisdiction and in each Western Canadian province there is a mandated English Language Arts provincial curricular

framework that is based on the *Common Curriculum Framework* (Crown Right of Manitoba, 1996).

The provincially mandated curriculum provides teachers with two important components. The first component provides the theoretical background and the learning outcomes. In Alberta this component is called the Program of Studies. In Manitoba, it is referred to as the Manitoba Curriculum Framework. In Saskatchewan it is known as a Curriculum Guide. I shall hereon refer to this first component as the *ELA Framework*. The second component gives examples of strategies, lessons, and ideas for teaching. I refer to this component as *The Illustrative Examples*.

Understanding how children learn and in particular how they learn language is an important aspect of deciding how to approach language arts teaching. "Educational theories are explanations of the human phenomenon of learning, not truth statements about why we do what we do. They provide a conceptual framework for us to explain how and why we learn" (Jaramillo, 1996, p. 134). The ELA Framework is underpinned by a conceptual framework based on a social constructivist theory of learning: *Manitoba Curriculum Framework of Outcomes and Standards, K–4* (1996, p. 4). Well-known researchers and theorists specifically referenced in the ELA Framework are Atwell (1987), Britton (1970), Brownlie and Close (1992), Calkins (1994), Cambourne (1984), Clay (1991), Graves (1991 Halliday (1975), and Vygotsky (1978).

The social constructivist underpinnings of the curriculum framework are founded upon Vygotsky's (1978) sociocultural theory. Vygotsky, a Russian psychologist, developed this sociocultural theory to assist in understanding the development of language, memory, attention, and perception in children. Vygotsky's sociocultural theory posits that learners construct knowledge in a social, cultural context. Vygotsky advanced the idea that the mind is active in the construction of knowledge and that social interaction plays a fundamental role in the process of learning. Jaramillo (1996) claimed that "intrinsic to Vygotsky's

sociocultural theory is the notion that social experiences shape the ways students think and interpret the world" (p. 139).

Central to Vygotsky's (1978) theory is the importance of interaction between children and their teachers, parents, and peers in their learning environment. To emphasize the importance of learning through social interaction with others, Vygotsky explained, "Every function in the child's cultural development appears twice: first, on the social level, and later, on the individual level" (p. 57). Vygotsky's sociocultural theory also includes the concept of the zone of proximal development, which has important ramifications for classroom practice. The zone of proximal development, according to Vygotsky, is the distance between the child's ability to perform a task or solve a problem with adult or peer guidance and the child's ability to perform the task or solve a problem independently. The distance between the actual developmental level and the potential developmental level, known as the zone of proximal development, "defines those functions that have not yet matured but are in the process of maturation, functions that will mature tomorrow" (Vygotsky, 1979, p. 86). This is the zone in which children need to engage in social interaction in order to construct meaning.

Based on this social constructivist theory of learning, some of the main goals of the ELA Framework are to develop authentic and meaningful communication, to appreciate linguistic and cultural diversity, and to strengthen a sense of community (*Manitoba Curriculum Framework,* of Outcomes and standards, K-4 English Language Arts, 1996, p. 3). The ELA Framework views language learning as an active process that is continuous and ongoing. Therefore, the outcomes are continuous and often recursive, building from one grade to the next based on what students already know and can do. The ELA Framework also stresses the integrated nature of listening, speaking, reading, writing, viewing, and representing as the six language arts. It promotes active learning that draws on a

broad range of multiple resources, including technological, media, human, and print resources.

The ELA Framework makes deliberate efforts to draw upon children's experiences. For example, the general outcomes draw upon the children's experiences. General Outcome 1 is about the children's own thoughts, ideas, and feelings. General Outcome 5 is about learning in and about various communities. This outcome also specifically deals with diversity: celebrating diversity and appreciating diversity in the classroom as well as in the broader community. There is a broad definition of text (p. 81), which includes oral, visual, print, media, and other texts. Texts from a variety of cultures and viewpoints are encouraged, but no specific texts are required or mandated. This broad definition and lack of mandated texts allows students and teachers to engage in texts that are socially and culturally meaningful.

The ELA Framework also emphasises that language arts learning occurs in authentic and personally meaningful ways. Drawing upon Halliday's (1975) work in sociolinguistics and Cambourne's (1984) theory of conditions for literacy learning, the ELA Framework suggests that students benefit from a range of opportunities to use language for "authentic, real-life purposes" and that they need to have many opportunities to use language in a "variety of personal, social, and academic needs" (p. 4). The ELA Framework states that the learning environment influences language learning and emphasises the need for an environment that is rich in language as well as meaningful experiences, and interaction with others. (p. 4).

The importance of critical thinking, inquiry learning, and the use of media and technology are promoted in the ELA Framework (*Manitoba Curriculum Framework of Outcomes and standards, 5 – 8 English Language Arts*, 1996, p. 4). Critical literacy, inquiry learning, and media are important in helping students not only comprehend or make meaning of a variety of texts, but to understand the implications for their own lives and the lives of others.

The ELA Framework, based on the *Common Curriculum Framework for English Language Arts: Western Canadian Protocol for Collaboration in Education* (Crown Right of Manitoba, 1996) identifies six language arts strands: listening, speaking, reading, writing, viewing, and representing as well as numerous student outcomes for kindergarten to Grade 12. The framework stresses the integrated nature of these strands.

The student learning outcomes are categorized under five general outcomes.

General Outcome 1: To explore thoughts, ideas, and feelings

General Outcome 2: To comprehend and respond personally and critically to oral, literacy, and media text

General Outcome 3: To manage ideas and information

General Outcome 4: To enhance the clarity and artistry of communication

General Outcome 5: To build and celebrate community. (pp. 4, 5)

These general and specific outcomes, although mandated, are not prescriptive in the sense of defining which programs, books, literature, resources, or approaches any teacher must use. The intent of this outcome-based, social constructivist ELA Framework is to provide guidelines and expectations for teachers in Western Canada and to the "assist educators" as they "plan learning activities" (Crown Right of Manitoba, 1996, p. 1).

The ELA Framework thus calls for the teacher to play a central role in shaping the classroom language arts curriculum (*Manitoba Curriculum Framework of Outcomes and standards, K-4 English Language Arts*, 1996, p. 4). The social constructivist underpinnings, open-ended outcomes, emphasis on language arts processes, and considerations of cultural and social differences of the ELA Framework allow for teachers to develop a language arts classroom curriculum based on the teaching context, the students, and the knowledge and experiences of the teacher. In other words, it provides space for the teacher to be the curriculum maker.

Challenges of Constructing Classroom Curriculum in Nonmainstream Contexts

For the purpose of this study, I use the term nonmainstream in the same way that Heath (1983) did. Nonmainstream refers to diverse classrooms outside of the Western middle class culture that historically has been assumed to be the norm. The northern school that is the research site for this study is considered a nonmainstream community because it is in a low socioeconomic area; the population in the community consists of a mix of people of Aboriginal and Euro-Canadian heritage, with the majority of the population Aboriginal, including both Métis and First Nations; and the community is rural and somewhat isolated from any urban centre.

The studies reviewed in this section contribute to a body of research that looks at some of the challenges teachers in nonmainstream teaching contexts encounter as they construct the language arts classroom curriculum. I begin with three seminal studies, Heath (1983), Lensmire, (1994), and Dyson (1997). Heath (1983) and Dyson (1997) explored different cultural and social influences on language arts from the perspective of the students. Lensmire (1994) also explored cultural and socioeconomic influences on the teaching of language arts, but from the perspective of a researcher who spent time teaching language arts in a culturally and socioeconomic diverse classroom. These seminal researchers discovered that it is essential but also challenging to understand the language and literacy experiences and knowledge that children bring to the classroom. Their work opened the door for further research in nonmainstream teaching contexts from the perspective of the teacher as a key agent in the development of the classroom curriculum.

Following a review of these three seminal studies, I look at some of the research regarding language arts teaching in Canadian nonmainstream settings as well as other additional research relevant to this study.

Seminal studies.

Heath (1983) published a seminal work that examined the influence of the cultural differences in the language and literacy used in the communities and in the schools. Her findings are based on many years of ethnographic research in three communities in South Carolina and led the way for further research regarding the influence of home language, cultural background, and context on classroom curriculum. During the time of Heath's research (1969–1978), desegregation policies and low performance in South Carolina public schools were creating a demand for change in the educational community. At the time of her research,

> Communication was a central concern of black and white teachers, parents, and mill personnel who felt the need to know more about how others communicated; why students and teachers often could not understand each other, why questions were sometimes not answered, and why habitual ways of talking and listening did not always seem to work. (Heath, 1983, p. 2)

Heath's (1983) research focused on children from three communities. Heath described the communities as follows: a predominately White working-class community on the outskirts of town; a predominately Black working-class community, also on the outskirts of the town; and a middle class White and Black urban community. Most of the teachers were White and from the middle class urban community. Heath did not focus her study on race but rather on "culture as learned behaviour and language habits as part of that shared learning" (p. 11). Moreover, she found that culture is related to socioeconomic status in that the Blacks and Whites in the middle class community had similar language and literacy interactions, and both differed from those in the working class communities. The language and literacy patterns of the children in the two working class communities were not used in school, and this caused confusion for

the children in these communities. Heath wanted to find out more about the language and literacy patterns in the communities and to find ways to bring them into the daily interactions of the school.

In addition to the information regarding cultural differences, language patterns, and experiences that children bring to classroom learning, Heath (1983) also contributed ideas regarding the importance of teachers becoming aware of those differences and knowing how to make use of them in the classroom to support the students' language learning. Heath led an inquiry with teachers into the local culture and language patterns of the three communities. She spent many years working with teachers to help them become more aware of their own language usage and that of the children in their classes, so that the teachers could become "cultural brokers between communities and classrooms" (p. 369). She went on to say,

> They [the teachers] tried to recognize and accommodate group differences among students without stereotyping behaviours according to race or class membership. They brought into their classroom, the people, ideas, and practices of the communities of their students. (p. 354)

Heath pointed out that, according to the teachers, her ongoing, extensive work with them had been the catalyst for change particularly in "breaking the boundaries, and encouraging the flow of cultural patterns between classrooms and communities" (Heath, 1983, p. 369).

In a 1993 article, 10 years after publication of her seminal study, Heath concluded that changes in classroom practice had only occurred after many years of extensive work and reflective practice on the part of the teachers. She also found that within 5 years following the original study, many teachers said they lost their connections to the local community. Heath noted that the political climate of the schools in her research setting and in other parts of the United States changed in the 1980s, and teachers lost much of their autonomy. Schools relied more on testing than on teachers' observations of the students to determine

the approaches and programs of study. Heath reported that the gains in community–school interaction were not sustained. It remains unclear how best to support teachers in their attempts to shape a culturally sensitive language arts classroom curriculum.

Lensmire (1994) added to the discussion of challenges faced by teachers of language arts in nonmainstream contexts. He was a researcher who became a classroom teacher for a period of time to learn what it was like for the teacher to address cultural and socioeconomic diversity in the classroom. His interest was not so much on home language as on the cultural and social experiences that children bring to the classroom that influence their literacy learning, as well as the kinds of relationships they build with other students and teachers. He taught in a Grade 3 classroom consisting of students from diverse socioeconomic and cultural backgrounds. He taught one language arts period each day for one school year and focussed on writing in a writers' workshop approach (Graves, 1983). Lensmire found that the socioeconomic and cultural context of the students affects the relationships that are formed in the classroom. He stated that developing a community of respectful learners in the classroom is no easy task. He found it difficult to help children establish working relationships with each other, particularly when students were from different socioeconomic or cultural backgrounds. He also found it challenging to incorporate the lived experiences of the children particularly if those experiences and ideas appeared racist or classist to him or to others in the classroom. Lensmire found it a challenge to help children understand and appreciate their cultural and social differences. He found that teaching in a classroom where children have varying experiences and cultural and social backgrounds requires a great deal of knowledge about the students, their social and cultural contexts, as well as about teaching and learning. But it also requires a great deal of negotiating with the children as they learn about one another. Lensmire argued that part of the role of the language arts teacher is to create "an engaged, pluralistic classroom community that recognizes and affirms

differences among children and encourages children to learn from and be enhanced by, those differences" (p. 146). He reported that in spite of his best efforts, he was not as successful as he had hoped to be in developing classroom relationships, and he had to continually to strive for a "pluralistic classroom." Lensmire stated that teachers must respond to language learning in a manner that values and appreciates "the social life of children in the classroom, and that actively strives to create a classroom in which children accept and learn from each other's differences" (p. 143). He also said that it is necessary to "strengthen the role of teacher as curriculum maker in the writing workshop, by having teachers engage children in collective writing projects focused on important texts in children's lives" (p. 143).

Like Heath, Lensmire (1994) concluded that the social and cultural backgrounds of children are important considerations for the classroom language arts curriculum and that teachers need to consider children's experiences and build on them in the classroom. However, because he was working as a teacher in the classroom, he identified, more specifically, how challenging it can be for teachers to be curriculum makers where there is cultural and social diversity. He went on to say that the most meaningful, rewarding, and effective teaching and learning is negotiated through interactions among the students and between the teachers and the students. "What do our experiences and those of the children in my classroom mean for how we teach and learn?" (Lensmire,1994, p. 2).

Dyson's (1997) research on the teaching of writing also added to my understanding of the challenges that language arts teachers in nonmainstream contexts face. Dyson worked in an elementary classroom and observed the interactions and the writing of selected students during language arts classes over a school year. Dyson's research was conducted in an urban school in a culturally diverse, low socioeconomic area. Her findings were similar to Lensmire's (1994), in that she also highlighted the challenges of developing relationships among the children. Like Lensmire, she argued that the development of working

relationships among the students is beneficial for student learning. Dyson's work illustrates how cultural and socioeconomic diversity is a potential resource for individual and collective growth. She stated,

> In sum, I have argued for a pedagogical approach in which teachers, administrators, parents, and the public are sensitive to the ideological as well as the social dimensions of literacy and, moreover one in which teachers respond to and build on what children know and can do but also help the children to respond to and build on what each other knows and can do. In such an approach, teachers who work amid sociocultural diversity have a distinct advantage over those who do not. That diversity is their key to become more conscious of their authorial choices and of the rhetorical and the social consequences of what they choose to say. (p. 184)

Research in Canadian settings.

There is limited research conducted in the Canadian prairie context examining the teaching and learning of language arts for children in nonmainstream contexts (Ball, 2007; Kelly, 2010; Laderoute, 2005; Ward, 2001). Kelly examined the literacy of adolescent boys in a rural Saskatchewan context. Ward (2001) and Laderoute (2005) explored the influence of the home language and culture in the literacy development of Aboriginal students. Ward's research was in urban settings, while Laderoute's took place in a northern setting. Ball (2007) conducted an extensive review of the language and literacy of Canadian Aboriginal children. The following is a discussion of the work of these researchers.

Kelly (2010) added to the work of Heath (1983), Lensmire (1994), and Dyson (1997) by bringing a recent rural Canadian perspective on the influence of context on literacy. In her research regarding literacy of adolescent boys in a rural Saskatchewan setting, she discovered that the social and cultural context of these students plays a major role in how they view literacy. Kelly noted that students'

reading and writing interests are shaped by their "cultural home life, social relationships, and popular media" (p. 47). Some examples of writing that illustrate the connections to personal experiences include stories of boys hunting with their fathers, of sports, fixing farm machinery, and riding dirt bikes. Based on her work with the boys in this rural community, Kelly concluded that any language arts curriculum, regardless of whether or not it is developed in the classroom or beyond, needs to view literacy as a social practice rather than as a set of skills to internalize in order for literacy to become more significant in the lives of young rural students (p. 203). Although she did not look at the teachers' perspectives, it is evident that if classroom literacy is to be viewed as a social practice, teachers will have an important role in shaping that classroom curriculum based on the lived experiences of the students and the community.

> The concept of literacy as a social practice offers a more culturally sensitive and responsive view because literacy practices vary and change from one context to another. Social practices are shaped by the context of work, school, home life, and social relations. (Kelly, 2010, p. 24)

Laderoute (2005), influenced by the work of Deyhle and Swisher (1997), conducted an ethnographic study in a cross-cultural situation in a small Northern Alberta community with the key purpose to "describe, analyze, and interpret Cree children's experience of literacy" (p. 11). Laderoute agreed with Deyhle and Swisher (1997) that "the cultural context represented in school may be different from what is being learned and developed at home" (p. 15). She suggested, as did Deyhle and Swisher (1997), that Aboriginal children are often viewed from a deficit perspective when their home language and culture are not seen as strengths to learning but are viewed as barriers. Laderoute suggested that for Cree students, it is particularly important to view literacy from a broad perspective that includes not only listening, speaking, reading, and writing but also viewing and

representing as components of language learning. She also highlighted ways in which the cultural knowledge children bring to school needs to be acknowledged.

An important finding from Ward's (2001) work that is relevant to my study is the "centrality of the teacher-student-community relationship in the educational process" (p. 44). Ward conducted extensive research regarding the intercultural communications between urban Aboriginal students and their classmates and teachers in Canadian schools. In her urban classroom-centered research, Ward was searching for the "type of participant structure that would engage children most deeply in thoughtful conversations with one another" (p. 42). Ward indicated that educational instruction must take into consideration the home language and culture of the students to develop the linguistic, cultural, affective, and creative diversity that each child brings. She learned that the teacher played a major role in creating a classroom atmosphere that invited participation from all students.

In 2007, Ball wrote an extensive review of the language and literacy of Aboriginal children in Canada for the Canadian Language and Literacy Research Network. Ball concluded that there was little available research regarding the language development of Aboriginal children. Therefore, her report was based on demographic studies, consultations with scholars, and community-based Aboriginal leaders. Ball said that according to the 2001 Canada Statistics, well over 80% of Aboriginal children's home language is English and that Aboriginal children are more likely to learn an Aboriginal language as a second language in school rather than as a first or second language at home. "Aboriginal children are increasingly likely to learn their Aboriginal language, if at all, as a second rather than as a first language" (Ball, p. 14).

Ball (2007) suggested that the language development of Aboriginal children is a complex issue and that Aboriginal children starting school are frequently considered delayed in their oral language abilities. "It is generally believed, though not well documented, that Aboriginal children are especially at

risk of language delays" (p. 15). Ball went on to say that it is not well understood why this is so, but in addition to the cross cultural differences discussed by Deyhle and Swisher (1997), Laderoute (2005), Ward (2001), and others, language development delays in Aboriginal children may be related to social conditions such as "sub-standard housing, low levels of education, low employment, poverty, and geographic isolation, resulting in lack of access to services" (p. 19). Ball also suggested that there are no culturally sensitive assessments to assist in looking at the language development of children before they start school or as they enter kindergarten.

Ball stated that oral language is the foundation for success in reading and writing. "It is well known that success in school requires vast exposure to, practice with, and proficiency in oral language" (p. 13). Thus, language delays would place Aboriginal children at risk for delays in other aspects of literacy including reading and writing.

Additional research.

The previous Canadian researchers examined language, cultural, and social issues pertaining to children's learning. Kennedy (2001), also a Canadian researcher, examined some of these same issues from the teachers' perspectives. Kennedy focused on the racial identity of Caucasian teachers in Aboriginal schools. She explored the perspectives of four White female teachers, herself one of those teachers, who worked in Aboriginal school settings. In this narrative inquiry, Kennedy focused on the differences between the White teachers and the Aboriginal students through the eyes of the teachers. These four teachers shared their personal stories as they sought to share their identities as White female teachers teaching in Aboriginal schools in Alberta. Kennedy stated, "A teacher's self understanding is expressed in classroom practice and, at the same time, that practice exemplifies a teacher's self understanding" (pp. 14–15). Her research, like mine, uses Connelly and Clandinin's (1988) concept of personal practical

knowledge to explain the teachers' way of knowing in the classroom. Kennedy wrote about the tensions that resulted in the classrooms of each of these teachers. She stated that much of the tension was due to the "demands of curriculum and the need to make sense of what is happening to them [the students] within the raced relations of the classroom" (p. 126). The participants in her study suggested that racial differences between teachers and students need to be acknowledged so that the differences can begin to be opportunities for greater learning rather than tensions that create barriers to learning. The teacher's perspective, highlighted by Kennedy's work in Aboriginal schools located close to an urban metropolis, is helpful to my work that looks more specifically at how teachers deal with the tensions that are created not just by cultural differences, but also by other contextual influences that are found in a Northern Canadian community.

Deyhle and Swisher (1997) conducted an extensive review of research regarding American Indian education. Although this study is nearly 15 years old, I chose to include it here because it is one of the few reviews of research regarding Aboriginal education. In examining the research regarding American Indian students who did not complete their high school education, Deyhle and Swisher determined that the students often cited feelings of alienation, lack of relationships with their teachers, distrust of the school system, and home responsibilities as reasons for leaving school before completion (p. 131). They also determined that a strong adherence to Native language and culture contribute to greater success in schools. Deyhle and Swisher claimed that for American Native children, "difficulties in schools and classrooms are linked to the differences between the home and school culture" (p. 138). They went on to say that a "culturally sensitive curriculum was not the solution or sole key to school success" (p. 137), but it is an essential one. Their findings indicate that,

> The cultural differences in beliefs, attitudes, and behaviours are usually manifested in communication patterns, interactional styles, and social values. Many Indian students come to school with learning and

> interactional styles that are very different from the style of learning and interaction they encounter in the classroom. Not only are students faced with learning new concepts, but they also become participants in a new cultural context. (Deyhle & Swisher, 1997, p. 138)

Deyhle and Swisher's (1997) findings inform my study in two important ways. First, they provide additional argument for the importance of the relationships between students and teachers. "For teachers who care enough to watch and listen and who have high expectations of their Indian students, the educational experience is a positive one for both teachers and students" (Deyhle & Swisher, p. 150). Second, similar to Heath (1983), Lensmire (1994), and Dyson (1997), Dehlye and Swisher suggested that schools should embrace the idea of cultural differences and consider these differences as strengths to the classroom curriculum. "We believe in an environment that communicates the fact that cultural differences are strengths and not deficiencies is the first step in addressing the educational needs of American Indian/Alaskan Native and Canadian Indian students" (p. 139).

Nieto (2010a) also explored teaching in nonmainstream setting from the teachers' perspectives. Her work is based on her many years of working with teachers in cultural and social diverse classrooms in low socioeconomic urban areas in the United States. In many circumstances, she worked with teachers who did not share the same cultural and language background or social experiences as the students in the class. She viewed teachers as having the essential but challenging role of building the classroom curriculum based on the experiences and background of the students. In her words, "There are no easy answers, no pre-packaged programs that can fix the uncertainties that teachers encounter every day" (p. xii). Nieto argued that the effectiveness of teachers is influenced by the context in which they teach. Nieto suggested that teachers of culturally diverse students are effective if they place a high value on the students' culture and identity, connect learning to the lives of the students, have high expectations of

students, stay committed to the students even when obstacles get in the way, create a safe learning environment, are resilient to difficult situations, use active learning strategies, view themselves as lifelong learners, and care about and respect their students.

Summary of Background and Purpose

Guided by a social constructivist view, this study explores the influence of the Northern Canadian context as teachers use their personal practical knowledge to build a classroom language arts curriculum. Teachers' practices and ongoing knowledge develop through social negotiation, dialogical interactions, reflection, experience, and exposure to learning opportunities and spaces.

I view teachers as important agents in the development of their classroom language arts curriculum and their teaching practice. Teachers have the important role of constructing and enacting a classroom language arts curriculum that integrates their own experiences, the lived experiences of the students, the contexts, and the subject matter.

As Feiman-Nemser (2008) suggested, we need more insight into the work of teachers in cultural and educational settings different from those in mainstream urban centres. I agree with Laderoute (2005) that the time is right to look at educational experiences in Northern Canadian communities with the purpose of bettering our understanding of what it is like to teach and learn in these communities and to find ways to support teachers and students in these contexts. Similar to the work of Elbaz (1983), my study explores the classroom curriculum from the perspective of the teacher.

Chapter 3. Methodology: Seeing Big

This research is a qualitative case study of how four teachers in one northern Canadian community view the influence of northern contexts on their language arts teaching practices. As a case study researcher, I was drawn to Maxine Greene's (1995) notion of "seeing big and seeing small." My objective was to see big, to view teaching and learning through the eyes of the four participating teachers.

> To see things or people small, one chooses to see from a detached point of view, to watch behaviours 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 view 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, the uncertainties they face. When applied to schooling, the vision that sees things big brings us in close contact with details and with particularities that cannot be reduced to statistics or even to the measurable. (Greene, 1995, p. 10)

As described in Chapter 2, this study views the teacher as central to the construction of the classroom language arts curriculum. To view classroom curriculum from the point of view of each of the participants in the midst of the northern community in which they teach is to see big (Greene, 1995). To see big is to be in close contact with the participants in their environment, which is how this case study was conducted. The goal of this case study is not to generalize or reduce the findings to statistical information, but to explore language arts teaching practices and the influence of the northern community and the provincially mandated curriculum framework: to see teaching from the perspective of the four teachers.

In the first section of this chapter, I provide an introduction to qualitative case study research. In the second section, I discuss the selection of the research site and the participants. The third section describes the process and the sources of data collection, including the challenges of scheduling and the role of the researcher. The fourth section describes the data analysis process.

Qualitative Case Study Research

Qualitative researchers are interested in understanding the meaning that people have constructed of the world and their experiences in it. "Qualitative researchers stress the socially constructed nature of reality, the intimate relationship between the researcher and what is studied, and the situational restraints that shape inquiry" (Denzin & Lincoln, 2005, p. 14). Qualitative research provides an in-depth exploration of the research question. "Qualitative researchers are interested in understanding how people interpret their experiences, how they construct their worlds, and what meaning they attribute to their experiences" (Merriam, 2009, p. 5). Gay and Araisian (2000) stated that qualitative research includes

> taking into account contextual factors in the settings the research participants inhabit; collecting data from a small number of purposefully selected participants; and using nonnumerical interpretive approaches to provide narrative descriptions of the participants and their contexts. (p. 25)

"In general, case studies are the preferred strategy when 'how' or 'why' questions are being posed, when the investigator has little control over events, and when the focus is on contemporary phenomenon within some real life context" (Yin, 2003, p.1). As stated in Chapter 1, the purpose of this case study is to explore, from the point of view of the participating teachers, how they experience teaching in a northern context and how the northern contexts influence the

development of their personal practical knowledge and their language arts curriculum.

As explained in Chapter 1, there is little research regarding teaching and the influence of contexts in Northern Canadian communities. Most of the research regarding teaching is conducted in mainstream North American urban schools or settings. Merriam (1998) suggested that case studies are useful for providing information about areas or issues where there is little available research.

A case study is "an empirical inquiry that investigates a contemporary phenomenon within its real-life context, especially when the boundaries between phenomenon and context are not clearly evident" (Yin, 2003, p. 13). Yin's statement is an apt description of the circumstances of my doctoral research. My case study explores teacher knowledge and professional learning in a northern context. "Thick description, experiential understanding, and multiple realities are expected in qualitative case studies" (Stake, 1995, p. 43).

One defining feature of a case study is that the object of study, or the case, is a "bounded system" (Stake, 1995, p. 2), and the findings cannot be generalized beyond its specific situation. The goal of this case study regarding the influence of the northern contexts and the provincially mandated ELA Framework on the teaching practices of four language arts teachers in one northern community will be, as Stake (1998) claimed, "not to represent the world, but to represent the case" (p. 104). The primary goal of this case study research is to understand, as thoroughly as possible, this one case. The primary goal of this case study is to understand the influence of the northern contexts on the language arts teaching practices of four teachers. I use a case study in order to maximize what can be learned from this one case of four teachers in one northern community.

Research Site and Participant Selection

Selecting a research site involved a series of steps. First, I identified a potential Northern Canadian school division that serves a large number of

northern schools in many diverse communities. The mission statement of this particular school division states it will use research to guide decision making and values professional development. I forwarded an extensive information package to the chief superintendent that included my research proposal, letters of information for administrators and participating teachers, and the University of Alberta ethics approval. Following a discussion of the research proposal by a divisional committee consisting of the chief superintendent, the area superintendents, and other administrative personnel, I was granted permission to conduct my research in one of the division's schools.

My criteria for site selection required that the administration of the selected school is committed to professional development and ongoing learning for teachers through their policies, actions, and learning opportunities. On this basis, a specific school was selected. I have changed the name of the school to Wagana to protect the identity of the school and those who teach and learn there.

Participant selection.

My criteria for selecting the individual teachers required them to

- Be considered by their administrators as effective language arts teachers
- Consider themselves as ongoing learners who strive to find ways to meet the challenges of their students
- Have been teaching in the same northern community for two or more years

Four potential participants, representing a range of grades and recognized by their division as exemplary language arts teachers, were recommended by the administrators. I sent information letters and consent forms to be signed by each of the four participants and the two school administrators. Once the consent forms were signed and returned to me, the school administrators and I arranged dates for my visits to the school.

The four teachers were Mae, Faith, Melody, and Andrea.[2] Mae was a kindergarten teacher with 23 years of experience in the school. Faith was a Grade 5 and 6 teacher with 3 years of experience in the school and originally from the community. Melody was teaching high school English and had been in the school for 8 years. Andrea taught Grade 8 and had 5 years of experience in the school. These teachers were familiar with each other. Some worked closely together while others did not.

Originally, I had requested elementary grade teachers; however, the school considered Melody, a teacher who had previously taught elementary grades and was recently teaching high school language arts, to be an excellent match to the selection criteria. Consequently, she was selected and proved to be very helpful in providing information and data regarding both her current position as well as her previous positions as an elementary teacher. This slight shift in criteria is an example of how case study research is not a clearly defined step-by-step process. The protocols and procedures shift and change depending upon the situation and the participants.

Data Collection

Data for case studies come from multiple sources (Yin, 2003). Stake (1995) claimed that case study researchers must "try to understand . . . how the people being studied, see things" (p. 12). When considering data sources, I considered how best to explore multiple realities in a way that would allow me to *see big* (Greene, 1995). I considered data sources that would provide the most authentic and realistic view of teaching from the perspective of the teachers. I considered how I might obtain the most detailed descriptions of teaching from the participants' point of view. I also considered the conceptual framework of this study, teacher personal practical knowledge. As described in Chapter 2, a

[2] Each teacher's name is a pseudonym.

teacher's personal practical knowledge is often tacit knowledge, and teachers are often not used to articulating such knowledge (Meijer et al., 1999). I decided that in order to gain the teachers' perspectives, to see big, and to explore multiple realities, I needed to talk to the teachers, individually and together. I wanted to observe them and their interactions with one another and provide opportunities for them to articulate their knowledge of teaching. I decided on the following main sources of data:

- On-site observations documented through field notes
- Semistructured interviews with each teacher
- Group meetings with the four teachers
- Artifacts from the group meetings (poetry, lists, diagrams, charts, concept maps)

My data sources include several individual interviews with each of the four teachers and group meetings with the four teachers. The interviews and group meetings are described in detail later in this chapter. I also included direct observation in the school and community and wrote these observations in the form of field notes. My observations were intended to add detail to the description of the community and the school. Because the group meetings often generated some type of artifact such charts, diagrams, lists, poems, or sketches, these artifacts also became data. In addition, I have some email conversations with the participants and some personal reflections that I wrote during and after my on-site visits.

Scheduling.

Scheduling visits to the school was challenging. I planned my visits to the school to be once a month over three consecutive months, with each visit being 1 week in duration. My on-site visits were scheduled on September 14–18, October 13–16, and November 2–6, 2009.

I had to travel a long distance by air and car and arrange for local accommodation so I could be at the school on a daily basis. Because accommodation for visitors is not available in the research community, I made arrangements to stay in the closest town, a drive of approximately one hour. I worked with the school administration to try to ensure that my visits did not interfere with visits from consultants or other divisional personnel. My visits were also scheduled around the school calendar of events and the individual teacher's calendars.

During each 1-week school visit, I met with individual teachers as often as time permitted. We usually managed to meet individually at least three or four times during each of the 3 weeks. We were usually able to schedule two group meetings during each visit. Our individual meetings lasted from 30 minutes to an hour and a half. Our group meetings generally lasted an hour and a half. All the meetings were audio recorded.

I found myself adapting to the school environment from the onset. I was careful to adjust my visits and interviews around the busy schedule of the participants. In spite of the careful planning, participating teachers were occasionally absent or unavailable during prescheduled meeting times. For example, on one occasion, one of the teachers and I had arranged a 7:30 a.m. meeting; however, the meeting had to be cancelled because an unexpected snowstorm made the roads too treacherous for travel. I was unable to drive from the location where I was staying to the school due to the road conditions and as a result had to reschedule the planned meeting.

On several occasions, unexpected school events would occur and the teachers and I had to rearrange meeting times. On other occasions, finding a quiet space to conduct group meetings or to have individual conversations was challenging. The school was a busy place and in spite of the fact that the visits were prearranged, there were many times when flexibility and adaptation were

necessary. There were some days my time with the individual teachers was limited simply because of other commitments the teachers had.

The participating teachers were very flexible and would often meet with me during their scheduled school breaks, after school, and before classes began in the mornings. Our group sessions were usually scheduled for the last hour and a half of the day. This was one teacher's scheduled preparation time that she willingly gave up. For the others, it meant having to make alternative arrangements for their classes in order to participate in the group meetings. Making arrangements for someone else to supervise the classrooms proved to be challenging at times, as there are few substitute teachers in this northern community and it is difficult to arrange for an educational assistant who can supervise the class. I was pleased that the four original participants remained committed to this research in spite of the amount of their time that was required.

While on-site, my main goal was to conduct semistructured interviews with the teachers individually and to meet with them as a group. (See section on individual interviews later in this chapter for a discussion of the semistructured interviews and group sessions) However, when I was not meeting with the teachers, I would drive and walk around the community of Wagana making observations that focused on the environment to help me understand what the teachers were referring to when they discussed the local community. I also walked around the school and made notes that might later help me understand the school setting as the teachers described it. My observations in the community and school were also helpful in developing my own description of the community and school as a researcher. I spent time in the kindergarten class on several different occasions, twice early in the morning, four times at lunchtime, and four times at the end of the day. I also visited the other three classrooms, but not for extended periods during class time. I dropped into the Grade 5 and 6 classroom at the beginning of three different mornings. I was in the Grade 8 and the high school English classrooms only at the end of the day or between periods to see the

classrooms or to talk with the teachers. I often visited the staffroom, the library, the office area, and the corridors of the school. Again, the purpose of these observations was to help me interpret what the teachers were telling me in the interviews.

Role of the researcher.

As the researcher in this qualitative case study, I was the primary instrument for data collection and analysis. Yin (2003) stated that the term "participant observer" originates from ethnographic research. Being a participant-observer meant spending time in the research site. The notion of participation is important because as an observer, I interacted with the people in the school and in the community. I spent time at the research site making and recording observations.

In my previous position as a consultant, I had experienced some of the opportunities and challenges of working in a northern context; therefore, I was able to identify with and be responsive to the experiences of the participants. Although I was not actively involved in the day-to-day teaching activities and did not intentionally facilitate professional learning opportunities during this research, I participated as an observer in some school activities such as a tepee ceremony[3], two different student assemblies, several informal gatherings of the staff and administration in the staffroom, and a very brief morning staff meeting.

According to Stake (1995), qualitative case study research requires an ongoing interpretive researcher role.

> Given intense interaction of the researcher with persons in the field and elsewhere, given a constructivist orientation to knowledge, given the attention to participant intentionality and sense of self, however

[3] This ceremony took place in a tepee erected in the school yard by the Ojibwa people in the community. A local community member told me that the tepee ceremony was based on an Ojibwa tradition that celebrates the interconnectedness of the four seasons.

> descriptive the report, the researcher ultimately comes to offer a personal view. (Stake, 1995, p. 42)

Given the centrality that Stake described, I did not assume that I was invisible while I was in the school.

As a case study researcher, I was continually self-assessing my data gathering approach and reviewing my data through journaling and reflection. I was constantly making decisions regarding when to ask more questions, when to probe more deeply, and when to move on to other areas of discussion. I continually questioned my data. My analysis at this point consisted of reviewing the data and making some tentative categories of information. As I reviewed the data, I asked new questions based on the previous questions and responses. Having spent close to 30 years working as an educator, I am usually comfortable in schools settings; however, returning to the school setting as a researcher was, at least in the beginning, uncomfortable. The discomfort was due in part to my anxiety about my skills as a researcher as well as my unfamiliarity with my role as a researcher. There was a benefit to this uncomfortable feeling, as it made me more keenly aware of my surroundings and more observant than I might otherwise have been. Being uncomfortable also caused me to continually review and question my data, my interview technique, and my ideas for facilitating the group sessions. This continual self-questioning and reflection was of great benefit in developing my interview questions and the group session conversation activators.

Being an excellent communicator is an essential requirement for case study researchers. "A good communicator empathises with respondents, establishes good rapport, asks good questions, and listens intently" (Merriam, 1998, p. 23). My previous experiences as both a teacher and a consultant led me to believe that I would be a good communicator in a research situation. However, I quickly learned that communicating as a researcher is much different than communicating as a teacher or as a consultant. I found myself in unfamiliar

territory and was continually questioning my technique as a researcher. I continually strived to be observant, to pay attention, and to look "inquiringly and wonderingly on the world in which one lives" (Greene, 1973, p. 267).

After each day in the school, I returned to my room to listen to the interviews and conversations, not to begin data analysis, but to hear myself: how I asked questions, responded or waited, probed, explored, or changed direction, and how attentively I listened. Did I interrupt or allow sufficient time for the teachers' stories of their experiences? Merriam (1998) wrote that "hearing what is not explicitly stated but only implied, as well as noting the silence . . . is an important component of being a good listener" (p. 23). Were my questions open-ended and sufficiently exploratory to allow for sharing personal experiences and stories? I learned much by analyzing my technique and was able to continually improve my questioning skills. Careful, thoughtful listening is essential when conducting individual interviews and group conversations. As Seidman (2006) suggested, "listening is the most important skill for interviewing" (p. 78). Based on my experience, I knew it was an important skill in facilitating group sessions as well. Seidman went on to say that a researcher needs to listen on at least three levels. Researchers must listen to what the participant is saying, listen to the participant's inner voice, and remain aware of the process and substance of the conversation.

I also needed to observe the body language of the participants as I listened. For example, one day I noticed that one of the teachers appeared more anxious than usual. After a few minutes, she kept looking at her watch. When I asked her if something was wrong, she sighed and remarked that it was not a good day because her educational assistant was absent and her students had gone to the gym without the assistant. She was uncomfortable because her class was disruptive during the morning and she felt she needed to be with them. We immediately ended the interview and scheduled another time when she was more comfortable and less distracted.

From my previous work as a consultant and in my research for my Master of Education degree, I knew that establishing trust and comfort with the participants was essential in order to be able to gain an understanding of the participants' perspectives. Seidman (2006) claimed that when an interview is conducted in a manner that creates an environment of trust, it can be a "powerful way to gain insight into educational and other important social issues through understanding the experience of the individuals whose lives reflect those issues" (p. 14).

I was constantly aware of the need to establish a trusting and empathetic rapport with the participants. The participants, by agreeing to be part of the research, were trusting that I, as the researcher, would be sensitive to their thoughts, experiences, and ideas. In this study, it was important to develop a sense of trust and respect with each of the individual teachers. It was also important to develop a sense of trust and respect among the whole group: researcher and participants. I observed that the combination of individual interviews and group sessions helped to make the teachers more comfortable with me as a researcher. The teachers knew that I was somewhat familiar with northern schools and northern communities, being aware of my previous experiences as a language arts consultant who travelled to many northern schools on a regular basis. My previous experiences helped me develop trust with my participants and to plan activities that would generate discussion.

Right from the beginning, particularly in the group sessions, there was a lot of laughter and much conversation. Many times the participants remarked how much they enjoyed the opportunity to come together and talk about teaching and learning and about their thoughts and ideas. They often indicated that these group meetings as well as the individual conversations were a rare opportunity for them to spend time talking about teaching, listening to others, and reflecting on their teaching and learning experiences. The development of trust led to a rich dialogue about the issues and concerns of the participants and helped me to pose questions

that were likely to solicit meaningful information about teaching and learning from the teachers' perspectives.

On-site observations.

Creswell (2005) defined observation as a process of collecting and recording first-hand information about people and places in the research setting. Although my main goal was to talk to the teachers in order to gain their perspectives about language arts teaching in Wagana, I also wanted to see the school and community for myself. During each of my three weeklong on-site visits, I spent time exploring the school by wandering around and talking with students, parents, and staff. I also walked and drove around the community to see the community through my own eyes.

September 14–18, 2009 was my first on-site visit. On the first day, I met with the administrators to outline some of my plans and to hear from them what plans had been made for meeting with the teachers individually and in a group. The vice principal showed me a small room off the main corridor of the school that she thought would be suitable for the individual interviews. I also met briefly with each teacher during the first afternoon. This first meeting was not an interview; it was an introduction and explanation of the research. For the remainder of the first week, much of the time was spent in interviews or group sessions. However, I had several hours on the second day to explore the community. I walked by the teachers' houses, other homes, and by the lake. I also visited the community general store and post office, noting what they looked like on the inside and who was frequenting these community places.

During that first week at the school, I spent time between interviews and group meetings to explore the school. The administrators were very welcoming and suggested that I could wander around the school, but not into classrooms unless invited by the teacher. I visited the library, gymnasium, and staffroom. I also spent time in the corridors of the school. I often shadowed the four

participating teachers during meetings, informal gatherings such as recess, lunch, and day-to-day activities in the school. For example, during the first week in September, I joined the kindergarten and the Grade 5 and 6 teachers outside on the playground at recess for three of the mornings during the first week. I was not sure what I would notice on these playground visits, but I thought it would give me an opportunity to visit informally with Mae and Faith. Also during this first week, I joined Melody and Andrea during the afternoon break between classes in the corridors as they talked to students. I either ate my lunch in the staffroom or joined the kindergarten class.

During my October visit, I again spent some of my time between interviews and group meetings, exploring the school and community. In October, I drove around the community to find locations that teachers had talked about such as the Holistic Centre and the Adult Education Centre. In October, I attended a school celebration event in the gymnasium. All teachers and students attended. There were presentations of awards and entertainment by various students. I recorded all my observations in the school and community as field notes and audio recorded all conversations and interviews. My field notes also included the activities and events that I noticed taking place in the school and community that could influence the school atmosphere on days when I was visiting. I noted who was visiting in the school and the kinds of activities that involved students and teachers. In November, for example, the ceremonial tepee was set up in the school yard by the lake, and many students and teachers were going back and forth from the tepee to the school. There were often outdoor activities taking place during each of my visits as well as extracurricular indoor activities such as the art club and the music practices.

The field notes were used to help add relevant information to the interview conversations and the group activities. For example, when the teachers talked about the ceremonial tepee, I had seen it on the school yard and subsequently had the opportunity to visit it. To have participated in the celebration assembly helped

me to understand when one of the teachers talked about the importance of celebrations for her students. Exploring the school and community helped me to understand the daily context of the school environment.

At the end of each day I also audio recorded my daily reflections. My reflections, observations, and field notes helped me to know more about the school and community. By reading through my observations of the community, I had a better sense of the places the teachers talked about.

Individual interviews.

> "If you want to know how people understand their world and their lives, why not talk to them?" (Kvale & Brinkmann, 2009, p. xvii)

In line with the social constructivist paradigm of this research, I conducted qualitative research interviews that were as Kvale and Brinkmann (2009) suggested, "a production site of knowledge." They further stated that "knowledge is actively created through questions and answers" (p. 54). Kvale and Brinkmann posited that the data gained from interviews are "produced, relational, conversational, contextual, linguistic, narrative, and pragmatic" (p. 53). They further claimed that an interview is "a conversation that has a structure and a purpose" (p. 3).

The purpose of my interviews was to help me better understand how the teaching practices of the teachers in Wagana were influenced by the northern contexts. I also wanted to know how these teachers used the ELA Framework as they constructed their classroom language arts curriculum. I wanted to explore language arts teaching in Wagana through the eyes of these four teachers and to do that I had to talk to them extensively.

Between September and November during my three on-site visits to Wagana School, I conducted 9 to 12 interviews with each of the four participating teachers. During my first visit, I met with each of the four teachers three or four times for periods of 30 to 90 minutes. We met at various times during the day, and

in the case of one teacher, who had no preparation time and spent the lunch hour with her students, I arranged to drive her back to her home community at the end of each day so that we could talk along the way. We set up the audio recorder and chatted for an hour as we drove back to her community. The other teachers often relinquished their scheduled preparation time and sometimes made arrangements to have another teacher or an educational assistant manage their classroom while they talked with me.

In preparing for the first on-site session, I followed Kvale and Brinkmann's (2009) guidelines for "semi-structured life world interviews." They contended that semistructured life world interviews attempt "to understand themes of the everyday world from the subjects' own perspectives" (p. 27). My interviews were conducted "according to an interview guide that focuses on certain themes and may include suggested questions" (p. 27). For my first and second set of interviews, I developed open-ended questions that were designed to explore the research focus with each of the participants. (see Appendix A for the interview questions).

Seidman (2006) suggested beginning with a few "grand tour" questions and then following up on the stories, ideas, topics, or themes opened by these general questions. Although it was important for me as a beginning researcher to have a list of questions, I also realized that the objective of the interviews was not just to get answers to the questions, but also to learn about the experiences and ideas of the participants. Because this study is about the perspective of the participants, I attempted to generate questions that might work as prompts to help the participants engage in stories and reflections about their experiences and their knowledge about teaching and learning in their current (and perhaps previous) northern context. During some of the interviews, I followed my questions closely, while at other times the interview resembled what Bogden and Biklen (1992) referred to as "a conversation between two trusting parties" (p. 97).

For my first visit in September, I had two objectives. First, I wanted the teachers to develop a sense of comfort and trust with me as a researcher. Second, I wanted to get to know the teachers and find out as much as I could about what it is like for them to teach language arts in Wagana. In other words, I wanted to focus on them as teachers and individuals in this particular northern community. In September, my questions focussed on the teacher, the community, each teacher's approach to teaching language arts, her language arts program, and her interpretation and understanding of the English language arts provincial curriculum framework.

To conduct the individual interviews, I was assigned a small room along the main corridor in the school that was private and relatively quiet. Only on occasion did a child open the door to see what we were doing. Often, however, the room was needed for other meetings and the teachers and I had to relocate to various corners and impromptu meeting areas around the school. I audio recorded each interview and immediately following recorded my thoughts and reflections.

As I developed my interview questions, I tested them by interviewing a university professor who had previously taught in a northern community. She not only answered the questions but also provided feedback on them. In spite of this preparation, I discovered as I conducted the interviews that the individual participants responded to the questions differently. I realized that different questions offered opportunities for different responses from each teacher. For example, what seemed like a thought-provoking question for one teacher was not as provoking for another, eliciting only a minimal response. However, the questions did serve as a guide for our conversations and also as a catalyst for further probing questions for each teacher. I tried, as Seidman (2006) suggested, to "listen hard to assess the progress of the interview and to stay alert for cues about how to move the interview forward" (p. 79). The ideas and reflections of the teachers became the springboard for other questions. Interviewing became

easier and more comfortable for the teachers as well as for me as the days progressed and as the teachers and I became more familiar with each other.

I found taking notes during the interviews to be disruptive to my concentration. As a result, after the teacher left at the conclusion of the interview, I made notes while the conversation was fresh in my mind. I noted whether or not the teacher seemed relaxed or anxious, tired or energized. I noted some of the body language and the facial expressions that I had observed as we were talking. I also made notes at the end of each week of research as I listened again to the interviews and group meetings. These notes included my personal reflections as well as some preliminarily thoughts on classification and categorization of the findings.

Throughout the September visit, I learned a great deal about each teacher, her perspective of the community and her language arts program. I began to get a glimpse of the teacher as a language arts teacher in Wagana.

During my second visit to the research site, October 13–16, 2009, my questions focussed on each teacher's perspectives regarding the context of the community and its influence on her teaching practices (see Appendix A for the questions). I asked about each teacher's understanding and knowledge of teaching and learning, and the kinds of learning opportunities and experiences that supported her as a language arts teacher in this community. I was again able to meet with each teacher three or four times during my second on-site visit. By this time we had settled into a routine.

My third and final on-site visit was November 2–6, 2009. After the first and second visit, I listened to the audio recordings and thought about questions that I had not asked or ideas or comments that I wanted to clarify with the teachers. Therefore, some of the questions that I asked were for specific clarification, such as in the case of Melody, whom I asked to tell me more about her literature circles, specifically about choosing books. I also realized that several of the teachers had talked about relationships, and I wanted to hear more

about relationships with students, parents, and others in the school and community. We also talked about the school environment and various places in the school and community the teachers frequented and the reasons they frequented them.

I also used the individual interviews to further explore ideas that had been generated in group sessions. For example, in the first November group meeting, the teachers began to talk about teachers having a special knowledge that comes with being in the classroom. Although we explored this idea in the group session, I wanted the teachers to tell me more about their thoughts on this, so I used the next interview I had with them to explore this idea of teacher knowledge further.

As a result of this research, I learned much about the process of interviewing. I was reminded that interviews are cumulative. I was glad to have the questions as a guideline to keep me focussed on the information and ideas I was exploring.

One interview often established the context for the next interview. I learned to listen carefully and to focus less on the questions that I thought I wanted to ask and focus more on the participants' responses. I became more adept at allowing their responses to guide the subsequent questions. In the beginning I found it difficult to resist the urge to intervene and say something when a silence occurred. I came to realize that those silences were golden opportunities for the participant to reflect on her responses and to consider her ideas thoughtfully. By allowing these silences and this time to think, I also created an increased level of comfort in the interview situations for me and for the participants. I solicited additional information to accompany responses by asking for examples or stories to illustrate ideas and points. I learned that regardless of how thorough I thought my questions were, there were additional questions I wished I had asked as I listened to their responses at the end of each set of interviews. After the first and second set of interviews, I was glad that I was still able to pose more questions.

However, after the last visit, as I continued to transcribe and listen to the teachers' voices, there were questions I wished I had asked.

Group meetings.

In addition to the individual interviews, I conducted a series of group meetings with the four teachers. I had several reasons for conducting interactive group meetings as well as individual interviews. First, case studies generally use more than one source of data (Yin, 2003). I considered the group sessions as a source of data that would help to confirm or add to the data collected through the individual interviews. Focus groups can be used to add information to people's opinions and perspectives and to verify a researcher's interpretation of data from interviews (Morgan, 1997; Vaughn, Shay Shum, & Singagub, 1996). The data from my group meetings added to the ideas and perspectives that the teachers and I discussed in the interviews. The data from the group meetings also helped to verify my interpretation of data from the interviews (Morgan, 1997; Vaughn et al., 1996).

Second, I considered my social constructivist stance and my previous experiences as a teacher and a consultant. I wanted to provide teachers with the opportunity to construct meaning of their language arts teaching and the influence of the northern contexts with others. "As researchers our stances, our angles of repose, do affect what we are interested in, the questions we ask, the foci of our study, and the methods of collection as well as the substance of analysis" (Ely, Vinz, Downing, & Anzul, 1997, p. 38). I wanted the teachers to interact with one another as they talked about being a language arts teacher in the northern community of Wagana. I wanted to observe these interactions and to see and hear how teachers constructed meaning of their teaching practices in a group situation.

Third, I was influenced by the literature on two types of groups in qualitative research: collaborative inquiry groups (Cochran-Smith & Lytle, 2009; Wells, 2009) and focus groups (Morgan, 1997; Vaughn et al., 1996). Through my

work as an educational consultant, I had experience with collaborative learning and inquiry groups. Although this study did not involve action research, the concept of collaborative inquiry groups (Cochran-Smith & Lytle, 2009) influenced my decision to include interactive group meetings as part of the data collection.

Vaughn, Shay Shum, & Singagub (1996) stated that "the best procedure for obtaining people's feelings and opinions is through a structured group conversation" (p. 7). I had a focus for each group meeting and I structured discussions and interactive tasks based on that focus. The advantages of focus groups lie in the group dynamics. Group dynamics create a synergism that leads to a wider range of data. The group's dynamics also involve the concept of snowballing, where one participant's comments will elicit comments from others. Group discussion can also generate an excitement about the discussion topic, and the group provides comfort and security for the participants (Vaughn et al., 1996). In planning the group meetings, I was hoping to see these same advantages.

The fourth reason for conducting group meetings was to increase the comfort between the teachers and me, the beginning researcher. The group meetings provided all of us an opportunity to become comfortable with one another. The teachers appeared confident and comfortable when they were together in a group, and as a result they got to know me better and to feel more at ease sharing their thoughts with me.

In planning the group meetings my goal was to facilitate interactive discussions regarding teaching language arts in Wagana. I was cognizant of the need to try to make the meetings a comfortable, safe, trusting space for interaction and discussion. I also wanted to encourage alternative ways for the teachers to represent their ideas in ways other than only open-ended discussion (Eisner, 1997). I considered visual representations as well as various forms of writing. Eisner stated that alternative forms of representation can be used to "shape experience and enlarge understanding" and "to illuminate rather than obscure the

message" (p. 8). Because I had successfully used Eisner's ideas of alternative forms of representing ideas as a teacher and as a consultant with groups of teachers, I was hopeful and reasonably confident that this approach would elicit useful data from the participants. I tried to incorporate ways for the teachers to purposely put their thoughts and ideas into forms of writing or visual representations to create a source of data to add to the audio recordings. Meijer et al. (1999) pointed out that visual representation is "a research technique for capturing and graphically representing concepts and their interrelationships" (p. 62).

The group meetings generated much discussion and provided many artifacts that became valuable data. The teachers were enthusiastic about the group meetings and did not miss any. They encouraged each other to share ideas. They listened, laughed, and shared many stories and anecdotes from their teaching experiences. Sometimes they vented their frustrations. Although they disagreed at times with each other and with me, they also built on each other's comments and appeared to work thoughtfully and diligently on every suggested activity or task. When I listened to the recordings after the sessions were done, I was struck by the humour and laughter that the teachers brought to the discussions. Humour and laughter became an integral part of our group sessions.

Our first group meeting in September, focused on teaching language arts in Wagana. I began with introductions because these teachers did not all know each other well even though they had worked in the same school for a number of years. To get ideas flowing and to get the teachers thinking about language arts, I asked them to work in pairs to generate a list of words and phrases to describe language arts teaching in their classroom. This idea was one that I had used in classrooms and with teacher groups before. In my experience, it was a good way to generate ideas and to initiate a focused conversation between two people. Besides getting the ideas flowing, I also wanted the teachers to talk to one another about their language arts teaching so they could begin to identify any ideas,

approaches, or beliefs they might have in common. After a few minutes of complete, contemplative silence, during which the teachers appeared to be engaged in thought, they suddenly began talking to each other. The teachers talked, laughed, and shared stories for the next several minutes. As they discussed the lists as a group, the teachers continued to share their experiences related to language arts teaching in Wagana.

We then embarked on a second activity. I asked each teacher to record individually on sticky notes as many responses as possible to the following: "My language arts program would be more successful, if only . . . ." This idea is based on a strategy called "list-group-label" (Taba, 1967). Again, it was an idea I used previously with teacher groups and in my university classes to focus participants on thinking specifically about an idea or concept. In this case, I wanted the teachers to think about their language arts programs. The intent was to uncover the ideas, experiences, resources, and opportunities that might enhance the teaching of language arts in Wagana. Once again, the teachers laughed, shared a few brief stories, and then began the task of writing their individual comments on their sticky notes. I was able to circulate to see the kinds of comments that were being written. I noticed various facial expressions that seemed to be looks of concern, concentration, an occasional smile, and lots of thoughtful expressions. After the teachers had several minutes of thinking and writing ideas on sticky notes, I asked them to come together as a group to categorize their ideas by grouping those that were similar or had a common theme. The purpose was to identify the ideas they had in common. The sharing generated more discussion among the teachers as they worked through the process. The teachers created a large chart by sorting the sticky notes into groups and using a marker to label each group as a separate category. In response to my questions, they described their rationale for placing each idea into the assigned category. They were coconstructing meaning and I later analysed their discussions and charts as data.

During my second site visit, in October, we met twice as a group. The focus of this second set of group meetings was to delve further into each teacher's practices and experiences regarding language arts in this northern context and to explore how teachers find ways to support their language arts teaching.

I had previously asked the teachers to bring something that exemplified them as a teacher in this community at this time. For this idea, I was once again thinking of Eisner's (1997) idea of representing knowledge in alternative ways. I also thought it would add to the data by providing a representational source of information about the teachers. We began the first of these two group meetings with each teacher taking a turn presenting her artifact to the rest of the group. As each teacher shared how she viewed herself as a language arts teachers in Wagana, the rest of us listened, asked questions, laughed, empathized, and sometimes shed a few tears. The artifacts are described and explained in Chapter 4. The discussion of the artifacts set the stage for further exploration about being a language arts teacher in Wagana. I asked each teacher to generate a list titled "How to be a language arts teacher in Wagana." Each teacher worked on her list of ideas for several minutes. During this time, I circulated among the teachers and looked at the lists. Based on the chuckling from the teachers, they appeared to enjoy this activity.

Finally, I asked them to participate in a writing activity that I had prepared based on a type of poetry I have used previously with both practising and preservice teachers. The idea was originally introduced to me through the Write Traits Program (2001). The idea is to create a "how to" poem that illustrates the main ideas of how to be or do something. From my previous experience, I thought the activity would provoke thinking and discussion and would also provide some written documentation to add to my data regarding how the teachers saw themselves as language arts teachers in Wagana. We talked about how to create these "How To" poems. The teachers worked as partners to create poems called "How to be a Language Arts Teacher in Wagana." During this writing task, the

teachers talked more about teaching in Wagana, laughing and continuing to share experiences. These poems are shared in Chapter 5 of this dissertation

The next group meeting focused on opportunities and resources that the teachers found helpful or supportive to them as language arts teachers in Wagana. When planning for this meeting, I struggled with a way to facilitate a discussion about learning that was focussed but open-ended enough to generate discussion about how the teachers in Wagana accessed support for their language arts teaching. I wanted to know who or what helped these teachers with the subject matter aspect of the classroom curriculum. I began this meeting by reading aloud to the participants the book *Grasper* by Paul Owen Lewis (2004). My objective was to stimulate a conversation about learning and language arts teaching. The book did not initially initiate a discussion about teacher knowledge or learning, but it did initiate some personal responses to the idea of personal and professional change. The teachers began their discussion with personal feelings toward professional development situations and experiences. Eventually the discussion turned to opportunities and experiences that lead to shifts and changes in their teaching knowledge and their practice.

At this same meeting, teachers brought and discussed professional resources they used to support their teaching. In the previous group meeting, October 15, 2009, the teachers had referred to some specific resources that they had found helpful in their teaching of language arts and had agreed to bring these and other resources to share at our next group meeting. The teachers also talked about people who had helped them become language arts teachers and experiences that they found helpful in learning to teach language arts.

Following this open-ended discussion, I asked the teachers to each list the key features of professional development that have been effective for them in their current teaching contexts. After each teacher generated a list of key features, I asked them to work in pairs to share their ideas. I then assigned them another writing task, an activity that I have used many times with children, groups of

teachers, and preservice undergraduate teachers. I read to them Margaret Wise Brown's (1949) *The Important Book.* We talked about using the structure of the poems in this book to create similarly structured poems to illustrate the important features of professional development according to each pair of teachers. These writings, called *The Most Important Thing about Professional Learning,*" provide a summary of the teachers' thoughts regarding the professional learning opportunities that are valuable to them. This activity was fruitful in allowing me to better understand the teachers. However, I later realized that the focus of this particular meeting was not as relevant to my research questions as I had originally thought it might be.

We again met twice as a group during my third and final site visit, November 2–6, 2009. Since the October site visit, I had listened to the audio recordings of our previous group meetings and individual interviews. In listening to these previous recordings, I heard teachers talking about places outside their classrooms that created tension. I also heard them talking about the safety and security they experience in their own classrooms. It appeared to me that the teachers had touched on Connelly and Clandinin's (1995) concept of professional knowledge landscapes, a metaphor for the knowledge contexts that teachers inhabit both inside and outside of the classroom.

Because of this connection, I wanted to further explore the idea of professional knowledge landscapes more explicitly with each of them. I also wanted to try an activity that involved something other than writing. I selected the idea of visually mapping the places in the participants' lives that were comfortable and those places that created tension. I was reminded of the mapping technique used by Meijer et al. (1999). In their research on teacher knowledge of reading comprehension, they used a nonstructured procedure and asked teachers to create a map of their ideas. Building on the activity they described, I developed the beginning of a map on a large sheet of paper that I would share as an example.

In our first group meeting of November, I shared my example and I explained that I saw myself in many landscapes, some that created tensions and some that were comfortable places. I had originally thought about having the teachers work on this activity in pairs. However, after some open-ended discussion about the personal and professional places in this school and community, I realized that this was a very personal topic. I gave each participant a large sheet of paper and asked her to begin her own visual map. I suggested they could use symbols, words, pictures, whatever they needed to visually represent places in the school, community, and outside of the community that were places and spaces that were important to them as teachers and learners; places and spaces where they were comfortable or perhaps places and spaces in which they were not comfortable. I allowed about half an hour for them to work quietly on these and gave them opportunity to ask questions and comment to each other and me as they worked. They did not finish these visual maps in the group meeting, so I asked that they finish them on their own and bring their maps to their next individual interview with me. We did not share these as a group because I felt it was important to afford privacy to each teacher when discussing her visual map. Instead, the visual representations were discussed in the individual interviews the following day. Only one of the teachers was willing to let me keep her visual representation. The others did not want them to appear in a dissertation because they were only a "rough sketch of ideas" (Mae, Interview, November 2009). However, they were all willing to show them to me and talk about them. The teachers spent the remainder of the time in that group meeting sharing teaching experiences that had arisen since the last site visit.

We met again as a group the following day, November 3, 2009. I wanted to use this time to explore each teacher's personal, practical knowledge about teaching and learning. We had discussed language arts teaching in our individual interviews and there were many ideas that I was hoping would be repeated or elaborated on in the group meeting. I wanted to confirm or add to the information

that each teacher had shared individually. I also wanted these teachers to have an opportunity to hear what others were saying about teaching language arts. I had begun to notice many similarities and commonalties in the teachers' individual comments and I thought it would help generate more ideas if they shared their ideas with each other. I wanted them to share how they came to teach the way they do and to share what they knew about how students learn. I wanted to understand the underlying assumptions and knowledge from which each teacher worked and how they made decisions about their practice. First, I asked them to reflect on student learning. They were to respond to the statement: "This I know about student learning." As in a previous session, I asked them to record their ideas on sticky notes so they could rearrange them later. After several minutes of recording ideas, I asked them to set aside these notes. I gave out a different colour of sticky notes and asked them to record ideas relating to teacher knowledge by responding to a similar statement: "This I know about teaching."

I then asked them to group their knowledge statements about student learning into categories based on commonalties. As they collectively grouped their ideas and co-composed data, the teachers engaged in a discussion regarding student learning and in particular talked about the opportunities, challenges, and issues that students encounter in this community.

Finally, I asked them to see if they could match their teaching knowledge statements to their student knowledge statements. My reason for combining the two sets of ideas was to see if what they would say as they explored whether their views on student learning were congruent with what they knew about teaching. Based on their initial silence and hesitancy to begin, the combining of these two sets of ideas appeared to be a very challenging and thought provoking task for the participants. It took several minutes before Andrea took one of her thoughts and suggested it would be a good place to start. From that starting point, a lively and lengthy discussion ensued during which the teachers talked about teacher knowledge. They created a very large visual representation in the form of a chart

of categories and statements on a huge sheet of paper. Through this activity, the teachers provided much information about their teaching practices and the influences that shape their teaching knowledge.

Follow-up meeting.

I returned 2 months after my final site visit to meet with the participating teachers for a follow-up discussion while they were attending their annual conference in an urban centre (Follow-up visit, January 21–22, 2010).

During the intervening 2 months, as I transcribed the recorded data that I had collected, I contacted the teachers via email to ask for confirmation and clarification of various ideas that they had expressed in the interviews. When I met with the teachers, I gave each of them a copy of a brief account of some of what I had heard from her regarding her teaching practices. I had written the beginnings of an account of each teacher and her classroom and I wanted them to read it to see if what I was portraying was accurate. I wanted to ensure that my written account matched their perception of themselves as teachers. This meeting was also an opportunity for the teachers to share their reflections regarding their participation in my study. I had emailed each teacher ahead of this meeting and asked them to write a reflection about their experience in this research study. In the email, I provided a few questions that could serve as a basis for their reflections but I also asked them to reflect on any aspect of the research experience that was important to them. I wanted to know what they experience meant to them. I had been reflecting on the experience and what it meant to me and I wondered what the teachers thought. In this follow-up meeting, the teachers discussed their reflections, and each teacher also gave me a written reflection that she had previously prepared.

Data Analysis

> "Qualitative research is a deeply interpretive endeavour" (Ely et al., 1997, p. 160).
>
> "There is no particular moment when data analysis begins" (Stake, 1995, p. 71).

I began thinking about and making tentative analysis of data as soon as I made my first on-site visit and certainly after I conducted my first set of interviews. Data analysis involves making sense of and interpreting the data. I thought about and reviewed my data during my on-site visits as well as between visits and as the amount of data began to grow, I became overwhelmed with the increasingly challenging task of making sense of it all.

Analytic methods differ from researcher to researcher, and making sense of the data requires some way of ordering the details.

> We recognize that there are many approaches to qualitative analysis, and that you are guided to some extent by the conventions within your academic disciplines, by whatever texts you are reading, by your own previous experiences or those of colleagues. We think that it is more important for researchers to understand certain principles underlying qualitative analysis and to adapt approaches as the needs of their own data suggest rather than to attempt to follow any one approach too rigorously. (Ely et al., 1997, p. 163)

For data analysis, I began with a process similar to one described by Stake (1995): classify raw data, begin interpretations, review raw data under various possible interpretations, search for patterns of data, seek linkages . . . , draw tentative conclusion . . . organize final report" (p. 53). I was also influenced by Miles and Huberman's (1998) three stage data analysis: "data reduction, data display, and conclusion drawing/verification" (p. 10). Data reduction is "the process of selecting, focusing, simplifying, abstracting, and transforming the data that appear in written-up field notes or transcription" (p. 10). I soon realized that

data analysis is not a linear process, but a very messy back and forth process of working with the data, writing, highlighting, making lists, charts, and more writing.

Transcribing.

The first step of data analysis was transcribing the interviews, the group meetings, and my recorded reflections. The very act of transcribing is, as Kvale and Brinkmann (2009) suggested, "an interpretive process" (p. 177). The authors also stated that a transcription is "a translation between one narrative mode—oral discourse—into another narrative mode—written discourse" (p. 177). As I transcribed the audio recordings of the individual interviews and made notations in the transcriptions, I was not only able to hear the conversations over again, but I was also able to recall the nuances of each of those conversations, the body language, the circumstances of that particular interview session, the pauses, and the laughter. I also transcribed all of the discussions from the group meetings, and again, in relistening to the conversations, I was able to not only record the discussions, but also to hear again the laughter of the teachers, and the side comments between each pair of teachers as they talked together. It was an effective way to listen in on conversations that I missed the first time while I was focused on the other pair of teachers.

Making sense of the data.

To begin making sense of and interpreting the data, I worked recursively through the data as it was being gathered as well as after, during the post data collection phase. I listened to the audio recordings many times, even after I had completed the transcriptions. I also reread my notes and reflections many times. Using the transcriptions, I embarked on Miles and Huberman's (1998) stage of "data reduction." I attempted to review the data for patterns and themes (Stake, 1995). For example, I looked for patterns such as recurring words, ideas, or

metaphors. I then looked to see if any of these recurring patterns might be the beginnings of a theme or conceptual idea that connected back to the research question and the underlying theories. I began "coding" (Ely et al., 1997) the data by reading and rereading and providing labels by way of notes in the margins to "identify a meaning unit" (Ely et al., 1997, p. 162). I thought of meaning units as words, phrases or sections of the transcripts that seemed to be a segment that held particular meaning for me as the analyser of the data. During my first attempt at doing this, I sorted through the transcripts based upon the focus that I developed for each school visit. For example, my first on-site visit focused on the teachers' perspectives of the school and the community. First I reviewed the transcripts by date of on-site visits. I first examined the interview transcripts and went through them, placing words and phrases in the margins to show the ideas that teachers talked about during each visit. For example, when they talked about the water issue in the community, I put the phrase "water issue" in the margin. When they described feelings of discomfort or situations that created anxiety in the school or the community, I placed "personal tensions" in the margin. During this process, I also placed annotations that referred to my field notes and reflections. The process of going through the transcripts and making notations in the margins helped me to determine some possible patterns or reoccurring ideas from each on-site visit, but it did not go far enough in helping me interpret the data and develop themes or conceptual ideas in relation to the theoretical framework.

As Seidman (2006) suggested, there is not a "model matrix" that one can use while interpreting or making sense of transcripts (p. 118). I decided to look across visits to find ideas that spanned the entire time frame of my research. I was looking to see if I could find the relationships and patterns between and among the visits and the teachers. I reviewed the transcripts of the individual interviews first. I went back and organized the transcripts by teacher. I went through each teacher's interview transcripts and wrote in the margins words or phrases that might later become possible themes or conceptual ideas that related back to my

research questions and theoretical framework. For example, when a teacher talked about her language arts classroom practice, I wrote in the margin what idea or concept was being discussed. One idea that kept recurring was *knowledge of students*. When I went back over my highlighted and marked-up transcripts, I saw some patterns emerging. I reexamined the transcripts and tried to organize the information based upon Elbaz's (1983) five categories of teacher knowledge (see Chapter 2 of this dissertation). I then tried organizing the data according to the categories identified by Meijer et al. (1999).

It was at this point that I realized that by using others' categories as a starting point, I was identifying the categories of teacher knowledge that the participating teachers in this northern community discussed. I identified three main categories emerging from my data and then wrote a summary of each using the teachers' comments from the interviews and the group meetings. "Writing has a significant role in this process of interpreting the data our explorations produce" (Ellis, 1998, p. 6). I found this to be true as I wrote about the categories of teacher knowledge I had identified. This writing helped me to highlight the words the teachers themselves used to talk about their teaching knowledge and their classroom practice. It also helped me to determine what the teachers had said about teacher knowledge and how my data related to that of Elbaz (1983) and also to that of Meijer et al. (1999).

I realized through this writing task that I was repeating ideas over and over because so many ideas were common among all four teachers. I found also that by writing based only upon these categories, I was fragmenting the depiction of each teacher's experiences and not providing the reader with a description of each teacher, her language arts classroom, and her experiences and perceptions of the school and community. I was not honouring the teacher as central to the classroom curriculum as my conceptual framework indicated. What I had done, though, was to find some common categories that led to themes of teacher

knowledge among the four teachers. I would return to these later in my analysis and interpretation. These themes are discussed in Chapter 6.

I reorganized the data once again, according to each teacher. I went through the data many times, looking for the patterns in each teacher's teaching practices and her teacher knowledge. I looked for relationships between my notes and reflections and what each teacher was saying. I talked to myself and had a kind of dialogue with the text in an attempt to understand the teachers and the text. I was, as Merriam (1988) suggested, "holding a conversation with the data" (p. 131). I went through each teacher's transcripts and tried to see each participant as a teacher and a learner.

It was at this point that I began to write a description of each teacher. I started with the artifact that each participant brought to the group meeting to represent herself as a teacher in Wagana. I then went through the interview transcripts to find comments that would help me further describe each teacher. Once I had these descriptions, I was able to think about each teacher as I read through my notes and the transcripts yet again. I placed my research focus on a bulletin board in front of my computer so that the focus was foremost in my mind as I continued to comb through the data. It was with each participant and the research focus foremost in my mind that I began to acquire some clarity. I sat with my notes and the transcripts, my research focus, and the teacher descriptions spread around me on the floor as I reorganized the data yet again, this time in a way that I could write and account of each teacher's language arts classroom practices to highlight how the northern context influences their personal practical knowledge. I was reminded of Stake's (1995) thoughts on analysis when he said, "by reading and rereading the accounts, by deep thinking, then understanding creeps forward" (p. 73).

I constructed a more detailed account of each teacher and her language arts classroom based on what was said in the individual interviews and the group meetings. I began writing different accounts in various ways, until I found a

structure and order that seemed to work for each teacher. This was my attempt to "reduce and display" (Miles & Huberman, 1998) the data. There remained, however, some data that did not quite fit into the individual teacher accounts. As I analysed this data, I found that there were ideas common to the teachers but indirectly related to their classrooms. I concluded that this set of data could be examined through the concept of landscapes outside of the classroom (Clandinin & Connelly, 1995) that influence teachers' personal practical knowledge.

The writing, thinking, rewriting and revisiting the data became my way to stay focussed on the data. It was a way of exploring the meaning before finding a way to communicate it to others. It was my way of constructing meaning from my data. However, it was a messy and chaotic process. Once I realized that I was not going to *find* meaning in the data, that it would not jump out at me, I began *to compose* and *construct* meaning from the data.

This construction of meaning was a long, slow process involving many different drafts of writing. After working through the data many times, I thought I was describing and interpreting what the teachers were trying to say about teaching language arts in Wagana. I was fairly certain that I was composing a description of each teacher and her language arts teaching practices. The next step, however, was to interpret these teachers' words and to develop themes and draw conclusions (Stake, 1995) from the data based on the theoretical framework and underlying research of the study.

Throughout the process of sifting and combing through the data, I continued to hear and see that there was so much worth telling. It became clear to me the more I looked at and listened to the data, that the concepts of teacher personal practical knowledge and teachers as curriculum makers were the main ideas running through the interviews and the group sessions. By constructing meaning of the teachers' experiences through the concept of teachers as curriculum makers and personal practical knowledge, I had found the way to tell

their experiences to others. I sent copies of my writing to the teachers for their feedback, wanting to ensure that I was accurately depicting their ideas.

As I continued to write and rewrite, the structure of this dissertation emerged. I realized that this study gave me a great deal of information about teaching in a northern context and as I share this information with others, they too will be able to construct meaning from this study.

The processes used in this qualitative research case study to gather and analyse data led me to a rich description of the language arts classroom practices of the four participating teachers. These teachers and the contextual influences that shape their classroom practices are described and discussed in the following chapters. My interpretations of the data and my contributions to the scholarly research and literature are discussed in Chapter 6.

Delimitations

As a qualitative case study, this research is delimited to the perspectives of four teachers from the same school in one northern community located in western Canada. These teachers were identified by their administrators as effective language arts teachers. Because the emphasis was on their perspectives, I did not attempt to collect or analyse data regarding the local language and literacies. I do however, report selected observations within the local school and community in order to support and clarify the teachers' descriptions and perspectives. Other than from the teachers' perspective, I did not analyse the provincial documents, nor did I evaluate the teaching materials or resources of the participating teachers.

By focusing on the perspective of four teachers in one northern location, my hope is that the voices of these teachers will resonate with readers as they make connections to their own teaching and learning.

Chapter 4. Findings: The Community, the Teachers, and Their Language Arts Classrooms

> Qualitative research tries to establish an empathetic understanding for the reader through description, sometimes *thick description*, conveying to the reader what experience itself would convey. (Stake, 1995, p. 39)

There are three sections in this chapter. In the first section, I describe the community of Wagana[4] as I came to know it through my visits there. I also describe the school and the school division. The second section is divided into four descriptive accounts: one for each participating teacher. Each account describes the teacher, her perspectives on the school and community, and her language arts teaching practices. The chapter ends with some group poems that the teachers composed telling how to be a language arts teacher in Wagana.

Wagana

In Chapter 1, I said that each northern community that I visited was unique in its own way. Wagana is unique, too. The following section briefly introduces the community of Wagana to provide some background for understanding the socioeconomic, cultural, and geographical context. I also provide some relevant background information regarding the school and the school division to which Wagana belongs. I gathered the following information through observation in the school and community and conversations with the school principal, vice principal, and the area superintendent. I have provided as much information as I can to create a description of the community without jeopardizing the anonymity of the school and the participating teachers.

Wagana, with just over 1,000 people, is nestled beside a large lake in a Western Canadian province. Locally, the name "Wagana" refers to a community composed of four smaller, interconnecting ones. One of the four smaller

[4] Wagana is a pseudonym for the research community.

communities is a First Nation Reserve. The other three communities are a mixture of Aboriginal and non Aboriginal people. These four adjacent communities each have their own name, but it is difficult to tell where one community ends and another begins.

While the population of Wagana is a mix of people of Aboriginal and Euro-Canadian heritage, the majority of the population is Aboriginal, including both Métis and First Nations. English is the main language of the community, particularly among the children; however, the traditional tribal language of Wagana and the surrounding area is Ojibwa. According to the school superintendent, the principal, and the vice principal, there are varying degrees of adherence to the traditional Ojibwa language and culture in Wagana. These administrators said that there is an attempt on the part of some in the community to generate more Ojibwa speakers among the young people.

Wagana is accessible by road and is a 3-hour drive from a major urban centre. The nearest small hospital, grocery store, and other rural prairie amenities are about an hour away in a nearby town with a population of approximately 1,000. The area is surrounded by forests and lakes and is very scenic, but Wagana itself is located in an area of rock with little or no soil cover. There are no industries and little economic opportunity in Wagana. Some of the local residents engage in hunting, fishing, trapping, and harvesting of wild rice. In the summer months the lake and lakefront provide opportunity for some tourism. There are campgrounds and cabins but no hotels or resorts, and the single motel is not open all year round. The lake area also provides some opportunity for commercial water activities such as boating, water skiing, and diving. There are a few cottages and camping areas on some of the lakefront areas. The band office, nursing station, and school also provide employment in the community. The lack of economic opportunities contributes to the low socioeconomic status of the community. The school administrators reported that the community experiences numerous social issues such as substance abuse, gambling, and suicide.

To reach the community of Wagana, I travelled by car from a large urban metropolis. The road is paved until about the last 20 minutes, and then it becomes a winding gravel road. The road into Wagana offers different challenges depending on the time of year. In the spring, summer, and fall the road is extremely bumpy, with deep ruts. It is also very dusty, making it difficult to see and impossible to keep a vehicle clean. If it rains, however, the road turns dangerously slick and slippery.

Winter brings other challenges for travel. Heavy snowfalls are usual and travel becomes very treacherous. The paved road from the city can often be snow or ice-covered and have very poor visibility. The dirt road is also often slippery, and difficult to travel for the majority of the winter. I noticed many handmade crosses to signify the numerous tragic deaths by vehicle accidents on the road.

Trees line the road into Wagana, the mixture of deciduous and coniferous vegetation making it a scenic drive in all seasons. At first, only a few houses are visible through the trees, along winding tree-lined paths. Then more houses appear closer together as the community nears. Homes are dotted throughout the community with winding dirt roads connecting them. Most of the houses are small, bungalows or mobile homes that have been brought in and put on foundations without basements. The land between the houses is rocky and barren, and as a result it is difficult to grow flowers, shrubs, or fresh produce.

Situated along the road, close to the community, is a large building which is the health centre and nursing station. Nearby is another large building that houses a preschool program. There are many abandoned vehicles situated among the houses. Residents use these for repair parts for other vehicles due to the fact that there are no garages or other repair facilities in or near Wagana and it is very costly to hire a tow truck to come the long distance to the community.

In the central area of Wagana, the road forks in three directions. Straight ahead are the general store/post office, houses, and eventually the lake. To the left are more houses and winding roads. To the right is the school. The local cemetery

is in front of the school. A large lake is behind the school. Across the road from the side door of the school is a row of houses where many teachers live. These particular houses, commonly referred to as "teacherages," are owned by the school division. Many of the teachers from outside of the community and some local teachers choose to live in these teacherages and pay subsidized rent. However, some of the teachers commute from the nearest town about an hour away.

The lake area behind the school and surrounding the community is picturesque. The view from the school and from many of the homes in Wagana is stunning. It is a beautiful lush green in the summer. In the autumn, beautifully coloured trees line the lakeshore. In the winter, the lake is a sea of white as far as one can see; the lake becomes a winter activity zone for cross-country skiing, snowshoeing, and snowmobiling. As one teacher who lives in a teacherage told me, "I always wanted a lakefront property, and here I can look through my window and see the lake and enjoy the tranquility of its beauty in all four seasons" (Field notes, October 2009).

There are very few commercial businesses. The small general store located close to the school is also the community post office. In this same location there is also a gas station that was in operation at the time of this study. The general store has three rows of shelves for canned and packaged foods, a few coolers, and a check-out area at the front. When I visited the store, the shelves contained mostly canned and packaged products. There were few fresh fruits or vegetables for sale. The coolers contained a variety of canned and bottled pop and a few milk products. There were several people from the community visiting inside the front door.

Dogs are often seen wandering around the school playground and waiting outside the school entrance. On one visit, as I approached the front entrance to the school, there was a tiny ball of black fur curled in the corner just outside the school entrance. It was a small black puppy. I later discovered that one of the

teachers adopted the puppy and gave it a home. The school manager told me that the dogs can be a nuisance; many of them have no home and litters of puppies are often discovered in unusual places and sometimes have to be destroyed. Some of the dogs are adopted by teachers or others in the community, but many are left to wander and die of starvation or other perils.

The school division.

Wagana contracts a provincial school division to run their educational program. Because the school population is comprised of students from the First Nation Reserve as well as three non-reserve communities, the financial and contractual agreement for the school is complex. This contract specifies the programming in the school, the amount the local authority pays the school division, and the responsibilities of both the local community and the school division. The federal educational funds that are received by the First Nation Reserve community are used to help pay for the services of the contracted school division. Many students from nonreserve areas of the community are funded by the provincial educational system.

The agreement between the provincial school division and the community of Wagana includes provisions for offering Aboriginal cultural and language programs in the school. For example, 3 years ago the school began a nursery and kindergarten Ojibwa immersion program in an attempt to encourage use and development of the traditional language of the community. The immersion program and the English program operate in separate classrooms. Parents have a choice as to which nursery or kindergarten program they send their children.

The contracted school division is, geographically, the largest division in the province. The head office is located in a large urban city, a three hour drive south of Wagana. The division is divided into geographical areas. One of these areas, Area G, services Wagana School as well as several other schools. Wagana is one of the larger schools in this area. Some of the other schools are very small,

including a one-room school and a few two-room schools. This particular area has an area superintendent, a mathematics consultant, an English language arts consultant, a special services consultant, speech-language pathologists, a psychologist, and access to other divisional consultants, such as a science consultant and a health and physical education consultant. These support personnel are often visible in Wagana School; the administrators spoke highly of their commitment to supporting the educational activities of the school.

The school division maintains a divisional library, resource centre, and a technology department that provide support and resources to all the areas. Area G holds an annual conference each year, usually at the end of January. For this annual conference, teachers from each school in the entire area are brought together in the large urban center for 2 days of professional development and social interaction.

The school

Wagana School houses approximately 330 students from prekindergarten to Grade 12. There are 28 teachers, including classroom teachers, a resource teacher, two guidance counsellors, a music teacher, physical education teacher, art teacher, two literacy intervention teachers who work with students in small groups or individually to support literacy instruction, and a coordinator for the newly introduced Ojibwa immersion program. There are about 12 educational assistants as well as other support staff. The school staff includes both Aboriginal and non Aboriginal people. The school has a full-time principal as well as a full-time vice principal. At the time of this study the principal was in his second year at the school. The vice principal is from the community of Wagana, is Aboriginal, and had been working in the school as a teacher and administrator for over 30 years. Children are bussed from the various areas of the four communities.

Most of the instruction in the school is in English. For many years, Ojibwa has been taught as the second language in the school. In this second language

class, elementary students received a minimal amount of instruction per day, ranging from 20 to 40 minutes. As mentioned previously, an Ojibwa immersion nursery and kindergarten program was recently introduced in an attempt to support children in the traditional language. Throughout the school, local teachers occasionally converse with one another or with some of the children in the traditional Ojibwa language. In the school staffroom, where teachers, visiting Elders, other school visitors, and school support staff gather for breaks, English is generally spoken, but I occasionally heard local teachers and some of the educational assistants converse with community visitors in their Aboriginal language.

Every time I visited the school, I encountered people from the community, including community Elders, most of who were Aboriginal in the building. I often saw Elders participating in classroom activities. They are part of a school and community program to connect children and Elders. Some Elders share a particular skill like sewing, quilting, trapping, or cooking while others choose to read or tell stories to the students. The vice principal shared another example of this school program by showing me recent pictures depicting local Elders teaching students how to skin a muskrat and how to prepare and cook the meat. On one of my visits to the school, there was a ceremonial tepee in the back schoolyard, near the lake. The keeper of the tepee was the school guidance counsellor, and his responsibility was to keep the ceremonial fire going at all times. Several Elders and others from the community, some of whom were also teachers, helped with the tepee as well as demonstrated to the students the significance of several traditional ceremonies.

In the school, the community, and in the school division, people refer to various teachers as “local” or “nonlocal.” Local teachers are those who grew up in the community, left to get a teaching degree, and returned to teach in the community. Nonlocal teachers are those who come to teach from other places and often other cultural or socioeconomic backgrounds.

On numerous occasions when I was in the school, I had the opportunity to visit the library and chat with the librarian. The library appears to be a hub of the school and there are usually students using the library at all times of the day. The librarian, along with some of the teachers, hosts "library nights" for young parents and preschool children. The purpose of these library nights is to introduce books and craft activities to parents and children together. The library nights are also a way to invite parents into the school so that the school environment becomes more comfortable and inviting for them. The librarian also holds a number of book fairs throughout the year to interest readers of all ages and to give parents and students an opportunity to purchase books at a reasonable price. The school library is the only library in the community, and books must otherwise be borrowed or purchased by mail or through the Internet, which is not a reliable service and not accessible to every resident.

The school division demonstrates a strong commitment to the school and contributes to many extracurricular learning activities in the school. These divisional activities create opportunities for relationships among the Wagana teachers, between the teachers and the divisional staff, between the school and the community, and among Wagana teachers and teachers from other schools.

For example, fiddling is a popular musical activity in Wagana and many students begin learning to play the fiddle from an early age. The school division has a fiddling program and fiddling teachers travel to many of the schools to teach fiddling. An important annual event that takes place in the school in which many of the students and staff participate is called a Music Jamboree. This Music Jamboree is three days of fiddling, jigging, and other musical events. Students and staff from other area schools stay at the school and engage in musical and social activities. The school division supports this event through funding and it is also common to find the area superintendent cooking, cleaning, and participating in all the musical and social events.

Another important event is the Winter Games. Wagana takes turns with another area school hosting an annual large outdoor winter sports event. Students and staff from other area schools come to participate in indoor team sports such as volleyball, basketball, and badminton as well as outdoor sports such as snowshoeing, cross-country skiing, and trap setting. Several hundred students and staff converge on the school, sleep in the classrooms, eat in the cafeteria, and participate in the sporting activities and planned social events. The host school provides the volunteers to make and serve the food and to supervise all the sporting and social events. Over the years, teachers have volunteered for many of the jobs that are required to make the games successful. For example, one of the teachers recently helped with the winter snowshoeing races even though it was minus 30 Celsius. Another said that she helps with the cooking, the event organizing, as well as many of the indoor or outdoor events.

The school division has a formal policy with guidelines to foster healthy food and healthy living choices. This policy has been in effect for several years, and teachers are expected to model healthy eating, particularly while in the school. Only certain foods and beverages are available for sale or consumption during school activities. Students are taught how to read food labels and how to choose foods according to Canada's Food Guide. This healthy food and healthy living policy was introduced in an attempt to curb diabetes and substance abuse, and to promote healthy lifestyle choices for the students and the community.

When I arrived at the school for my initial visit as a researcher, I observed that the staffroom had a bottled water system for drinking water and for making coffee, tea, and for cooking. I also observed that each classroom had a similar system. The large water kegs turned upside down on white stands were present in each classroom along with a supply of small, pointed, paper cups from which to drink. The drinking fountains were taped over and not in use. Signs over the drinking fountains and taps indicated that the water was not to be used for drinking. Hand sanitizers were provided in all rooms.

The lack of safe drinking water has been an ongoing issue in the school for several years. The water contains *E. coli* bacteria. The unsafe community drinking water conditions have required the school to use bottled water and hand sanitizers. Although the staff and students make the best of this situation, I cannot help but wonder why contaminated water continues to be an issue and how the lack of safe water must affect the students in their personal lives and in their homes. Some of the effects of contaminated water on the teachers are described in the following sections.

The above information provides a description of the community of Wagana, the surrounding area, the school, and the school division. In later chapters, aspects of the community, the school, and the school division will be discussed through the eyes of the four participating teachers. Their perspectives will provide a much clearer image of what it is like to live and teach in Wagana.

Four Language Arts Teachers in Wagana

As outlined in Chapter 1, this study explores how contexts affect the teaching practices of four language arts teachers in a Northern Canadian community. In this study, teachers are recognized as curriculum makers who are important agents in the development of their classroom language arts curriculum and their teaching practices are an expression of their personal practical knowledge. In the following section, I introduce each teacher and give an account of her language arts teaching practices as she described them to me. These accounts also include the teacher's perspectives on the community and the school. I composed the following accounts based on the data gathered from my observations in the school, individual interviews, groups meetings, and artifacts from those meetings, including the artifact that each teacher brought to represent herself as a language arts teacher in Wagana.

Mae.

When I first came to talk to Mae, she was proud to tell me that this was her 24th year of teaching in Wagana. Mae is a Chinese Canadian, originally from a large family in Eastern Canada. Mae has been in Western Canada for many years, in fact, for most of her teaching career. She completed her teacher education in Nova Scotia and then decided that she wanted to see more of Canada. She wanted an adventure. She applied for teaching positions in the west and her first job was on a First Nation Reserve in one of the prairie provinces. Her current position, which she has held for 23 years, began as a term contract, filling in for a Grade 1 teacher on leave. At the time, Mae was job searching and just happened to run into her present superintendent in a post office in a nearby town. After a brief discussion he suggested that she should apply for the position in Wagana. Mae did and has been teaching in Wagana ever since.

Mae teaches early elementary, usually students in kindergarten or Grade 1. She was been trained in Reading Recovery (Clay, 1985) and worked as a Reading Recovery teacher in Wagana for a few years. Her love and passion for working with young learners is evident as she talks about her students, both current and previous ones. Whenever Mae engages in conversation about young learners, her face lights up, fills with a smile, and her eyes twinkle. When people ask her when she is going to retire, which they do frequently, Mae tells them that she is still enjoying each day and each child way too much to leave. Mae appeared very proud to say that after many years of teaching, she continued to construct her teaching knowledge.

> People often say that because I have been teaching for so many years, it must be easy by now. I say, not for me. I learn new things every year from my students. I feel good when I am in my classroom. I really like being with my students, they keep me going. (Interview, November 2009)

Mae's representational artifact brought to an October group meeting was a CD called *The Dreamer* by Eric Bogle (2009). Mae said she brought the CD to

represent herself as a teacher for several reasons. She incorporates music, rhyme, actions, songs, and chants into her classroom at every opportunity so it seemed natural that her choice of artifact would be something musical. However, her choice went deeper than that. Mae said that the words to the song, which she carefully printed out and gave to me, exemplified her attitude, passion, and commitment to teaching and working with young learners.

> I picked this song that I really like. It is called *The Dreamer*. It is by Eric Bogle, a Scottish folksinger. Just the title alone I thought represented me, but the lyrics do as well. I dream of better things for my students. I have high expectations and I dream the students will be successful and fulfill their dreams. (Group meeting, October 2009)

Mae is a nonlocal teacher and the only one of the four participants who did not live in a teacherage in Wagana. She commutes about an hour drive back and forth every day from a nearby town. Mae expressed in two separate interviews that she felt connected to the community because most of the people in the community knew who she was and what she did. During our many conversations, Mae always spoke fondly and passionately about the community of Wagana and the children that she has taught there over her 23 years. She knows most of the families and has taught many of the people in the community. She had children in her class whose parents she taught when they were children in Grade 1 or kindergarten. Mae is often invited to weddings and is comfortable attending social events in the community that involve students or previous students. She says that she did not see a need to live in the community to be part of the community.

> I don't live here but I think I am part of the community to some extent. I have associations with the parents and some of the staff. Some of the students know I had their mom in my class and I have had their uncles. They know I have been here a long time. The parents know me and they sometimes get a chuckle out of the fact that their child has the same teacher they had. (Interview, November 2009)

Mae described particular situations where her long career and connections in the community worked to her advantage in the classroom. She laughed as she told me that she could often connect with the children through her previous connections with another family member such as a parent, aunt, uncle, or sibling. For example, one day as Mae was trying to get the children to come in from outside, she laughingly compared one small child to his uncle. "Boy, Dakota, you sure remind me of your Uncle Joe, such a busy young man" (Field notes, October 2009). Dakota was most interested to hear what else Mae had to say about his uncle. As Mae and Dakota walked hand-in-hand into the school, Mae related a few childhood stories about Dakota's uncle as a child. Mae used this diversionary tactic as a way of getting Dakota to quit playing on the swings and come back into the school and it worked. However, it was also a way of connecting personally to his life outside of school. Mae told me that her relationships, built through her years in the school, as well as her care and concern for the children and the families, gives her credibility and has earned her trust from the local people. The administrators and other teachers in the school confirmed that Mae is very well respected and trusted for her commitment and dedication to the early development of the children.

Although Mae said she felt connected to the community of Wagana, she also indicated through a visual diagram made in one of our November group sessions and discussed during a subsequent interview that she did not feel a complete sense of belonging in the school community. She told me that she did not frequent the staffroom because she experienced feelings of tension between some of the local and nonlocal teachers. Mae said she coped with this by avoiding the staffroom and developing working relationships with several teachers on staff that she felt share similar teaching philosophies and approaches. "I don't go the staffroom very much. I am more comfortable in my own room or with teachers that I work well with" (Interview regarding visual representation, November 2009).

During the second group meeting in October 2009, the school team meetings became a topic of discussion as the teachers worked in pairs and later in a large group to discuss supports and resources for their language arts teaching. Although the school set aside time each month for team meetings, Mae found these meetings stressful. In Wagana School, the teachers were divided into groups depending on the grade they taught. There were three designated groups in the school: Nursery to Grade 4 teachers, Grades 5 through 8 teachers, and high school teachers. Mae's team was composed of teachers who taught Nursery to Grade 4, but Mae told me that although she appreciated that time was set aside for the teachers, she did not find the meetings helpful in developing working relationships among the teachers or as a support for how she constructs her classroom language arts curriculum.

> The time is too prescriptive. We don't have any time set aside to talk about ELA or our students. We don't ever really get to know what others are doing in ELA. It is very stressful and I am not comfortable in the meetings. We are kind of forced to work together. (Group meeting, September 2009)

Another issue that Mae told me about that was not directly related to language arts but does influence her personal practical knowledge was the issue of safe drinking water in the school. Drinking water and sanitation are a constant issue in the school. The water fountains are out of service and have been replaced by bottled water; there are hand sanitizers in every classroom. The sinks in the washrooms do not function. Mae's kindergarten class has the same kind of bottled water system as the other classes. When I visited her class at the beginning of the school year I saw firsthand one of the challenges her students' experience. In Mae's class, the water bottle is placed against the wall on one side of the room and nearby there is a dispenser for the cone-shaped paper cups. I watched as 5 year olds, new to the school year, tried to coordinate holding the pointy bottom cup in their hand while pushing down on the water button. Water spilled onto the

floor and over the children while many wee hands squeezed the pointed cup hoping to hang on to it, but, instead, forced the water out over the top of the cup. It was not long before Mae brought out her supply of small flat bottom cups for the children. Although this may appear a small issue, Mae told me that it disrupted the class and created frustration for both the teacher and the students.

Inside Mae's classroom.

Wagana's kindergarten program is full day every day, unlike many other kindergarten programs in the province which are half-day programs. Full-day kindergarten was implemented three years ago to help support language development with Wagana children. Kindergarten is not the first year of school for many Wagana students. Wagana has a nursery program that encourages children to come to school at age 4 as a prekindergarten experience. The nursery classroom is situated right next to the kindergarten classroom and the teacher is considered part of the school staff. One of the reasons for the nursery program, according to the vice principal, is to help children in Wagana socialize and become familiar with a school atmosphere. Mae and other teachers and consultants that I talked to indicated that another very important reason for starting school at age 4 is that children in Wagana appear to lack strong oral skills and often come to school speaking very little. Mae said that the young children do not speak much English or Ojibwa. Many have little or no experience with books and print before nursery school. The nursery program is not mandatory and not all families choose to send their children. Wagana also has an Ojibwa nursery and kindergarten program. Families can opt to enrol their children in the Ojibwa or the English program. Many times over the course of our conversations, Mae stressed that the development of oral language is her priority in teaching language arts with kindergarten and Grade 1.

> I really push oral language. It is really important for them [the students] to talk and to listen. I have come to zero in on oral language and find

> nonfiction a good starting point. I teach language through music and repetitiveness, rhyme, and action. . . . Children need to hear the language a lot. Hearing and speaking is important for their reading and writing. (Interview, September 2009)

Mae explained that when she first came to teaching in a northern community, she took language for granted.

> When I first came to Wagana, the biggest mistake I made was to take language for granted. I would assume that the children knew things that they did not know. I would take for granted that they knew certain words. I found they did not have the language or the experience to talk about subjects. They only knew what was around the community and they did not have much opportunity for conversations and few have experience with books and other print. Sometimes when I go to do an assessment with a book, like in the [name deleted] divisional assessments, I find it hard because many students do not have the prior experience and therefore cannot relate to the book. (Interview, September 2009)

Mae told me that when children first come to kindergarten or nursery school, many do not appear to know how to respond to the kinds of questions that are usually asked in a school setting. Students often do not seem to understand the difference between a question and a statement or comment. After her first few years of teaching in this community, Mae went from taking language for granted to assuming that all the children in this community experienced difficulty with language. However, Mae also encountered students in her class with a very advanced vocabulary and a great deal of experience with language. She now says that she cannot generalize about the students' language development but remains concerned about it. During three of our October interviews and in one October group meeting, Mae said that for her to know the children is important so that she can better understand what they know and the experiences and opportunities they have encountered. Mae said it is important for her to start with the language that

the children bring and build on that. Sometimes, she said that this "building on" (Mae, Interview, October 2009) can be a slow process, but it cannot be rushed or ignored.

> I used to take for granted that the children would know certain words for items and objects until I realized that often they did not. As I got to know the families, I found that some families have experiences together and some families rarely leave the community, and some children have little experience outside of the home and immediate area. I need to know what the children know and build on that. (Interview, October 2009)

As a kindergarten teacher, Mae spends all day with her children. She even eats lunch with them, while other teachers take a lunch break and go home or eat in the staff room. She teaches her own physical education and remains with her class during music and art, even though Wagana has a music teacher and an art teacher. Mae gave me three main reasons for spending all her time with the children. First, it helps her to know the children well. Second, it helps build what Mae refers to as a "trusting community where children feel comfortable with one another and with being in school" (Interview, October 2009). Third, because Mae finds that many children in Wagana come to school with limited school language and limited opportunities for English language development outside of the home and the local community, she can engage in conversations in many different situations if she spends all day with the children. She can ask different kinds of questions and introduce language in a meaningful and personal context.

For example, I visited the kindergarten class several days during the lunch break. Mae was always busy going from table to table talking with the students about their choice of lunches, explaining various vegetables that she had brought along, and talking about healthy choices and foods. She also engaged the children in conversations about their families, their activities at recess, and many other topics. One day Mae brought some interesting vegetables and dip for her own lunch. She had raw carrots, celery, peppers, and cauliflower. One little boy asked

her what they were. She explained to him they were vegetables and carefully named each one. She then asked if he wanted to try some with her dip. He was delighted to try and he picked a carrot, dipped it and then tried a few other vegetables, dipping them also. A few days later, Mae brought vegetables again with her lunch. The same little fellow came along and asked if she had any of that "white stuff" to put them in. When she said she did not have any dip, he said, "Don't want your lunch anymore" (Field notes, September 2009).

During our October interviews, I asked Mae what advice she would offer a first year teacher coming to Wagana to teach language arts. Mae offered the following suggestions:

> You have to get to know your children. Observe the children closely at the beginning of the year to determine the atmosphere of the classroom. Start with things you know they can do and understand, then move on to other things. Learn what kinds of experiences they have had and have not had. Do not assume anything about what they might know, understand, or care about. (Interview, October 2009)

In spite of her many years of teaching, Mae continues to actively search for ideas and resources that are relevant and interesting for her young students. A few years ago, Mae and Grace, her teaching partner at the time, were part of an ongoing Area G project that focussed on reading, writing, and oral language. Through this project, Wagana School decided to focus on oral language in Grade 1; Mae was assigned to team teach with the Grade 1 teachers, one of whom was Grace.[5] Mae and Grace decided to try nonfiction themes with Grade 1. During language arts time both teachers worked with the class. Grace and Mae planned the units together and worked together in the class to develop routines and teach large group activities. When the children broke into small groups, Grace focused on reading and writing, while Mae focused on oral language activities. Mae was

[5] All the names of teachers, students, and places are pseudonyms.

often seen with small groups of children in the hall outside the class, practising poems, songs, or readers theatre. Mae incorporated a wide variety of activities congruent with her priorities for oral language development and the interests of the children. Mae said, "When it came to trying the nonfiction, we did not at first realize what an interest there was nor did we realize the potential to get at vocabulary and language in such a successful way" (Interview, September 2009).

Nonfiction themes, according to Mae, also lead to more integration of other subjects so that the students became immersed in a topic. For example, Mae and Grace planned a unit about owls. After the students had left for the day, the teachers excitedly transformed the classroom into a forest. They turned out the lights and placed several stuffed and plush owls strategically around their forest classroom. Some of the owls were provided by a local resident taxidermist who happily lent them to the classroom forest. Mae and Grace found recordings of owls and arranged to have them playing when the children arrived outside the classroom. The next morning, they gathered the children outside of the room and told them to enter quietly and to listen and observe carefully. Everyone quietly and carefully entered the room and the children experienced the sights and sounds of the owl forest. The owl unit originated from a previous thematic unit that inquired into animal habitats because the children were fascinated with the owls that lived in their community. The unit focussed not only on the owls that were common in Wagana but owls that are found in other places as well. The students were actively engaged in reading, writing, drawing, singing, talking, and researching about owls. It was during this unit that students from older grades came to help the younger students dissect owl pellets. Mae laughed as she recounted the experience. Mae said that many of the younger children exhibited a great deal more enthusiasm for the messiness of the owl pellets than some of the older students. But she also said that the interaction between the younger students and the older students was a good opportunity for lively discussions, with lots of questioning and curiosity.

Mae's excitement about the success of nonfiction units and themes and the emphasis on oral language was evident as she passionately described the many nonfiction units that she has engaged the students in. Mae reported that nonfiction appeals to children in Wagana because they seem better able to connect their experiences to the nonfiction texts and themes. Over the next few years, with the support of the school librarian, Area G, and the school administrators, Mae and Grace added a wide range of nonfiction resources to the school. Mae said that these resources build on the local experiences and love of nature that the children in Wagana have.

Mae does a lot of cooking and eating with her students. Through the cooking and baking, she is incorporating language skills in an authentic purposeful manner. Thanks to Mae, I came home with some great ideas and activities to share with preservice teachers based on the unit she was currently working on about apples. Some of the ideas included recipes for applesauce and apple muffins, a finger puppet song, several poems, chants, book titles, centre activities that included drawing and sequencing, and an oral story about the star inside the apple.

Mae appears to make decisions about the resources she uses based on the children and their lived experiences.

> I don't use a specific program. . . . I have to think of different ways to engage the kids. I have to think about each child and what might work for them. I also have to find out from them what they are interested in and what will be important to them. (Interview, September 2009)

In talking to Mae and in my visits to her classroom, it was easy to see that Mae incorporates a lot of music, chanting, songs, dance, and other physical movement into her language arts. "I bring music to my classroom. I also bring enthusiasm. I learn from my students and I enjoy my students" (Group meeting, October 2009). Based on my observations and the data from the interviews and group meetings, I concluded that Mae is a bundle of energy and constantly

encourages children to experience language in multiple ways. She tries to create authentic situations for the children so that they can use language in a variety of ways for a variety of purposes. Mae often plans field trips to the city so that the children will experience children's theatre, city attractions, and meet other children. Mae said, "These children need to hear language a lot and they need to practice it in lots of ways, but in ways that are important to them and to their experiences" (Group meeting, September 2009).

Mae celebrates language and learning with many little presentations to others in the school, to parents, or among classmates in the classroom. The children practice and present poems, songs, chants, readers theatre, dances, and other activities to share and celebrate their learning with others. One year, during the music jamboree at the school, Mae had her kindergarten class performing the Macarena based on the months of the year. Another year, she had the students studying various versions of the Gingerbread Man. Based on one of the versions, the students presented a readers theatre, using masks made from paper bags.

> I like the celebrations we have at school, like assemblies. I really like the music program. I also like that I can highlight my children. My students do a couple of poems, or sing a song. There are quite a few opportunities for celebration and that is really good for children to see how well they can do things. It gives a purpose for practicing and using language. (Interview, November 2009)

Because Mae emphasizes oral language and language development in her kindergarten curriculum, she appreciates the oral language emphasis that she finds throughout the provincial curriculum framework. She also values the celebration and community aspects of the curricular outcomes and indicated that understanding community, community building, and celebrating learning was important in her teaching context. In an interview regarding the provincial framework, Mae said, "I really like the celebration and community part. Right

now, I am focussing on the oral aspects and looking a lot at community and social development" (Interview, September 2009).

> Mae does not use any one particular published program to teach.
>
> I go and get books and stories and ideas that I think will be interesting for my children. I look for resources that will interest my students. I don't choose books or resources just because we happen to have them in the school. I have to think carefully about the children I have and the experiences that they have. (Interview, September 2009)

Mae prefers to teach using thematic units, because she says that the children engage more if they are immersed in a theme or topic that is interesting to them. One thing she laughingly pointed out, however, was that some themes only last a short time while others will last longer than she ever anticipated they would. Mae indicated that the children are the ones who guide the length of the theme as well as the theme itself.

From these discussions regarding Mae's language arts priorities, it became apparent to me that she works from a social constructivist perspective regarding teaching and learning. She believes in using hands-on activities that incorporate language use in authentic and meaningful ways. She begins with the students' prior knowledge and builds on that knowledge through immersion and experience with multiple sources. Mae differentiates her instruction and allows for a variety of tasks and activities for the children depending on their abilities and strengths. In conversations about her team teaching with Grace, Mae said,

> We used a lot of hands-on experiences. We used small groups and helped children construct their own meaning in different ways. We did not ability group them except for guided reading. Flexible, heterogeneous groups made it better for the students in the groups to help each other and learn from each other. (Interview, October 2009)

Mae looks to the local community for resource personnel to help in her classroom. During one of our early interviews, Mae said,

> I like the idea of tapping into the resources in the community. Some of my students' uncles, cousins, and dads have skills like fishing, lumber jacking, or hunting. All I have to do is make sure that I invite them in to the classroom and they love to come in and talk to the kids. It often sparks an idea for another theme that we can run with for a while. I love when this happens. (Group meeting, September 2009)

Mae recently had Aboriginal Elders in her classroom making bannock with the kindergarten children. The Elders in the school are part of a school grandparent program. Whenever she plans a unit, Mae looks for ways for the grandparents to help with hands-on activities such as the bannock making, sewing, and beading, but also for reading to the children. She includes the grandparents in this way for two reasons. First, she believes that it is important to have the grandparents actively involved with the children. Second, she believes that the children can learn from and appreciate the skills and talents that the grandparents have to share.

For Mae to engage her students in hands on activities requires a great deal of preplanning. Not having access to supplies is a challenge for Mae working in Wagana. Materials and supplies have to be brought in from either the nearest town or from the city. This is difficult, particularly with food items. Mae goes shopping in the nearby town or takes advantage of trips to the city to stock up on materials that she thinks she might need but it is often difficult to anticipate all the needs. Mae sometimes orders supplies from the city, but the few delivery services are very expensive, and the postal service is sometimes slow. Often people coming to Wagana from the division office in the city will act as couriers bringing van loads of supplies the teachers have ordered from various suppliers in the city.

During one of our September group meetings, Mae indicated that being far from urban services is sometimes difficult for children particularly ones with special needs and special learning situations. For example, Mae has encountered autistic students in her class in the past, and she said that in her experience, each

autistic child is unique. At the time of our interviews, Mae had a young boy in kindergarten diagnosed as autistic. Mae attended a recent workshop held in the school regarding teaching autistic children. Although she greatly appreciated the workshop and the information it provided, following the workshop she felt very much isolated and on her own as there are no supports for autism available in the local community.

In an interview in September, I asked Mae where and how she found support for her language arts teaching. She told me that one of the most important supports for her is her discussions and interactions with teachers in similar situations or circumstances.

> I get a lot from other teachers. When Grace came on staff, we talked a lot. When she was here, I would drain her brain; even now I call her up and go over for tea. Now I share with Faith and a few others on staff. I like it when we get to go to workshops or the conference with other teachers from the school division because then I can sit and talk and listen to others with common issues or experiences. You can figure things out together. (Interview, September 2009)

Attendance is an issue for Mae's kindergarten class. She says that parents often do not send their children to kindergarten. During one of our interviews, Mae told me that the attendance issue is partly due to social issues in the community. She then added that sometimes the lack of attendance, even as early as kindergarten, is because parents do not equate regular attendance with school success in the same way as teachers do. Kindergarten, according to Mae, is not viewed by some parents as an essential grade. The school division has tried to dispel this view in two ways: by establishing prekindergarten in both English and Ojibwa and by having full-day kindergarten. Mae said that other parents tell her that school is too hard and so they choose to keep the children at home. To deal with this issue of attendance and to help parents better understand kindergarten,

Mae talks to parents and grandparents about school and the importance of regular attendance.

Mae attributes her long stay in the school and her continued passion for teaching young children to her ability to be flexible. She said,

> I have told people here that you have to be flexible, to know when to change, and more importantly, how to take ideas and adapt them to your own teaching situation. Every community is different, every year is different, and you need to be able to adapt to your surroundings. (Interview, September 2009)

Faith.

Faith is Aboriginal and Wagana is her home community. Faith understands Ojibwa but speaks only a little of her traditional language. She regrets that she is not fluent in the Ojibwa language and that she did not learn the language when she was young. She said that like many people her age in the community, she does not speak the Ojibwa language well, but hears it spoken by some of the older people. She told me that her parents were afraid of being punished for speaking Ojibwa when they were young so they wanted their children to learn only English. Faith learned some of Ojibwa language from her grandmother but not until she was 18. She also said that few if any of the children in the school speak Ojibwa, although some know a few words or expressions.

Faith lives in a teacherage, directly across from the school. She grew up in Wagana and began raising her four children in this community. While her children were still of school age, she decided to leave the community and go to university to become a nurse. She told me that leaving the community to return to school took great courage on her part and it changed her life. Faith also told me that in order to muster that courage, she reminded herself of the "moss story" (recounted below); a story told to her many times by her grandfather. When she arrived at the university and connected with other Aboriginal students she

discovered that the majority of them were in the Faculty of Education. After considerable deliberation, Faith changed from the Faculty of Science to the Faculty of Education. She decided to use her scientific and numerical abilities to be a high school science and mathematics teacher. She added that in recent years, she has also needed to dig deep for courage and again she was reminded of the moss story. "Teachers require a lot of courage," said Faith (Group meeting, October 2009).

Faith's first job was not in Wagana and not in a high school, nor was it focussed on science and mathematics. Her first teaching position was in a Grade 5 class in another large school on a First Nation community in Western Canada. She accepted this position so that she could work with students who were mostly Aboriginal. She found herself, a high school science and mathematics teacher, teaching all subjects to students in an elementary grade. "I had no experience teaching 10 and 11 year olds, and no experience teaching language arts. It was scary, stressful, fascinating" (Interview, September 2009). After a few years of teaching, Faith came to Wagana. She was beginning her fourth year there when our interviews began.

When it came time for Faith to share what she had brought to represent herself as a teacher, I noticed that she did not have anything visible with her. Perhaps she forgot or did not want to share, I thought. But I was wrong; Faith had a story to tell. She grew up in a family of storytellers. Deciding what to bring to describe herself as a teacher in this community at this time was difficult she said. As she pondered what to bring, she said she kept returning in her mind to the story her grandfather had shared with her many times. However, she wondered if she was brave enough to tell a story in front of her colleagues and me. It was partly because of this anxiety that she finally decided it was important for her to share this particular story. Here is the "moss story" in Faith's words.

> This one story always comes to mind when I think about myself and where I am at right now. Why do we see moss on rocks? The story goes that

> Nanabush had a brother and this brother was lazy while Nanabush was a hard worker. The brother travelled from family member to family member. When he overstayed his welcome with one family, he would move on to the next one. He was not independent and he was scared of everything. Just like me; I used to be scared to try things. Eventually the brother ended up living with Nanabush. Nanabush taught him how to hunt, taught him how to take care of himself, and how to make a fire. Soon the brother was able to take care of himself and he was able to go out and be independent and to live on his own and make his own decisions and choices. The brother lived to be an old man. When Nanabush met up with him again the brother had died and there was no one to take care of his remains. So Nanabush carefully and respectfully laid the brother out by the rocks. Moss soon began to grow among those rocks. Moss on the rocks reminds us not to be scared or lazy but to go out and face what life has to offer, face those challenges and work hard. (Group meeting, October 2009)

Faith is a local teacher, and a large part of her personal practical teaching knowledge is tied to her Aboriginal heritage and her sense of belonging to the community of Wagana.

> This is my home community. It is a quiet community. It is actually four communities together. We don't live too far from a town so we can access banks and groceries and a hospital, doctor, and dentist more easily than some other northern communities. I have family here, a lot of family. (Interview, September 2009)

In several of our conversations, Faith told me that living in the community helps her know the families and the children in ways that nonlocal teachers may not. She said her involvement in the social aspects of community life makes a difference to her understanding of the children. Faith said that an important part of being a teacher is to be a member of the community. She also said that there are very few recreational activities in the community but people find ways to

socialize. Faith goes to weddings and wakes and visits the homes of friends and families around the community. She took on a new activity this year and attends sewing classes at the Community Holistic Healing Centre.

Faith suggested that being from the community helps her understand the personal, cultural, and traditional background of the families and this understanding helps her to develop relationships with the students and their parents. For example, Faith told me about an experience of attending the traditional ceremony of welcoming young girls into womanhood.

> We have a ceremony for young girls when they begin womanhood. It is a welcoming ceremony—they are entering their next stage of life. It is organized by the traditional wise old lady and she hosts it by the fire . . . We [the older women] all present them with a gift and give them advice on being a woman and how to care for themselves. (Interview, November 2009)

During the summer, her niece and another young girl, both of whom were assigned to Faith's Grade 5 and 6 class in the fall, were ready for this ceremony. Faith gave a gift of small items; hair accessories, a pen, paper and other items that would suggest to the girls that it is good to have fun but also to value education. Faith's advice to the girls was exactly that. "Have fun, but remember the value of education and the importance of ongoing learning" (Interview, November 2009).

In an October interview, Faith said that being from the community; she has an advantage over those who are not originally from the community. However she suggested that teachers who come to this community from other places should try to get involved in the community.

> It is an advantage to live in the community. It allows you to know people more personally. I go and hang out with the parents. I go to functions and I stand and talk to the parents and the kids. I think it makes a difference for any teacher to be part of the community. Even when I was teaching in another community, I did not stay home. I went out and got involved in

> the community. When there was a wake, I went, and when I got invited to weddings, I went. (Interview, October 2009)

Like Mae, Faith expressed her frustrations with the issue of bottled water in the school and in the community. She was concerned with the safety of the water not only for drinking and cooking at school, but also for the risks that unsafe water created for her and others in the community with ongoing health problems.

> I live in a teacherage and I cannot drink the water. I buy water in a small town about an hour away. Because there is only my daughter and me, I go to town to buy water about once every 2 weeks. I use the water that I buy for cooking and drinking. I use the water here for showering and for laundry. It is scary to shower in it because I am a diabetic and if I have even a little cut, and that dirty water gets in, I could get infection from the E. coli bacteria and that would be dangerous for me. . . . Washing myself and my clothes in the brown dirty water is disgusting, but there is little choice. (Interview, October 2009)

Inside Faith's classroom.

When we first met in September 2009, Faith was teaching a combined Grade 5 and 6 class for the first time. Previously in Wagana, she taught Grade 3 but asked to move to upper elementary for a teaching change. Faith prefers to keep her class of students for at least 2 years. This practice of staying with a class for 2 years and then moving them on to another teacher is sometimes referred to as "looping." Faith indicated that this looping technique gives the opportunity for teachers and students to stay together for a longer time and therefore to get to know each other better. Faith said that it takes a long time for the students to develop a level of trust with the teachers and one year is not long enough. Because Faith's teaching is based on the development of relationships with and among the students, this development of trust is important.

Because there is a wide range of student achievement, interest, and attitude toward school, Faith is determined to find out as much as possible about each student early in the school year. Faith said she uses different kinds of assessment tools to find out as much as she can about the students' language abilities. Although she could not remember the names of all the various assessment tools she has used it the past, she certainly knew the ones she felt gave her relevant information about her students. She uses running records, miscue analysis,[6] and a variety of writing tasks such as journal writing, personal experience writing, writing in response to reading, and writing in content areas. She asks students to read with her individually and in small groups. She analyzes their writing as they write in their journals. What she wants to find out, she says, is what "each child can do in language arts, what they are learning to do, and what they are interested in doing" (Interview, October 2009). But the information that she gleans from her various assessment techniques is not all that she needs to know. Faith told me that there is so much more to understanding the students than their academic achievements and abilities. When I asked her what advice she would give to a language arts teacher coming to this northern community, she said:

> Get to know your students. Know them on a personal level; make some kind of connection with each of them. Try to understand what life is like for them so you can understand how to find resources that will interest them and connect with them. I bring oral stories to the classroom and try to make a connection to their lives through those stories. (Interview, October 2009)

Faith attempts to find a personal connection with each and every student as early in the school year as possible. "The personal connection allows me to appreciate each child as an individual person. It also makes the students more comfortable in my class when they can connect personally with me" (Interview,

[6] Running record and miscue analysis are specific assessment techniques and are further explained in Appendix B.

October 2009). Faith grew up in the community and lives in the community; she said that by virtue of growing up in the same community as the children in her class, she can connect with them outside of the school in a more personal, less academic manner.

> I see each child and each one has his or her own story. My job is to watch and listen so I can see and hear their stories. My job is to help each child to grow and learn in the best way they can. We have these curriculum guides and a lot of times we forget to think about the child. I remind myself that each child is where they are and they are who they are and then I say, where do we begin and where can we go this year? (Interview, October 2009)

In one of our October group meetings, Faith described herself as quiet, particularly in a formal school setting. However, in conversations with Faith, I learned that she loves to get out and about in the community and particularly likes to go and meet the parents in informal settings. Faith is comfortable in the community and is not hesitant to talk to parents outside of the school environment. She said that a big part of knowing the children is talking to the parents. "Knowing parents on a personal level makes a difference for the children" (October 2009). Faith gave two reasons for this. One is to better understand the children from the parents' perspective; the other is to help the parents understand what their child is doing in school and why they are doing it. Faith told me that she learns a great deal about the children by talking to the parents. She invites parents into the class so that they can see and hear first hand what is happening.

Faith also said that knowing the children involves letting them know you as a person outside the classroom as well as a teacher.

> I bring pictures of myself and my own children. I share some of my life with the students. I grew up with oral storytelling, so I bring those stories to the classroom, stories that help us grow and understand each other. I

make a good connection with my students through those stories. (Interview, October 2009)

An example she gave was a young boy in her class who had a reputation for teasing and misbehaving. Faith approached him and said, "You sure remind me of your father" (November 2009). The boy was taken aback, quite surprised that Faith would know his dad, but he wanted to know more. Faith said, "Yeah, you ask your dad about me. I used to babysit your dad. I babysat him almost every day. I helped raise him" (Interview, November 2009). The young boy went home and asked his dad. Faith went on to say that the father told the son to honour his teacher and to behave because Faith had been like his second mother. "That connection was important to him . . . he is much better behaved and more settled, now" (Group meeting, November 2009).

Faith said it is an asset to be in the same school as many of her nieces and nephews. Having nieces and nephews in the school, said Faith, helps the other children know and trust her. She said she once heard one of her students whisper to her niece, suggesting that it was "cool" to have an auntie in the school. Faith said many times that knowing the children takes time and commitment on her part as the teacher.

Faith stated that there are challenges to living and teaching in Wagana. One of the challenges that Faith finds very frustrating is the problem of student attendance. When asked why attendance was a problem, Faith replied, "I don't know exactly, but I think for the most part it is social and family issues like drugs, alcohol, and gambling. But, as a teacher, I have to look at each situation individually, not generally" (Interview, October 2009). Faith went on to say that as teacher, she looks for ways to support the child but also to help parents understand the necessity of consistent attendance for "interactive learning and ongoing support not only from the teachers but also from other students" (Interview, October 2009). She told me about a girl in her Grade 3 class last year who had an attendance record of less than 30%. Faith went to the home and spoke

with the girl and her mother. She also brought the mother to school to see the kinds of things that were happening in the class and to show the mother the value of being in school. The mother finally agreed to send her daughter regularly, and in return Faith promised to work with the girl every day after school to provide support for her academic progress. Faith said that her way to deal with the attendance issue is to examine each individual case and try to determine why each child is not attending and what she or the school can do to help that child attend.

Faith said one thing that stands out for her in her Grade 5 and 6 class is her students' struggles to communicate in writing. "Getting these kids to write is a struggle. They don't like writing" (Group meeting, September 2009). In that same group discussion, Andrea and Melody, also said that writing is a particular challenge for their students. Although they were not sure why writing seems to be such a challenge, they suggested that part of the struggle with writing comes from what appears to be a limited vocabulary as well as limited experience using language in a variety of situations for a variety of purposes. Consequently, Faith tries to build on community experiences and oral storytelling to help the students better understand and use language. "I grew up with oral stories. I bring those stories to the classroom, stories that help us grow and know each other and ourselves" (Group meeting, October 2009).

Later, in an interview (October 2009) when I asked her to elaborate on storytelling in her classroom, Faith told me that she incorporates storytelling for two major reasons. First, when she tells stories, she encourages students to participate, to share their own stories, or simply respond to hers. Second, she uses story telling as a way for children to hear the English language over and over again, exposing them to a range of words and expressions. Faith tries to incorporate some of the Ojibwa words into her classroom storytelling. She hopes that by doing so she can instil an interest in Ojibwa as well as English.

Faith also reads aloud to the students on a daily basis. By reading aloud she once again exposes children to a wide range of experiences and vocabulary.

Because Faith believes in storytelling and reading aloud, she began the school year by combining the two. She decided to read aloud from one of the *Chicken Soup* (Canfield & Hansen, 2008) books.

> I have been doing read-alouds every day after lunch but I have started the *Chicken Soup* books. I am using them because they are shorter pieces, and I thought the kids would find them interesting. They love them. (Interview, September 2009)

These books, according to Faith, have short stories based on true experiences of children about the same age as the ones in Faith's class. Faith went on to say,

> Some of the stories are very intense and sad. One was about a friend dying during the school year. But we talk about that. We talk about the feelings and how to deal with things like that. I worried that they might be too sad or that the students might not connect to them, but boy oh boy, they were able to talk and to make lots of interesting and very personal connections. (Interview, September 2009)

Faith said that by reading these short, personal stories, she engages the children in listening, responding, and telling their own stories. Faith laughed as she told me about what happened one day when she was not at school. The substitute teacher took her students to the library. When Faith returned to school the following day and asked the children to show her the books they had found in the library, many of the students had signed out other *Chicken Soup* books. She was surprised and delighted to know that her students were genuinely interested in this genre. It was a confirmation that the stories were meaningful to them. She realized that these stories drew them in to something that was immediately accessible. She also realized that the children were making personal connections to these stories and that she could use these books as a springboard to other, more complex texts that would also connect to her students' personal experiences.

In two separate interviews (September and October 2009) and in a group meeting (September 2009), Faith said that vocabulary often appears to be a barrier to both reading comprehension and writing. She said that "children in Wagana need to be surrounded by language" (Group meeting, September 2009). Like Mae, Faith says her priority for language arts in Wagana is oral language development. She said she feels strongly that reading and writing are based on an understanding and much practice with oral language. She told me that she structures her reading and writing instruction so that her students receive repeated modelling, opportunities for practice, and much help with structuring of ideas. Faith teaches prewriting strategies to help the children organize their ideas. Her students use a variety of webs, diagrams, and lists to get started with writing tasks. She also incorporates many opportunities for the student to share their writing ideas with each other before they begin a draft.

During our interviews (October and November 2009) and in a group meeting (November 2009), Faith suggested that when children read or are read to, there needs to be elements of discussion and talk about the reading to encourage deeper understanding of the language and the concepts. "Literacy success for students depends on them making personal connections to the texts they read, as well as writing about topics that are personally meaningful to them" (Interview, November 2009). Children in Faith's class are encouraged to share not only what they are reading but also what they are thinking about when they are reading, and most importantly how they connect their own experiences and feelings with what they are reading. Faith encourages this sharing of ideas in small groups. Faith's preference is to have her classroom accommodate small group instruction by organizing desks into small groupings and arranging areas for group activities around the room. Although she plans for whole class activities each day, she uses much of her instructional time working with small groups. She purposefully incorporates many activities that involve students actively interacting with each other and with a variety of text.

Faith hopes to strengthen the students' interest in language through an emphasis on oral discussions, storytelling, oral reading, group reading and individual reading. She also encourages short writing activities that are connected to the daily life and personal experiences of the children. She often uses what she refers to as "quick writes."[7] When I asked her to explain this strategy, she said,

> I give them a topic or idea and ask them to write. Sometimes, it is just lists or words. For example, my dog, big, four legs, four feel, floppy ears, black fur . . . They have only a short time to write. It can be a list, a sentence, a picture with words. (Interview, September 2009)

After a few minutes of writing, the children usually share their ideas orally with others in a small group. Faith reported that the oral sharing helps to increase their interest in others' writing and their vocabulary. Faith also does journal writing, usually at the end of the day. Here again, she does not focus on correctness; she wants the children to express personal thoughts and ideas. She says the students use these journals, particularly in the beginning of the year, to ask her questions or to tell her personal stories. Faith responds to their journals with stories of her own or answers to the questions.

Faith often plays word games with her students because she hopes it will help them to enjoy words and language and expose the students to words in many situations. One day (Field notes, October 2009) before classes started, I went looking for Faith and found her in her classroom with a small group of students gathered around her at a table, laughing and talking. They were playing some kind of word guessing game with Faith. She grinned as she told me that sometimes she throws in some of the Ojibwa words that she knows to encourage a love of two languages. Faith said that most of her students do not speak Ojibwa and she hopes to spark an interest in the community's traditional language.

[7] "Quick writes," as explained by Faith, came from an idea in Brownlie and Close (1992).

In a subsequent interview, Faith said that she often plays word games with the word wall.[8] She has the students find words on the word wall that sound the same, mean the same, are opposite, or rhyme. She and the students also play tic-tac-toe using the word wall words.

Faith also uses a great deal of poetry in her class. She laughingly described how she reads or recites poems in a variety of voices at any time of the day, sometimes when they are lining up to go to the gym or out for recess. "These children love poetry," she says, "and they love to play with the language" (Interview, October 2009).

Faith tries to integrate language arts teaching with content areas such as science and social studies. Faith indicated that this integration with topics of interest to the students helps make learning more relevant to their experiences. Faith, like Mae, looks for books and resources that interest the children, rather than following any particular commercial language arts program. However, she did say she found that one recently published Canadian program includes some good Canadian literature that her children find intriguing, and she uses aspects of this particular program because of the literature and the small group lesson plans.

Faith is particularly proud of the Wagana school library. On several occasions she mentioned taking her students to the library several times a week. Faith told me that the librarian has lived and worked in the community for several years. She is a wonderful resource who knows the students and their interests and who actively searches for reading materials that the students will want to read. "I take my students to the library often, we like it there" (Group meeting, October 2009).

Faith uses a lot of trade books and literature to teach, and she is very happy with the resources in the school library and book room. She said,

[8] A 'word wall,' as it is used by Faith, is explained in Appendix B.

> There are lots of books to choose from, books that the students enjoy. I have been in other schools where there is not such a good library and there are not as many good choices for the teachers and for the students. (Interview, October 2009)

Like Mae, Faith incorporates community cultural activities into her classroom curriculum. Because she is from the community, she is very aware of many of the community events. For example, as previously noted, the community had a ceremonial tepee located in the school yard behind the school. Teachers and students were participating in traditional ceremonies and Faith was bringing her students to learn the significance of the coming of age ceremony. Her plan was for the children to do some writing and oral storytelling around the ceremony.

Faith is disturbed by the lack of things for children to do in Wagana. In our very first interview she said,

> In terms of recreation there is nothing. I haven't seen much organized for the children except what the school offers. The school and the division are very good at organizing activities for the students, but the community needs to help as well. (Interview, September 2009)

Faith values the kinds of activities that the school and the school division plan for the students. She said that having students participate in sports and musical events enhances the social experience for them.

I asked Faith to tell me what or who supports her as a teacher of language arts. She said "I talk to some of the other teachers, like Mae and [names two others]. They are very good resources. I also talk to the parents (Interview, September 2009).

In a subsequent interview in October, Faith and I talked again about supports for her language arts teaching. She said that she learns a lot about language arts teaching from reading books and other resources for teachers. She said again that she talks to others.

> I learn a lot from reading language arts teaching resources. Reading and listening are my ways of learning. I talk to other teachers [named those in the school she talks to]. I learn a lot from the kids, even my own daughter who is older. When she tells me my ideas are boring, I tell her to show me how to fix it up so it will be better for the kids. . . . I have also talked to the language arts consultant. (Interview, October 2009)

She also said she likes to observe others while they teach. "I observe others. I watch to see how they handle small group instruction" (Interview, October 2009).

Like Mae, Faith said she likes to talk to other teachers in the school division from different schools. She said,

> I like the January area conferences where I can talk and listen to others in the same school division. One year we had some really good language arts presentations from teachers in other [names the school division] schools. There was one presentation on how to do story vines and another on writing. These were our own teachers and they are good because we were actively involved in the workshop. We tried things out and saw student examples. (Interview, October 2009)

Melody.

Melody is nearing the end of her classroom teaching career and is beginning to consider retirement, "another major decision in my life: another fork in the road" (Group meeting, October 2009). What struck me most about Melody was her incredible sense of humour and her propensity to laugh at the challenges and stressful situations she encounters in her daily teaching. Our interviews were delightfully injected with a great deal of laughter. Melody is a nonlocal female Caucasian teacher. She lives in a teacherage in Wagana, but only during the week days. She owns a home in a large city, a 3-hour drive from Wagana, and travels to that urban home almost every weekend.

Melody taught in other northern communities, both in this province and another before coming to Wagana. At the time of our interviews, she had been in Wagana for 8 years. Since her arrival in Wagana, she has taught many grades in the elementary school. However, she was recently appointed to teach high school English, which she has grown to love. Melody told me that her approach to teaching high school English is based on her experiences teaching language arts in elementary grades. Melody described herself as a reflective learner who is constantly rethinking her teaching and searching for ways to expand her teaching repertoire with ideas that are engaging and meaningful for her and her students. From watching Melody interact with students and from listening to what other teachers and the administrators said about Melody, I know she cares deeply about her students and their futures.

Melody chose Robert Frost's poem *The Road Not Taken* as a symbol of herself as a teacher. She described teaching as a constant series of decisions and told me that teachers have so many choices to make both personally and professionally on a daily basis. She went on to explain that where she is now as a teacher is not where she imagined herself when she first graduated.

> I started as an art teacher and in the mid '70s. Then I decided, okay, I need an adventure, something completely different. I headed north. I have had many forks in the road along the way and most of them have been very fortuitous forks. When I think about when I first started teaching and where I am now, I would never have imagined that my career would have taken me where it has. It is not what I ever imagined. (Group meeting, October 2009)

Melody went on to say that decision making is "very much a part of teaching, every single day" and that teachers are continually reflecting, rethinking, and reconstructing their understanding of teaching and learning in order to make decisions for the next time.

> I think that we have so many choices to make all the time. Teaching is a constant series of daily decision making as well as personal decisions to make. It is always a rethinking: should I have done this or should I have done that. (Group meeting, October 2009)

Although Melody lives in Wagana, she does not feel she belongs to the community. When asked to talk about this sense of not belonging, Melody replied,

> Well, you are always an outsider. You are never truly part of the community. If you are White and you did not grow up here, you are considered from the outside and you never really belong. People here do not see you as belonging here. So I have to come to terms with that and it is okay. I always have to kind of watch myself. I feel like I am being watched. I am sort of comfortable with the fact that I will never be part of the community, I will never belong here. That is part of the reason why I still go back to [names the urban centre] on the weekends. (Interview, October 2009)

Melody shared with me that although she does not belong, she feels she is viewed as a trusted teacher and respected for her work in the school and with the students. Melody reported that Wagana has many social and economic issues to deal with but that the students and community have realized that there are issues and there is an attempt to deal with the drugs, alcohol, unemployment, and lack of activities for young people.

> There is a lot of unemployment, a lot of substance abuse, and there are a lot of families with issues and problems. There is just a lot of stuff to deal with here. I think that when you are in a community like this but you were not brought up in a community like this, your normal seems different from the normal here. At least there is an attempt to deal with some of the issues here. There is an honest acknowledgement that there are problems and we

are trying to deal with them, not just shove them under the carpet. (Interview, September 2009).

The number of suicides in recent years is indicative of the hopelessness that sometimes invades community members according to Melody. Melody moved to Wagana from a more isolated community even farther north than Wagana. In talking about her northern teaching experiences, Melody told me that there were more problems in the community she left and related the story of why she left that community. Melody taught Grade 6 in Garnth,[9] and when it came time for her first Grade 6 class to graduate from high school, the number of students who had died outnumbered those left to graduate. Deaths were due to suicide, fights among young people, or accidents related to alcohol or drugs. Melody left because she found it too sad and too difficult to deal with. She came to Wagana because she thought there was more of an attempt to acknowledge problems and attempt to deal with them. She indicates that there is much more hope in Wagana. "There is a sense of . . . um . . . hope here; yes hope is the word that I would use. It is the hope that keeps me going" (Interview, September 2009).

Melody participates in school events that include the community. "I do dances and library nights and all the divisional activities that involve students. I know the students from when they are little duffers" (Interview, October 2009). On many occasions when I was in the school, I saw Melody supervising student activities during recess, noon, and after school. I often saw her in the hallways conversing with the students and helping them to plan activities. I saw her as approachable and accessible to the students on an ongoing basis. I noticed students frequently stopping by her classroom after school to chat, borrow a book, or ask for some help with subjects other than their language arts, subjects Melody does not teach.

[9] Garnth is a pseudonym.

In our second September interview, Melody was quick to suggest that there were "advantages to teaching in a small northern community, far from the city" (Interview, September 2009). As in many small schools and communities, the students know one another well and Melody knows the students well. For Melody, this familiarity works to her advantage in teaching language arts. Because she is so familiar with the students and them with each other, it makes choosing themes, books, and ideas of interest to the students easier and more relevant.

> I get to know the kids. This is not like a big, scary school where the teachers don't know the students and the students don't know each other. There is something comfortable about that kind of knowledge. Most of the students know each other and there is no gang issue here. There is not a lot of peer pressure. The students basically dress the same, so there is not a lot of the dressing competition thing. There is not a lot of money for all the fancy games and toys so there is none of that sort of hierarchy here (Interview, September 2009).

Melody, like Mae, indicated through her visual diagram that there are places in the school that are more comfortable for her than other places. Like Mae, Melody does not frequent the staffroom. When I asked Melody about her reluctance to visit the staffroom, she replied by saying,

> Part of the reason I don't go to the staffroom is because there is some tension between the local staff and the non-local staff. There seems to be a lot of gossip there and I don't want to be involved. I find it to be a very toxic atmosphere, so I just don't go. I feel an undercurrent that says I am not welcome. (Interview, November 2009)

I asked her how she dealt with that tension. She laughed and said,

> I try to stay in the areas where the tension is not as evident. I stay in my own hallway area, and in my own room. I love the community that I have developed in my room. I like the people in the hallway area that I work

> with and talk to. Yes, there are tensions, but I try to manage them and live with them because I am not really part of the local community or the local community within the school. (Interview, November 2009)

In the October interview, when the teachers discussed the team meetings at school, Melody said that because she is the only teacher of language arts in the high school, she has no one to share ideas with. She would prefer the team meetings to be organized differently, so that she could talk to the elementary teachers about their language arts practices and about their issues and challenges in teaching language arts.

> At the high school, who am I going to talk to? No one else teaches language arts. The rest of you, I never get to see you, let alone talk to you about your students and your language arts programs. We need to share across grades. (Group meeting, October 2009)

Melody went on to say that the team meetings that are not intended for discussions regarding teaching practices or theory but deal more with school and divisional administrative issues are less productive than ones where there is a clear teaching focus. She therefore seeks interaction with others who teach language arts outside of the school to help her find new ways of thinking about teaching and learning or to confirm her current approaches in language arts.

In many of our conversations, whenever Melody talked about the personal challenges she faces in Wagana, her humour would shine through. In one conversation she laughed and said, "I have to buy groceries elsewhere and I can't drink the water, and my place is mouldy and the roof is falling down, but I love the kids here" (Interview, September 2009).

Inside Melody's classroom.

In one of our October interviews, Melody said that she believes that it is comfortable for the students to confide in someone who is not originally from the community and who is not connected to the families here. Melody suggested that

teachers who are not from the community have the opportunity to create a safe classroom environment for the students to discuss personal and community issues in a nonjudgemental environment.

> I am a trusted adult in their lives and I live here in the community. They feel safe with me. They can bring things up and know I am not going to be judgmental. You see, I am sort of part of the community, as a teacher, but I am also an outsider; outside enough that they know if they tell me something, I am not going to tell others in the community. I am sort of neutral and consistent but I also have some understanding of what it is like to live in this community. (Interview, October 2009)

Melody said that her long career span in the community and her position as a trusted, neutral, non-judgemental adult in the school informs the kinds of discussions and topics that take place in her language arts classrooms. Because of Melody's trusting relationship with the students, they are willing to engage in language arts activities that involve sensitive topics such as suicide, drug and alcohol abuse, and family relationships. Students are open to sharing their personal experiences and making connections between the local issues and global community.

> That is another good thing about being at this school, when the kids get to know you they are not that shy about talking about their issues if you choose the right material. It is easier now for me to choose material, for two reasons. One, I know the students well and I know the community, and two, there seems to be more materials on the market geared at young people's issues and challenges and also geared toward an Aboriginal audience. (Interview, October 2009)

Much of Melody's language arts program is centered on knowing her students well and choosing themes, topics, resources, and programs that are relevant to the students' lives. Melody said that the language arts curriculum in her class is about "social interaction, collaboration, and sharing among the

students" (Group meeting, October 2009). One of Melody's priorities is to establish a safe learning environment where the children take risks with their reading, writing, speaking, listening, viewing, and representing. She told me that she wants the students to experience language in authentic and personally meaningful ways so that they can use language "to communicate and to express themselves and their ideas" (Group meeting, October 2009).

Melody adamantly said both during an October interview as well as in an October group meeting, that to teach language arts effectively, you have to know your students well in many ways.

> You have to get to know the students as persons, find out about their backgrounds. Know them not just academically, but also the family and social situation. Find out about where they live and the conditions in their home. Find out who they are related to, what they like to do. Learn what they deal with. Knowing the students and the way this community is critical for any kind of success teaching here. (Interview, October 2009)

In an October group meeting, Melody said that she strives to know her students well and to provide opportunities for her students to work together. She went on to say that she sees her language arts classroom as a "safe place for her students to explore a variety of topics relevant to their experiences and interests" (Group meeting, October 2009). She also said that because the "community suffers from lack of employment, substance abuse, and gambling and many students live in poorly equipped housing and crowded living conditions," the students needs safe places to talk about such social issues.

In a subsequent interview, we continued to discuss some of the social issues that Melody noticed in the community. In her role as teacher, Melody said it is important for her to know not only the issues in the community and among the students but to also know the students' perspectives on the issues. Melody said,

> For me, the important thing is the acknowledgement among the students, they recognize that this is not how they want to live and there are ways to deal with problems that are healthy. There is hope here among the students. (Interview, September 2009)

Melody reported that the willingness to look at the issues from a variety of perspectives allows for open-ended and meaningful discussions in her language arts classes.

For Melody, to know the students also means to know the families and the parents. For Melody, finding ways to invite parents into the school and to make that school experience comfortable is important. Melody willingly plans for and engages in opportunities for parental involvement in school and divisional activities such as library nights, winter games, music jamborees, concerts, assemblies, and portfolio conferencing.

Melody told me that the distance from the city and the socioeconomic conditions in the community prevent the students from accessing many of the online games, toys, and video arcades that are available to urban students and that her colleagues in large cities tend to complain about. Cell phones in class or in school are not an issue as there is no cell phone service in or around Wagana. Melody said,

> I look at the issues the city teachers put up with and all in all this is a pretty peaceful place to be when you are dealing with adolescents. We have our problems but at least I know what they are. I know the community. There is comfort knowing your surroundings. (Interview, October 2009)

Melody said that knowing her students makes her teaching more purposeful, more deliberate.

> My teaching is more deliberate. Before, I used to grasp at straws and now I might still grasp at straws, but now if I grab a straw I know what I have

> to do to make it workable for the students that I have. (Group meeting, October 2009)

When I asked Melody to talk about successful language arts strategies that she has used, she stated wholeheartedly that using visual representations with students in Wagana is usually successful. "I started as an art teacher, and language arts and art are very similar in many ways. Students can construct their own understandings and represent those understandings in many forms" (Interview, October 2009). Melody said that her students have a variety of interesting and thoughtful perspectives to share. She also considers them to be particularly adept and talented in producing and understanding visual representation. Therefore, she often incorporates visual representations such as gallery walks,[10] collages, videos, webs, diagrams, and schematic drawings in her teaching and students engage in representation as a means of demonstrating understanding or as part of their learning process. In discussing the talent and ability that students in Wagana have for visual representation, frustrations regarding technology in Wagana School surfaced. Melody wholeheartedly wants her students to have access to the visual and representational aspects of technology, but experiences some challenges associated with that. She claims that the students should be adept at using smartboards, websites, digital programming and gaming techniques in writing. However, she is not adept at any of these and said that many sites are blocked and the technology in the school is unreliable.

When asked about her priorities in her language arts program, Melody indicated that one of her main goals is for students to read and to find pleasure in stories or pleasure in information and learning.

> I would love my kids to take pleasure in the act of reading and I would like them to express themselves as writers. I am a reader and I take great pleasure in reading. I think reading for these students is an opportunity to

[10] Gallery walks are explained in Appendix B.

> experience the world through someone else's eyes. A lot of time we get caught up in what is happening in our own little world and we forget that we can connect with others through reading. Reading is something that kids should enjoy. (Interview, September 2009)

Melody reads aloud to her students daily. For example, in her Grade 9 class, her most current read aloud novel is *Johnny Kellock Died Today* by Hadley Dyer (2006). In choosing this book, Melody carefully considered the students in her class and their need to talk about their own feelings and experiences in relation to the characters in the novel. She thought it would connect to the lives of her students and would generate discussion and thoughtful responses.

> I chose it because it deals with the issue of teenage abuse. The hero in the book is a boy about the same age as my students, and many of my students this year in Grade 9 are boys. Many of these children deal with family issues and when I read about the boy in this book, the kids in my class talk about some of their issues. (Interview, October 2009)

I asked Melody if the students were hesitant or shy in regards to talking about themselves and their own or their families' personal or social issues. Melody replied,

> A lot of kids are blunt about talking about personal or families and relating the text to their own lives of lives of somebody they know. Books that have subject matters that are relevant to their lives are good because they get them talking and then writing about things are that meaningful to them. (Interview, October 2009)

Another book that Melody was reading aloud to another class was *To Kill a Mockingbird* by Harper Lee (1960). When I asked why she thought this book was relevant she replied,

> because it deals with racism. But it takes it [racism] away from the present and puts it in the past. That way, the kids talk about it in all kinds of ways.

> We get wonderful discussions and writing from this book. (Interview, October 2009)

In that same interview, Melody also said that she reads aloud for "multiple purposes." We revisit the book to look for examples of figurative language. We discuss characters, plot development, and other aspects of books and language" (Interview, October 2009). Another important aspect of reading aloud to the students, indicated Melody, is the need for students to hear a range of language that they do not hear on a day to day basis in the community. She said, "Children need to hear words and language spoken by others so that they can internalize them and use them in their own spoken and written expression" (Interview, October 2009).

During a conversation with Andrea in one of our October group meetings, Melody agreed that students in Wagana appear to have a limited vocabulary, and it is often the lack of understanding of vocabulary that interferes with meaning in reading and with some of the difficulties that the students encounter in writing. Melody said that over the years, teaching in many different northern communities, she learned that she cannot make assumptions about what the students know and do not know.

> Very often I discover that the things I assumed that they [the students] know, they don't know because they have not had any experience related to that knowing. If they do not have any experience or any way of relating to the topic, I either have to find a new topic or we have to build in the experience. (Group meeting, October 2009)

Melody is an advocate for the use of a literature circles. She has used them in many grades for several years, she gives workshops on them, and she will happily talk about them to anyone who is willing to listen. During one of our group meetings, Melody talked about literature circles (which she often does), and Faith piped in and said, "Do you use literature circles? I never knew that. I really would like to use them. Any advice?" (Group meeting, October 2009). Melody

was pleased to engage in a conversation with Faith about literature circles and the two of them made plans as to how they could support one another.

In several of our interviews, Melody often talked about the advantages she sees in using literature circles.[11] By using a literature circle approach, Melody can give the students choice in their selected readings and she can choose a variety of novels around a topic of interest to the students and at a variety of reading levels that meet the needs of the readers in her class at the time.

> They [literature circles] are successful because kids have choice in the books they read. The power of choice is overwhelming, they like that. They [literature circles] are successful because they always get opportunities to talk about what they are reading and to write about what they have read and what they are thinking. It has components of reading writing, listening, speaking, and sometimes even viewing and representing. (Interview, October 2009)

The advantages from using literature circles continues long after the students leave her class.

> There was another young man who did not like reading and read little. He first told me—'there hasn't been a book written that I would like to read.' But after he had gone through successive literature circles, he came and asked me 'what else have you got that's new?' He is now one of the students that I ask to read new books that I am thinking of using in younger grades to see if he thinks it will make a good literature circle book and if the students will like it. He reads the book and will come back and give me a really good critique of whether it is lit circle worthy or not. I have a few other students who do that for me as well. I will buy a copy and pass it to them and they test drive it for me. (Interview, October 2009)

[11] See Appendix B for an explanation of literature circles.

Sometimes Melody will purposely choose a sensitive or controversial topic if she feels that the students need an opportunity to read, write, think, and discuss a particular issue or theme.

An example of this occurred a few years ago. Melody was teaching a class of Grade 9 students and there was a suicide in the community: a teenage student suicide. All suicides greatly affect the students, but this one, being a student, was even more traumatic for the class. Melody wanted to give the students an opportunity to talk, read, write, and think about the issue of suicide and the issue of hope and hopelessness and dealing with hardships. Instead of tackling the issue directly, as it was very sensitive, she decided to open the discussion and the thinking by using a literature circle unit that focussed on historical fiction where young people deal with hardship in the past. She selected texts such as Hesse's (1997) *Out of the Dust*, which portrayed young people dealing with hardship and difficult situations in different places and different times. The class worked with this theme of overcoming hardship and finding hope, allowing the students to see themselves and others through reading historical fiction novels. Melody attributed the success of literature circles to the choice that the students have in selecting reading material as well as to the opportunities that the students have to talk and connect the novels to their own lives. For the students to make personal connections, Melody needs to know the students well so she can thoughtfully choose a selection of appropriate novels from which the students make choices.

Melody incorporates double entry journals[12] as part of her literature circles responses. In looking at these journals, it was obvious that Melody modelled and provided feedback and discussion about the journal entries. Melody built criteria with the students regarding these journal responses. As a result, these responses become much more sophisticated over time and the students become much more expressive as well.

[12] See Appendix B for an explanation of double entry journals as used by Melody.

Melody constantly builds her supply of novels for literature circles, each year adding more and more books that the students deem interesting and relevant. She asks older students to read books for her to see if they are interesting and appropriate for younger literature circles. Through her literature circles, Melody even has parents coming into the school to borrow books that their students have read and enjoyed. One day after school a parent arrived at Melody's door saying that her son was reading a really good book in class and he had been talking and chuckling about the book at home. The mother wanted to read the book so she could engage in the discussion with her son. Melody happily lent the book to this mother. She told me this was not the first time that parents became interested in reading books that their children were reading. "I have had parents borrow a book and then come back and say, 'What else have you got?' I like that" (Interview, September 2009).

One day in October, after our group meeting, I was in Melody's classroom looking with interest at the student work on the walls, and the set up of the class. A young man walked in to talk to Melody about an assignment. She suggested to him that he might like to read a particular book and she went looking for it. As she opened her cupboard doors, I was amazed that every cupboard in her class was filled with half a dozen copies of numerous novels. One whole classroom wall of cupboard space is full of novels that Melody has used in previous literature circles. These books are available for future literature circles, but also for the reading enjoyment of students, past and present, and parents. Over the years, Melody has managed to access all kinds of grants and budgets in order to build her literature circle library. She is always asking about and looking for funds for books and classroom resources.

She is always on the lookout for new novels that the students will enjoy. Accessing novels is a challenge. Because Internet services are not a reliable option, Melody sometimes searches through supply catalogues and begrudgingly orders without the opportunity to look carefully at the texts. During weekends in

the city, Melody frequently visits bookstores to find interesting, relevant novels for her students. She also relies on recommendations from the language arts consultant and other teachers, usually the ones that she meets while attending committee meetings in the division or in other professional communities.

Melody incorporates magazines and newspapers into her teaching although these are also difficult to access. She uses *MacLean's* magazine which she has sent to the school. She also uses an Aboriginal newspaper that she gets in the city and brings back for the students. There is also a person originally from the community of Wagana who currently writes for a large urban newspaper, so Melody collects those articles when in the city and brings them back for the students to read and discuss.

Another of Melody's language arts priorities includes proficiency in writing. She hopes her students will express themselves and know that they have the writing skills to "do what they need to do" (September 2009). Melody told me that she wants writing to be meaningful for the students. She wants them to feel confident knowing they can express themselves in a variety of forms.

Melody said that that the most engaging writing comes from the students' experiences. Melody teaches memoir writing because it is personal, meaningful, and it connects to the kinds of discussions that occur in the literature circles.

> Memoir writing is great. I think I originally got the idea from the www.readwritethink.org website and then took it from there and expanded it from what I know of the kids here. We read a lot of biographies and do a lot of pre-writing activities. Then they choose an event from their life and write about it. I think it works well because, generally, students don't have a lot of opportunities to share some of their personal experiences in a way that is non-judgemental. (Interview, October 2009)

Melody combines memoir writing with literature by directly using literature to teach memoir writing styles and strategies. Melody said that personal writing has a "double benefit." Melody learns more about her students through

their writing, while it encourages their personal writing. To find teaching tools to support that kind of writing, Melody needs to have some knowledge about her students.

> I make decisions based on the students that I have and what I think we need to build on. It is not like I have a set curriculum that I do every year, because every group of students is different. I look at my class and think carefully about who is there and who we are together. Then I go out and find stuff that we can successfully use. (Interview, October 2009)

As much as she prides herself on knowing her students, she finds at least one piece of memoir writing from a student each year that "is heart rending" because it reveals life experiences about which she was unaware.

> There was one piece in particular. A young man—we had been together for 2 years. I taught him in Grade 8 and then I moved with him to Grade 9. During that year, one of the kids hung himself and so [names the student] wrote about his memory of the day he found out that [name of boy] hung himself. It brought me to tears. It was a very moving piece. It was a phenomenal piece of writing and very, very moving. (Interview, October 2009)

When I asked Melody what beliefs guided her language arts teaching, she replied, "I guess it is the whole idea of constructivism. The idea of making meaning, constructing your own meaning of your world and of text" (September 2009). Melody brings the community into her classroom and tries to make language arts personally meaningful for her students. One day I was in Melody's room after school and a poster was slid under her door. It was a poster to encourage students to apply for an Aboriginal achievement award. Melody took it and immediately talked about how she could develop a classroom writing task that would help her students apply for this award. In previous years, a similar assignment led to other students receiving such awards. In this way Melody hopes

that the students recognize an authentic value to reading and writing and view language use as a powerful tool for their own learning journey.

When I asked Melody where she finds support for her language arts teaching, she said,

> What really stands out for me is the divisional learning committee. I have learned more being on that committee in the last 5 years than ever before. I learn by going through the processes that we go through like all kinds of reading and writing processes and activities. We have wonderful collegial discussions. I like to talk to others from the division who are in similar communities. I do a lot of reading and searching online. I like the provincial committees also. Again I get to talk to others and find out what works for other teachers. I also go to [names the ELA consultant]. I have some resources that are meaningful to me as well that I go too often. I like Faye Brownlie's books for literature circles and Doug Beuhl's work as well as the work of Jeffrey Wilhems. If I have read their work, I try to attend their sessions if they are in [names the closest urban centre]. (Interview, October 2009)

As mentioned by both Mae and Faith, Melody also expressed great frustration with the attendance issue in Wagana. She said, "There is a big disconnect between parents' perception of school and that of the students" (October 2009). She indicated that in her class there are students who are responsible for getting themselves and their younger siblings dressed, fed, and off to school. She said these students make the effort to come to school because they value the time they spend there. Melody told me that some of the attendance issue is due to the responsibilities that young children face at home. Melody went on to say, "the more parents we can get into the school, the more they realize what their children are doing and why" (October 2009). Melody said that the attendance issue needs to be resolved through long-term measures, including involving more parents in the school from the time children are very young. This is one of the

reasons that Melody volunteers to participate in the library nights and other school activities that include parents of students of all ages.

Andrea.

Andrea is an unmarried female Caucasian who previously taught in Wagana, left, and returned 2 years ago and since her return has been teaching in the upper elementary grades. In many previous positions over the past several years, she taught high school English. Andrea is a nonlocal teacher who grew up in a small urban city on the Canadian prairies. She received her teaching degree in Montreal and started her teaching career in Toronto. After a number of term contracts, she realized that jobs in Ontario were scarce, so she returned to her home province on the prairies to seek employment. A job offer came from a northern community in her home province. Andrea accepted that position and after several years in her first northern community, Andrea took a job in Wagana as a high school English teacher. During this time, she successfully engaged students in many creative art and visual activities including drama. Andrea led the school in a major drama production that involved most of the high school students. She engaged in many extracurricular activities and was intent on finding out as much as she could about the students and their interests. She also encountered what she described as intense sadness and death among the students and in the community. Andrea said,

> There were a number of deaths in the community at the time and it just became overwhelmingly sad and difficult to work here for me. The kids were crying all the time and there was just too much death. It was hard for me to leave, but I had to. (Interview, September 2009).

As a result, Andrea left Wagana, but after a number of years and various positions teaching and consulting in other areas and in more southern centres, she returned to Wagana, to be, what she calls a “repeater,” this time as an upper elementary teacher. When I asked why she returned, Andrea said, “I really

enjoyed being here, even though I left . . . I think there is more hope here now and parents want the best for their kids" (Interview, September 2009).

Although she enjoys teaching here, she does not feel like she is accepted as part of the local community. She likes working with the children and is very proud of their accomplishments. However, she experiences anxiety about living alone in the community because her place has been broken into several times.

> There is a troubled side to the community. Since I have been here I have been robbed five times. I feel that everyone knows and I do not feel protected here. I feel I won't be looked after here, so I have to look after myself. (September 2009)

Andrea has family and friends in a large city south of Wagana and usually spends part of each weekend visiting her family and friends there. However, she spends the remainder of her time in Wagana and considers the teacherage to be her home. Even though Andrea lives in the community and considers Wagana to be her home, she said, like Melody, that because she is White and not originally from Wagana, she is not really considered part of the community.

> I have mixed feelings about this community. I think there is great hope here. A lot of people are wonderfully accepting and supportive and although they might not have much educational background, they want the best for their children. There is also a very troubled side. Since I have been out here, I have been robbed five times and so I feel there is a group of kids that are lost. I live here but I don't feel I will ever be a member of the community. I have been told that by many, many people here. I am never going to be someone from here so it is never going to be my place. That's fine, but I live in a teacherage, and when my place gets robbed, I know people know and that is hard to leave that at home. So that is a hard problem. I feel betrayed. (Interview, October 2009)

Andrea volunteered to go first when it came time to share what the participants had brought to represent themselves as a teacher in this community.

From her book bag, Andrea carefully extracted an original hardcover version of the book *Hatchet* by Gary Paulsen (1987).

> This exemplifies me. It is about survival, it is a book about survival. He [the main character] spends the first half of the book very unhappy because he can't eat a good meal and the plane isn't coming and he is just unhappy with the way things are. He is not accepting where he is and what he has to do to get what or where he wants. That is what I feel my predicament here is. I need to accept that these are the students I am teaching, at this place, at this time. (October 2009)

Andrea, like Mae and Melody does not often go to the staffroom.

> The staffroom is full of tension depending on who is in there. It is a mine field. I don't sit down there unless it is empty and I am on a break. It is totally not a safe place. The tensions are between groups of people and I feel unwelcome there. (Interview, November 2009).

In spite of Andrea's tensions in both the school and the community, she told me that she loves teaching in Wagana.

> I love living in this very scenic location. I started my teaching in the north and kind of fell in love with the kids and their forthright way of speaking. (Email conversation, September 29, 2009)

In a group meeting in September, Andrea also commented on how much she likes teaching in Wagana.

> I enjoy teaching here. Students here are very intuitive and perceptive and I like that about teaching here. (Group meeting, September 2009)

Regarding the team meetings, Andrea was quite outspoken and I sensed that the team meetings caused great frustration for Andrea. Although she said she appreciates that there is time set aside for teachers to meet, she also said,

> At the team meetings there are a million little things—tiny problems that eat away at you so instead of talking about ELA, we talk about the doors in the classroom, or other little problems that are really annoying and wear

> you down but they are not subject or teaching related. I don't think it is a positive experience to have a bunch of us sit in a room complaining about all these little things and get all worked up and nothing can come of them any way. All we do is leave mad. We all dread team meeting day. Everybody gets worked up to a frenzy and we are all frothing by the end of the meeting. (Group meeting, October 2009)

Andrea also talked about the water issue and how it affects her students. She said,

> The water issue is annoying–Right now we [the school classrooms] are getting water from some sort of service and the kids complain because there is debris at the bottom of their cup when they drink it. This water issue is a disturbance for me when I am teaching (Interview, October 2009)

Inside Andrea's classroom.

Through many of our conversations, it became evident that one of Andrea's priorities was creating a safe learning place in the classroom. She considered her classroom a "haven for both her students and herself" (Group meeting, October 2009). It is a place where she felts that the students "trust her and see her as a caring, compassionate teacher who wants the best for them" (Group meeting, October 2009). Andrea noticed evidence of the safety that the students feel in her classroom in their journal writing. They used their journals for writing about issues that were personal and ones that stemmed from community and school relationships and experiences. Like Melody, Andrea said that by living in the same community as her students, she better understood some of the social and economic issues that the children dealt with. However, like Melody, she also said, that because she was considered an outsider, she could bring another perspective to the students that may enhance or add to their learning journey.

In several interviews and group meetings, Andrea commented on the importance of being organized and flexible when teaching in a northern community. “It is important to plan for all aspects of your teaching and personal life in regards to the materials and resources that your require” (Interview, September 2009).

When Andrea and I discussed access to resources in a September interview, she spoke with great frustration about the challenges created by the geographical location.

> If you need something for your class, like a video for example, you cannot assume that it will be here or get here when you need it. You have to go out and get it in your hot little hands. Everyone has this added burden on their plate. It can become stressful; never knowing for sure if what you need will be here. When I first started teaching in the north, it took me a whole year to get a different mindset, not a city mindset. Things are not the same as in the city and you have to adapt and make the best of the resources that are here and work with what you have. Flexibility is essential. (Interview, September 2009)

By talking to and observing Andrea, I learned that she was passionate about language arts and integrates language arts approaches and activities into all subject areas. It was apparent through our many conversations and in the many group sessions that Andrea took her teaching seriously and considered teaching as a “way of life” (Group meeting, November 2009). Andrea said that she loved to teach language arts because it “can really touch the lives of the students” (Interview, October 2009). For Andrea, language arts was a way for her students to find out about themselves. She said, “For my students, language arts is about finding out who they are, how language can be a part of their lives and how they can use language to express what they want to say” (Interview, October 2009).

In a discussion about the community of Wagana during both a September interview, and a September group meeting, Andrea raised the idea that her

knowledge of the issues and challenges as she experiences them here affected the way she taught language arts. She said living in Wagana was very different from the city life with which she was previously familiar. She also said that through her experiences living in Wagana, she had developed a better understanding of her students and the experiences they brought to class. “You have to take what you learn and adapt it to your own situation” (Interview, September 2009).

Andrea believed that the students needed to “own the language arts curriculum.” (Group meeting, October 2009). She strived to instil a sense of ownership and responsibility regarding language. She told me that it was important for her students to feel that “the language arts program in the classroom is theirs, that they have books they find interesting, and they write about ideas that are important to them” (Group meeting, October 2009). Andrea said she wanted her students to feel that they were confident and competent speakers, readers, and writers. She strived to help all students find ways that they could construct meaning from text and to tell their stories through language. When asked about her teaching beliefs, Andrea said,

> I want my students to find their voice and to feel that they have a voice in society. Coming into yourself through your writing and through your reading and through your language, I think that is my philosophy. (Interview, October 2009)

Andrea said that the students in Wagana experienced difficulty expressing themselves.

> I think what is really weak all through this school is discussion. Kids don’t talk and there is so much missing for them. There is such a need for talking. I want them to talk beyond local gossip and to talk about their lives. Talk is a precursor to writing. You need to have language and be able to use language for different purposes . . . I want them to get to the place where they can grapple with ideas and argue with others and express their feelings . . . I want them to ponder, to think critically, to analyze

> ideas, and to view things from different perspectives. (Interview, October 2009)

Andrea purposely incorporated many opportunities for talking to others. She encouraged small group discussions. She also encouraged students to draw, jot notes, make diagrams, or use a variety of strategies so they would remember what they wanted to say. At the time of our interviews, Andrea was planning a news broadcast unit with the students. She felt that the students would enjoy and benefit from hearing news, reading news, and creating news from around the local community. This unit however, was presenting challenges because newspapers and new reports were not easily accessible in the community. She managed to use podcasts of various news reports as one way to introduce this genre to the students. Andrea reported that, although her students appeared to her hesitant to speak in class or to speak loudly and clearly, they had much to say. She also told me that they had a great sense of humour and a great sense of timing when telling stories about their experiences.

> These guys do tell stories. They are very funny. Their delivery can be fantastic. This morning they were telling me local ghost stories. They are very funny. They don't have a lot of vocabulary. They heard the stories from their grannies, but they have difficulty writing them. (Interview, October 2009)

Andrea said that the students' humour was one of the delightful aspects of teaching in this community. Andrea built on these oral stories and these experiences in other aspects of her language arts curriculum. She encouraged the students to write their stories, or to tell them again to others. She encouraged them to find connections regarding their stories to the stories and other texts they read.

Andrea's focus on oral language was evident in her approach to teaching reading and writing. Andrea indicated in several interviews that writing was an issue for students in her class. She said that her students required support and repeated experiences with vocabulary. Andrea said that her students used a

limited vocabulary in their writing and she found it was often the vocabulary that interfered with meaning making in reading. Consequently, she used a variety of strategies like three-point approach, word maps, word cycles[13] sketching, and dramatizing to make vocabulary relevant and meaningful to the students.

One method that seemed to bring some writing success in Andrea's classroom was journaling. In several interviews and in the group sessions, Andrea maintained that writing needed to be personal and meaningful for the students. Andrea bought journals in the city for each of the students to write in and she incorporated time each day for the students to write.

> I went out and bought all these journals and said just write and that worked a lot. I try to build in time at the end of the day or before lunch. I encourage them to do self-writing, just like in the movie with Hilary Swank, they all write their own personal stuff. It works with these students. (October 2009)

She told me that their journals were private and they could write whatever they chose. Some students chose to draw in their journals, but others wrote pages and pages. Andrea told me that many students used their journals for talking about personal issues or emotional events in the community such as suicides or accidents. "A huge part of writing is that they [the students] are able to say things that are meaningful to them" (Interview, October 2009). Some students drew, some wrote poetry, and some wrote narrative or other forms of personal writing. Andrea encouraged the students to use their journals for what Andrea referred to as a "healing process," or a way to talk about and think about all that goes on in their lives.

> In this community, like others I have been in, there is a lot of healing that needs to happen, generational healing and individual healing. There is a lot to talk about and I really believe in processing ideas through language. So

[13] Three-point approach, word maps, and word cycles as used by Andrea are explained in Appendix B.

> I guess that is why I work better in these kinds of environments. When I go to a place like [names an urban southern middle class community] the way I teach doesn't seem to work as well. (Interview, October 2009)

Andrea read aloud to her students daily. There were three reasons, she said, for her reading aloud. One reason was to let children hear language and vocabulary. Andrea said that part of the struggle with students and their reading was their lack of experiences outside of the community which often resulted in limited vocabulary. By reading aloud, Andrea was allowing the children to hear the vocabulary and to talk about it before they read it alone.

> Their language is weak and I don't know how to deal with it except by using vocabulary strategies, like the three point approach and pre-teaching words, and a lot of talk on my part, so that they hear me use words in real situations. (Interview, September 2009)

The second reason for reading aloud was to instil a joy of reading. Andrea said she wanted the students to be exposed to a variety of genres and authors so they could choose reading materials that they would find meaningful and interesting to them. "They need to know that there are books out there for them that they can love" (Interview, September 2009).

The third reason for reading aloud was to encourage discussions about reading. Andrea often chose texts that she hoped would encourage the students to share their own stories, opinions, and feelings about a variety of ideas and topics.

> I always read *The Outsiders* (Hinton, 1967). I do a lot of drama with it. Even though it is totally out of date, the kids love it. When I read the first chapter, they draw the characters. We work through the book, learning different ways to respond. (Interview, October 2009)

Besides reading aloud, Andrea also provided uninterrupted time for independent reading. Andrea said that time for independent reading was a priority every day. "Kids need time to read. If something else gets bumped in my schedule, I won't cry about it, but reading is critical" (Interview, October 2009).

Andrea's class went to the school library twice a week and the students were encouraged to choose any reading material they like, fiction, nonfiction, or magazines. Andrea provided an incentive for reading; she bought each student a $10.00 book at the end of each month if they fulfilled their reading goal for that month. Some students saved up a couple of months for a more expensive book and Andrea went to the city and bought the books for the students. Although Andrea recognized that not everyone agreed with this type of incentive program, it helped her achieve her goal of developing more engaged readers. "There is something about owning a book, it is yours and you don't have to take it back to the library. I don't think that students here own a lot of books" (September 2009).

Andrea incorporated reading discussions and encouraged students to respond to reading in a variety of ways. She said that by responding to text, students were articulating their feelings and opinions. She hoped that this articulation of feelings and opinions would lead to improved oral communication and improved writing. Andrea said that allowing for discussions of various ideas and responses to text helped to make the literature more interesting.

> It makes the literature more exciting. It allows the learner to have control over the learning. It takes more time to open things up and allow for different responses, not to cover up any. But it is worth it. Kids need to uncover ideas not to cover them. (Interview, November 2009)

Andrea told me that because the students in Wagana were highly intelligent and had much more to communicate than they could express in writing, she incorporated drama and other visual representation into her language arts program, particularly as ways to respond to text. She said many times during our interviews that the students in Wagana were very artistic and responded well to representational and visual activities. She used a lot of drawing, poster making, and graphic organizers such as diagrams, charts, and mind maps to help students record and organize ideas. One interesting organizer that she showed me was a diagram with four quadrants that students used for both reading and writing. To

respond to their reading, students used each of the four quadrants to respond in a particular manner.

> This quad entry idea went over really well. Four boxes. One quadrant for a vocabulary word that they liked the way it sounded, one for an emotional connection, another quad for a climactic moment, and the final quad for two questions. Every month, I would teach a different kind of response. They got to practice that response over and over again. I gave them feedback so they would work at getting better at their responses. (Interview, November 2009)

Andrea also used a variety of art techniques, poetry, and drama to make reading, writing, and language meaningful for her students. "Drawing works beautifully. Acting works beautifully. Poetry works. They like poetry" (Interview, October 2009). Andrea told me that she saw many similarities between teaching language arts and art. She maintained that the arts and language were means of expression and that "reading, drama, drawing, and representing can be cathartic" (Interview, October 2009). When Andrea worked with drama she focused on the process not necessarily the production. Andrea had the students dramatize reading selections as a way of connecting with the book characters. She said, "I don't think there is any way that students can do all the necessary processing about a character, or about a book and not come to terms with some feelings of their own. That's the power of drama" (Interview, October 2009). She told me that with drama, as with all other language arts activities, it was important to find what worked for the students and to create safe spaces as well as multiple opportunities for self-expression.

> I like the whole idea of the artist developing in personal areas to develop art, and developing art to develop in personal areas. I see this as the same in language arts, particularly in writing. A lot of it is about trust and risk taking which is huge in writing. I find in my class and in this community there seems to be a lot of shame around everything. No one wants to say

> their piece because it might be embarrassing or it is to be hidden. But that is part of ownership. Claim your experiences. (Interview, October 2009)

Most of Andrea's language art successes came from the use of visuals representations and art incorporated into language arts. One unit in particular that Andrea considered very successful was a unit on masks and mask making. In this unit the students explored the ideas of masks that we, as people in a social society, do and do not visibly wear. As Andrea said, "This unit involves a lot of self-questioning. Who are you? How do you represent yourself?" (Interview, October 2009). Andrea went on to say that this unit made students more aware of their strengths. She also said that the unit raised curiosity among parents and therefore she saw it as a way to encourage parental involvement in the children's school learning.

I asked Andrea about her language arts priorities and she said that she focused on helping students find their strengths and giving them opportunities to develop those strengths. She said she wanted the students to have opinions and ideas and to be able to express them. She also said she wanted students to choose books and other resources that were meaningful for them.

> I strive with developing the processes that are meaningful to the students, having language arts come from the kids and not just give them a bunch of strategies so they look right, but to make the program right for them, for the students. (Interview, October 2009)

I asked each teacher what advice she would give to a first year teacher coming to this community to teach language arts. When I asked Andrea, she paused briefly and then stated,

> Trust yourself and your knowledge; go for the things that you know are right for your class. You have to look out for yourself. You have to trust your gut about what works and doesn't work for the kids you have. (Interview, October 2009).

Andrea went on to say that teaching language arts was all about finding what works for you and your students. To find what works, "you have to know the students and what they live with and how they react and respond to their social situations" (Interview, October 2009). Andrea shared a very poignant story about an experience that taught her to be more thoughtful about her teaching and more cognizant of the students and their part in classroom curriculum. Here is Andrea's story.

> When I was in Gatter (a town with a mostly middle class, Anglo-Saxon student population) I was teaching the kind of student that I was when I was growing up; a suburbs kid from a middle class family. We went on a leadership conference with some students and there was a group of other students from other schools. Most of the other students were Aboriginal and our kids were different. The students all had to make speeches. Our students knew how to make a speech and their language was better, more practiced and clear. The students from the Aboriginal community spoke into their sleeve but the things that they were saying were really touching and very moving. My thought was—I don't know that I would know how to teach that type of student. I suddenly realized I had that kind of student sitting in the back of my room and I had not noticed them. They went unnoticed right in my own classroom because they were not like me at that age; confident and knowing. Some kids take a while to speak, but they are thoughtful about what they say and not as forceful in saying it as I might have been. That experience taught me that all kids have something profound to say. I, as teacher, may miss some of them with my blast-through, exciting method. I remember leaving that day, feeling emotionally raw, having my eyes opened to a different kind of student and realizing that I needed to think of other methods and means of reaching all kinds of students. I wondered if I had any business teaching Aboriginal

> children if I could not know them enough to find approaches that worked for them and for me (Interview, October 2009)

Andrea told me that this was a pivotal moment in her teaching career. She said that one of her goals in life was to be a teacher who "values the experiences and prior knowledge of the students, accepts them and all that they have to offer, and works with them to make language arts meaningful to their lives" (Interview, October 2009). Andrea also told me that "It is a real challenge to be a teacher with so many different students and to try to open the world of language arts to all of them" (Interview, October 2009).

When we met in November, Andrea raised a concern that was creating a great deal of tension for her. She had recently attended a workshop at the school for teachers in Grades 4–8. During this time, the teachers were introduced to a program that seemed very prescriptive to Andrea and did not match her teaching philosophy. She was upset that someone who did not know her students and did not know her teaching practices would tell her how to teach her students and what materials to use. Andrea said she was upset that the presenter recommended this particular program,

> without knowing what is going on in our school or in my classroom. I felt completely not listened to. There is nothing in this program that appeals to me. I wanted to quit teaching. It seems like the division is getting more prescriptive. I feel like I am being shoved into a box. I can see my students shrivel up by using this program. (Interview, November 2009)

Andrea said that the important factor in any language arts curriculum whether it be a mandated one or the one constructed in class with the students, was that it needs to be "inclusive so that all students can feel that language; reading, writing, listening, speaking, viewing, and representing is meaningful for them" (Group meeting, September 2009). She subsequently also said, "I like that the language arts curriculum framework in our province includes reading, writing, listening, speaking, viewing, and representing. I think a broad definition of

language arts fits for more people in more ways" (Interview, September 2009). Andrea said her greatest hope was "that my students will be lifelong readers and writers" (Interview, October 2009). She also said,

> I guess language arts really comes down to students having a sense of ownership about language; the kind of ownership that makes them believe they have a voice in their own writing. Writing and reading can be in their life, part of their life, and be meaningful to them. There is power in language and I want the power to work for them. (Interview, October 2009)

During an interview with Andrea in November, I asked her to talk about the kinds of support that she looked for as a language arts teacher in this community. She told me that she often watched movies and documentaries about teachers who had worked successfully with students in impoverished areas and communities. Andrea told me that she probed these movies for what these successful teachers did and what they had in common. She suggested that successful teachers strongly believe in their students as learners and no matter how difficult the challenge, they find ways to make the learning meaningful and purposeful to the lives of the students.

> I watch these movies because I am looking for clues to how to get my students to talk about their lives, to look at themselves. I am looking to see what these teachers do. And what they often do is try to pull from the kids' lives. They try to find the issues they really care about. That is really the question of my career. How can I do this? (November 2009)

She talked specifically about the movie called *Freedom Writers* (2007) starring Hilary Swank and the TV movie, *The Ron Clark Story* (2006) starring Matthew Perry. She said that the teacher in *The Ron Clark Story* was particularly inspiring.

> He was really big on getting the kids excited about learning, making it real for them, taking the kids and bringing the classroom to their lives and

> taking them out of the classroom to experience learning in authentic situations. I see my students in these movies. (Interview, November 2009).

Andrea said she strived for the same in her classroom community; for students to feel "valued as learners, to be excited about learning, and to feel that the learning is purposeful and meaningful to their lives" (Interview, November 2009).

Andrea, like all the other participating teachers, worried about students' attendance. She said, "Attendance is weak. When I speak to the parents, they do not always connect attendance to school success" (Interview, September 2009). Andrea told me that most parents in Wagana wanted the best for their children, but the parents did not understand the school system and felt uncomfortable coming into the school to see what was going on there. Andrea said that the parents who did become involved saw that the school was attempting to integrate some of the "traditional and current interests of the community into the school curriculum" (Interview, September 2009). Andrea suggested that teachers and students together had some responsibility to help parents to better understand what the students were doing and accomplishing. Andrea added that if teachers could find the right curriculum to engage the students, they might also engage more parents and have less attendance issues. She often tried to talk to the parents as well as the students to generate positive feelings about school, learning, and specifically about the kinds of activities that were taking place in her classroom.

How to be a Language Arts Teacher in Wagana: The Teachers' Voices

I want to end this section on the language arts teaching practices of four teachers with the words of the teachers, to make their voices the final thoughts of this section. The following poems provide a thoughtful conclusion regarding teaching language arts in this northern community. In a group meeting, I asked the teachers to work in pairs up and talk about being a language arts teacher in

Wagana. As each pair prepared to write these poems, they first generated a list of ideas about teaching language arts in Wagana.

Their discussions centered on important aspects of their language arts teaching practices. I listened as the teachers shared their ideas. The first idea from Mae was, "love your students." Then Andrea said, "share the books you love and find what the students love. Bring the world into the classroom." Melody began the discussion in the other pair by saying, "get to know your students." Faith then said, "Invite them to take risks in their learning." Each teacher continued to contribute ideas from her own experience and each pair worked on their "how to" poetry for quite some time. As I listened and circulated, there was a buzz of talk and laughter as the teachers engaged in the task. In composing these poems, they examined their teaching practices and the influence of their current teaching contexts. They also explored various ways to put their ideas into a predetermined type of poetry. Each pair presented their poem to the other pair.

When I read these poems, I hear their laughter, recall the discussions, and remember their engagement during the writing task, and know that these poems reflect these teachers as language arts teachers in this northern community.

How to be a Language Arts Teacher in this Community . . .

By Faith and Melody

Love children
Get to know your students
Know where they are now
Know where they need to go
Know them on many levels,
Read, read, read.
Write, write, write.

Love language
Talk about what you read,
Interact with others
Talk about what you write
Make language real for the students
Read, read, read.
Write, write, write.

Love reading,
Read aloud to everyone
Choose what you read
Share what you read
Read for many purposes
Read, read, read.
Write, write, write.

Love writing,
Express yourself in writing
Write about what you know
Share with others
Write about what you read
Read, read, read.
Write, write, write.

How to be a Language Arts Teacher in this Community . . .

By Andrea and Mae

Love kids,
Honour the students' experiences,
Respect the students' world,
Extend the learning beyond the classroom,
Bring the world "in"
Empathize.

Share yourself,
Share the books you love,
Be flexible, accept, and adapt,
Make learning safe,
Invite risk-taking,
Smile!

Read aloud,
Model meaningful language,
Talk, talk, talk,
Use music and drama to make it real,
Encourage interaction and curiosity,
Be creative.

Roll with the punches,
Be a little insane,
Have a sense of humour,
Listen to others, particularly your students,
Admit your mistakes and find other solutions,
Be in touch with yourself.

Chapter 5. The Provincially Mandated English Language Arts Curriculum and Its Influence on the Professional Knowledge Landscape of the Teachers in Wagana

Clandinin and Connelly (1995) suggested that for teachers, the landscape outside the classroom is less secure and safe than the classroom landscape.

> When teachers leave their classrooms and move into another place on the professional knowledge landscape, they leave the safe secrecy of the classroom and enter a public place on the landscape. Walking out of the classroom is walking into a dramatically different epistemological and moral place on the landscape. (Clandinin & Connelly, 1995, p. 14)

In two separate interviews, I asked each teacher to talk about the provincial ELA Framework and the Illustrative Examples because I viewed these mandated curricular documents as important components of the teachers' professional knowledge landscape. I wondered what place these documents held as part of each teacher's classroom language arts curriculum.

Benefits Associated with The ELA Framework and The Illustrative Examples

Based on my interpretation of the interviews, the four teachers said that the provincial curriculum documents allow them to be curriculum makers and to shape the English language arts curriculum in their classroom because they are not prescriptive regarding the approach, programs, literature, or resources that are to be used. They also said that the social constructivist underpinnings of the provincial curriculum are solid and congruent with their approach to teaching language arts.

> I think it is good that it is not really specific in regards to the programs or resources. It depends on the teacher and her students. You don't have to do things the same as anyone else. It allows you to be creative, and flexible

> and in tune with your students and community. It does not tie you down to one way of doing things. (Mae, Interview, September 2009)

> The curriculum framework gives you the freedom and flexibility to do what you think is right for your students at the time. It acts as your guide but it does not prescribe your program, that is a strength. (Faith, Interview, October 2009)

> I like the framework because it is not prescriptive. It does not tell you what to use. There are lots of good suggestions that you can use, but you can approach things differently if your students require it. It leaves me the freedom to choose what I need to do with the students that I have. I started as an art teacher and to me art and ELA are very similar. In ELA, you can help the students reach the outcomes in a variety of ways, depending on the kids. It is the constructivist idea. It is like when students construct their own art project in art, you can do the same in ELA. To me there is a lot more freedom for the teachers and the students do learn in many ways. There is no one way that you have to teach. (Melody, Interview, September 2009)

In that same interview, I asked Melody what she considered the strengths (if any) of the ELA Framework. She replied, "The constructivist underpinnings, the open-ended nature of it, the suggestions that are offered for the teacher, and the process-oriented nature of the outcomes" (Interview, September 2009).

The teachers reported that the illustrative examples are the most useful part of the provincially mandated curriculum. The illustrative examples are provided to help teachers with instructional activities congruent with the specified learning outcomes. These examples are often suggestions as to what strategy or activity a teacher could use to help the students meet a particular outcome. Andrea stated,

> They use a ton of examples and show things that other teachers used. The examples are what I use to help me. The examples are a huge gift. I fill in places where particular things won't work for my kids. . . . The strategies that accompany the framework—those are fantastic. I often adapt the strategies for my students but they give me the starting idea. I appreciate that. (Interview, September 2009)

As Mae said, "Examples are very helpful. If we are not really sure sometimes we need examples, just like the children do." (Interview, September 2009). Faith also found the illustrative examples provide support for instructional ideas.

> I like the ideas and the activities and the examples. I really like the examples. They help me get a better idea about the expectations of the outcomes. The examples help me to understand. When you look at the examples, the outcomes make sense. (Faith, Interview, September 2009)

Melody found the illustrative examples helpful because they cited a number of references for further reading. "I like the fact that there are support materials and suggestions for further reading if you need it and other authors that you can turn to" (Interview, September 2009).

Andrea found the provincial curriculum framework very helpful when she first came from Ontario to Western Canada. It helped her to understand the expectations, approaches, and theoretical underpinnings of language arts teaching in Western Canada. Andrea said that the provincial curriculum framework is inclusive and therefore applies to most students. She told me the broad definition of literacy, which includes reading, writing, speaking, listening, viewing, and representing, allows students to show what they know in many ways. "My big thing about English language arts is that I want it to apply to everybody and not just the good reader and the good writer, the ones who find reading and writing come easily" (Andrea, Interview, October 2009).

These teachers told me that the most successful language arts curriculum is one that combines the lived experiences of the children with the skills and strategies of the provincial curriculum framework. They believe this combination will maximize the possibility of success for the students after graduation.

Challenges Associated With the ELA Framework

Based on conversations with the teachers, there are issues regarding the provincially mandated curriculum that create particular challenges for them. Teachers expressed feelings of being overwhelmed by the documents. They also talked about the issues they experienced as they continue to try to learn about the provincial curriculum and how it relates to the teaching context and the lived experiences of the students. The third issue relates to mass media and technology.

Feeling overwhelmed.

When I asked Andrea to tell me about the ELA Framework, there was a long pause and then she said,

> It is everybody's little secret. Everybody is nervous about it and thinks that everyone else is doing it accurately. It is something that is not talked about enough and nobody is being super honest about it. Everybody is pretending that they get it but they do not. There has been a big push to use it but that has not been coupled with working with it for teachers. Everyone is pretending they are on board and everyone is on board a bit, but there are huge areas where people are pretending they know but they really don't. That's the elephant in the room. (Interview, September 2009)

Andrea's comment reminded me of Clandinin and Connelly's (1995) concept of *cover stories*. Clandinin and Connelly suggested that outside of the classroom teachers experience a dilemma. They say that in the out-of-classroom part of the professional knowledge landscape, teachers talk about provincial and divisional policies, plans, and expectations. In the classroom, they "tell of what

matters to them most, that is, stories of children and classroom events" (p. 15). Clandinin and Connelly went on to say that "teachers tell us they live and tell cover stories, stories in which they portray themselves as characters who are certain, expert people. These cover stories are a way of managing this dilemma" (p. 15).

In effect, Andrea was saying that she and other teachers often tell cover stories so that they appear to understand the provincially mandated curriculum but in reality there are aspects of it that they do not understand but are hesitant to admit.

The participating teachers said that the number of outcomes is overwhelming and that the language used to express the student outcomes is not easy to understand. For example, there are 56 outcomes for each grade, and teachers are expected to know these outcomes and implement them in their planning. When discussing the disadvantages of specific and numerous mandated curricular outcomes, Eisner (2002) pointed out that "the more numerous they [the outcomes] are, the more cumbersome they are" (p. 165).

"It [the ELA Framework] is overwhelming, there is just so much. I don't know if I will ever be comfortable with it" (Mae, September 2009).

Faith said the learning outcomes are vague and confusing. "Some of the outcomes are very wordy and I don't know what they mean in relation to my students" (September 2009).

Andrea expressed frustration with the language and referred to it as "beyond teacherese." Her comments about the language struck me as important because Andrea had been described by her administrators as particularly accomplished and knowledgeable in the area of language arts. If she was experiencing frustration and difficulty, I wondered how other teachers were coping with the language. In a September interview, she said,

> Some of the outcomes I read and read again and I'll go, what do they want me to teach out of that? It is written in beyond teacherese, it is in some

> kind of ivory tower language which is not very helpful for a classroom teacher, particularly one in a northern community. It is so huge you never get a sense that you've got the whole thing. Are you expected to have the whole thing? (Interview, September 2009)

Andrea's dilemma appears to be one of those situations to which Craig (1995) referred:

> The situations that tear at the heart of my practice are the ones in which I am stripped of voice and agency. They are the situations in which someone else's knowledge is delivered to me through the conduit in one place on my professional knowledge landscape and I am expected to enact it as if it were my own in my classroom. (p. 24)

Andrea pointed out that although the provincially mandated curriculum is open-ended enough to allow for teachers to develop their own classroom curriculum, there is still an expectation that teachers understand and integrate the provincial outcomes into their planning. This expectation is placed on teachers provincially and divisionally and is therefore one of those situations that create a dilemma for teachers because they have little voice in the matter.

Teacher learning.

The overwhelming nature of the framework leads to another issue for these teachers. This issue involves the challenges associated with the ongoing learning that seems to be necessary in order to understand the provincial curriculum and more importantly to understand how to relate the provincial expectations with the lived experiences of the students.

Almost 15 years after the introduction and initial implementation of the English language arts framework, the four teachers agreed that they are still learning about the contents of the curricular documents and how to relate these documents to their teaching context. The teachers all reported that ongoing, consistent support in connecting the curricular outcomes with their particular

teaching context and the lives of their students is important if they are to effectively shape a classroom language arts curriculum that honours their students and the provincial expectations. Furthermore, they indicated that it was particularly difficult to access this support in their northern teaching context and their knowledge of the mandated documents required them to move beyond their community.

When the curricular documents were first introduced, Mae was already teaching in Wagana. It is important, said Mae, "to learn about the documents in relation to my own specific teaching context and the lives of my students" (Interview, October 2009). A few years ago Mae was part of an area early literacy project which was ongoing for 5 years. In this project, teachers from a number of northern schools came together to discuss the development of reading, writing, and oral language continua.[14] Mae found it extremely beneficial for not only developing student continua based on their own students, but also for providing a purpose for teachers to delve into the curricular documents together over an extended period of time. Mae expressed a desire for this type of ongoing, interactive purposeful learning opportunities to be more frequent and more ongoing.

Faith told me that the best way for her to learn about the documents is to talk to other teachers working in similar teaching contexts. She said she talks to Mae and others in Wagana School, but she also tries to connect with teachers in other northern communities. She said that teachers in similar teaching contexts are better able to help her understand the learning outcomes in the provincial framework in a way that matches her students' experiences.

Of all the teachers in this study, Melody was the most comfortable and knowledgeable about the curricular documents. Melody reported that she knows the provincial curriculum framework well, only because she has been fortunate to

[14] A continuum, according to these teachers, is a set of student behaviours to indicate what children can do at various stages of reading, writing, and oral language.

have received opportunities to continually delve deeply into the provincial framework over the past several years. Several years ago, Melody was asked to sit on a divisional committee that was exploring reading and writing in Grades 5 to 8. This ongoing committee meets several times a year and has representation from all areas of the school division. The committee consists of about 15 teachers from various schools across the division as well as several English language arts consultants. It is through her experiences with this ongoing committee that Melody has constructed and reconstructed her understanding of the provincial framework over time.

> A lot of my curriculum learning has to do with the committees that I have been on with this school division. We go back and look at the documents and look again and again for specific purposes. Going back and rereading for specific purposes helps me to look at the curriculum framework in different ways. I am not sure if by just teaching on my own, I would have done that. Also being able to talk to colleagues over time about the specific aspects of the framework in relation to my students is most helpful. Talking to others on the committee was a huge help. (Interview, October 2009)

Melody was also part of provincial committees that worked with the curricular documents. Through these various interactions, Melody has been deepening her understanding of curriculum framework over a number of years. As her understanding of curriculum develops and changes over time, so does her understanding of and approach to teaching. She also expressed the desire that these ongoing, interactive learning opportunities somehow be made available to more northern teachers.

Andrea said that understanding the provincial framework and language arts teaching requires opportunities to interact with others who teach students of similar ages and in similar contexts. Andrea looks for summer university courses that are based on the provincially mandated curriculum. She has participated in

summer institutes sponsored by the provincial department of education and an urban university and found them helpful in better understanding the provincial curriculum. Summer institutes and university courses are available in the large urban centre. Summer courses, as opposed to courses during the school year, work for both Melody and Andrea because they can travel and access these courses in the summer months. They both said that they find the distance from Wagana and the weather conditions prohibitive for taking courses during the school year.

As noted in the previous section, the four participating teachers look for professional learning opportunities outside of the community of Wagana. They seek collaboration with others outside the community but this can be a challenge due to the geographic location of Wagana. It is often difficult for teachers in Wagana to access professional learning opportunities outside the community because of issues related to travel; issues such as cost and distance.

As mentioned earlier, two of the teachers attend summer institutes but find it extremely difficult due to the travel distance to attend classes or courses during the school year. Urban teachers have relatively easy access to meetings of professional organizations such as reading associations and can attend face-to-face meetings and workshops. Teachers in Wagana can certainly belong to these organizations but attending the face-to-face after school meetings is not possible, and as noted later in this chapter, online communication is not consistently available.

The teachers told me that the school division seems to be aware of the need for northern teachers to interact and connect with one another and the challenges associated with doing so. Many of the committees of which both Melody and Mae have been a part, were sponsored by the school division.

Melody has been fortunate enough to participate in several committees. All of the committee meetings are in the city and there have been numerous occasions when she was not able to attend due to bad weather. Earlier I mentioned

an English teachers' conference that Melody attended. This conference was held in another northern location and the cost for Melody to attend consisted of ground travel to the city and then flight costs to the other northern community, plus hotel and meals for 2 days. In spite of these associated costs, the school division continues to sponsor this conference on an annual basis to support collaboration among the high school English teachers.

The divisional area that includes Wagana sponsors an annual conference that brings all the teachers from all the area schools together for 2 days of learning and social interaction. The teachers value this annual event and use this conference to make connections with others. Faith said she also tries to follow up on these connections with phone calls and emails during the rest of the year.

Another way that the teachers learned about the mandated documents was through visits from consultants or other educators from outside the community. The school division provides for an English language arts (ELA) consultant in each area within the division. The ELA consultant who supports Wagana is from a large urban community and usually visits the school for a day or two at a time, several times during the school year. The teachers told me that the language arts consultants over the years have been very supportive in helping them develop their language arts teaching practices. When I was in Mae's classroom one day after school, she showed me a new resource for kindergarten that the language arts consultant had just given her. "I use bits from this new resource that the ELA consultant gave me last year. It is quite good" (Interview, October 2009). Mae said that without the support of the consultant she would not have been aware of this resource. She went on to say that she counts on the consultant to help her stay informed of current resources.

It was during Faith's first teaching assignment in a northern community that she began working with a language arts consultant who lived and worked in the community. Faith was new to teaching elementary school and new to teaching

language arts. Faith said the ELA consultant spent many hours with her both in classroom and after school to help.

> When I first came to Northway Lake,[15] there was this guy. I remember him so well. He was the ELA consultant in Northway Lake. He was a very good support. We planned and organized together. That was a big help. Then I went and tried things in the classroom and then came back to talk to him. (Interview, September 2009)

Since coming to Wagana, Faith has continued to work with the ELA consultant assigned to Wagana. As mentioned earlier, Faith and the language arts consultant planned and implemented an integrated unit the previous year. Melody also said she worked closely with her ELA consultant over a number of years and with the help of the ELA consultant, planned, organized, and presented her first literature circles workshop for other teachers. She has been fortunate to give this presentation several times and in several places over the past few years Melody said that through her interactions with the ELA consultant she was better able to connect her ideas and her student work to the provincial curricular outcomes. "I remember [names an ELA consultant] helped me a lot to figure out the curriculum guides and recommended me to the committees that I have been fortunate to work on" (Interview, September 2009).

It appears, from the comments of the teachers, that it takes several years and ongoing interaction with other teachers and educators from outside the local community to understand the provincial curriculum framework and the illustrative examples and to connect these to their own teaching context. Interaction with others in an ongoing and purposeful manner was the best way to better understand and personalize the provincial curriculum framework. However, they all agreed that they find it challenging to participate in ongoing learning opportunities

[15] Northway Lake is a pseudonym for the northern community where Faith first started teaching.

because of the issues associated with travel. These challenges will be discussed in more detail later in this chapter.

Mass Media and Technology

The third issue regarding the provincially mandated curriculum relates in part to General Outcome 3, which deals with managing and organizing ideas and information. The teachers told me that, besides being particularly difficult to understand, this outcome also specifies that students engage with multiple resources and materials. The teachers strive to incorporate multiple resources into their classroom instruction, particularly a variety of print texts as well as the community resources described earlier in the chapter. However, they said that students do not have sufficient access to ensure that they are mastering the language arts outcomes to the extent expected in the curriculum and required for success later in life. Although General Outcome 3 is not the only place in the provincial curriculum that indicates the use of multiple resources and a variety of text, including digital text, it was in a group discussion about the ELA Framework and General Outcome 3 in particular, that the teachers' frustrations with media and technology surfaced (Group meeting, October 2009).

Faith said that she and a language arts consultant had worked on a unit, integrating language arts with science and social studies. As part of this unit, the students chose to engage in a variety of research topics. The research aspect proved to be a challenge because students could not access Internet sites at school either because the Internet was not working or because a number of sites were blocked. To complicate matters, few students have computers or Internet access at home. Although the students made good use of print resources in the school library, Faith was disappointed that they could not use the Internet and was particularly concerned because the use of multiple resources is an essential aspect of General Outcome 3 in the provincially mandated language arts curriculum. She

said that this lack of reliable Internet service puts her students at a disadvantage as they are not familiar and comfortable with technology.

Melody pointed out that besides unreliable access, there is also an issue at the divisional level about which sites can be accessed in schools and which sites are blocked to the schools.

> I can't access or take advantage of blogging. You can use some internet but I cannot get into the sites that I want. I use the computers basically for word processing. The students use them as glorified typewriters. However even though the students become comfortable on the computers as word processors, both the divisional assessments and the provincial assessments that the students have to do, they cannot use the computers. There is a bit of disconnect there. (Group meeting, October 2009)

Due to divisional concerns regarding use of the Internet, many websites have been blocked and cannot be accessed at school. The lack of access to websites creates challenges for Melody. For example, she wanted to use *MacLean's* magazine for numerous teaching purposes in her language arts classroom, so she ordered copies of it to be delivered by mail to the school. However, many of the student activities and the entire teacher support materials and explanations are only accessible online at www.macleans.ca. This particular website was blocked at the school and therefore Melody and the students could not access the teaching guide and the students could not access the student activities.

Melody told me that newspaper sites are also blocked. "We cannot even read the newspaper online" (Group meeting, October 2009). She found this frustrating because she could not use this valuable resource while at school. Another major language and literacy website for teachers, the International Reading Association's readwritethink.org site, which Melody uses consistently from home, is blocked at the school. Melody was frustrated because she wanted her students to be technologically competent and globally competitive, and she

expressed concern that her students will be at a disadvantage when they attempt to join the workforce in places other than their community.

Andrea planned a unit regarding critical literacy and the media. However, this proved challenging to implement. One of the reasons was the lack of current mass media in the community. There are no paper format newspapers delivered to the community or sold in the local store. Few homes access media coverage via internet and few students watched the news on TV. Andrea managed to use previously recorded CBC podcasts to provide some news coverage for students.

On my first visit to the school in September 2009, as Melody and I walked the halls at recess, she told me that she was to attend a high school English teachers' conference hosted by the school division. The theme of the conference was *technology in the classroom*. Melody said she did not want to go because she felt that she had nothing to offer, she was frustrated with technology, and she did not think she could represent her school well. When I returned to the school in October, after the conference, I specifically asked Melody about the conference in one of our group meetings. Melody told me that she did attend and was very glad that she had. Although she said she did not contribute as much as she would have liked regarding technology use, she realized that there were other teachers in the division who, like her, were not as adept and comfortable with technology as they hoped to be. She also realized that many teachers are finding interesting ways of integrating technology into their classroom curriculum. Melody was motivated to find ways to learn more about technology. When I earlier listened to her comments about not wanting to attend the conference, I was wondering if she was worried about creating a cover story that represented her and her school as adept and comfortable with technology when in reality, it is an ongoing challenge for Melody in Wagana.

Another challenge facing the teachers was the limited support for trouble-shooting if there is a problem with the technology.

> If I want to do this with my class, I can get help from the technology guys but I am on my own for the most part, and I have to know everything, everything, everything, There are going to be glitches and I have to be the one to solve them. I am not a technological person but I have to learn so I can use technology effectively in the class. (Andrea, Group meeting, October 2009)

There are few people in the community who are able to assist with the problems when technology is not up and running effectively. Most often, set up, upgrades, and repairs require support from the city. However, travel takes time and is dependent on the weather. The school division has one technologist providing support for many schools, so there is often competing demands for service when a technology issue arises in a community such as Wagana. During the group meeting in October, the teachers told me that the school division is attempting to resolve the technology problems, and there is desire and hope that technology will be available and useful to the school community: both teachers and students. However, several months after I had finished data collection, teachers did not seem any less frustrated with their technology issues. In fact, when I tried to send the teachers a draft of part of this dissertation months later, email was still an issue for these teachers.

These teachers realize that the world is changing and becoming a technological world and with the changes in technology also come changes in thinking about literacy and preparing students for changes in the way the world thinks about language and social participation in language.

Lankshear and Knobel (2006) described technology in today's society as involving new literacies. The new literacies refer not to just the use of technology but to a new mindset around the rise of digital electronic technologies. Established social practices have been transformed and new social practices have emerged. Many of these new and changing social practices involve new and changing ways of producing, distributing, exchanging, and receiving text by

electronic means. Lankshear and Knobel stated that besides different "*technical* stuff new literacies are made of different *ethos* stuff" (p. 24). Often more participatory, more collaborative, more distributed as well as less published, less individualized, less author-centric than conventional literacies, this type of literacy reflects a different mindset and involves different kinds of social and cultural relations. Lankshear and Knobel also claim that the development and mass uptake of digital technologies presents different ways of thinking about the world and responding to it. Thus a new kind of mindset has begun to emerge and some new kinds of literacies have begun to evolve. Schools have some responsibility to involve the teachers and students in an awareness of this new mindset.

These teachers stated that they, together with their students, are at a disadvantage in the world of new digital technologies and are left behind in regards to the new social practices that have emerged. In a community where cell phones do not function due to lack of service, Internet access is sporadic, newspapers are not delivered, and many people do not have access to computers in their homes, developing new literacies is a challenge.

Chapter 6. Discussion and Recommendations

> Because it is an exercise in such depth, the case study is an opportunity to see what others have not yet seen, to reflect the uniqueness of our own lives, to engage the best of our interpretive powers, and to make, even by its integrity alone, an advocacy for those things we cherish. (Stake, 1995, p. 136)

As stated in Chapter 1, the purpose of this case study was to explore, from the point of view of the participating teachers, how they experience language arts teaching in a northern community and how the northern contexts influence their personal practical knowledge and the construction of their language arts classroom curriculum.

In Chapters 4 and 5, I presented my findings. In this chapter, I discuss these findings in relation to the literature and research that framed my study. I discuss the links and connections between my work and the work of others. Because qualitative research often leads to further questions, I also make recommendations for future investigations.

Teacher Personal Practical Knowledge

My study adds to the scholarly discussion regarding teacher knowledge by providing specific information about how the contexts in one Northern Canadian community influence the teachers' knowledge as they construct their classroom language arts curriculum. Until this study, there has been little information available regarding teacher knowledge specific to the influences of northern contexts or specific to language arts instruction in Canada.

This study has led me to a deeper appreciation of the complexity of teacher personal practical knowledge and the intricacies of the influence that contexts have on that knowledge. As noted in Chapter 2, various researchers have identified or developed categories of teacher knowledge (Elbaz, 1983; Meijer et

al., 1999). I too, initially attempted to organize my data into categories of teacher knowledge. During the process, I recognized that regardless of the categories I might assign to teacher knowledge, teachers are "knowing persons with their own epistemological relations to their milieu and their students" (Clandinin & Connelly, 1995, p. 26). Clandinin and Connelly (1995) went on to say that "knowledge becomes the embodied forms (e.g., images, metaphors, personal philosophy, rhythms, rules, and principles) by which teachers interact with the world, rather than the knowledge of things (e.g., of subject matter, children, and instructional methods) that teachers need to know to fulfill their societal function" (p. 26). My study confirms Clandinin and Connelly's idea that the components of teacher personal practical knowledge are inseparable and it is the integration of teachers' knowledge that helps them construct and enact their classroom language arts curriculum.

It is this inseparable integration of teacher knowledge that makes the writing of this dissertation difficult. It would be easier for me to discuss teacher knowledge by dividing it into describable categories. However, by breaking apart this special kind of knowledge, I run the risk of making the parts seem less interwoven and complex than they really are. It is difficult to separate the personal from the professional, the experiential from the emotional, or the practical from the personal or professional. I have, therefore, organized the discussion of my findings around four main themes.

The following four interrelated themes specific to the Northern Canadian community of Wagana and the teaching of language arts discussed in this chapter add to the scholarly conversation regarding teacher knowledge.

- Language arts teachers as curriculum makers
- Empowering students through language
- Social contexts within the classroom
- Belonging in the school and the community

Each of these themes is discussed below.

Language arts teachers as curriculum makers.

> Teachers know a lot about teaching but it is often seriously underrated. We bring a lot of life experiences to our teaching knowledge. Knowing comes from being in the classroom with the students. Being in the classroom gives us knowledge that others cannot have. Our knowledge is not all professional. (Andrea, group meeting, November 2009)

As outlined in Chapter 2, this study recognizes that the teacher is central to the shaping of a classroom language arts curriculum that is the dynamic interaction of the students, the teacher, the subject matter, and the milieu as they are experienced in the classroom. As early as 1983, Schwab contended that teachers are in the best position to understand the learning needs of the students. The language arts teachers in this study have a variety of teaching practices, approaches, strategies, and resources from which to choose. As curriculum makers, they accept the responsibility to choose the kinds of practices that will best support their students. As noted in their accounts, none of the teachers uses a commercial program to teach language arts. Each of them thoughtfully chooses books and materials that they feel are relevant and personally meaningful to their students. The choices made by these teachers are in response to the lived experiences and learning needs of the students. They allow, as Paley (1997) suggested, for the classroom curriculum to be negotiated between the students and the teacher.

As I examined the teaching practices of the four teachers in Wagana, it became apparent to me that the kinds of approaches, strategies, and resources that they choose are directly related to their personal practical knowledge: an integrated knowledge of the students, particularly the lived experiences of the students, the community, and their own personal and teaching experiences. This is consistent with Clandinin and Connelly's (1992) notion that "Teachers and students live out a curriculum . . . An account of teachers' and students' lives over

time is the curriculum, although intentionality, objectives, and curriculum materials do play a part in it all" (p. 365).

I found that the classroom language arts curricula of the participating teachers have several key elements in common. The participating teachers strive to make learning authentic and meaningful for their students. They choose approaches, strategies, and resources that value social, interactive ways of learning and support relationship building in their classroom. They consistently strive to model language and learning strategies. They also consider the provincially mandated ELA Framework.

After carefully considering the elements that are common among the four teachers, I found that teachers in this study view themselves as curriculum makers who enact a classroom language arts curriculum that is primarily based on social constructivist principles. The following discussion focuses on elements of the classroom language arts curriculum that are common to all four of the participating teachers.

The classroom language arts curriculum of the participating teachers is based on authentic learning experiences. All of these teachers seek authentic and personally meaningful ways for students to engage in language. By authentic, I mean that the teachers choose resources, materials, and themes based on the interests and experiences their students bring to the classroom from their life outside of it. The teachers surround the students with language and try to immerse them in language, but more importantly, they seek opportunities to foster authentic and meaningful use of language in the classroom. As curriculum makers, these teachers work from a practical understanding of a social constructivist theory of learning that says children learn language through authentic learning situations (Cambourne, 1984; Halliday, 1975; Vygotsky, 1978).

Halliday (1975) contended that children acquire language when it serves a variety of purposes or functions for them. Throughout this study it was evident that the participating teachers seek and create contexts in which children can use

language for purposes that are meaningful for them. For example, Mae stays with her children all day so that she can participate and add to their conversations and discussions when they are using language for authentic purposes.

Faith's use of integrated thematic units based on science or social studies is an example of using language for a particular purpose. Faith's students engage in meaningful exploration of topics of their own choosing. According to Faith, in these kinds of inquiry projects, students use language more authentically and engage in meaningful discussions and conversations with one another and with the teacher and librarian. Mae labels places and objects around the room and posts common and new words on a word wall. She also posts the words to songs and poems on chart paper around the room as well. Mae finds that her students are particularly interested in talking, reading, and writing about nonfiction. Faith also has a variety of words both familiar and new posted around the room and uses the words to play word games.

Melody and Andrea base their reading and writing instruction on the personal experiences and interests of the students. Their choices of reading materials and writing topics come not from any particular commercial program but from a variety of ideas and resources. They see themselves as curriculum makers who teach students, not content (Allington & McGill-Franzen, 2004). By choosing resources and materials based on the experiences and interests of the students, they are more likely to engage the students in meaningful language experiences. Cambourne (1984) identified engagement as one of the most important conditions for language learning. Andrea and Melody both told me that the most successful and engaging writing tasks are those that come from the students' personal experiences.

Andrea and Melody provide safe spaces for students to talk about their experiences and relate them to experiences of others through reading and listening activities. Melody teaches memoir writing and Andrea uses personal journals as a means of expression and healing for her students. Melody says that she tries to tap

into the social and recreational activities in which the students participate. She tries to connect the experiences and language of the students outside of school to the language of the classroom. These teachers try, as Portelli and Vibert (2001) suggested, to "break down the walls between the school and the world" (p. 78).

The teachers in Wagana see authentic language use as a key to language learning. As curriculum makers, they make decisions with the lived experiences of the students foremost in their minds. Kelly (2010) supports this authentic and meaningful language learning, stating that literacy is a social practice that is influenced by school, home life, and social relations.

The participating teachers strive to create a classroom language arts curriculum that emphasizes learning as a social process where students acquire meaning through social interaction with others. This is consistent with Vygotsky's (1978) sociocultural theory that posits that learners construct knowledge in a social and cultural context. Because of their adherence to learning in a social interactive manner, all of the teachers employ small, interactive group activities so that the students can talk to one another and share ideas without having to do so in front of the whole class. As curriculum makers, these teachers are comfortable with the uncertainly that often comes with providing students with opportunities to learn from each other. The four teachers use small groups for many purposes. They do so because they believe that small groups give students an opportunity to use language, respond to their reading, and talk about ideas, feelings, and experiences. As curriculum makers, they believe, as Cambourne (1995) stated, students "need a myriad of opportunities to interact with others in order to clarify, extend, refocus, and modify their own learning" (p. 188).

I observed Mae's students working together at a table, playing, or doing some art or craft activity in a small group in the classroom. Faith told me that she provides most of her instruction in small groups to allow opportunities for all of her students to talk to each other and to her. Her classroom is arranged in small group settings which allow the students to work together both formally and

informally. Melody and Andrea use small, interactive group discussions and activities extensively for much of their language arts program.

In the four classrooms, children's discussions and responses to literature and other texts is most often carried out in small groups. Melody's use of literature circles is an example. She uses group collaboration and interaction to get the students talking to each other about the topics or themes about which they are reading. She encourages the students to make connections among the themes in literature to their own experiences. Faith facilitates small group book talks. Besides having their students respond to reading through talk in small groups, the teachers also encourage the students to write about, draw, or represent what they have read.

Even though small groups are used consistently and regularly, Andrea expressed concern that the students still occasionally require prompts or very specifically structured tasks in order to talk to one another. Andrea recognizes the importance of teachers providing structure and input to enable children to use language in ways they could not do so on their own. In other words, Andrea was recognizing and enacting Vygotsky's (1978) zone of proximal development that suggests that students learn through the support of trusted and knowledgeable adults.

Another ongoing practice that is common to all the classroom language arts curriculum of the participating teachers is the modelling of language use and learning strategies. The importance of modeling language is emphasized in Cambourne's (1984) conditions for learning and Pearson and Gallagher's (1983) concept of the gradual release of responsibility.

Reading aloud in the classroom is one important language arts teaching strategy for modelling language use. These four teachers read to their students regularly because they believe it is important to have students hear literary language. "I don't think that even from an early age, children here have been read to at home and they don't have that understanding of what book language sounds

like" (Melody, Interview, September 2009). In a group meeting in September, the four teachers agreed that although reading aloud was important for hearing the language, it was also an important way for modelling the joy of reading. By reading a variety of different genres to the children, the teachers were helping them to see and hear the different ways that different texts are read. The teachers purposely chose a variety of genre and topics to help children make decisions about their own reading choices. The teachers also told me that reading aloud helps the students with writing because of the exposure to a variety of language and writing genre and topics. The teachers also said that reading aloud helps with oral language because it generates oral discussions (Group meeting, September 2009).

Reading aloud is only one of the many ways in which the teachers model language. Faith also uses story telling as a means to encourage language use. She often incorporates some traditional Ojibwa words into the stories so the children will also hear that language. Melody purposely tries to use varied and complex vocabulary in her daily speaking. "I try to kick up my vocabulary a notch. I want the students to hear unfamiliar terms and words in authentic contexts" (Interview, Melody, September 2009). Andrea brings in podcasts of news reports so the students will hear language used by others in authentic contexts. Faith provides opportunities for word games in her classroom so the children will see and hear a variety of words. Mae labels things in the class and takes children on field trips so they can experience language in contexts outside the community. Melody also likes to expose her students to learning opportunities outside the classroom. "English language arts doesn't just happen in the classroom," Melody said (Group meeting, November 2009). Melody attempts to help her students become more comfortable and confident in the discourse of an academic classroom, but in doing so she also tries to start with the discourse of the students. Melody's approach appears to me to be congruent with Nieto's (2010b) comment, "to be

successful, people need to learn, feel comfortable in, and claim as their own the discourses of the environment in which they function" (p. 124).

The participating teachers consider the provincially mandated ELA Framework, which is, as noted in Chapter 2, underpinned by a social constructivist theory of learning and encourages the teacher to shape a language arts curriculum based on the academic, social, and cultural experiences of the students. I found that the teachers in this study, who are regarded as effective language arts teachers, appreciated the open-ended, process oriented nature of the ELA Framework which allows the teachers and students to choose resources, strategies, and materials as they construct their classroom language arts curriculum. They also found the social constructivist foundational underpinnings of the curriculum congruent with their choice of common teaching approaches as mentioned in the previous sections. The teachers appreciated the examples and suggestions that are offered in the Illustrative Examples. The teachers said they use these examples and suggestions to help them as they construct their own classroom practices.

However, I also found that, in spite of, or perhaps because of, the flexibility and responsibility that the ELA Framework provides for teachers, the teachers in this study perceive the ELA Framework as overwhelming in its content and language. As described in Chapter 5, learning about the ELA Framework in relation to the lived experiences of the students is the most challenging aspect of the ELA Framework for these teachers. Constructing meaning of the ELA Framework in isolation is not enough. The ELA framework needs to make sense in relation to the teaching context, the experiences of the teachers, and the lived experiences of the students and the teaching.

The teachers in this study require opportunities to interact with others over time in order to construct meaningful connections among the ELA Framework and their students and teaching contexts. Melody's ongoing work on divisional and provincial learning communities is an example of such ongoing interactive

learning that relates directly to her students and her teaching contexts. Andrea says that when she attends summer institutes she has opportunities to relate to the ELA Framework directly to her teaching contexts and her students. These summer institutes also provide opportunities for interaction with other teachers. Mae's participation in a 5-year divisional project that explored the work of students in northern communities to the outcomes of the ELA Framework is another example of an opportunity to connect with others in similar teaching contexts and to relate the ELA Framework directly to the students in Wagana. Faith connects the ELA Framework with her students thorough her ongoing interaction with a language arts consultant.

Almost 15 years after the introduction of the provincially mandated ELA Framework and associated documents, the teachers in Wagana are still overwhelmed and confused by the provincially mandated documents. Although it appears to be common practice to assess the effectiveness of a mandated curriculum framework based on the accomplishments of the students, we should not be relying only on the testing of student achievement to understand if the mandated provincial curriculum is effective. I recommend that we also need to obtain ongoing feedback from teachers as a meaningful assessment of whether or not the mandated ELA curriculum framework is effective. The perceptions and voices of the teachers are important considerations in determining whether or not the ELA Framework is meaningful and usable in the contexts in which teachers are teaching. If the mandated documents are overwhelming in the size and content, it stands to reason that they will not be useful to the teachers as they shape their classroom curriculum. What kinds of implementation and support are provided to teachers and what kinds of support are teachings looking for as they build this mandated curriculum into their classroom curriculum?

Living and teaching in Wagana presents opportunities and challenges for the teachers. Based on information from the teachers, I suggest that they require ongoing, meaningful support as they construct and enact a classroom language

arts curriculum that considers the lived experiences of their students, their own experiences and knowledge, the influences of the northern contexts, and the ELA Framework. In order to provide meaningful support to these language arts teachers, it is important to understand the teachers' personal practical knowledge and the influences that the northern contexts have on that knowledge.

The teachers indicated that the school division provides support for the teachers and the students. The language arts consultant provides assistance to the teachers but her presence is limited and spread over many schools and communities. The teachers value the annual Area Conference, mostly for the opportunity to connect with other teachers in the divisional area. The teachers seek other opportunities to interact with teachers in similar teaching contexts outside of their home school. Melody and Mae spoke highly of divisional and area committees and learning groups that they found beneficial in developing their language arts teaching practices. It is commendable that the divisional area and the school division have supported these learning opportunities.

Empowering students through language.

> "There is power in language and I want the power to work for them [the students]." (Andrea, Interview, October 2009)

The preceding discussion focussed on the teachers as curriculum makers and illustrated how their teaching practices closely align with a social constructivist theory of learning. An additional finding that I consider to be important is the teachers' profound passion for empowering students as effective English language users. These teachers, who represented a range from kindergarten through to high school, all make language use a priority in their classroom language arts curriculum. They see language as having power and as being a part of every aspect of life. They see language as more than just reading and writing. For teachers in Wagana, the power of language extends into the arts and technology as well. The power of language was recognized by Friere (1970),

who suggested that the goal of language learning is to develop critical awareness that leads to social change.

"Oral language skills form the foundation for literacy development" (Bainbridge, Heydon, & Malicky, 2009, p. 56). All four teachers expressed concern regarding the oral and written language of their students. Mae, as a kindergarten teacher, was concerned about the oral language of her children. She said during many of our interviews that developing oral language was a priority for her class. When I asked Mae about her language arts priorities, she said, "I really push oral language. . . . Hearing and speaking is important for their reading and writing" (Interview, September 2009).

Faith, teaching in an elementary classroom, acknowledged that her students experienced difficulty with writing and with understanding vocabulary when reading. Faith said, "I want my students to learn to read and read to learn. I want them to connect their reading and writing to their own lives" (Interview September 2009). Andrea, teaching upper elementary, and Melody, teaching high school, both talked about vocabulary and writing issues in their classrooms as well. They also noted that expressing ideas orally was still an issue in later elementary and high school. Melody said,

> ELA means anything and everything that has to do with reading and anything and everything that has to do with writing. I would love my kids to take pleasure in reading and find the reading that they can enjoy and engage in. And I would like my kids to be able to express themselves and their ideas and feelings in writing. (Interview, September 2009).

The teachers told me that their students struggle with writing and so they provide their students with opportunities to talk before, during, and after writing tasks. They also encourage representation as a way to support writing. They often connect writing to reading and allow students to begin writing tasks through representational strategies. Wilhelm (2004) suggested that "inviting children to

create visual responses to texts is an effective bridge to other composing literacies, such as writing and multi-media design" (p. 17).

The participating teachers encourage writing tasks based on the personal experiences of the children, the reading that is taking place in the classroom, authentic learning situations, and units or themes being taught. For example, Melody uses memoir writing to tap into personal experiences. She also uses journal writing to connect personal experiences to reading. Andrea uses journals for personal expression and she also teaches writing in response to reading. Faith incorporates expository writing into her inquiry and uses journals for personal writing. Writing occurs in connection to community and school events. Teachers use field trips outside of the community as opportunities for writing. Melody has students writing letters, schedules, and itineraries to help plan such field trips, while others have students respond by writing thank-you letters, follow-up reports, or records of experiences in their journals.

The teachers' commitment to empowerment through language leads them to recognize the importance of representation and the arts. The teachers in Wagana encourage their students to express their knowing through various means of representation. Several researchers and educators advocate for the importance of visual and dramatic arts in language use and instruction (Booth, 1987; Brownlie & Close, 1992; Eisner, 2004, 2009; Paley, 1997; Wilhelm, 2004). Eisner (2009), a strong advocate for integrating arts into all areas of education, said that "the limits of language are not the limits of cognition. We know more than we can tell" (p. 8). He went on to say that we need to "expand our conception of what knowing entails" (p. 8). I found that the teachers in Wagana are also suggesting that their students know more than they can write or say. Their concept of literacy which includes viewing and representing is congruent with that of Eisner (2004), when he wrote that teachers should "recognize the diverse ways in which people can be literate . . . or multi-literate . . . schools need to attend to the cultivation of literacy in many forms" (p. 8).

All the participating teachers promote active participation in language through a connection to the arts. Andrea engages the students in drama so they can express through body language as well as oral language. She also integrates drawing and poetry into her language arts classes. "Drawing works beautifully, acting works beautifully. Poetry works; they like poetry" (Andrea, Interview, October 2009). Faith also uses a lot of poetry in her class. "They love poems" (Faith, Interview, September 2009). Mae does a lot of singing, chanting, and rhyming with her students. She also uses dancing and readers theatre. She encourages the children to perform their songs, chants, dances, or readers theatre for others in informal settings such as the classroom or a corner of the classroom and in more formal settings such as school celebrations. Both Andrea and Melody told me that their students are very adept and creative when it comes to representing ideas visually. The teachers and students build on that strength. Wilhelm (2004), based on his research regarding reading engagement, says that "being able to create images, story worlds, and mental models while one reads is an essential element of reading comprehension, engagement and reflection. In fact, without visualization, students cannot comprehend" (p. 9). He goes on to say that whether students are dealing with fiction or nonfiction, "visualization is central to reading and to thinking" (p. 10).

Melody uses a strategy called gallery walks[16] to encourage conversations and language use based on visualization.

> Gallery walks are successful in getting the kids to talk and to generate ideas and language. Mostly for the gallery walks, I use pictures or some kind of visual because for whatever reason, the kids here seem to be in tune to visual kinds of things. (Interview, September 2009)

Andrea often incorporates a unit on mask making during which students explore their identity through visual representation in the form of masks. This

[16] Gallery walks are defined in Appendix B.

mask unit encourages much discussion and student interaction and allows the students to share ideas both informally and formally as they together. Melody began her teaching career as an art teacher and incorporates a variety of art techniques in her language arts classes to encourage language use among the students. In her literature circles, students often develop themes through posters, collages, and other artistic forms. All of the teachers identified role playing as another way of responding to reading while using language.

Although each teacher was concerned about language use, none was able to pinpoint specifically why students experience difficulty with oral language and writing. Some suggested that the students' home language, culture, and background experiences may be contributing influences. However, the teachers said that further exploration into some of the reasons for this struggle might help both teachers and students as they develop their classroom language arts curriculum. In examining the concerns of these teachers, I was reminded of the work of Heath (1983). Although it was not within the scope of this study to do so, an exploration of the cultural differences between language and literacy in the homes and the school involving the teachers as researchers could provide insights into some of the language difficulties that the teachers note.

Another important area of research that requires further investigation is visual representation and the connection between the arts and language learning. As previously mentioned, a number of researchers and educators recommend integrating the arts and language learning. (Booth, 1987; Brownlie & Close, 1992; Eisner, 2004, 2009; Paley, 1997; Wilhelm, 2004).

A growing number of researchers suggest that the viewing and representing elements of language arts that are currently recognized as strands of the ELA Framework should be integral to the definition of literacy (Brownlie & Close, 1992; Eisner, 2004, 2009; Wilhelm, 2004). The teachers in this study would certainly agree that this is the direction in which our literacy education needs to evolve. The teachers in my study indicated that many of the students in

Wagana, many of whom have an Ojibwa background, excel when they express themselves through viewing and representing. It is beyond the scope of this study to consider whether or not there is a cultural basis for the students' reported strengths in these areas. Research with Aboriginal children indicates that this is an important avenue for further investigation. (e.g., Laderoute, 2005).

As these teachers strive to empower students with language and to develop language through multiple ways, they recognize that media and technology is an essential component of language arts. The teachers expressed strong concerns that although access to mass media and technology is essential for these students, the necessary support and resources are often unavailable. This would be a concern for any school, but for northern and rural areas, it is particularly problematic because these same students and teachers do not have easy access to other sources of information outside of their local community. For students who have strengths in the areas of viewing and representing and who need access to ideas and resources outside of their community, the lack of access to media and technology is seriously problematic. Media and technology need to be made more accessible to northern locations. Further research is necessary to identify the best ways to support teachers in their use of technology in northern settings.

Social contexts within the classroom.

> Teachers know by observing their students, by listening, by reading the students' writing, by talking to the students and others in the community, by virtue of being in the classroom with the students and developing relationships with the students. Teachers know a lot about how to teach and what to do. (Melody, Group meeting, November 2009)

I found that the participating teachers strive to create a safe, social context within their classrooms. When I asked the teachers to sketch their personal and professional landscapes, each one represented and subsequently talked about her classroom space in a positive way. Faith drew happy faces in her classroom. She

said, “although there are tensions in the room, for the most part, these tensions are part of the process of learning together.” She also said that the classroom is a “satisfying and happy place for her and for her students” (Interview, November, 1009). Melody drew crowns spaced around her classroom because she said it was “like a special kingdom where great things happen and the people in the classroom worked together to make it a safe and caring place” (Interview, November 2009). In talking about her classroom, Andrea said, “My room, I try to make it into a bit of a refuge, with my kids . . . it is almost a sacred space for me and my students” (Interview, November 2009). She also drew flowers in her classroom and explained the flowers represented “blossoming is happening. I really appreciate my class and we are blooming in there” (Interview, November 2009). When Mae described her sketch, she began by saying “As you can see, the focal point of my whole life is school and within the school, the things that make me happiest are my classroom and my students” (Interview, November 2009). She went on to talk about her classroom as a safe place for her and for the children. She said, “I feel happy in my classroom, I get really wound up with my class and we get very excited about lots of things that happen there. We are like a family at school” (Interview, November 2009).

Whether or not they are from the community, or whether or not they feel they belong in the community, one common thing that the teachers expressed was that their relationships and connections with the students provide a clear message to their students that they, the teachers, care, not only about their students’ learning, but about them as individuals. Based on what the teachers told me, I conclude that each teacher values her relationships with her students as essential to being an effective language arts teacher.

According to Melody, “The people you touch and affect are those with whom you have a relationship” (Group meeting, November 2009). By experiencing many of the same living conditions and by virtue of being in the

community, these teachers said that they try, as much as possible; to understand the realities of the world their students live in. In the words of Freire (2005),

> Educators need to know what happens in the world of the children with whom they work. They need to know the universe of their dreams, the language with which they skilfully defend themselves for the aggressiveness of their world, what they know independently of school, and how they know it. (p. 130)

As documented in the accounts of their classroom practice, the teachers in this study acknowledge that the students bring lived experiences to their language arts learning. These experiences are the foundation upon which they build the language arts classroom curriculum. "In order to start with what the children know, it is important to know the children in more ways that just academically" (Faith, Group meeting, September 2009). The four teachers said in several interviews and in the group meetings that knowing the students and developing relationships with them are the most important goals of successful language arts teaching. In their accounts, they explain that knowing the students means more than knowing their academic abilities; it means knowing them as persons within the context of the school and community.

Each of the participating teachers told me that knowing the students takes time. In a September 2009 interview, Melody said that she values the opportunities that she has had on several occasions to move up to the next grade with her students so that she has more time to know them better. Faith prefers looping or staying with her students for 2 years for the same reason; to know the students better. Several researchers have said that creating meaningful relationships in classrooms among and with the students is challenging. (Dyson, 1997; Lensmire, 1994; Nieto, 2010b). Although he did not live in the same community in which he taught, Lensmire (1994) found that developing relationships in a culturally diverse classroom is challenging and it takes time and commitment on the part of the teachers.

Nieto (2010b) stated, “Creating a classroom climate in which all students feel that they have good ideas, that they have a right to learn, and that they are important and worthwhile is not an easy task” (p. 113). Because the teachers in this study said they make it a priority to establish a classroom environment in which they try to create spaces where the students learn in community with each other, their views appear congruent with those of Dewey (1916), who said that learning occurs essentially in community with others.

Andrea said, “It is about trust and risk-taking” (Interview, October 2009). In a group meeting when asked about language arts teaching, the first thing Faith said was, “Invite them to take risks in their learning and to learn from each other” (Group meeting, September 2009). Andrea said, “Social aspects are important. They [the students] need chances to listen to each other and to work together” (Group meeting, September 2009). In that same meeting, Mae said, “I work hard to help children listen to one another and to work together and help each other” (Group meeting, September 2009). Melody said that “part of the reason why I like literature circles is because it brings the students together. They talk and listen to each other and they build connections to one another and to me as well” (Interview, October 2009). The creation of the teachers’ classroom communities builds on the strengths and realities of the students and the local community.

When asked to give advice to new teachers coming into northern communities, Mae, Faith, Andrea, and Melody told me that getting to know the students, not just academically but personally as well, was paramount. They stressed the importance of developing trusting relationships with the students over a period of time. Based on their accounts, these teachers appreciate that “For teachers who care, the student as a person is as important as the student as a learner” (Day, 2004, p.12).

Nieto (2010b), in her research regarding African American high school students, says “a close relationship with teachers is an essential ingredient in helping students stay in school” (p. 123). The teachers in this study recognize the

importance of what Nieto refers to as “deep and meaningful relationships” (2010b, p. 124). When Melody said, “I am a trusted adult in their lives. They feel safe with me” (Interview, October 2009), she was acknowledging the depth of the relationships she builds with her students. When Andrea bought a journal for each of the students and encouraged them to write about their personal or family issues, she was developing relationships and trust with her students. Faith’s visits to families help her develop close relationships with her students. Mae spends recess and lunch, and goes to the gymnasium and music classes with her kindergarten class because she wants to build meaningful relationships and a trust with her students.

Belonging in the school and community.

As explained in Chapter 2, Clandinin, Connelly, and He (1997) described professional knowledge landscapes as a metaphor for the knowledge contexts that teachers inhabit both inside and outside of the classroom. “The landscape metaphor is important to us because it captures the exceedingly complex intellectual, personal, and physical environment for teachers’ work” (Clandinin et al., 1997, p. 673). Clandinin and Connelly (1995) stated that “the everyday personal life of the teacher off the professional landscape influences the life on the landscape. Conversely, teachers’ professional life on the landscape influences their personal life off the landscape” (p. 27). My study adds to the research about professional knowledge landscapes because it looks at the personal landscape of teachers who work within the environment in which they live whether or not that living environment is culturally and socially different from that in which they were raised.

For the teachers in the northern community of Wagana, their knowledge of and connections to the school and the community are particularly important. The importance of their knowledge of and connections to the community is twofold. The teachers’ knowledge of and connections to the community relate to

- Relationships teachers develop within the classroom
- The teachers' sense of belonging within the school and the community

Although the social contexts of the classroom were discussed in the previous section, relationships in the classroom and language arts instruction are also influenced by the teachers' knowledge of and connections to the community.

Relationships teachers develop within the classroom.

The teachers' accounts regarding the community show that there is no question that many of the students deal with difficult personal, social, cultural, and socioeconomic issues. The teachers recognize the issues that permeate the community, but they view these experiences as the foundations for the classroom language arts curriculum. They do not view these difficulties as barriers to successful learning nor do they view them "as rationalizations . . . for low expectations of what students are capable of learning" (Nieto, 2010b, p. 113). This is apparent in Melody's choice of topics such as dealing with hardships or exploring racism for her literature circles. Andrea uses journals as a way of expressing feelings and ideas and as a way of healing for the students. Faith attempts to encourage the children to read and talk about family and social issues in their group and independent reading time. Mae chooses nonfiction units and texts and strives to include community people in her classroom curriculum. In a group meeting in October 2009, the teachers noted that by "knowing the students we gain a special knowledge that allows us to see the students' strengths and learning potentials and therefore also allows us to have high expectations of them" (Group meeting notes, October 2009). As Nieto (2010b) pointed out, "too often society's low expectations of students, based on their life's situations, pose even greater barriers to success than the difficult situations themselves" (p. 117).

Melody and Andrea stated in their October interviews that most of their students do not have access to broad and varying perspectives and viewpoints. They feel that it is their job to help their students develop the skills of critical

analysis and decision making. Melody and Andrea both indicated that as outsiders coming into the community of Wagana, they brought with them "different perspectives to help broaden the worldview of their students" (Melody, Interview, October 2009) and to help them "better appreciate their own cultural and experiential backgrounds" (Andrea, Interview, October 2009). However, they also said in their interviews and in the group meetings that by living in the community and experiencing the challenges associated with living there, they are better able to connect to the challenges the students face. Andrea and Melody indicated that the students often view teachers from the outside as nonjudgemental, trusted people who can help them to connect their world to the larger global community.

Because teachers experience the issues faced by people in the community, such as that of a safe, reliable water supply, discussed in Chapter 5, these experiences relate to the kinds of knowledge that teachers have of the community and what it is like to live there. "Everything that goes on in our life here and in our students' lives affects our teaching. Really good language arts teaching strategies are not enough, you must consider the emotional, personal, and social aspects of the students" (Melody, group meeting, November 2009).

All of the participating teachers told me in several interviews as well as in the group meetings that knowing the students and developing relationships with them means knowing the community and the families. However, each teacher has a different way of learning about the community and developing relationships within it. Faith's way of knowing the community and developing relationships with the families comes from her experiences growing up and living in the community and maintaining a connection to the people in the community. She attends social and cultural events and is related to many community people. Mae and Melody spent years getting to know the families through their teaching and their involvement in activities at the school and in the community. They build relationships with the children and adults as they volunteer for library nights, through social functions at the school, and are sometimes when they are invited to

social events in the community. Andrea's determination to live in the community in spite of the personal hardships she endures such as being robbed several times is an indication of her commitment to knowing her students and the community. Mae said that the most important lesson she learned in her many years of northern teaching was to "start with what the children know." Every year, she begins with ideas and themes that are based on the children's experiences. She also begins with tasks and activities that she knows the children can tackle with confidence and success (Interview, September 2009).

During a September group meeting, the teachers agreed that staying in the community and working in the school for several years is an advantage because they come to know the families and the students much better. Mae said that because she has taught in Wagana for many years and has come to know the families, she knows the students often before they even come to kindergarten.

Another important consideration for the teachers as they develop relationships with and among the students in the classroom is valuing the local cultural traditions that are visible in the community. Mae invites Elders and other family members into the classroom to teach some of the traditional cultural aspects such as beading and bannock making. Faith speaks some of the local Ojibwa language to her students and participates in community cultural activities such as the womanhood ceremonies. Melody looks for literature that creates discussions in the language arts class regarding Aboriginal traditions and issues, particularly those that interest or affect young people. Andrea also seeks relevant reading materials and other resources that connect to the lives of her students. These efforts on the part of the teachers indicate that they place a high value on the students' culture and identity and connect learning to the lives of the students.

Inside the classroom is a special place for these teachers. It is the place where decisions are continually made, curriculum is shaped, relationships are forged, and the realities of the community context, the subject matter, the students, and the teachers interact.

> Being in the classroom becomes comfortable the more you know the kids and the more they come to know you. We know each other as people and learn together. We develop a relationship with one another. We develop a sense of community. (Notes from group meeting, November 2009)

Teachers' sense of belonging within the school and the community.

My study adds to literature of how the definition of teacher knowledge has been extended over the past few years because it extends the concept of teacher knowledge to include a sense of belonging or not belonging to the community in which one teaches. It is not possible "to understand ourselves as only a teacher. We are that, but we are many other things as well" (Connelly & Clandinin, 1988, p. 27).

While the importance of teachers' personal lives has long been recognized, there has been little written about the teachers' sense of belonging in the local community. This might be more of a rural phenomenon than an urban one and it might be more unique for teachers in relatively remote communities such as Wagana.

The influence of the personal life of a teacher as well as the sense of whether or not one belongs in the community is particularly important in the northern community of Wagana. As noted in Chapter 4, each of the four teachers made reference to their life in the community and in the school. Two of the four teachers are single, White, female teachers who came to Wagana from urban, middle-class environments. Melody and Andrea described a sense of being an outsider in Wagana, regardless of the fact that they chose to live in the community. They also indicated that although they did not feel that they would ever belong to the community, they were trusted adults in the lives of the students and respected teachers. They were described by their administrators as "effective, caring teachers" (Interview with administrators, September 2009). Their sense of

not belonging in the community is an important part of their personal knowledge landscape and therefore part of their personal practical knowledge.

Although Kennedy (2001) explored the perspectives of four White, female teachers, who worked in Aboriginal school settings, none of these teachers lived in the community in which they taught. They traveled from their homes in a nearby urban centre and therefore did not encounter the students and community people outside of the school settings. Kennedy focused on the racial differences between the White teachers and the Aboriginal students through the eyes of the teachers, but these differences were only evident in the classroom setting. In my study, the cultural and social differences that some of the teachers experience is not just in the context of the classroom, but also in their daily lives outside, as well as inside, the school setting. In this northern context, the teachers' social and personal lives are inseparable from their dealings with the students and their families.

In my study, part of the teachers' understanding of self is influenced by their sense of belonging or not belonging in the community. Faith, who was born and brought up in the community of Wagana, feels a very strong sense of belonging in the community. This belonging influences her personal practical knowledge as well but in a different way than that of Andrea and Melody. Faith uses her Aboriginal background in her teaching and says it gives her an advantage in knowing the students. Andrea and Melody suggest that they bring a different perspective that can help to broaden the students' learning and at the same time they also attempt to make the students' experiences part of the classroom culture and curriculum.

Mae's personal landscape is different yet again from the others because she is a Chinese Canadian who chooses not to live in Wagana but has taught there for many years. She does not experience the same lack of belonging that Andrea and Melody do, perhaps because she does not live in the community. It would be interesting and valuable to further investigate the influence of differing cultural

and socioeconomic backgrounds of the teachers who come to live and teach in the community. It would be valuable to investigate this sense of belonging and not belonging of the nonlocal teachers from not only their perspective but also from the perspective of the students and parents.

As noted in Chapter 4, Mae, Andrea, and Melody feel tension in the school environment, particularly in the staffroom. They do not frequent the staffroom often because of the tension they feel there. They say that part of this tension is between the local teachers and the nonlocal teachers. This tension is part of the school landscape and part of their personal landscape and therefore an influence on the teachers' personal practical knowledge. Faith expressed no such tension and was quite comfortable in the staffroom, perhaps because of the fact that she is originally from the community and is therefore considered a local teacher.

The tensions that the three nonlocal teachers feel in the school and the tensions that Andrea and Melody face in the community influence the personal practical knowledge of these teachers. My study speaks to the idea that the influence of language, cultures, and background differences not only between teachers and student, but also among the teachers requires further attention. The tensions experienced by the nonlocal teachers, both in the community and in the school require further investigation. Can such tensions be alleviated or highlighted so that a diverse teaching staff can be valued as an advantage in the same way that Dyson (1997) said diverse classrooms should be viewed as an advantage? Dyson suggested that teachers should

> help the children to respond to and build on what each other knows and can do. In such an approach, teachers who work amid sociocultural diversity have a distinct advantage over those who do not. (p. 184)

Perhaps the diverse nature of the teaching staff in communities like Wagana can be the key to helping students understand and value diversity in the school and in the broader global community. However, it is not sufficient to foster diversity without closely attending to the potential issues of power and

identity that may emerge in the teacher to teacher interactions. The work on teacher identity of Delpit (1988) may be useful in this regard. The influence of language, culture, and background differences among teachers needs attention at the school level, but also at the preservice level in classes in faculties of education.

Summary

Teaching language arts is an ongoing learning process and the northern contexts add to the complexity of that learning process. Northern communities and schools have largely not been sites of educational research. However, their geographic locations and the diversity of their populations make them important spaces for research. Further research into various aspects of teaching and learning in Northern Canadian contexts will help all of us to better understand how to support teachers, students, and others as they strive to ensure the best possible education for the children in these communities.

Chapter 7. Reflecting on the Research Process

As the study progressed, I was appreciative that the four teachers remained committed to this research. In spite of the issues of time, and time is always a big issue in schools, they each met with me several times during my visits and they appeared to enjoy the group sessions. No one missed a session. After spending much time with the four participating teachers, individually and as a group, I wondered how the experience of being part of this research affected them.

I met with Mae, Faith, and Melody 2 months after the last set of interviews and group sessions. The teachers were gathered in the nearest large urban centre attending their annual area conference. I was able to meet with them after the first day of the conference. I had previously emailed each of the teachers and asked them to write about the experience of being part of this research. All of the teachers either gave or sent a written reflection. The fourth teacher, Andrea, who was unable to attend the meeting, sent her reflections to me via email. We concluded our meeting with a celebration dinner. The teachers seemed to appreciate the opportunity to relax and be together in an environment outside of their school and community. They said that they do not have much time for dining and relaxation during the school week, so this was a luxury that they valued.

As part of my data analysis, I examined the teacher reflections to see if there were any common themes pertaining to their involvement with the research process. As a result of this analysis, I found two common themes. The clearest theme to emerge from the teachers' reflections was their appreciation for the opportunity to talk about teaching with others who understand and appreciate the hard work and emotional input they put into teaching.

Mae professed to be very apprehensive about being part of the research. She told me that initially she felt pressured into participating by her administrator. She said, however, that after the first meeting, she was committed and enjoyed talking about her teaching, particularly in the group sessions with the other teachers.

> When I was first approached about the project, I didn't want to be part of it. I felt it was going to take too much time away from my class. It seems like the same ones are always asked to do things. I was apprehensive about the types of questions that would be asked and if I could answer them to your liking. I felt pressured into participating by the administration. After the project started, I felt more relaxed and at ease with everything. I really appreciated that our individual interviews could take place after school. It made it less stressful on me and my class. At first I was scared. The principal talked me into it. I thought it would be too much work and too much time. I was really apprehensive. The conversations, both individual and group were learning experiences for me. (January 2010)

I found it disconcerting to learn that any of my participants might have initially been pressured to participate. However, Mae reassured me that her concerns had been alleviated after our first meeting when we talked about her involvement and I told her she could opt out at any time. After this first meeting, when Mae was reassured that the interviews would not take place during class time, she said she felt comfortable and would have withdrawn if she felt she needed to. She also told me that after our first meeting, she chose to stay with the study because she found it meaningful to talk to others. She said, "I enjoyed the opportunity to talk about my teaching with you and my colleagues" (January, 2010).

Melody said that being part of the research and being able to talk to others about teaching was "cathartic":

> I found the whole thing a very cathartic experience; to have open and honest conversations with other teachers. We shared things about our teaching that we would never have had an opportunity to share otherwise. It was reassuring to know that I was working with colleagues who think the same way about teaching that I do. (Interview, January 2010)

The teachers told me that teaching is very busy and often becomes an isolating and lonely profession. These teachers spend all day working with students and have little time to connect with other adults in the school. Faith said she felt very alone in teaching, planning, and worrying about the students. It was not until her participation in this study that she had time to connect with other teachers in Wagana about her teaching practices.

> Usually I am a quiet person and in sessions I often do not talk, but I do listen, Sometimes I day dream, but in these group sessions, I was able to share and discuss and to put myself out there and talk about my feelings about teaching. I liked that. I felt I could trust the others. (Faith, January 2010)

It would seem that the process of being involved in this type of research has the power to enhance reflection and to help teachers engage in the kinds of meaningful conversations about teaching that they desire but for which they do not seem to have time. The teachers recommended that schools find ways to make it more comfortable and feasible to work together.

The second theme to emerge from the reflections is related to the first. The teachers reported that talking in depth about their teaching and their teaching knowledge helped them to reflect very deeply about their current practice. The opportunity to reflect on practice is a way for teachers to think carefully about their teaching beliefs and their teaching practice. Mae said,

> I had to go back and really think about what I was doing. When I talked in an interview about my focus on oral language, I had to go back and look at what I was doing and question if I was practising what I said I believed. (January 2010)

Melody also indicated that the discussions, both individual and group, forced her to rethink her practice and to revisit some of the successful approaches she used previously. Faith claimed that the discussions gave her the courage to try new ideas as well as to rethink the ideas she was currently using. She said, “When

I have to articulate my beliefs, then I also have to look at my practice" (January 2010).

Sometimes deep reflection on practice is difficult and this was the case for Andrea who said,

> I have both enjoyed the sessions with you and the group and been bothered by them. I found they made me think a lot about my work and my life and I am reconsidering some of the choices I have made. (January 2010)

The theme of reflection is an important one for these teachers. The opportunity to articulate one's beliefs appeared to provide an opportunity to reexamine one's teaching practices for congruence with those beliefs.

"Qualitative case study is highly personal research" (Stake, 1995, p. 135). How has this research affected me; my thinking and my practice? I began this research with a profound belief in the work and passion of teachers. Having been a teacher, a consultant working with teachers, and an instructor of future teachers, this research is very close to my heart. Although I spent many years working with teachers who live and work in challenging conditions in Northern Canada, I have had very little experience as a teacher in a northern community. My teaching experiences were mostly in a southern urban center. I wanted to know more about what it is like for teachers in northern communities. My work with teachers in northern communities and this current research has left me with a desire to look more closely at teacher knowledge and ongoing learning in a variety of contexts.

I am glad that I went to one community and talked over a period of time with four teachers. I was glad to provide an image of this one community in the hopes that others may make connections to this community and these teachers. I was struck by the commitment that these teachers demonstrated in their desire to share their experiences with me so that they could be shared with others. I enjoyed the individual conversations and I enjoyed the group sessions. I hold a deep respect for these teachers and I felt that I learned a great deal about what it is

like to be a teacher of language arts in this particular northern community. I cherish the understanding that I gained from them.

Every time I listened to the audio recordings of the interviews and the group sessions, I was struck by the laughter I heard. Humour was important to these teachers. In spite of the challenges in their classrooms and beyond, they talked about these issues with laughter. The humour that they brought to their conversations suggests to me their commitment to this community and to these students regardless of the challenges presented by the context. The laughter also represents their willingness to look at difficult and challenging situations in a broader context, to look beyond the immediate challenge to the goal of being an effective teacher in this community.

I worked with the data and the teachers' voices so much and so carefully that I found myself considering the teachers' voices as I planned for my university teaching, or as I planned for presentations, or simply as I thought about other teachers I know. Their voices became a part of my professional decision making.

A few months after completing the data collection, I attended a major international language arts conference in a large American city. This annual conference was designed for teachers and educational researchers to share ideas, approaches, and research. Part of the conference included a large exhibition hall where publishers and educational companies display and sell their products. As I walked through the exhibition hall, I was struck by the glitz, gimmicks, and bright colours that surrounded many of the display booths. In my head, I heard the voices of the participating teachers arguing against the prepackaged, teacher-proof materials that were surrounding me in this display hall. I found myself thinking about the commercialism of education. Many of the large publishing companies were selling products that claimed to be the answer to teaching. But my research teachers told me time and again, over and over, there is no magic program, no one recipe for student success. Why then do teachers and schools spend so much time

and money on programs and materials as opposed to providing time and support for teachers?

I began to wonder how I would change my approach to working with teachers. In my previous work as a consultant, I worked with teachers from a social constructivist perspective and held several beliefs about teacher learning. I believed that supporting teachers in their ongoing learning process is essential. I believed that it is the quality of teaching and the quality of the relationships that teachers and students build together that matters most in the success of students. I believed that schools need to place more of an emphasis on teacher learning and less on packaged materials. I believed that anyone who has the good fortune to work with teachers should make every effort to know the teachers. These beliefs have been confirmed and strengthened by this research. Although in much of my work as a consultant, I thought I was considering the teachers' knowledge, I now realize that I could have and should have found more ways to come to know what the teachers know and how they came to their ways of knowing and let their knowledge guide the ways in which I provided support for the continuation of their ongoing knowledge. I often looked for ways and means to bring northern teachers together to puzzle over some aspect of teaching or learning. I tried hard to make these kinds of interactive learning opportunities extend over several months or sometimes over several years. I now believe that these kinds of learning spaces and opportunities are important and I would look for more ways to extend interactive learning for teachers. However, I would be less likely to determine the puzzle for the teachers and more inclined to let their questions guide the learning investigations.

If one is to support teachers, one must understand what the teacher knows, how they know what they know, what they believe about teaching and learning and how they came to those beliefs. As supporters of teacher learning we cannot control all the experiences that are brought to the learning situations. We can however, try to understand those experiences and how they influence the teaching

and learning of each individual teacher. To support teachers in their professional learning, we must listen to and try to understand the teacher and the teaching contexts. Context matters, it matters to the students, and to the teachers. It needs to matter to those who support teachers. What works well in one context, may not work in another. What works well with one teacher and group of students may not work with another. If we are to meaningfully support teachers, we really need to know them well, to know their beliefs, their approaches, their contexts and their learning desires.

When I look at the participating teachers' accounts, I see teachers who are serious and passionate not only about their students' learning but also about their own learning. I see teachers who value social and relational ways of learning. For them, trusting relationships and interaction with others is an important part of learning. How can learning spaces and opportunities be created in which a culture of trust and respect prevails, allowing teachers to bring their personal practical knowledge?

The teachers in this study were adamant that there is no one recipe for meaningful learning for their ever evolving personal practical knowledge. Each of these teachers is unique in the knowledge that they hold and in the way in which they learn. In fact during one of our group sessions, I recall Andrea and Mae coining the phrase professional learning must be "ME"aningful. The others quickly picked up on this phrase talked about their learning in terms of their knowledge and experiences as well as the knowledge and experiences of their students. They reminded me that it is more meaningful for teachers to participate in professional learning opportunities that are based on their current teaching situation and their personal practical knowledge than on the development of programs of instruction or "sure fire" or "teacher proof" types of teaching tools or strategies that can be generalized to all situations. These types of prescriptive models are not relevant to the particularities of these teachers' contexts. Prescriptive models of instruction or of professional development do not consider

the background of the students, the teacher, or the community. They do not take into consideration the personal practical knowledge of the teachers and the contexts in which they teach. Their discussions brought back to me a quote from Butt et al. (1992):

> This preoccupation with prescription has led to the formation of bodies of professional knowledge which have been largely ignored by professionals-in-action since they have found that little of this prescriptive technology is appropriate to specific situation whose nature is uniquely personal, instinctive, intuitive, reflective, and practical. (p. 52)

It is important to examine the kinds of ongoing support that can logistically be provided in relation to the northern contexts as well as the personal practical knowledge of the teachers in those contexts.

> The notion of practical knowledge provides the basis for a conceptualization which sees the teacher as possessing valuable resources which enable her to take an active role in shaping her environment and in determining the style and ends of her work. If the teacher has such resources she becomes someone to work with rather than on. (Elbaz, 1983, p. 6)

Like the teachers in this research study, through the conversations, I felt a need to re-examine my own teaching and learning approaches. I began to rethink my day- to-day planning approach to teaching at the university. If I believe in a social constructivist approach to learning and if I believe that learners bring experience and knowledge to learning, am I honouring that experience and knowledge and am I allowing the students in my classes to construct and reconstruct knowledge through interaction with others. Do I allow for choice and meaningful dialogue? Do I know my students well enough to know what they bring to the learning situation. I began to ask many questions of my own teaching and as I plan for undergraduate classes, I hear the voices of the participating teachers talking about their experiences, their frustrations, and their successes.

Their voices help me to think carefully about my approach to my undergraduate teaching.

Because I work with preservice teachers, I also considered the implications of this study on their preparation for teaching. Preservice education for teachers should provide safe discussion spaces and opportunities for the students to explore differences in regards to race, gender, religion, culture, socioeconomics, and contexts. There is a wonderful array of children's literature that could be used to help teachers to facilitate discussions about these differences in a straightforward manner. It is important to make this kind of literature available and accessible to preservice and inservice teachers.

New teachers often find jobs in unfamiliar contexts and if they have had opportunity to explore the influence of contexts on teaching, they may be better prepared and more open to the various teaching contexts that exist, particularly in Northern Canadian locations. It is important for teachers to examine their own language, culture, and background experiences in relation to those whom they will teach. Greater attention needs to be paid at both the preservice and inservice levels to the cultural and social backgrounds of teachers in relation to the contexts in which they will be or are teaching.

Every time I visited the community of Wagana, I saw evidence of many initiatives and programs that integrate the school within the community. The school, the school division, and the teachers continually search for ways to connect student learning to the cultures and experiences of the community. This school and community have initiated many ideas from which we can learn. My study focused solely on the teachers' perspectives and I was left wondering how the parents and students view the language arts programs in the school and the many initiatives that the division, school, and teachers undertake. Qualitative studies that explore the perspective of the community and the students would also help provide information to better support the many efforts that the teachers make to develop the language and literacy of the students.

This research journey has helped me to reexamine and reflect on my own work, as a teacher, as a supporter and advocate for teachers, and as a researcher. The voices of the teachers and the images of their northern community and school linger in my mind and compel me to think carefully about teacher personal practical knowledge and teachers as curriculum makers as I plan for my teaching and for further research. This research journey has inspired me to continue to explore teacher personal practical knowledge and professional learning. I have come to realize with greater intensity, that teaching is a challenging and demanding endeavour and teachers deserve support and acknowledgement regarding what they do every day, what they know, and how they continue to learn. I thank the participating teachers for this inspiration and for their dedication to teaching and their commitment to the children in their northern community and to this research. I hope that others who read this will find the information cause for their own reflections on the influence of contexts on teaching practices.

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Appendix A: Interview Questions

Focus of first visit – getting the teachers' perspectives about what it is like to be a teacher in this particular community.

In determining my focus for the first visit, I thought it would make sense to start with the school and community and then move into teaching first and then into questions about how the participating teachers learned how to teach or how to do what they do in language arts.

Prompts that I can use:

- Could you think of an example
- Think about a time when . . .
- Give me an example of . . .
- From your perspective . . .
- Describe . . .
- Can you help me to visualize . . .

Questions:

The Community

In these questions, I am trying to get a sense of this community from your perspective. I would like to know what it is like for you to live and teach here.

How long have you been teaching in this community?

What brought you to this community?

Tell me about this community from your perspective.

Describe some of the things that you like about the community?

Are there things that you find difficult or challenging here?

The School

I am trying to get your perspective on this particular school.

Tell me about the school from your perspective.

Describe what you like about this school.

Tell me about any issues that you experience in this school. How are issues dealt with?

Going back to your first northern experiences:

I am trying to get a picture of your present and previous northern experiences.

Where did you first start your northern teaching experiences?

What made you decide to go to that community?

Tell me about teaching in the north when you first started?

When you first started teaching language arts in the north, what did you have to learn?

What kinds of challenges did you face?

What issues arose?

What did you like about that first experience?

What problems did you encounter?

How did you get your teaching ideas?

How did you go about finding out about teaching in that first year?

How does your teaching now compare to your first year or first few years?

Focus of second visit – How do teachers construct their understanding of teaching language arts in this northern community?

Language arts – I am trying to find out about your language arts classroom curriculum.

What does the term language arts mean to you?

What are your priorities in language arts?

How did you establish those priorities?

Tell me about your language arts program. Walk me though a typical language arts class.

- What do you do?
- What do the children do?

Can you give me an example of a daily activity and explain how and why you use it?

Describe your favourite/most successful language arts activity or strategy.

- How did you get that idea?
- What do you think makes it successful in this school?

In your experience, how do teachers know when something is working well? How do you know when something is not working – what are your first clues?

Tell me about a language art activity that was not so successful.

- How could you tell it was not so successful
- What made you want to try it?
- What were you hoping would happen?
- What happened and what did not happen?
- Would you try it again with changes? What kind of changes?

Tell me about the things you like about teaching language arts.

What are some of the opportunities that you have teaching language arts in this community?

Describe some of the issues or challenges you face as a teacher of language arts in this community?

- How do you deal with these issues?
- Who do you turn to for help?

What kind of resources or materials do you use for the students? What do you like/not like about the resources and materials you use?

Where do you find or how do you access resources and materials for your class?

Is there anything else you can tell me about what it is like to be a language arts teacher in this school/community?

ELA Curriculum

I would like to understand if and/or how the ELA provincial Framework fits into your language arts teaching practices.

What do you think of the ELA Framework?

Does the ELA Framework meet your needs as a teacher? Do you find it helpful? Why or why not?

Do you see your students in the ELA Framework? Tell me more about the Framework and your students.

What do you see as the strengths of the ELA Framework? What do you see as the weaknesses?

What role does the ELA Framework play in your teaching and planning?

Some teachers feel that the current ELA Framework needs some changes. If you could advise the province of changes that would make the ELA Framework more relevant to your teaching situation, what changes would you suggest?

Questions

How did you learn how to teach language arts?

Where do you get help for teaching ELA? Where do you go for information?

Describe some of the resources and materials that you find useful for your own professional growth. What resources do you use?

- Teacher guides, books, booklets, web sites
- Colleagues, consultants, or other personnel
- Things from teacher stores
- Curriculum supports
- Relatives
- Workshops
- Oprah. Dr. Phil
- Principal, vice principal, parents, students themselves, teacher aides

Describe a time when you experienced a situation or opportunity that really helped you with your teaching of language arts in the northern context. Explain to me how it helped.

Tell me about someone who provided support for your language arts teaching. Describe the kind of support and what it means to you and how you feel about it.

What kinds of professional learning opportunities are available for you here in this community, area, school division?

If you were planning PD for this school this year, what would you suggest? Why?

What kinds of personal experiences from your past help you teach language arts in this school?

What advice would you offer to a new teacher coming to teach ELA in this school?

Appendix B: Language Arts Terms

A **Double Entry Journal** is a response journal used with literature circles. The journal has two columns. The first column is for an event, quotation, or situation from a novel and the second column is for the students to write their thinking about that event, quotation, or situation.

Brownlie, F. (2005) *Grand conversations and thoughtful responses: A unique approach to literature circles*. Winnipeg, CA: Portage and Main Press.

A **Gallery Walk** is a process by which students use observation skills to gather data and sometimes draw conclusions about a topic or idea. It is used as a representation strategy during which students view artifacts, representations, pictures, quotes, titles, or the work of others. The purpose of viewing is often to initiate discussions, or to develop ideas and concepts.

Brownlie, F, and Close S. (1992). *Beyond chalk and talk: Collaborative strategies for the middle and high school years.* Markham, ON: Pembroke Publishers.

Literature circles are an organizational strategy whereby students read a variety of novels and discuss their reading in small groups. In Brownlie's approach, students have a choice in what and how much they read. There are no assigned roles in the discussion groups.

Brownlie, F. (2005) *Grand conversations and thoughtful responses: A unique approach to literature circles*. Winnipeg, CA: Portage and Main Press.

Miscue analysis is a diagnostic tool that helps teachers gain insight into the reading process.The term "miscue" was initiated by Goodman (1969) to describe an observed response in the reading process that does not match the expected response. He states that the departures from the text are not necessarily a negative aspect of the reading process but rather "windows on the reading process" (p. 23).

Goodman, K. (1969). Analysis of oral reading miscues: Applied psycholinguistics. *Reading Research Quarterly,* 4 (1), 9-30.

A **Running Record** is an assessment tools originally created by Marie Clay (1993), a developmental psychologist and world-wide authority on early reading. Running records help teachers assess a student's oral reading proficiency and reading level by examining both accuracy and the types of errors made.

Clay, M. (1993). *An observation survey of early literacy achievement*. Portsmouth, NH: Heineman.

Three-point Approach for Words and Concepts is a vocabulary strategy whereby students write a definition, draw a picture or diagram, and provide a synonym or example for a word or concept. Adapted from Simons (1991).

Simons, S. M. (1991). *Strategies for reading non-fiction.* Alford, MA: Spring Street Press.

A **Word Cycle** is a vocabulary building strategy. Students build a cycle of usually nine words, defining the relationships between all adjoining words in the cycle.

Szabos, J and Filkins, V. (1984). *Reading: A novel approach.* Carthage IL: Good Apple Press.

A **Word Map** is a strategy that assists with the development of concepts and vocabulary. Students provide a definition, main characteristics, and examples to explain the word or concept in a diagram format. Adapted from Schwatz and Raphael (1985).

Schwartz, R. M. and Raphael. T. E. (1985). Concept of definition: A key to improve students' vocabulary *The Reading Teacher* 39.2 (Nov) p. 198- 205.

A **Word Wall** is an idea developed by Cunningham (1991). It involves selecting words that are common references in reading and writing. Teachers display selected words on a wall or bulletin board and use them as the basis of word identification study. They become a kind of visual scaffolding that provides students with a reference for words they will need for literacy activities. In Faith's classroom the words are displayed on the walls and alphabetized. These words are often used for word study activities and word games.

Cunningham, P. M. (1991). *Phonics they use: Words for reading and writing.* New York, NY: Harper Collins.