More Than Generalists: Towards an Identity as a Beginning Elementary Literacy Teacher

by

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A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of

Master of Education

Elementary Education

University of Alberta

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Abstract

Elementary teachers are known to be primarily responsible for the literacy of children, being termed “custodians” of literacy. However, this responsibility can be associated with serious doubts as to one’s competency and ability to teach this subject. Such doubts are common among pre-service and beginning teachers.

Framed in a sociocultural perspective, and using a case study research design, the purpose of this study was to develop an understanding of what it means to be a beginning elementary literacy teacher. This research draws attention to the way identity is socially constructed both through interactions with others and through teachers’ narratives of their teaching practice. Data collection included one semi-structured interview with each of six beginning teachers. Data analysis provided insight into five broad themes: teacher identity; the subject of language arts; literacy; literacy teacher identity; and constructivist teaching. Study findings included the role of a positive school context in establishing a strong sense of teacher identity, the role of mentorship as a way to support beginning teachers in their literacy teaching, and the implicit connection between theory and practice in the narratives of beginning teachers’ literacy teaching practices. Suggestions for changes in teacher education, and insights into the importance of mentorship are provided.

Preface

This thesis is an original work by Julie Mae Teske. The research project, of which this thesis is a part, received research ethics approval from the University of Alberta Research Ethics Board, More than generalists: Towards an identity as an elementary literacy teacher, Pro00039148_REN1, April 29, 2014.

Acknowledgements

Although my name appears alone on the front of this document, this was not a solitary endeavour. I wish to express my gratitude to the following people who have helped me in many ways:

Dr. Lynne Wiltse, you first inspired me to write a thesis. From that moment on, you have mentored, encouraged and supported me to see this through to fruition. Your unwavering patience on this journey has been greatly appreciated. Thank you for sharing your wisdom. You helped me to clarify my thinking and motivated me by believing in the value of what I was doing. I began my graduate studies with you as my professor and now I end with you as the supervisor of this thesis. This has been an honour for me.

Dr. Jill McClay, you have been a gifted mentor to me in my academic life. I hope you can "hear" that influence within the following pages. You helped me to develop as a writer and you have always moved my thinking forward. Working with you has been my privilege. Your support, guidance, wisdom and generous investment of time have been invaluable.

Dr. Claudia Eppert, thank you for taking the time to be on my committee. I look forward to many thought provoking discussions about language arts and literacy.

To my first class of pre-service teachers at the University of Alberta, teaching you gave me the impetus to begin this research. Thank you for your candidacy and openness. To the teacher participants in my study, thank you for willingly sharing your narratives with me, allowing my readers to catch a glimpse of your teaching lives.

To my fellow graduate students and teaching colleagues, specifically Deanna Behr and Coralie Kerr, thank you for the thoughtful discussions and your continued interest. You helped me to refine my thinking and reinforced the merit of this research.

To Lori Follis, thank you for giving me permission to use your artwork in this thesis. Your images express what words could not.

To my in-laws, Ernest and Myrna, thank you for so lovingly taking care of my children and giving me much needed breaks. Your Sunday night suppers helped me to step away from my work and allowed me to gain perspective.

To my parents, Zacheria and Shirley, words fail me. You raised me in an environment where I could construct my own understanding of the academic worlds you both inhabited. Those influences still live on. You have generously provided child care and meal delivery service and have allowed me many opportunities to focus on my work free of distractions. Mom, thank you for being my unpaid editor. You are the quintessential teacher. Dad, thank you for prompting me to pursue my graduate degree.

To my husband, Todd, you have provided the technical support, emotional support and financial support necessary to realize my dream. There were times I wanted to stop and you would not let me. Thank you. I value your thoughts as an “outsider” to the world of teaching. You are a very wise man.

To my beautiful children, Grace, Jacob and Benjamin, thank you for giving me many opportunities to smile and laugh and to remember what my purpose in life is. You have had to become more independent while I wrote this thesis. I hope you can see that dreams come easy but sometimes achieving them does not. The struggle to achieve those dreams makes the victory sweeter. Aim high my darlings.

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PROLOGUE

Hello darkness, my old friend,
I've come to talk with you again,
Because a vision softly creeping,
Left its seeds while I was sleeping
And the vision that was planted in my brain
Still remains
Within the sound of silence
(Simon & Garfunkel, "The Sound of Silence")

It was in the sound of silence that this work was first allowed to grow. In the course of my writing, silence was elusive, punctuated by flurries of activity typical of a household with a young family. But when the silence came, rare and treasured, it brought with it fertile ground for writing.

Context is everything. The above paragraph represented my view of silence in the *context* of my writing. In this case, silence was welcome and at times essential. When I first showed my advisor, Dr. Lynne Wiltse, the lyrics by Simon and Garfunkel, I mentioned that I might use the theme of silence in my prologue. A simple conversation with her changed the way I viewed my work and the way I viewed silence. After I heard Dr. Wiltse say, "your work is about disrupting silences", I reframed my view about my work and began to think differently about silence. Thinking that my study had the potential to disrupt the silences elevated its importance. What it means to be a beginning elementary literacy teacher has been shrouded in silence. This thesis aims to disrupt that.

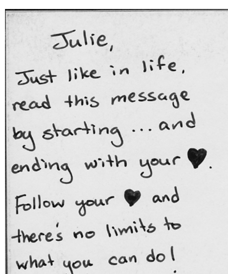
© Lori Follis – Girl at art

CHAPTER ONE - INTRODUCTION

> Qualitative researchers are interested in telling, and are often consumed by the need to present their stories of research as an ongoing journey. Their writings must, therefore, reflect the process of research – the character and foundational beliefs of the original conceptual framework as well as the evolving one, considerations on the stumblings, in-progress victories, insights and puzzlements of the researcher as the research unfolds.
> (Ely, Vinz, Downing, & Anzul, 1997, p. 52)

The words of these authors rang true for me. Presenting my research journey was an important and deeply personal endeavour. Perhaps not typical for thesis writing, I have chosen to use images to document this journey (see Appendix A). These are included at the beginning of each chapter, reflecting the personal meanings each chapter held for me.

When I accepted a position as a sessional instructor at the University of Alberta, a dear friend inscribed the following message in a picture book. Little did she know how prophetic her words would be. I followed my heart when I began the journey of teaching pre-service teachers and that journey was the beginning of this work.



The Beginning

The beginning is the most important part of the work. (Plato)

In some ways it seems logical to view chapter one as the beginning. And in many ways it is. But as I look back over my work, I see many beginnings; the beginning of the idea for my research, the beginning of my research methodology, the beginning of the actual research and the beginning of the writing. While this chapter does mark the official beginning, there are beginnings contained in every chapter of this thesis. The beginning is the most important part and all of these beginnings mark the trajectory of this thesis. This

chapter aims to provide the reader with some insight into the origins of this work while also laying the groundwork for the chapters that will follow.

Intersection of the Personal and Professional

This research involves teachers and teaching. The link between the personal and professional selves in teaching is well documented in the research (Alsup, 2006; Britzman, 2003; Olsen, 2010). Indeed, it is difficult to separate out who we are as individuals and who we are as teachers because the personal and professional are so intertwined. They influence and are influenced by each other. While the majority of this thesis will focus on my professional work and therefore my professional identity, my personal identity is inexorably linked to that. For this reason, I will provide a brief glimpse of relevant personal information that will help to explain the course of my teaching career thus providing a greater understanding of the contextual factors that contribute to this work.

Family Context

I grew up being influenced by two academic worlds; the world of teaching and the world of research. These two worlds were seemingly different, yet they shared points of contact. This intersection is part of what drew me to my various professional roles; an elementary teacher, a graduate student, a teacher educator and finally, a researcher.

My mother began her teaching career as a secondary teacher and transitioned to elementary. She graduated from the University of Saskatchewan with a Bachelor of Education. My father worked as a research scientist. He graduated from McGill University with a Doctorate of Philosophy in Physical Chemistry.

Teaching

Me. A teacher’s daughter. Weekends spent in my mother’s classroom investigating all the treasures found within those four walls. Reading all of the books in her classroom library. Playing the games my mother made for her students. Gazing at all the student work on the walls. Walking around the rows of desks and looking at the names above each coat hook. Listening to my mother talk about her lesson plans, her students, and the people with whom she worked.

Research

Me. A research scientist’s daughter. Excursions to my father’s laboratory. Watching my dad combine two clear liquids to produce a new red one. Learning about hypotheses testing and independent and dependent variables. Gazing at the periodic table of the elements. Looking at the sterile equipment in the laboratory and learning at an early age that this is where research was conducted. Listening to my father talk about research, his research conferences and the people with whom he worked.

Influences of Teaching and Research

The occupations of both of my parents were intriguing and influential. I loved listening to my mom talk about the funny things her students did and how she loved watching them learn and grow. Although I could not understand the scientific aspect of my father’s research, there was something about the research itself that captivated my attention. Education was very important to both of my parents. My mom did not say much about her career aspirations for me but my dad was very vocal about his desire for me to become a scientist. I became a teacher. But I knew I would not stay in the

classroom forever. There was still something about my father's work, namely his research, that was alluring.

My Life as An Elementary Teacher

I began my journey as an elementary teacher in June of 1997 when I graduated from the University of Alberta. I received my first teaching position in November of that same year. On my first day, the day after my interview, a fellow staff member took great delight in informing me that I had been hired to teach what she termed, "the worst class in the school". Her information increased my feelings of despair. Not only would I be teaching a grade with which I was unfamiliar but I would also be facing serious classroom management issues. I relied heavily on my mother and her years of expertise and wisdom to help me through that year. She encouraged me to view my students in a more positive way. I quickly established a good rapport with my students and although it was a tough year, my interactions with these learners became a highlight. Also, because my position was part-time, I was still able to volunteer in another school. Fortunately this allowed me to see two very different school contexts.

The context of the school where I taught was marked by negativity, isolation and very little collaboration among the staff. The context of the school where I volunteered was the polar opposite. It was marked by positive interactions; support from administration, colleagues and parents; and a high degree of collaboration. As my first year of teaching came to a close, I was offered a teaching position for the upcoming year at the school where I had volunteered. I was thrilled. My first year of teaching had been very difficult. In stark contrast, my second year of teaching was wonderful. In my third year I moved to a different school but this transition was easier. I was more confident,

had gained experience and had benefitted from strong familial and collegial support. I now really *felt* like a teacher.

In the course of my elementary teaching career, I taught Grades 1, 2, 3, and 5 in addition to computer classes. I spent many hours helping with extra curricular activities like the running club, book club, choir, hand bells and the Orff ensemble. Although I loved my career, I still felt something was missing.

Teaching and Research

Upon completion of my Bachelor of Education degree, I received a letter from the University of Alberta inviting me to pursue a graduate degree. This was a dream of mine and although graduate work intrigued me, life happened. As my life unfolded there was little room to think about graduate studies but the seed had been planted.

When I was pregnant with my third child, I began to talk in earnest to my father about his graduate work. I also felt inspired by a colleague who had just finished her Masters degree in Elementary Education. The day after my youngest child celebrated his first birthday, I started my graduate degree in Elementary Education with a focus on language and literacy. As I progressed through my coursework, I relied on what I had learned as a classroom teacher. The new knowledge I was gaining in graduate school sparked many ideas of how I would change my teaching practice for the better. With each course that I completed, the thought of a thesis was never far from my mind. However, as I began to think about the research I might undertake, I knew that it would be different than the quantitative research my father had done in a research lab. Although different in nature, I had confidence that my research would be just as fulfilling to me as my father's was to him. Completing a graduate degree was to me, a perfect blend of teaching and

research. In many ways, these two areas had underpinnings of the narratives I heard growing up.

Starting Over – Post-Secondary Instructor

Before I finished my coursework for my graduate degree, a new challenge presented itself. I was asked to consider teaching EDEL 305, Language Arts in the Elementary School. Instead of Grade 2 students, my classroom would consist of pre-service teachers. In many ways, I felt like I was starting over.

When I began to prepare and plan for this new teaching assignment, my excitement grew. As a student, my favourite class had been language arts. As a classroom teacher, the subject I had most loved to teach was language arts. Now, as a graduate student, my focus was language and literacy. I loved this subject and couldn't wait to share my enthusiasm with my new students. Certainly they would love it as much as I did. Right?

Wrong. I found out quite quickly that the subject of language arts was one that caused trepidation and feelings of uncertainty for my students. While continuing to teach my undergraduate students, I began to question why many of them had such distaste for language arts. Some had had less than stellar experiences with this subject as students. Others had not had many opportunities to teach it in their first practicum and as a result were very unsure of the classroom context of teaching language arts. A few simply did not care for the subject and found it "boring". There were also some who did not feel confident in their own literacy skills and consequently were not sure how to teach a subject they were not "good" at. Subjects with a narrow focus or ones where the "right answer" could be found were cited as favourites as opposed to language arts. It seemed

like the most pervasive reason for this strong dislike was simply the nature of the subject matter itself. I loved teaching language arts because of the limitless possibilities involved. This same limitlessness expanse was problematic for my students. McClay (1998) explains the differential views about language arts:

> English language arts as a school subject has been both applauded and condemned as a ‘contentless’ subject . . . Enthusiasts relish the developmental nature of the subject, noting its limitless expanse and possibilities: language is the foundation of all our learning and the gateway to our social world. To others it seems a vague, amorphous discipline, lacking in objectivity and not encompassing a body of knowledge to be mastered. (p. 177)

To borrow McClay’s (1998) terms, I was the “enthusiast” and my goal was to facilitate a change in the “others”, my students, in terms of the way they viewed the subject of language arts. So began the challenge. A thorough discussion of that will be chronicled in later sections of this chapter. But first it is important to discuss language arts and literacy as a point of reference for the remainder of this thesis.

The terms, language arts and literacy, are used frequently in this thesis. These two areas are broad and because of this they defy a precise definition. However, the following two sections will provide a description and working definitions of the way these terms are used within the confines of this thesis.

Language Arts in the Elementary School

Most elementary students are given instruction in the following subjects: Language Arts, Mathematics, Science, Social Studies, Health, Physical Education, Art and Music. Each particular subject is designated a specific percentage of instructional minutes. Students in the Edmonton Public School District receive 1,520 minutes of instruction each week. Language Arts receives the greatest allocation of these minutes at 30%, Mathematics is second with 15%. In Grades 3 to 6 the percentages change slightly

with Language Arts receiving 25%, while Mathematics stays the same at 15% (Edmonton Public Schools, 2007). For Grades 1 to 6, the remaining subjects receive between 10-15% of the total minutes of instruction. The emphasis placed on language arts in comparison to other subjects speaks volumes as to its importance. However, language development is not to be confined to the above mentioned percentages:

> Language development is the responsibility of all teachers. For example, subject area teachers teach the specialized language and forms of each subject. English language arts teachers; however, have a special role because of their focus on language, its forms and functions. They help students develop and apply strategies for comprehending, composing and responding in a variety of situations. (Alberta Education, 2000, p. 2)

As evidenced in the above excerpt, there is an expectation that *all* teachers focus on language development, regardless of the subject they are teaching. In essence, language arts has a place in every subject that is taught to elementary students. Language arts therefore is taught all day and in every subject area.

Working Definition of Language Arts

For the purposes of this thesis, language arts will be taken to mean the subject area taught in the elementary classroom. In addition, language arts will refer to English language arts only. There are six strands of language arts: listening, speaking, reading, writing, viewing and representing. Whenever the term, language arts, is used here, it can include any of the six language arts strands.

Literacy

As with language arts, I will include a description of literacy followed by a working definition of it. Before I discuss literacy, I want to return for a moment to the purpose of language arts as explained in Alberta Learning's (2000) Program of Studies: "The aim of English language arts is to enable each student to understand and appreciate

language, and to use it confidently and competently in a variety of situations for communication, personal satisfaction and learning" (p. 1). For the purpose of this thesis, literacy will refer to the competencies that are primarily focused on in the subject area of language arts. It is common to hear references to many kinds of literacies such as; scientific literacy, musical literacy, mathematical literacy and computer literacy, but these will not be addressed in this thesis.

Before I provide my working definition of literacy, I will give a brief overview of several other definitions. The Alberta Education (2014) website includes a thorough discussion about literacy:

> Many definitions of literacy exist but at their core most definitions relate to oral language and an individuals' ability to understand and communicate through text. Today, literacy has become even more complex as 'new literacies' have emerged. The literacies of today are no longer linear (using a series of print-only, controlled vocabulary, basal readers to learn to read, print-only reference books to acquire information, and prescriptive templates for writing), but multimodal and multilayered. Today's learners must develop expertise with a wide range of literacy skills and strategies to acquire, create, connect, and communicate meaning in an ever-expanding variety of contexts. Today's youth connect and communicate through means such as blogs, wikis, instant messaging and texting. They not only acquire information from print sources, but can listen to podcasts, webinars, visit countless websites, and share video via YouTube and other sites. In the 21st century, literacy is much more than reading and writing. (para. 1-2)

The above definition shares points of contact with "The Statement for the United Nations Decade, 2003-2012 (UNESCO)": "Literacy is about more than reading or writing – it is about how we communicate in society. It is about social practices and relationships, about knowledge, language and culture" (UNESCO, 2003, para.2-3). Both of the above definitions assert that literacy is much more than reading and writing and they also emphasize the social nature of literacy.

It is also important to consider the role of literacy in contexts other than schools. The Canadian Literacy and Learning Network (2014) present some staggering statistics; 42% of Canadians in the 16-65 age bracket have low literacy skills. Equally disturbing is the fact that the employment rate of those with low literacy skills lies at around 20%.

In the same vein, The Education Matters website from Statistics Canada (2008) provides additional information on literacy:

> Literacy is crucial to the success of individuals in both their career aspirations and their quality of life . . . Strong literacy skills are closely linked to the probability of having a good job, decent earnings and access to training opportunities. Individuals with weak literacy skills are more likely to be unemployed or, if employed, to be in jobs that pay little or that offer poor hours or working conditions. (para. 1-2)

Literacy is essential both in and out of school. McDougall (2010) aptly explains:

> The primary teacher has long been considered a custodian of literacy. 'Literacy' is, in itself, a concept that defies easy definition . . . However, broadening views of literacy have made the responsibility for teaching literacy even more complex, nuanced and potentially more hazardous. (pp. 679-680)

According to Statistics Canada (2008), "Literacy is fundamental for learning in school" (para.4). Because of its importance both in and out of school, the stakes for literacy learning are high.

In this section I have presented several definitions and views on literacy. However, it is prudent to also include literacy theorists' insights into literacy. According to Gee (1989), "Any socially useful definition of literacy must be couched in terms of the notion of Discourse" (p. 9). Gee describes discourses as "saying (writing)-doing-being-valuing-believing combinations" (p. 6). In a similar vein, Lankshear and Knobel (2006) define literacy as "socially recognized ways of generating, communicating

and negotiating meaningful content through the medium of encoded texts within contexts of participation in Discourses" (p. 64). My definition of literacy is closely aligned with those of Gee and Lankshear and Knobel.

Working Definition of Literacy

For the purposes of this thesis, literacy will be defined as including a wide range of modalities and all six of the language arts. Literacy is equally important across a variety of contexts and social settings. Social influences on literacy are paramount and therefore, literacy is not viewed here as a set of isolated skills.

The Challenges

The previous sections of this chapter have helped to provide some of the context surrounding my work as a post-secondary instructor. This section will focus on the challenges I faced as I tried to help my pre-service teachers deal with varying degrees of dislike, ambivalence toward or even hatred of the subject area of language arts. As was previously explained, literacy is the foundation for all learning and literacy competencies are the primary focus of language arts. It is problematic if teachers do not have a favourable attitude towards this subject. What follows now are some of the challenges I faced as I endeavoured to be an agent of change. My mission was to alter the views of my students about the subject of language arts.

The "Hard Sell" of Theory

The Merriam Webster (2014) online dictionary defined *hard sell* as "hard sell *noun*: an aggressive way of selling something: something that is difficult to sell: something that others are not willing or likely to accept." These definitions are an apt description of the way I had to "sell" theory to my pre-service teachers. Theory was

viewed with suspicion and deemed rather useless in terms of the more "practical" applications for which these students were searching. Such applications usually would include the "tried and true" teaching methods or resources used by classroom teachers. These were classified as inherently more valuable than theory. I must admit, if I were not a graduate student while I was teaching EDEL 305, I might have agreed with my students and their assessment of theory. However, when I returned to graduate school, I had the opportunity to become well versed in the works and the associated theories of several researchers. These include Michael Halliday's (1969) functions of language; Brian Cambourne's (1995) conditions of literacy learning; Louise Rosenblatt's (1982) reader response theory; James Paul Gee's (1989) Discourses; and Frank Smith's (1984) literacy club. I soon realized that my teaching practices were closely aligned with several of these theories. Albeit at the time, I did not refer to it as theory; I thought it was just good practice. As a graduate student, I could reflect back and see the reciprocal nature of theory and practice. Now I faced the task of "selling" this to my pre-service students. In this sense, I was staying true to the first definition of hard sell – I was aggressively trying to sell the value of theory.

My pre-service teachers were on a quest for certainty. To them, theory seemed too vague, too irrelevant and too difficult to apply to the real world life of an elementary classroom. Theory and practice were mutually exclusive. You could have one but not the other. I needed a way to change this view. This was a lofty challenge indeed since this was a commonly held belief by both pre-service and in-service teachers (Danielewicz, 2001). In fact, many of my students' mentor teachers were validating their belief about the uselessness of theory. When this course first began, my students had a stronger

relationship with these practicing teachers than they did with me. I could not stand at the front of the classroom and laud the value of theory with the hopes that my students would blindly accept my views. I had to prove it.

I decided to use my two assignments to help my students view theory in a different way. My first assignment required my students to discuss five literacy activities that would correspond to five of Halliday's (1969) functions of language. My second assignment involved designing a poetry unit plan that was aligned with Cambourne's (1995) conditions of learning. By linking these theorists with the practical classroom applications, I felt I had achieved a measure of success in bridging the gap. My students expressed to me, on several occasions, their desire to have actual units, activities or plans that they could take with them into their future classrooms. I felt that my assignments were purposeful yet contained a strong theoretical framework. Towards the end of the course, most of my students did begin to view theory with less suspicion. There were still a few holdouts though!

Putting Language Arts in a Box

Some of my students tried to reconcile their dislike of language arts with their belief that this subject would be taught only for a specific time period each day and then they could move on. To me, this was akin to putting this subject in a box, taking it out when necessary and then putting it back in and closing the box until it was ready to be opened for the next language arts "session". The six strands of language arts - listening, speaking, reading, writing, viewing and representing - filter into every subject. In essence, elementary teachers are teaching language arts all day. Boxing it up is impossible. To help my students understand this, we began to closely examine the

Alberta Learning's (2000) English Language Arts Program of Studies in terms of the way language arts is described:

> Students become confident and competent users of all six language arts through many opportunities to listen and speak, read and write, and view and represent in a variety of combinations and relevant contexts. *All the language arts are interrelated and interdependent; facility in one strengthens and supports the others*. (p. 2)

Many of my students considered reading and writing to be the primary, and sometimes the singular, focus of language arts. This is why they felt this subject could be relegated to specific times each day, or boxed up. However, after looking through the aforementioned Program of Studies, my students began to see that reading and writing were not accorded a privileged status compared to listening, speaking, viewing and representing. As they began to view language arts with a broad lens, its application to other contexts and to other subjects was much easier to understand and led to a greater acceptance of the difficulty associated with compartmentalizing language arts. The need for the "box" was beginning to fade.

The "Right" Answer

My pre-service students inhabited the world of a student and the world of a teacher. Although this borderland (Alsup, 2006) represented the intersection of two worlds, the underlying goal was the same for the majority of the inhabitants. As students, they wanted the right answer. They were on a quest for the right way to answer examination questions and the right way to complete assignments. As pre-service teachers, they wanted the right answer. They were on a quest for the right way to teach language arts. In their minds, success in either world depended on the "right" answer.

The problem? In both of these worlds the one right answer was elusive. Searching for it would be fruitless. The "right answer" would reduce these individuals to those who could regurgitate and dispense information. They were capable of so much more than that.

Rather than giving my students a set of guidelines that would lead them to the right answer or the right way, I opted for a constructivist[1] approach in my teaching. I viewed my students as active learners who were responsible for their own learning and were capable of constructing their own knowledge as a result of their social interactions with me as well as their peers. This resulted in a collaborative classroom environment which caused frustration for some. Many of my students were accustomed to a transmission model[2] of learning where they could be passive learners and could rely on the teacher to direct the course of their learning. Activities like Tea Party[3] and Grand Conversations[4] pushed them out of their comfort zone and quite literally into the zone of proximal development.[5] The onus for learning rested squarely on the shoulders of the students.

Coming to the Study

The preceding sections were included to give the reader a chance to understand some of the challenges that my students worked through. As the course came to a close,

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[1] This will be explained in more detail in chapter four.

[2]http://ws1.roehampton.ac.uk/guidetogoodpracticeinassessment/teachinglearningandassessment/learningteaching/index.html

[3] Tea Party (Tompkins, 2009) is a learning activity that requires active participation where students move around the classroom, discussing a particular book (or in this case an idea from the textbook) with their peers.

[4] Grand Conversations (Tompkins, 2009) allow the students to take responsibility for the conversation, allowing them to voice their opinions and ideas. They can focus on the concepts that are most meaningful to them.

[5] The Zone of Proximal Development is the difference between what an individual can do independently and what he or she can do with assistance from a more skilled peer. (Vygotsky, 1978)

many of them began to change their view of language arts. It was impossible for me to alleviate every fear or change every student's mind. My goal was to provide my students with a positive language arts experience to help them understand the great teaching potential inherent in this subject. Based on the continued communication I had, and still have, with many of my students, I do believe I was successful.

Fast-forward several months. I was talking with a colleague who was explaining an initiative to remove literacy experts in the schools. In defending this stance, she made the comment: "Every teacher is a literacy teacher". I was taken aback. First I wondered what this even meant. What is a literacy teacher and what does it mean to be one? Would my pre-service students self-identify as literacy teachers? My recent teaching experience at the post-secondary level left me with serious misgivings related to the notion that **all** teachers view themselves as literacy teachers. My firsthand experience of witnessing pre-service teachers wrestle with the challenges of teaching language arts made it difficult to reconcile the notion that they would happily identify as literacy teachers.

Research Question

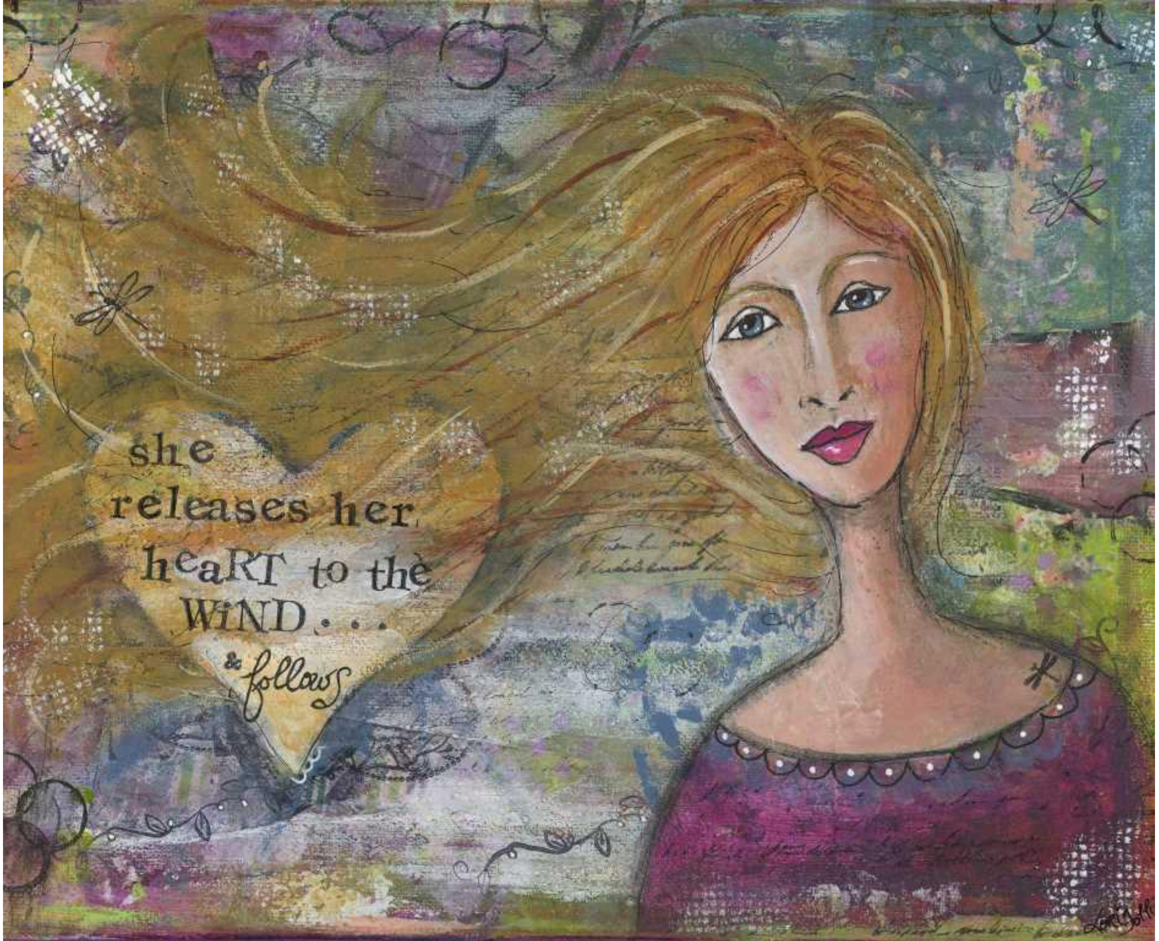
"Every teacher is a literacy teacher". This phrase continued to be in the forefront of my mind. And so too was my experience as a sessional instructor. A simple conversation and a complex teaching experience sparked the trajectory of my research. Once again, teaching and research would intersect as my research question was formed. What does it mean to be a beginning elementary literacy teacher?

This chapter focused on my personal history in terms of my family background, my beginning classroom teaching and my post-secondary teaching. I also included a

discussion about two major aspects of my study, language arts and literacy. I concluded with the events that led me to my study and the subsequent research question.

The following chapter will provide the reader with an overview of the theoretical framework and related literature that have informed my study. My research methodology is explained in chapter three along with a description of my participants and the research sites. Chapter four includes the key findings that emerged from my research. Chapter five concludes this thesis with a summary of the key findings, researcher reflections, limitations and ideas for future research.

Chapter one has highlighted the significance of language arts and literacy. The context that served as an impetus for this study has been explained. In chapter two, the theoretical framework and related literature that informs this study will now be presented.



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CHAPTER TWO - THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK AND RELATED LITERATURE

"One of the most important elements of a research thesis . . . is the incorporation within it of a theoretical foundation" (Oliver, 2014, p. 28). A theoretical framework is included to help the reader: understand the nature of the data and the way it is analyzed; understand the role of the researcher and the participants; gain insight into the researcher's perspective on the nature of knowledge. Social constructivism, Vygotsky's sociocultural theory, constructivist teaching and a constructivist study design will all be discussed in the theoretical framework section.

This chapter is comprised of two main sections: the theoretical framework and the related literature. Although the first section focuses primarily on the work of Vygotsky, it is important to note that this thesis draws upon the work of four theorists: Lev Vygotsky, Jerome Bruner, Albert Bandura and James Paul Gee, all of whom have published seminal works in their respective fields of study. These theorists will be discussed in terms of their emphasis on social interactions, specifically the social nature of learning and knowing and the social influences on self-efficacy and identity formation. The theories of Bruner, Bandura and Gee are included in the second section of this chapter and are discussed in tandem with the related literature.

Social Constructivism

Constructivism as a theory of learning arose in direct contrast to the learning theories of behaviourism and maturationism (Fosnot & Perry, 2005). In behaviourist theory, learning is dependent on reinforcement, repeated practice and external rewards (Fosnot & Perry, 2005). In maturationism learning is dependent on the particular stage of

development of the individual and therefore age norms are important (Fosnot & Perry, 2005). According to von Glasersfeld (2005), it was Piaget who first distinguished constructivism from other learning theories when he began to question whether knowledge was indeed a result of an objective reality. This sparked a change in the way knowledge was viewed, shifting it from an objective reality to a subjective construction of an individual's reality. Such a construction is a result of an individual's prior experiences and interactions with others in the environment. Fosnot and Perry provide the following description of constructivism:

> Rather than behaviours or skills as the goal of instruction, *cognitive development* and *deep understanding* are the foci; rather than stages being the result of maturation, they are understood as *constructions of active learner reorganization*. Rather than viewing learning as a linear process, it is understood to be *complex* and fundamentally *nonlinear* in nature. (p. 11)

In constructivist theory, the learner is viewed as active and learning is the result of the learner's interaction with the environment. Instead of a focus on the individual, learning is viewed as a collaborative activity. As a theory of learning, constructivism rests on the premise that individuals construct their understandings. These understandings are a result of the interplay of previous understandings and new understandings. Piaget, Vygotsky, Bruner, Gardner and Goodman are among those who have contributed to the field of constructivism (Fosnot & Perry, 2005).

Vygotsky's Sociocultural Theory

> Over the last several decades, in and across a wide variety of disciplines, there has been a massive 'social turn' away from a focus on individual behaviour (e.g. the behaviourism of the first half of the twentieth century) and individual minds (e.g., the cognitivism of the middle part of the century) toward a focus on social and cultural interaction. (Gee, 2000, p. 180)

The above quote provides a fitting introduction for this section on the work of Lev S. Vygotsky a Russian psychologist who is credited with developing sociocultural theory as a framework to understand human learning. Gee's words capture the essence of Vygotsky's main tenet; the individual cannot be understood apart from his or her social influences. An individual's interactions with others and the environment have an impact on learning, development and language.

Vygotsky (1978) asserts that children construct their knowledge in relation to others. Children learn by solving problems with the help of others and through the use of cultural tools. According to Vygotsky, cultural, (or psychological) tools play a pivotal role in cognitive development. These can be divided into material tools such as pencils, spoons, rulers, computers and sign and symbol systems such as numbers, works of art and language (Woolfolk, 2007). Vygotsky attaches prime importance to the cultural tool of language, as can be seen in the following: "Sometimes speech becomes of such vital importance that, if not permitted to use it, young children cannot accomplish the given task . . . *children solve practical tasks with the help of their speech, as well as their eyes and hands*" (p. 26, emphasis in original). Language is essential in constructing knowledge. Not only is language a tool to communicate with others but language is also a way for an individual to organize thinking, what Vygotsky terms "internal mental function" (p. 89). According to Wertsch (2010), "studies by Vygotsky and his colleagues reveal that they tended to view language and other cultural tools as always working in favour of more advanced human functioning, as inevitably leading to more sophisticated performance" (p. 41). Cultural tools are passed from one generation to another and are reworked in order to meet the needs of the current conditions of use. Woolfolk further

explains that "children do not just receive the tools . . . They transform the tools as they construct their own representations, symbols, patterns and understandings" (p. 41). One need only to look at the ways computers are being used now compared to a generation ago to witness such transformations.

Vygotsky (1978) emphasizes that learning occurs well before formal education begins. Children enter school with knowledge that is constructed as a result of their social interactions. According to Vygotsky:

> Indeed, can it be doubted that children learn speech from adults; or that, through asking questions and giving answers, children acquire a variety of information; or that, through imitating adults and through being instructed about how to act, children develop an entire repository of skills? Learning and development are interrelated from the child's very first day of life. (p. 84)

Vygotsky posits that children do not enter school as blank slates, but rather, have already begun to construct their own meanings of the world. He also asserts that children's learning has roots in social interactions. Vygotsky claims that "every function in the child's cultural development appears twice: first, on the social level, and later, on the individual level" (p. 57). It is through social interaction that the child can begin to understand cultural meanings and then these are internalized. Vygotsky references attention, memory and learning when he asserts that all higher mental functions have social origins. Learning cannot be separated from social contexts. Vygotsky also believes that learning can be enhanced by what he terms the zone of proximal development:

> It is the distance between the actual developmental level as determined by independent problem solving and the level of potential development as determined through problem solving under adult guidance or in collaboration with more capable peers . . . 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 but are currently in an embryonic state. (p. 86)

The zone of proximal development is the difference between what a child can do independently and what a child can do with assistance. This assistance can be from a teacher, another adult, or a peer. In a school setting, intuitive teachers will aim their teaching at the higher level of a child's zone of proximal development.

Even though Vygotsky's works were written decades ago, their value has not decreased over time, but instead are gaining acceptance (Wertsch, 2010). Moll (2014) explains the significance of this work: "More than any other psychologist, L. S. Vygotsky placed education at the heart of his theory and praxis" (p. 1). Before he became a psychologist, Vygotsky was a teacher who studied deaf children and children with learning difficulties. Moll noted, "Vygotsky regarded education not only as central to cognitive development but as the quintessential sociocultural activity. That is, he considered the capacity to teach and to benefit from instruction a fundamental attribute of human beings" (p. 1). Moll's insights clearly illuminate the relevance of Vygotsky's work to studies of education and teaching in particular.

Constructivist Orientation to Teaching

Von Glasersfeld (2005) raises two points that educators must be aware of if they ascribe to a constructivist orientation to teaching. First, there are differences in the way the environment is perceived by students and teachers. In this context, environment can be taken to mean textbooks, the curriculum, educational materials, computers, and even the teacher. The onus is therefore on the teacher to attempt to understand the experiences and understanding of the student. Second, because of the differences in the way the environment is conceived and knowledge is constructed, teachers must be aware that their intended meanings might not always be shared by their students. Von Glasersfeld

aptly explains that "learning is a constructive activity that the students themselves have to carry out. From this point of view, then, the task of the educator is not to dispense knowledge but to provide students with the opportunities to build it up" (p. 7). Open-ended educational activities are well suited for students to build up their knowledge.

Bainbridge, Heydon, and Malicky (2009) posit that teachers experience a shift in their roles when their teaching is aligned with social constructivism. As students take more responsibility for their learning, the teacher can become a facilitator rather than a director of the learning process. Teachers develop a more collaborative and less hierarchal relationship with their students. However, constructivist teaching is not easy (Gould, 2005). It requires flexibility and balance on the part of the teacher. Flexibility is required in terms of being receptive to the ideas of the students. For it is these ideas that often drive the teaching and learning process in constructivist teaching. Balance is also crucial in terms of the level of difficulty associated with student directed activities and balance in terms of establishing an appropriate level of teacher support.

Constructivist Study Design

Detailed information on my study will be provided in chapter three. A brief summary of a constructivist study design is included here so the reader can be aware of the parallels between the structure of my study design and the theoretical framework presented in the beginning of this chapter. Denzin and Lincoln (2000) shed light on the nature and understanding of knowledge within a constructivist design.

> The constructivist paradigm assumes a relative ontology (there are multiple realities), a subjectivist epistemology (knower and respondent cocreate understandings), and a naturalistic (in the natural world) set of methodological procedures. (p. 21)

Drawing on the work of Charmaz (1990, 2000, 2006), Creswell (2012) alludes to the subjective nature of the constructivist study design. He explains that "the researcher also brings values, experiences, and priorities . . . The constructivist study mentions the beliefs and values of the researcher and eschews predetermined categories . . . The narrative is written to be more explanatory, more discursive and more probing of the assumptions and meanings for individuals in the study (p. 430). A constructivist design focuses primarily on the meanings given by the participants and it also focuses on the values, priorities and experiences that the researcher brings to the study (Creswell, 2012).

Related Literature

Now that the theoretical framework has been discussed, I will focus on the related literature. Creswell (2012) defines the literature review as "a written summary of journal articles, books, and other documents that describes the past and current state of information on the topic of your research study" (p. 80). Literature reviews serve multiple purposes that can include: adding to the current literature; heightening awareness for a particular study; and informing the reader of the relevant research (Creswell). The sections that follow will address these purposes.

It is important to revisit my research question in order to understand the relevant literature. "What does it mean to be a beginning elementary literacy teacher?" In order to address this question, four significant areas of research will be addressed in this literature review. They are: teacher identity, literacy teacher identity, beginning teachers and self-efficacy. Teacher identity is a well-researched area and as a result this section of the literature review is comprehensive. Literacy teacher identity is an under-researched area

and as a result this section is relatively short but will be discussed in greater detail in the final chapter of this thesis.

James Paul Gee – Discourse and Identity

James Paul Gee is well known for his research in literacy and has published in several areas including linguistics, psychology, education and the social sciences. According to Gee (1989):

> At any moment we are using language we must say or write the right thing in the right way while playing the right social role and (appearing) to hold the right values, beliefs, and attitudes. Thus, what is important is not language, and surely not grammar, but *saying (writing)-doing-being-valuing-believing combinations*. These combinations I call 'Discourses' . . . Discourses are ways of being in the world, they are forms of life which integrate words, acts, values, beliefs, attitudes and social identities as well as gestures, glances, body positions and clothes. A Discourse is a sort of 'identity kit'. (p. 6-7)

Discourses cannot be taught but rather are learned through social interactions from those who are already proficient in a particular Discourse (Gee, 1989). According to Gee, a primary Discourse is a "home-based sense of identity" (p. 8). This Discourse is learned through interacting with those with whom we have close connections such as family members. In contrast, Gee (1989) explains that secondary Discourses are developed through interactions with others in public institutions, like churches or schools.

Gee's 2001 work centered around four perspectives on identity and helps to underscore the variability and complexity associated with identity. The first is the N-identity, nature perspective. Society has no power over our N-Identities as forces of nature in essence control them. Gee's second perspective on identity is the institutional perspective or I-Identity. Here the power lies not in nature but in the institution and the accompanying traditions, rules and laws. This type of identity has to do with an individual's position and therefore teacher identity is an example of an I-Identity. The

administration, the school board, or other teachers help to establish an I-Identity. The third perspective is the discursive perspective, or the D-Identity. For this identity, the source of the power is in the way others speak about an individual. Gee explains that "it is only because other people treat, talk about and interact with my friend as a charismatic person that she is one" (p. 103). Gee includes an important disclaimer about the D-Identity. The people who help sustain our D-Identity must be what Gee termed "rational" (p. 103) in that they must have solid reasons for speaking about a person in a particular way rather than being forced to do so. The fourth perspective is the affinity perspective or A-Identity. Here the source of power lies within certain specific and unique social practices that contribute to group membership. According to Gee, an affinity group has shared access to and shared participation in specific practices that groups members have in common.

Teacher Identity

> If identity is a key influencing factor on teachers' sense of purpose, self-efficacy, motivation, commitment, job satisfaction and effectiveness, then investigation of those factors which influence positively and negatively, the contexts in which these occur and the consequences for practice, is essential. (Day, Kington, Stobart, & Sammons, 2006, p. 601)

The above citation sheds light on the multiple influences of identity on the lives of teachers thereby underscoring both its importance and the need for continued research in this area. Horn, Nolen, Ward, and Campbell (2008) define identity as "the way a person understands and views himself and is often viewed by others, at least in certain situations – a perception of self that can be fairly constantly achieved" (p. 62). Although Horn et al. refer to identity as being fairly constant, this should not be equated with the notion of identity as stable. It is important to note that the research does support the notion of

teacher identity being in flux and open to change (Flores & Day, 2006; Horn et al., 2008; Olsen, 2010).

Because teacher identity is developed through relationships with others and in the social context of a school, it stands to reason that identity is socially constructed (De Ruyter & Conroy, 2002; Gee, 2001; Horn et al., 2008; McDougall, 2010; Olsen, 2010).

> Because accounts of *identity* necessarily provide for the description of individuals, it helps us see the people we are trying to understand. At the same time, identities are constructed through culturally available descriptors, narratives, and archetypes, embedding and linking the individuals in the contexts around them. (Horn et al., 2008, p. 62)

In the same vein, McDougall (2010) explains that teacher identity can be developed as teachers listen to what others say to them and about them and the way they are recognized as holding specific traits that are indicative of a “teacher”. This is in keeping with Gee’s (1989) concept of Discourses, and his work on the discursive perspective, or the D-Identity (Gee, 2001) discussed earlier. Establishing an identity is part of learning to teach and teaching is an inherently social activity. Britzman (2003) asserts, “Learning to teach is a social process of negotiation rather than an individual problem of behaviour” (p. 31). It is this negotiation between individuals and within institutions that influences teacher identity.

There is vast agreement among researchers that teacher identities are not fixed, but rather are fluid and open to change (Britzman, 2003; Day et al., 2006; Flores & Day, 2006; Hong, 2010; Olsen, 2010; Saka, Southerland, Kittleson, & Hutner, 2013). According to De Ruyter and Conroy (2002), “The social construction of identity is the first reason why it is dynamic or only relatively stable” (p. 511). Because identities are socially constructed, they can change as a result of our interactions with others. Horn

et al. (2008) propose two means whereby identity shifts occur, identification and negotiation. A person with whom an individual identifies, or emulates, can be the driving force behind a change in identity. Essentially, a teacher's identity can change to become similar to that of someone he or she respects. Negotiation is similar to identification in that it too produces a change in identity. Discussion was the driving force in changing an identity through negotiation as indicated by one of the teachers in the study by Horn et al. Both identification and negotiation focus on social interaction as a change agent in terms of a shift in professional identity.

The personal and professional selves both play a role in identity construction (Alsup, 2006; Britzman, 2003; Danielewicz, 2001; Day et al., 2006). The way teachers understand themselves personally factors into the way they understand themselves professionally. The intersecting and overlapping of the personal and professional is termed "borderland" by Alsup. There can be tension and conflict in the borderland. For example, a teacher who considers herself meek might feel tension if she were to exert herself in the classroom. This tension is not necessarily negative as it too can be instrumental in producing a change in identity.

Meristo and Eisenschmidt (2014) describe the interplay between the school climate and the school context:

> School size, school type (including the age of students) and location (i.e., rural or urban school) shape the context of a particular school which, together with the school climate, create the students' learning climate as well as the teachers' working climate. (p. 2)

Drawing on the work of Van Houtte (2005), Meristo and Eisenschmidt examine several factors related to school climate. These include: the shared value system of the staff, the

interactions between colleagues and administration and the physical features of the school. There is a link between teacher identity and positive school climate and context (Day et al., 2006; Flores & Day, 2006). McDougall (2010) explains:

> The construct of identity . . . acknowledges that the discourses teachers use in describing their teaching role are influenced by their understandings of institutional expectations, as well as the ways in which they identify with others. Though teachers have their own ideas of what defines their professional identity . . . it is likely that these views will be influenced by the roles imposed on them by various institutional bodies, as well as those roles affirmed by other teachers with whom they share similar beliefs and practices. Therefore, the conception of the teacher's identity will be influenced by the standpoint of all those who author their position, including the ways in which teachers view themselves. (p. 682)

This quotation highlights the importance of the school context in establishing teacher identity. Yost (2006) also speaks to the importance of the school context in terms of a teacher's self-efficacy but her work has implications for teacher identity as well:

> Thus, it seems logical to conclude that if a teacher's philosophy is not in line with a school's shared vision then a teacher must make a choice to join the collective group stance, align him or herself to minority opposing views, or leave the school or teaching profession entirely. (p. 60)

The school context can have a strong influence, either positive or negative, in shaping and re-shaping teacher identity.

Researchers agree that teacher identity development should be discussed within the context of teacher education. (Alsup, 2006; Danielewicz, 2001; Horn et al., 2008; Olsen, 2010). Both pre-service and beginning teachers are exposed to a wide variety of teaching strategies, theories, and approaches. In order to critically evaluate these, a strong sense of identity is necessary. Watson (2006) further elaborates:

> The importance of the concept of professional identity lies in the assumption that who we think we are influences what we do, i.e. there is a link between professional identity and professional action (in a sense, professional action is doing professional identity). (p. 510)

In the same vein, Olsen (2010) argues for the importance of teacher identity to be established in teacher education so that pre-service and beginning teachers will be better equipped to accept practices which align well with their identities while rejecting those which do not. Alsup (2006) agrees:

> If we need teachers who effectively educate (a fundamental requirement for any optimism about the future), then we need to know how the best teachers have become themselves. What makes someone a good teacher is not methodology or even ideology. It requires engagement with identity, the way individuals conceive of themselves so that teaching is a state of being, not merely ways of acting or behaving. I regard 'becoming a teacher' as an identity forming process whereby individuals define themselves and are viewed by others as teachers. (p. 3)

Constructing an identity is important work in learning to teach (Alsup, 2006; Britzman, 2003; Olsen, 2010). Part of establishing an identity involves a recognition of the reciprocal nature of teaching and identity as Britzman explains:

> Teachers [are] shaped by their work as well as shaping their work . . . For in considering what teaching does to teachers, our concern is with how the activity of teaching expresses something about the subjectivities of teachers and determines ways teachers come to construct their teaching identities. (p. 25)

Because of the social construction of identity, there are many factors that can contribute to teacher identity and the manner whereby such an identity is constructed.

Jerome Bruner – Narrative Ways of Knowing

Jerome Bruner is an American psychologist and educator whose work was heavily influenced by Vygotsky. According to Hyvarinen, Mikkonen, and Mildorf (2008):

> Recent theories of narrative have highlighted the radically different functions and roles that narrative can perform – as a particular form and structure of discourse; as a form of knowing the social world; as a perspective and frame of action; as a form of human identity; and as a mode of human interaction. (p. 225)

Narrative ways of knowing the social world and the use of narratives in establishing identity are two aspects that will be addressed in this section. According to Hyvarinen et al., "While literary scholars, for example, have demonstrated substantial interest in narrative as a way of knowing, this perspective has been largely absent from recent work in the social sciences – one exception is Jerome Bruner's path-breaking contributions" (p. 225). In terms of contextualizing narrative ways of knowing, it is important to understand Bruner's (1986) views on the two ways of thinking, the paradigmatic and the narrative:

> There are two modes of cognitive functioning, two modes of thought, each providing distinctive ways of ordering experience, of constructing reality . . . Each of the ways of knowing, moreover, has operating principles of its own and its own criteria of well-formedness . . . arguments convince one of their truth, stories of their lifelikeness. (p. 11)

Bruner emphasizes that the paradigmatic mode is characterized by formality, logic and empirical truth. This is in contrast to the narrative mode which can consist of "good stories, gripping drama, believable (though not necessarily 'true') historical accounts. It deals in human or human-like intention and action and the vicissitudes that mark their course" (p. 13).

Bruner (2004) explains, "Philosophically speaking, the approach I shall take to narrative is a constructivist one – a view that takes as its central premise that 'world making' is the principal function of the mind, whether in the sciences or in the arts" (p. 691). This premise is articulated in Bruner's (1986) earlier work when he refers to the function of a speech act in terms of a way to look for meaning within a realm of possibilities. In essence, Bruner argues that there is no one right meaning. We construct our meanings and this can occur by listening to the narratives of others as well as our own. Bruner's association with constructivism and narrative is not surprising as his work

is cited as contributing to the development of constructivism as a theory of learning (Fosnot & Perry, 2005).

Bruner (2004) focuses his attention on autobiographies as a way to describe life experiences: "We seem to have no other way of describing 'lived time' save in the form of a narrative" (p. 692). He further mentions that narratives are the best way to capture lived experiences as they can contextualize lived time in ways that historical recounting, or lists of dates cannot. Bruner also underscores the reciprocity between life and narrative:

> The mimesis between life so-called and narrative is a two-way affair . . . Narrative imitates life, life imitates narrative. 'Life' in this sense is the same kind of construction of the human imagination as 'a narrative' is. It is constructed by human beings through active ratiocination, by the same ratiocination through which we construct narratives. When somebody tells you his life . . . it is always a cognitive achievement rather than a through-the-crystal recital of something univocally given. (p. 692)

Bruner establishes that one's life story can be problematic in that events cannot be verified, a life story can be riddled with uncertainty and the narrator and protagonist are inseparable. Despite these flaws, Bruner argues that there is merit in the narratives of one's life story, or autobiography:

> The heart of my argument is this: eventually the culturally shaped cognitive and linguistic processes that guide the self-telling of life narratives achieve the power to structure perceptual experience, to organize memory, to segment and purpose-build the very 'events' of a life. In the end we *become* the autobiographical narratives by which we 'tell about' our lives. (p. 694, emphasis in original)

Bruner calls attention to the reciprocal nature of our experiences and our narratives and the meaning that is attached to them.

Narrative Construction of Teacher Identity

Soreide (2006) and Watson (2006) posit that teacher identity can be constructed and understood through narrative and Watson explains the connection between identity and narratives:

> This again highlights the external, relational nature of identity construction. In this view identities are constructed in the narratives we create and tell about our lives; how we externalize ourselves to ourselves and to others . . . people construct narratives and narratives construct people and our identities emerge through these processes. (p. 510)

Although the traditionally held view of narrative equates narratives with story, Watson argues that not all narratives can fit this definition. Drawing on the work of Ochs and Capps (2001), Watson (2006) further elaborates, “Stories of personal experience do not necessarily show all the traditional features of a narrative” (p. 511). While deviating in form, other types of narratives can still provide the same function. For example, as Watson explains, stories of personal experience still have value:

> Through analysing stories, and the resources that individuals draw on to construct these stories, we can perhaps say something about the way in which teachers actively construct their identities as professionals in an ongoing, effortful and dynamic process that needs to be sustained. (p. 512)

Watson (2006) conducted a research study with one teacher and subsequently analyzed the transcripts in terms of understanding this teacher through his narratives. Watson explains, “An analysis such as this does not, therefore, aim to represent a life but to focus on practices of teaching that provide insights into the processes involved in the construction of a professional identity” (p. 513). In addition, the teaching practices included in a particular teacher’s narrative are a matter of the teacher’s own choosing. Understanding teacher identity through narratives requires attention to both

circumstances and human agency, although such agency can be limited for beginning teachers who often feel forced into prescribed roles or identities (Ruohotie-Lyhty, 2013).

Literacy Teacher Identity

Bergeron (2006) asserts, "Although research on teacher preparation is replete with research specific to quality teacher preparation in general, much less information has been reported on the preparation of quality *literacy* teachers" (p. 78). In addition to the gap in the literature about literacy teachers, there exists a similar gap in the research regarding literacy teacher identity even though the link between literacy and identity is an important one. McCarthey and Moje (2002) question, "Why does identity matter? As literacy researchers interested in the relationship between literacy and identity, . . . [we] recognize this to be an important, and too often overlooked, question in studies of literacy and identity" (p. 228). Disciplinary identity has been researched in other areas. There is work on science teacher identity (Saka et al., 2013; Siry & Lara, 2012) mathematics teacher identity (Hodges & Cady, 2012) and music teacher identity (Ballantyne, Kerchner & Arostegui, 2012). Research on literacy teacher identity, specifically elementary literacy teacher identity is lacking.

Literacy Teachers

There can be no doubt as to the importance of literacy teachers. Courtland and Leslie (2010) state, "Literacy education has always been a priority in the elementary school curriculum . . . As the boundaries of literacy have expanded, literacy teaching has become more complex" (pp. 19-20). It is vital to draw from research in the field to mitigate this complexity. Smith and Rhodes (2006) refer to literacy teachers as literacy leaders and change agents and further describe literacy teachers:

> Effective literacy teachers model valuable literacy practices as their teaching identities develop over time . . . literacy teachers continue to work toward improving their own literacy skills while promoting literacy in diverse settings . . . Teacher candidates who are well prepared in teaching literacy are confident in their knowledge of literacy practices. (p. 32)

Smith and Rhodes highlight the relationship between establishing a literacy identity and becoming a confident literacy teacher. These authors stress that literacy teachers are to "become models of literacy" (p. 33) and their "professional identities are built around the idea of fostering a literate society" (p. 34). Modelling literacy, supporting the literacy learning of others, and improving their own literacy skills are all part of being a literacy teacher (Smith & Rhodes, 2006).

Smith and Rhodes (2006) explain that literacy teachers need to examine their own literacy competencies before they can support the literacy learning of their students:

> When teacher candidates take their first courses in teaching, they often are troubled by their lack of knowledge about how students learn to be literate. Many teacher candidates have gone through life just being literate, questioning neither how that came about for them nor how that comes about for others. Their 'teacher identity' formation begins with thinking about their personal levels of literacy and refining their skills to become better literacy models for students. (p. 36)

These authors strongly suggest that pre-service teachers strengthen their own literacy skills by reading, writing and using technology to enhance their own literacy.

Beginning Teachers

As I explained in the introduction of this thesis, my choice to study beginning teachers was purposeful. However, when I began my research, I did not consider the complexities associated with this particular demographic. According to Hebert and Worthy (2001), the first year of teaching, often called the induction phase, can have lasting implications in terms of the length of a teacher's career, job satisfaction and

teacher effectiveness. Flores and Day (2006) cite "feelings of isolation, mismatch between idealistic expectations and classroom reality and lack of support and guidance" as factors that contribute to the difficulty often associated with beginning teachers (p. 219).

In the existing literature, a prevalent theme emerged; beginning teachers often experience a discrepancy between their perceptions about teaching and the realities they face as a practicing teacher (Britzman, 2003; Hong, 2010; Saka et al., 2013; Tschannen-Moran & Hoy, 2007). According to Ruohotie-Lyhty (2013):

> The general picture that can be formed on the basis of the existing literature . . . on newly qualified teachers suggests that the induction phase, which is here understood to comprise the first years in the profession, generally severely challenges teachers' former beliefs about teaching and themselves. (p. 120)

Britzman offers a possible explanation for such challenges: "The overfamiliarity of the teaching profession is a significant contradiction affecting those learning to teach" (p. 27). Teachers were once students. This experience can lead to unrealistic beliefs about teaching (Hebert & Worthy, 2001) and can contribute to a view of teaching as a simple act, one anyone can do (Britzman, 2003). According to Britzman, "Because teachers were once students in compulsory education, their sense of the teacher's world is strangely established before they begin learning to teach" (p. 1). It would appear that this familiarity with teaching gives beginning teachers a false sense of insider status. They assume they understand the reality of teachers; however, such reality must be experienced through teacher education or teaching experience. It cannot be truly understood from the stance of a student.

Because of their unrealistic expectations, beginning teachers often have to deal with reality shock when they enter the profession. Generally speaking, they find teaching

more difficult than what they expected, yet they are not given time to reconcile these differences. Ruohotie-Lyhty (2013) explains, "Despite their lack of experience, however, teachers are expected from day one at work to assume the same duties as more experienced teachers" (p. 120). In addition to the aforementioned difficulties, beginning teachers often face issues of fitting into the school culture and uncertain job prospects (Ruohotie-Lyhty, 2013). Taken together, the factors that contribute to a difficult transition into teaching can have a negative impact on the professional identity of beginning teachers (Ruohotie-Lyhty, 2013).

Not all studies of beginning teachers focus on difficult beginnings. Hebert and Worthy (2001) document the positive factors associated with the first year of teaching: "The existence of new teachers who succeed calls into question the notion that the first year is necessarily problematic" (p. 899). The authors found that there was a close alignment with job expectations and workplace reality and that translated into an easier transition. Ruohotie-Lyhty (2013) studied two beginning teachers and found that: "The participants' stories display two different experience narratives: a painful and an easy beginning" (p. 120). The teacher with an "easy beginning" had realistic expectations of teaching. This is in contrast to other studies where a mismatch between job expectations and workplace reality are noted (Flores & Day, 2006). Hebert and Worthy highlight several other factors that could account for a successful beginning: familiarity, acceptance of the pace of teaching, school context and evidence of impact. The teacher in the study by Hebert and Worthy received a teaching position at the school where she had student taught, she was comfortable with the hectic pace of teaching, she described her school in favourable terms and she felt she was making a difference in the lives of her

students. These factors, combined with several others, contributed to what the authors cited as a "case study of success" (p. 897).

Elementary Teachers

In Alberta, most elementary schools are comprised of kindergarten to Grade 6, including children between four to twelve years of age. The majority of elementary teachers are referred to as "generalists", meaning rather than specializing in a particular subject area, generalists teach all subjects. Most elementary teachers are responsible for teaching language arts, math, science, social, art, physical education and health. Some elementary teachers also teach music and French. Grossman, Schoenfeld, and Lee (2005) highlight the inherent difficulty for elementary teachers to be competent in several disciplines:

> The question of subject-specific preparation for teaching becomes more complex when we consider the preparation of elementary school teachers, both in the area of content knowledge and in pedagogical content knowledge . . . Although the questions we have posed for pedagogical content knowledge are just as important for elementary teachers to explore as they are for secondary teachers, teacher educators need to wrestle with how to design the subject-specific component of the professional curriculum to reflect the fact that elementary teachers teach multiple subjects. (p. 231)

Grossman et al. provide suggestions on ways to reduce the number of subjects with which elementary teachers are required to be proficient. They argue for the inclusion of subject specialists in the elementary school: "Upper elementary teachers may need the opportunity to focus deeply on teaching and learning within fewer subject areas" (p. 231). Another suggestion is to provide higher priority to specific subjects: "Specifically, the content areas that are seen as core to academic success across the curriculum: literacy and mathematics" (p. 231). To achieve this, Grossman et al. suggest that a stronger focus be placed on literacy and numeracy in teacher education.

Albert Bandura – Self-Efficacy

Albert Bandura is a Canadian psychologist whose construct of self-efficacy is well known in educational circles especially in terms of motivation and learning (Woolfolk, 2007). Bandura (1997) explains, "Perceived self-efficacy is concerned with judgments of personal capability . . . People need firm confidence in their efficacy to mount and sustain the effort required to succeed" (p. 11). Our perceived self-efficacy comes from four sources: enactive mastery experiences, vicarious experiences, verbal persuasion and psychological and affective states (p. 80). The first three sources will be discussed further as these are particularly relevant to my work.

Enactive mastery experiences are situations that can be classified as successful but are often characterized by hard work or a need to overcome an obstacle. According to Bandura (1997), "Enactive mastery experiences are the most influential source of efficacy information because they provide the most authentic evidence of whether one can muster whatever it takes to succeed" (p. 80). These experiences are not a result of a set formula but rather are based on an individual's beliefs of what it takes to be successful in a specific context (Bandura, 1997). Vicarious experience refers to measuring one's self-efficacy in relation to the performance of others and can be based on modeling and feedback (Bandura, 1997). Social persuasion occurs when a significant other expresses confidence in an individual's abilities (Bandura, 1997).

Although Bandura (1997) outlines the sources of self-efficacy in general terms, he does speak specifically to educational environments including students, schools and teachers:

> The task of creating learning environments conducive to development of cognitive competencies rests heavily on the talents and self-efficacy of teachers.

> Evidence indicates that teachers' beliefs in their instructional efficacy partly determine how they structure academic activities in their classroom and shape students' evaluations of their intellectual capabilities. (p. 240)

Bandura (1997) further underscores the importance of self-efficacy when he argues that teachers with a high sense of self-efficacy have stronger beliefs about their effectiveness as teachers *and* their students' potential to learn. A teacher's sense of self-efficacy can have a direct impact on his or her students:

> The early school years are an important formative period in children's development of conceptions of their intellectual capabilities. Their beliefs about their intellectual efficacy are, in large part, a social construction . . . A teacher's sense of efficacy is likely to be especially influential on young children. (p. 242)

Essentially both the teacher and the students are effected by a teacher's sense of self-efficacy. Drawing on the work of Enochs and Riggs (1990) and Gibson and Dembo (1984), Bandura underscores the detrimental outcomes associated with low self-efficacy. Teachers spend less instructional time on subjects where they feel less efficacious (Bandura).

Tschannen-Moran and Hoy (2007) studied the factors that contributed to the self-efficacy beliefs of beginning versus experienced teachers. The findings of this study highlight the ways self-efficacy can be increased. Self-efficacy beliefs increase when a teacher receives positive verbal messages from administration, colleagues or parents. A teacher's sense of self-efficacy also increases with each successful teaching situation. The school context was also strongly linked to measures of self-efficacy, specifically the availability of resources and the quality of the physical features of the school.

Yost (2006) speaks to the importance for pre-service teachers to develop a sense of self-efficacy in their teacher education programs. The connection between resilience,

persistency and self-efficacy is also highlighted. Essentially, a higher sense of self-efficacy can result in a higher level of effort and a longer period of time spent on a specific task. Yost maintains that higher levels of self-efficacy can be achieved by focusing on authentic mastery experiences in teacher education:

> Practical applications of this construct for teacher education programs should be geared to greater understanding of how to provide authentic experiences for teacher candidates that not only teach them what to do (raising competence) but how to do it well in a variety of contexts (raising confidence). (p. 61)

Yost further explains that such mastery experiences are best achieved when there is a strong link between teacher education and student teaching. Essentially "learning what to do" and "learning to do it well" necessitates a connection between theory and practice. Drawing on the work of Day (2004), Ruohotie-Lyhty (2013) asserts, "Achieving a positive sense of identity is important to teachers' self-esteem and self-efficacy" (p. 122). This points to the connection between self-efficacy and teacher identity.

This work is situated within a sociocultural framework, specifically drawing on the work of Vygotsky. The beginning section of this chapter included a discussion of social constructivism, sociocultural theory, constructivist teaching and a constructivist study design. The second section of this chapter focused on the literature that is pertinent to my study. This section also included the work of three other theorists, James Paul Gee, Jerome Bruner and Albert Bandura. There were five areas of research that were included in the literature review: teacher identity, the narrative construction of teacher identity, literacy teacher identity, beginning teachers, and self-efficacy. Within this chapter there were strong underpinnings of the social influences on many of these areas. The social construction of learning and knowing and the social influences on teacher identity and self-efficacy have all been addressed within the context of the related literature.

The next chapter focuses on methodology. This will include details about my study design, recruitment of participants, data collection and data analysis. Contextual information about the participant's schools will be provided. Finally, the participants will be briefly introduced.

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CHAPTER THREE - METHODOLOGY

> Planning a research project can be compared to planning for a vacation trip. Before starting out, you consider what sort of trip most appeals to you, what you like to do, what it might cost, where you want to go, how best to get there, how long to stay and so on. So too, there are things to think about before you begin a research project. (Merriam, 1998, p. 3)

Merriam's metaphor of planning for a trip is quite fitting because as a neophyte researcher, beginning my research was like travelling to an unknown land. There was a new language to learn and new customs and traditions to be aware of. In planning a journey, both the point of departure and the destination are important. In many ways, my methodology was my point of departure, for this is where the actual journey began.

Situating Myself

The impetus for this study came as a result of my experience as a sessional instructor at the University of Alberta. When I taught EDEL 305 (Language Arts in the Elementary Classroom), I became aware of the reticence with which many elementary pre-service teachers approach the teaching of Language Arts. Many of my post-secondary students were in their fourth year and in a matter of a few months would make the transition to in-service teaching. Would this hesitancy still be present when these individuals had their own classrooms?

With this question still in my mind, I was confronted with a colleague's statement. Little did she know the ripple effect her seemingly innocuous words caused. Her remark? "Every teacher is a literacy teacher". While I agreed with that statement, I wondered if my pre-service students would. And then I wondered if beginning teachers would view themselves as literacy teachers. And so began my point of departure, with my research question: "What does it mean to be a beginning elementary literacy teacher?"

What now follows are the considerations I needed to make as I planned my research journey in the hopes of reaching my destination, the answer, or at least some insights into the aforementioned research question.

Which Methodology?

Once I decided on my research question, I needed to determine what methodology would be best suited for this inquiry. Before I made this decision I needed to understand the basic differences between qualitative and quantitative research. Denzin and Lincoln (1998) state:

> Qualitative researchers stress the socially constructed nature of reality, the intimate relationship between the researcher and what is studied, and the situational constraints that shape inquiry. Such researchers emphasize the value-laden nature of inquiry. They seek answers to questions that stress how social experience is created and given meaning. In contrast, quantitative studies emphasize the measurement and analysis of causal relationships between variables, not processes. Inquiry is purported to be within a value-free framework (p. 8).

It became clear that my research question could be best answered through a qualitative methodology. I wanted to understand what being a literacy teacher might mean. Merriam (1998) underscores that the qualitative researcher should possess certain attributes:

> To begin with, the qualitative researcher must have an enormous tolerance for ambiguity . . . The very lack of structure is what makes this type of research appealing to many, for it allows the researcher to adapt to unforeseen events and change direction in pursuit of meaning. (Merriam, 1998, p. 20)

I thought I could tolerate the ambiguity which Merriam spoke of. In addition, I felt that I could be flexible enough to undertake this type of research.

Case Study Design

Once I decided on a qualitative inquiry, the actual research design needed to be fleshed out. In order to accomplish this, I had to carefully consider the purpose of my

research. Patton states, “Purpose is the controlling force in research. Decisions about design, measurement, analysis and reporting all flow from purpose” (p. 150). The purpose of my study was to highlight what it meant to be a beginning elementary literacy teacher. I needed to learn about the experiences of beginning teachers in this regard. As Merriam (1998) states, “The decision to focus on qualitative case studies stems from the fact that this design is chosen precisely because researchers are interested in insight, discovery and interpretation rather than hypothesis testing” (p. 29). This led me to choose case study as my research design.

Stake (1995) defines case study as “the study of the particularity and complexity of a single case, coming to understand its activity within important circumstances” (p. xi). Another useful description of case studies is their boundedness (Creswell, 2012; Merriam, 1998; Stake, 1998). Merriam (1998) explains, “I can ‘fence in’ what I am going to study” (p. 27). Essentially there must be boundaries or limits on what constitutes the case, or what is to be studied.

According to Merriam (1998), case studies are particularistic, descriptive and heuristic. Merriam defines the particularistic nature of case studies as a “focus on a particular situation, event, program or phenomenon” (p. 29). My study is particularistic in that it focuses on a select, specific group of teachers and the manner whereby they develop an identity as literacy teachers. The descriptive quality of case studies results in a comprehensive discussion about the specific issue that is studied (Merriam). As soon as I decided on a case study design, I quickly realized that interviews would be the best tool for data collection because I believed that this would contribute to a thorough description of the phenomenon and shed light on the complexities of this issue as well. The heuristic

feature of case studies is explained by Merriam as " [illuminating] the reader's understanding of the phenomenon under study. They can bring about the discovery of new meaning, extend the reader's experience, or confirm what is known" (p. 30). I felt that my work could lead to a better understanding of what it means to be an elementary literacy teacher. This was crucial given the gap in the research on this topic. Furthermore, by asking teachers about their experiences with language arts in the classroom, I was confident that new insights could be gained. Because I chose to study more than one case, my study can be classed as a collective case study (Merriam, 1998).

Methodological Details

Recruiting Participants

After receiving University of Alberta ethics approval for this study (see Appendix B) I needed to recruit participants. I wanted a sufficient sample size so that I could see similarities and differences between cases but I did not want too many since I wanted to emphasize depth over breadth. Creswell (2012) explains, "It is typical in qualitative research to study a few individuals or a few cases. This is because the overall ability of a researcher to provide an in-depth picture diminishes with the addition of each new individual"(p. 209). I set my sample size to between three to five cases. This size would provide enough data while still allowing an in-depth picture of each case.

I chose purposeful sampling as a way to recruit participants. Patton (1990) elaborates:

> The logic and power of purposeful sampling lies in selecting *information-rich cases* for study in depth. Information-rich cases are those from which one can learn a great deal about issues of central importance to the purpose of the research, thus the term *purposeful* sampling. (p. 169)

Creswell (2012) also indicates that purposeful sampling is used in qualitative research because individuals are intentionally chosen so that the researcher can learn more about the phenomenon being studied. Merriam (1998) explains, "To begin purposive sampling you must first determine what selection *criteria* are essential in choosing the people or sites to be studied" (p. 61, emphasis in original). I decided on four criteria to use in determining potential participants.

The first criterion was that each participant needed to be a beginning teacher. For the purposes of my study, this could include teachers with two years of experience or less. My goal was to study teachers who were beginning to develop their identities rather than more experienced teachers whose identities might already be more firmly established (Beijaard, Meijer, & Verloop, 2004).

The second criterion was that the teacher be an elementary generalist. This was an important designation for several reasons. I wanted to capitalize on my insider status because I felt this would allow me to maximize the time I spent with each participant. Our shared roles and contexts would minimize the need for certain explanations as we were likely to have common understandings of the elementary curriculum, the characteristics of elementary aged children and the nature of an elementary school in general. In addition, I wanted to draw on my experience as a sessional instructor. I was familiar with elementary pre-service teacher education and was also aware of some of the issues that pre-service teachers were facing. Considering that my participants were beginning teachers, these issues may also be relevant to them as not long ago they too were pre-service teachers.

Third, the teacher needed to be a generalist, as opposed to specializing in a particular discipline. I was interested in the ways that elementary teachers negotiate the demands of teaching multiple subjects. Specialists like music teachers or physical education teachers do not have to balance the same number of subjects that generalists do.

Fourth, to participate in this study, the teacher needed to be currently teaching language arts. Several of my interview questions focused on language arts and literacy and would target my participants' language arts teaching.

Once I decided on my criteria, I chose snowball sampling (Creswell, 2012) to find potential participants. In essence, this kind of sampling allows the researcher to ask others to recommend individuals who could be good potential participants (Creswell 2012; Patton, 1990). I asked my former colleagues, my fellow graduate students and my professors from the University of Alberta to recommend individuals for my study. This type of sampling proved highly effective as I was able to recruit my participants in a timely fashion.

Rather than contacting potential teacher participants directly, my contacts first forwarded the information about my study (see Appendix C) to the principals whom they knew. Once these principals had received approval from their school boards allowing me to conduct my research with their teachers, they approached teachers whom they felt might be interested. Potential participants were provided with my email information. Interested individuals could then contact me. This resulted in a total of ten potential participants. However, some had issues with availability and others did not completely fit my criteria. For example, one secondary teacher and one teacher assistant were interested

but I decided to stay true to my criteria for inclusion and therefore, my sample size was finalized at six.

Data Collection

Miles and Huberman (1994) explain that "qualitative data, with their emphasis on people's 'lived experience' are fundamentally well suited for locating the *meanings* people place on the events, processes, and structures of their lives" (p. 10, emphasis in original). As I began to think about how to collect data for my study, I knew I wanted a data collection tool that would elicit my participants' views, and could provide me with glimpses into their world, including the meanings they attached to it. Yin (1994) lists six sources of data collection commonly used in case studies: archival records, documents, interviews, participant-observation, direct observation and physical artefacts. Although each source has its own merits and limitations, I chose interviews. The reasons for this will be discussed below.

Interviewing is frequently used in qualitative research to collect data (Ely, Vinz, Downing, & Anzul, 1997; Glesne, 2011; Merriam, 1998). Patton (1990) highlights the reasons to choose interviewing:

> The purpose of interviewing is to find out what is in and on someone else's mind . . . We interview people to find out from them those things we cannot directly observe. The issue is not whether observational data is more desirable, valid or meaningful than self-report data. The fact of the matter is that we cannot observe everything. We cannot observe feelings, thoughts, and intentions. We cannot observe behaviours that took place at some previous point in time. . . . We have to ask people questions about those things. The purpose of interviewing, then is to allow us to enter into the other person's perspective. Qualitative interviewing begins with the assumption that the perspective of others is meaningful, knowable, and able to be made explicit. (p. 278)

Indeed, it was the perspectives of my participants which I felt would best serve my research purpose. Interviewing seemed to be an effective means to gather data about these perspectives in order to help me answer my research question.

I chose interviewing because it was a means of data collection that capitalized on my interests and skills. Patton states, “But no less important than skill and technique is a genuine interest in and caring about the perspectives of other people. If what people have to say about their world is generally boring to you, then you will never be a great interviewer” (p. 279). In my capacity as a research assistant, I conducted several interviews. These interviews were anything but boring. Since I was fully engaged in the worlds of these participants I speculated that I would be just as engaged as I conducted interviews for my own study.

Formal data collection consisted of one face-to-face, semi-structured, audio-recorded interview. My interview protocol (see Appendix D) consisted of open-ended questions allowing varied responses from my participants. My interview questions targeted areas such as: background information, classroom demographics, experiences as students and descriptions of teaching practice. Participants were given the interview questions in advance. Additionally, each participant had the option to not answer particular questions. When my participants signed their consent forms, they were aware that I might request a second interview. Although I did not find this necessary, in the process of data analysis, if a participant’s response was unclear or if I required more information, I requested such information via email. All were very willing to provide this for me.

In order to minimize disruptions and inconveniences to my participants' professional and personal lives, the date, time and location of the interview was chosen by each participant. Five participants chose to be interviewed at their schools and one chose to be interviewed at a coffee shop. For the interviews conducted in the schools, two were in the teacher's own classroom and three took place in other rooms within the school. Three interviews occurred immediately after dismissal at the end of the day. The other three were held during school hours at the request of the administrator. The interviews ranged from thirty to forty-five minutes in length and were audio recorded.

The teachers in my study took time out of their busy schedules, in May and June no less, to participate in my study. The professor with whom I worked as a research assistant suggested I give each participant a picture book as a token of appreciation. After the interview was over, each participant was presented with the book, *Arnie the Doughnut*, along with a writing lesson I had developed to accompany it. Considering the nature of my study, this was a very appropriate token of appreciation. It was fitting to pay it forward, so to speak, by providing them with a *literacy* activity they could use in their classrooms.

Although the interviews were my primary source of data, I collected additional data, albeit rather inadvertently, from the interviews that occurred in the schools or in the teacher's classroom. The interviews held in the teacher's own classroom yielded data akin to "field notes" defined by Creswell (2012) as "the data recorded during an observation" (p. 216). Although I have been a classroom teacher for several years, I have not looked at a teacher's classroom through the eyes of a *researcher*. Conducting interviews in a classroom provided great insight. How were the desks arranged? What

evidence of student work could be found? What kind of literacy supports were posted on the walls? Even simple things like the manner in which the teacher phrased common items like the "Classroom Rules" poster helped me to gather additional information. Three of my interviews occurred in the school but not in the teacher's classroom. However, all three teachers took me to their classrooms, and this helped to provide a layer of contextual information. In some ways, interviewing teachers in their teaching environment led to a richer interview experience. Philpott and Dagenais (2011) indicate that for their study, interviewing teachers in their classroom helped to "create a more authentic interview experience" (p. 90). This was true for my study as well.

Conducting interviews in the participant's classroom also helped to provide context. For example, during one interview, the participant pointed at her word wall in reference to one of her responses. As she drew my attention to the word wall, I noticed that the words were printed on a multitude of colors rather than the typical white ones. When I asked her about this, she was able to explain the reasoning behind this; yellow and green for challenge words, pink were "need to know words" and words written on a pencil shape were content area words. Had I not been in her classroom, I would have been unaware of this innovation. Word walls are common in elementary classrooms. The way this teacher used her word wall was evidence that she differentiated instruction based on needs and ability levels. Challenge words were optional, but everyone did the "need to know" words. This teacher participant also mentioned that an experienced teacher had given her the idea to set up her word wall and had helped her to design her spelling program.

Although these interviews were similar in terms of process, the five that occurred in the actual schools seemed to yield richer data than the one at the coffee shop. As Clandinin and Connelly (2000) explain, “The conditions under which the interview takes place also shape the interview; for example, the place, the time of day, and the degree of formality established.” (p. 110). Two of these conditions were a factor for the coffee shop interview. The location itself, a coffee shop as opposed to a school, was not as conducive to conducting an interview. I was missing some of the context by not seeing this teacher in his school or his classroom. Additionally, the time of day was also a factor as it coincided with one of the busier times at this location resulting in a great deal of both activity and noise. The degree of formality did not appear to be a factor but there was one other factor that most certainly contributed to the interview conditions. The time of the coffee shop interview happened to correlate with a recent tornado warning. Suffice it to say, both the participant and I were slightly preoccupied, looking out the window to check on the foreboding skies. Despite all of these factors, I was still pleased with the end result of this interview. However I am thankful that I have the classroom interviews for comparison purposes. The differences in these interviews was tangible evidence that certain factors are beyond the interviewer’s control. For this reason, my decision to study six cases, as opposed to my original lower limit of three was certainly validated.

Data Analysis

When the interviews were finished, I began the process of transcribing. I used a digital recorder to audio-record each interview and used the Voice Recorder application on my iPad as a backup. I downloaded the audio recordings onto my computer where I opened them with the VLC application. This allowed me to reduce the rate of speech

thereby giving me ample time to keep pace with the recording without having to continually pause or rewind. But the slower rate of speech also resulted in more distortion. After my rough draft of each transcript was complete, I listened to the recording with the normal rate of speech, made corrections and inserted punctuation. Doing my own transcribing and undertaking the two-step transcription process were both purposeful choices because this enabled me to become more familiar with each transcript. This would not have been as easily accomplished had I hired a transcriptionist or transcribed without a second read through. Once each transcript was corrected and formatted properly, I emailed it back to the respective participant, asking him or her to check it over to make sure I had accurately represented our conversation. All six participants returned their transcripts to me and only one made changes to the original document. After I heard back from all my participants, I printed the transcripts and began the process of data analysis.

According to Glesne (2011), “Data analysis involves organizing what you have seen, heard, and read so that you can figure out what you have learned and make sense of what you have experienced” (p. 184). This is precisely what I set out to do and what follows is a description of the process I took in accomplishing this. The challenge in qualitative data analysis lies in completing an analysis of the data in the absence of an agreed upon method of doing so (Glesne, 2011; Miles & Huberman, 1994; Patton, 1990; Yin, 1994). Patton asserts, “In short, there are no absolute rules except to do the very best with your full intellect to fairly represent the data and communicate what the data reveal given the purpose of your study” (p. 372). While there are no steadfast rules in qualitative

data analysis, there are guidelines and I will explain the ones that I followed as I analyzed my data.

Before I could begin the process of analyzing my data, it was necessary to find a way to manage and organize the data itself. Patton (1990) suggests making four copies of the data. Of these copies, one is untouched and is used as a master copy for safekeeping; one copy is to be written on; and two copies can be used for cutting and pasting (Patton). While at first glance, four copies of data may seem excessive, Patton points out, “It is no exaggeration to say that these data are priceless. They are unique . . . the exact words people have spoken in interviews – these can never be recaptured in precisely the same way . . . (p. 380). I followed Patton’s guidelines and while the master copy and marked up copy do not require explanation, I will discuss my procedure for the cut-up copy.

I used my interview protocol and created a master document where I separated each question onto its own page. I then proceeded to cut and paste each participant’s answer under the corresponding question. This provided me with six different responses to any given question and made the process of cross-case analysis much easier.

Glesne (2011) explains that the choice of analysis is strongly linked to other aspects of the research including the research questions and the method of data collection (Glesne, 2011). For my particular study, a thematic analysis was the best fit. Glesne describes this mode of analysis, “In thematic analysis, the researcher focuses analytical techniques on searching through the data for themes and patterns. One of the important aspects of this work is data coding” (p. 187). After I read through each transcript several times, I coded the data into eleven categories: background information, teacher beliefs, experiences as a student, affect, transitions, literacy defined, confidence, feedback,

literacy teaching, support received and support wished for. I also followed the suggestions Merriam (1998) provides:

> In a multiple case study, there are two stages of analysis. For the *within-case analysis*, each case is first treated as a comprehensive case in and of itself. Data are gathered so the researcher can learn as much about the contextual variables as possible that might have a bearing on the case . . . Once the analysis of each case is completed, *cross-case analysis* begins. A qualitative, inductive, multicase study seeks to build abstractions across cases. (p. 195, emphasis in original)

I viewed my coding procedure as my within-case analysis. In terms of the cross-case analysis, I further refined these codes into five broader themes. These are: teacher identity, the subject of language arts, literacy, literacy teacher identity and the surprise in the box. I then compared each case in terms of these aforementioned themes.

Ethical Considerations

"Qualitative researchers are guests in the private spaces of the world. Their manners should be good and their code of ethics strict" (Stake, 1998, p. 103). The above quote is a fitting frame of reference for the ethical considerations of which all researchers must be aware. Issues of anonymity, informed consent, protection from psychological harm, and accurate representation were the most prevalent considerations for my study.

My participants were aware that their anonymity would be guaranteed by me. This was done in several ways. First, I did my own transcribing and as such, their names and any other identifying information were not provided to anyone else. Second, I gave each participant a pseudonym so that if I chose to quote directly from a transcript, the original name would not be included. Third, I gave each participant the option of where to be interviewed. If participants wanted absolute anonymity, they would not have to be interviewed at their school. Each particular school was given a pseudonym as well.

Both in the information letter and the consent form, participants were aware that they were consenting to be interviewed for a research study. I also explained that they could withdraw at any time if they chose to and their information would not be included in the thesis. In my ethics application, I had to indicate the risk level of my study and I also had to explain how I would mitigate any possible risks. Although my study can be classified as low risk, there were still safeguards I used to ensure the comfort of my participants. I provided each participant with a copy of the interview questions well in advance of the actual interview. This allowed them time to prepare and also allowed them time to withdraw if they felt uncomfortable with the subject matter of the questions. I also explained that they were under no obligation to answer every question.

To ensure that each participant felt that his or her views were accurately represented, I emailed a copy of the transcript to them. I gave them the option of making any changes. Each participant returned the transcript to me and only one made changes.

Voices You Will be Hearing

Participants in this study were chosen from two school boards in Alberta. Out of the six participants, two were male and four were female. Two had completed coursework to fulfill the designation of a language and literacy minor. Three of my participants were Division One teachers (K-3), two of my participants were Division Two teachers (4-6) and one participant fit both categories since she was responsible for three different grades in an alternative program.

There are four schools and two school boards represented in this study. A visual representation of the school boards, schools, and teachers is provided in Appendix E. School Board A had one school represented in my study. This school had three teachers

who participated. School Board B had three schools represented in my study. Each school had one teacher who participated. I will introduce each School board, school and the respective teacher(s).

School Board A

Bayside School

Bayside Elementary is an elementary school (kindergarten to Grade 6) with under 300 students. Over 90 percent of the students in this school are of Aboriginal descent including First Nation, Metis and Inuit (FNMI). Three of my participants taught at Bayside. This school had many innovative programs and supports in place for both the students and the teachers. Within the school there was an expanded gymnasium area with additional equipment. The teachers also provided alternative outdoor recess programs such as optional music enrichment and a quiet inside play area. Most classrooms also had a full-time educational assistant. One of these assistants was a retired teacher who missed the school so much that she returned in this capacity.

Interviewing teachers at this school was a unique situation. The administration was very supportive of researchers. The principal arranged for the teachers to be interviewed during class time. One teacher gave up his preparation time and chose to be interviewed while his students were in music. The other two teachers chose to be interviewed while their students were in the classroom and the principal arranged for their classes to be covered to allow them to participate in the interview.

The vice-principal was also very accommodating. He took me on a tour of the school and allowed me to observe in his classroom (he was not a participant in my study). In addition to the three teachers I interviewed, I was also able to meet several other staff

members. As an experienced teacher, I am well aware that each school has its own climate and culture. It was obvious that this school was warm and welcoming and the staff seemed to enjoy their jobs and their students. Adele, Janice and Peter were all from Bayside Elementary School.

Adele

Adele is an eloquent second year teacher who is currently teaching fifteen Grade 4 students at Bayside Elementary. Five of her students are coded. Adele is most confident teaching science and least confident with language arts. Adele is a language and literacy minor, having taken three curriculum language arts courses at the University of Alberta. Adele's interview took place during class time so she chose another vacant area at Bayside Elementary to conduct the interview. After our interview, Adele invited me to step into her classroom. I noticed an inviting atmosphere with an ongoing science experiment in a visible location. The students were sitting in desks arranged in three horizontal rows with the desks pushed together.

Janice

Janice is a dedicated second year teacher who is currently teaching Grade 4. There are twelve students in her classroom three of whom are coded. She spoke of the wide range of reading abilities in her classroom from beginning kindergarten to the end of Grade 4. Janice is most confident with science and least confident with language arts. Although this interview took place in a vacant office, I was able to visit her classroom before the interview took place. Her classroom was neat and organized and her students were sitting in desks in various groups.

Peter

Peter is a warm and friendly Grade 3 teacher. He has a class of fourteen students one of whom is coded as gifted. Like Janice, Peter also expressed concern over the wide range of reading levels in his classroom, the lowest being a kindergarten level. Peter is the most confident with science and the least confident with language arts. I was able to interview him in his classroom at Bayside Elementary. His students were just being dismissed to their next class and I was able to observe the calm and gentle manner with which he interacted with them. Peter had a wide variety of writing posters displayed prominently on his walls. His students were sitting in desks in groups of two.

School Board B

Ridgemont School

Ridgemont is an Elementary/Junior High which includes kindergarten to Grade 9. The school serves over 500 students. There is a wide range of socioeconomic brackets represented ranging from very low to very high. There is significant cultural diversity in this school.

Brad

Brad is a confident first year teacher. He is employed at the same school that he had attended as an elementary student. There are 22 students in Brad’s class none of whom are coded. Like Adele, Brad is a language and literacy minor. He is most confident teaching language arts and least confident teaching social studies. Brad chose to be interviewed at a coffee shop.

Hill Valley School

This school serves approximately 500 students from kindergarten to Grade 9 who come from a primarily middle class background. There is a French program for students in Grades 4-9 and there is very little cultural diversity represented in the school.

Emma

Emma is a cheerful second year teacher who possesses a quiet confidence. She spoke about her students with great admiration and mentioned how she enjoys sharing parts of her own life with her students so they can know her as a person, not just a teacher. Emma teaches Grade 2 in a class of seventeen students and has one coded student. Emma is most confident teaching language arts. She is least confident with social studies. I was able to interview Emma in her classroom. The most prominent features in her classroom were her extensive word wall, her inviting story corner and the wide range of student work prominently displayed in her classroom. The desks in her room were arranged in an L-shape.

Midtown School

Midtown School is an innovative school that offers alternative programming and embraces parental support. There is a wide range of cultural and socio-economic backgrounds. The school includes kindergarten to Grade 12.

Theresa

Theresa is an outgoing and energetic second year teacher in an alternative program at Midtown School. She is the only participant in my study who did not teach full time. She has eighteen students in her classroom and is the most confident with science and the least confident with music. Theresa's enthusiasm was infectious. Speaking with excitement, she related several activities her students were engaged in and

was moved to tears as she recounted one particularly meaningful experience. I was able to interview Theresa in her office at Midtown School. Midtown is a multi program school with under 300 students who are socioeconomically and culturally diverse. The administration at this school was also very welcoming and expressed an interest in my research and gave me tour of the school facility. This interview took place during school hours although Theresa was not teaching at this time. She took great pride in showing me her classroom and the aeroponic garden that her students had planted.

Additional Classroom Contexts

What follows is a brief description of class size, student demographics and coded students. This information is included in order to provide the reader with a more thorough understanding of the classroom contexts that were previously described.

Out of my six participants, one had a class size over twenty while the remaining five had class sizes under twenty. Adele, Janice and Peter each taught several students who presented with special needs and were coded. In addition, all three mentioned the very large academic range represented by their students. For example, Janice taught Grade 4 and had a student who was assessed at a kindergarten reading level.

Theresa taught four different grades and was required to teach a subject that she possessed no prior knowledge of. Conversely, Brad and Emma taught in classrooms where the student make up was quite homogeneous in comparison to the classrooms of the other four participants. Brad had the largest class size with two students who could be classified as special needs but were not coded as such. Emma had one coded student and aptly describes her classroom demographics: “I have a few lower academically and quite

a few high and then my average range, but there is no stand out difficulties in this specific classroom".

According to the Alberta School Act (Alberta, 2014), where possible, school boards must make an education program available to students with exceptional learning needs. As such, teachers must develop and create what is known as an Individualized Program Plan, hereafter referred to as an IPP. This document is significantly more detailed than a report card as it must contain measureable and specific goals. Considering that there are a significant number of goals required for each IPP, this is no small feat. In addition to creating this document, the teacher is required to meet with both the parents and the administrator so that they can read, modify and approve the IPP.

Once the IPP is created for a particular student, the teacher is responsible for providing a specialized program. IPP's can be created for both academic and behavioural needs. Most elementary generalists do not take specific courses in special education. For this reason, some teachers feel ill-prepared to create and implement these documents. Although four of my participants mentioned coded students, we did not discuss their feelings about completing an IPP.

Researcher Reflexivity

Creswell (2012) defines researcher reflexivity as "the researcher being aware of and openly discussing his or her role in the study in a way that honours and respects the site and participants" (p. 474). In the same vein, Rallis and Rossman (2010) posit that reflexive practice is essential to a reliable and ethical study. I was an experienced teacher but an inexperienced researcher. I needed to ensure that I would honour and value the

experiences of beginning teachers. Keeping this in mind, I chose to capitalize on my teaching experience, introducing myself as a teacher first and a researcher second.

In terms of honouring the participants, my goal was to create an open and trusting relationship within the confines of one in-person interview. I was able to exchange several e-mails with each participant before the interviews were conducted. This communication allowed me to answer questions and to clearly state the purpose of my research. At the time of the interview, I read over the consent form with the participant, making sure to inform him or her about rights, specifically the right to withdraw and the right to privacy.

Clandinin and Connelly (2000) state, "The way an interviewer acts, questions, and responds in an interview shapes the relationship and therefore the ways participants respond and give accounts of their experience" (p. 110). During the interviews, I was cognizant of my reactions to any personal information that was shared and at times, where appropriate, I shared my experiences. This seemed to put the participants at ease and allowed the interview to be more of a dialogue and rather conversational in nature.

Continuing the discussion on reflexivity, it is important to explain my position in terms of insider versus outsider status. According to Merton (1972), "Insiders are the members of specified groups and collectives or occupants of specified social statuses; outsiders are the non-members" (p. 21). This distinction is helpful to provide a frame of reference for my position as a researcher. I had insider status that allowed me to capitalize on the identity, experiences and terminology that I shared with my participants. As a teacher, I was able to share similar classroom experiences with my participants. I understand the pressures facing beginning teachers because I was one. I understand the

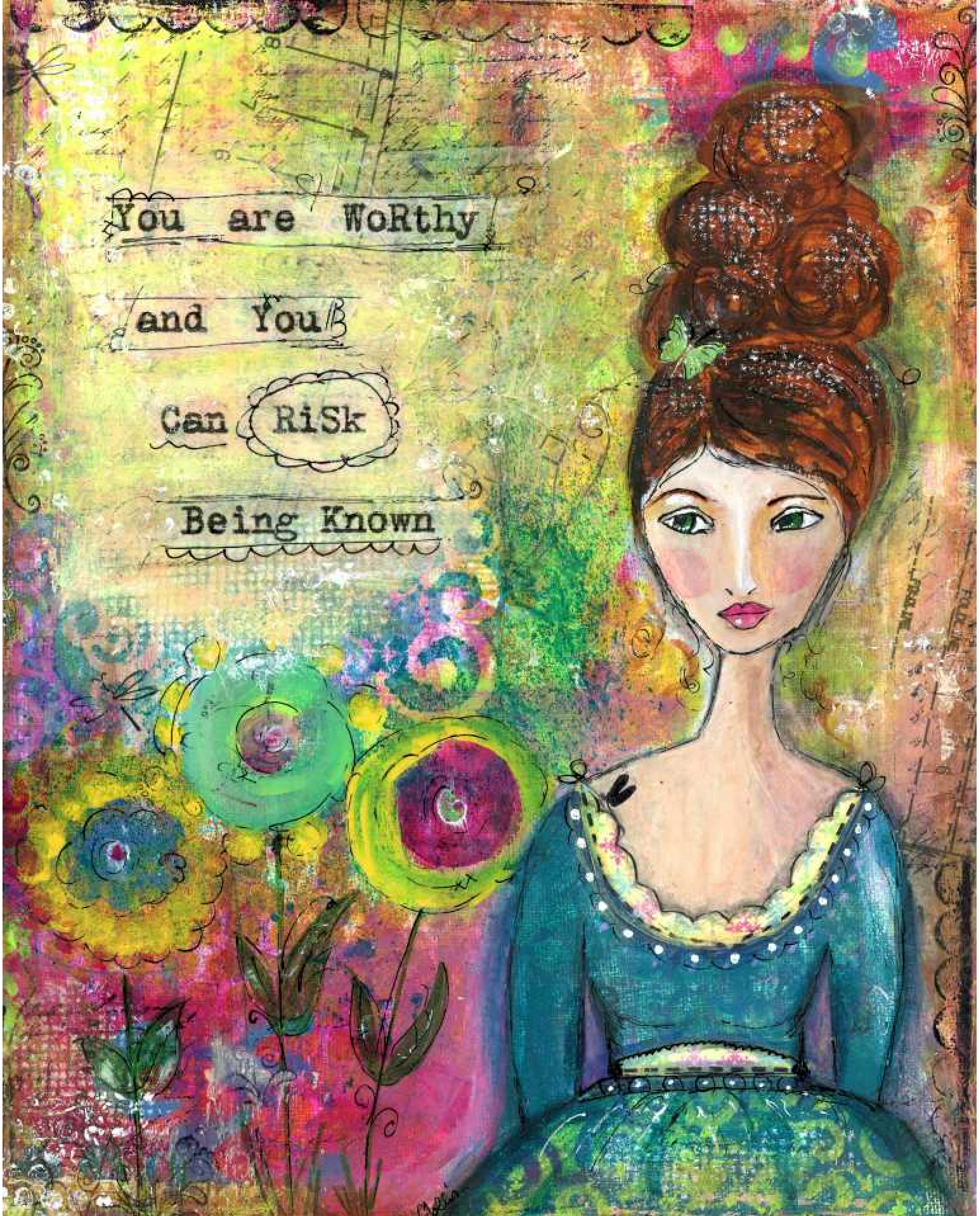
issues of classroom management because I too faced crowded classrooms and students with behaviour issues. I understand the difficulties surrounding pedagogy because I also needed to figure out the best ways to guide my students towards a deeper understanding of each subject. Additionally, as an insider, I was familiar with certain terms that teachers understand but the general public may not. For example, some of my participants used terms like "coded", "IPPs" "professional growth plans" and "Balanced Literacy". Not only did I understand the terms, I understood the work associated with them. An outsider may not understand the additional hours required to write an Individual Progress Plan (IPP) but I most certainly do.

Bridges (2009) writes at length about challenging the dichotomy between insiders and outsiders and does not agree that insider status is necessarily advantageous. For the most part, I disagree because I do believe that being an outsider or an insider does position the researcher differently and this position needs to be made explicit. Dwyer and Buckle (2009) explain, "This insider role status frequently allows researchers more rapid and more complete acceptance by their participants. Therefore, participants are typically more open with researchers so that there may be greater depth to what is gathered" (p. 58). However, insider status also carries some disadvantages including participants not fully explaining their experiences because they assume that the researcher shares those experiences (Dwyer & Buckle, 2009). Insider status may also prevent the researcher from clearly recognizing the participant's experiences as they may be closely linked to those of the researcher (Dwyer & Buckle, 2009).

Bridges (2009) also asserts that by identifying as a researcher, some sense of insider status is lost and on this point, I do agree. My role as a researcher did prevent me

from being a complete insider. However, the insider status afforded to me as fellow teacher did allow me to develop rapport and a level of understanding that would have been more difficult, but not impossible, to achieve had I been an outsider.

This chapter has provided the reader with an understanding of the way my research was conducted. An explanation of the way my participants were recruited and a discussion of the way the data was collected and analyzed have also been provided. A brief description of the participants and their school contexts (where applicable) was included here as well in the hopes that the reader will find this useful as we move into the next chapter. For it is in the chapter on my research findings where the voices of my participants are clearly heard. It is that chapter that we turn to next.



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CHAPTER FOUR - FINDINGS

> Qualitative research is a deeply interpretative endeavour and . . . analytical processes are at work in every step of the crafting of the document . . . Analytical and interpretive processes work in tandem in the construction of meaning . . . interpretation means drawing meanings from the analyzed data and attempting to see these in some larger context. Interpretations arise when patterns, themes, and issues are discerned in the data and when these findings are seen in relation to one another and against larger theoretical perspectives – our own newly emergent views or those to be found in 'the literature' (Ely et al., 1997, p. 160)

In essence, the above quote sums up the purpose of this chapter. My findings are the result of the interpretation and analysis to which Ely et al. (1997) refer. Five broad themes have emerged from this analysis. These are: teacher identity, language arts, literacy, literacy teacher identity and the surprise in the box. I will discuss these themes while keeping my research question in focus, "What does it mean to be a beginning elementary literacy teacher?"

Teacher Identity

The theme of beginning teacher identity was a dominant one in the data. My research question, "What does it mean to be an elementary literacy teacher?" touches upon issues of identity. Varghese, Morgan, Johnston, and Johnson (2005) studied language teacher identity and argued that "in order to understand language teaching and learning we need to understand teachers; and in order to understand teachers, we need to have a clearer sense of who they are" (p. 22). For my study, it is important to first understand the teachers before we can understand their literacy teacher identity. In order to get a clear sense of who my participants are as teachers, the factors that contribute to their teacher identity will be examined. Anspal, Eisenschmidt, and Lofstrom (2012) explain why this is important: "If we assume that identity is a key factor influencing the

teacher's sense of purpose, self-efficacy, motivation, commitment and effectiveness, then it becomes necessary to investigate the positive and negative influences of these factors on identity development" (p. 198). The following sections will explain the factors which seemed to have influenced my participants' teacher identity.

Hebert and Worthy (2001) assert, "The beginning teacher described in the literature is often portrayed as a frustrated, disoriented, and fatigued individual, struggling to make sense of her or his students, work, and life" (p. 902). Such a description is not in keeping with the way my participants presented themselves to me. Their narratives about their teaching were positive, they appeared to be confident teachers, and while they mentioned some challenges, these seemed to be easily mitigated through the help and support of others. I began to wonder what set my participants apart from the beginning teachers often described in the literature as stories of desperation, frustration and failure (Britzman, 2003; Flores & Day, 2006; Ruohotie-Lyhty, 2013; Saka et al., 2013). Initially, I questioned if my six successful cases would have much to offer. However the following insights from Hebert and Worthy dispelled my fears:

> Studying those whose first years are different from the norm, and comparing their experiences and perceptions to those who fail, has the potential to provide valuable information to teacher preparation, and offer an additional perspective for examining factors influencing the beginning teacher. (p. 900)

My participants appear to be different from the norm at least in terms of what is commonly cited in the literature (Alsup, 2006; Britzman, 2003; Flores & Day, 2006). While difficult beginnings for new teachers are common, the findings from my study can contribute to the understanding of successful beginnings. Part of this success may be attributed to teacher identity. My participants spoke about: their beliefs about ideal teachers, their experiences with transitioning into teaching, their experiences with

feedback and their school contexts. These four areas all relate to teacher identity and will be discussed in the following sections.

Ideal Teacher

Teacher beliefs play a role in the development of teacher identity (Anspal et al., 2012; Day et al., 2006; Hong, 2010; Kelchtermans, 1993). De Ruyter and Conroy explain that identity is made up of ideals and "comprises those ideal images to which one aspires" (p. 512). These ideals contribute to an individual's ideal identity and can "tell us something characteristically about the person" (DeRuyter & Conroy, p. 512). My participants were asked to identify and subsequently justify, three characteristics of an ideal teacher. De Ruyter and Conroy posed a similar question to the pre-service teacher participants in their study: "When we asked our Bachelor of Education students to describe the characteristics of their ideal teacher, most of them mentioned character traits like being patient, honest, open and just" (p. 514). My participants provided comparable responses including: enthusiastic, flexible, passionate, caring, creative, patient, understanding, hard-working, prepared, organized, humble, motivated, engaging, having a sense of humour, being a continuous learner, and being easy to relate to.

Kelchtermans (1993) provides two categories in terms of the self-image of teachers; the way they behave professionally and the way they are viewed by others. I too noticed that my participants' responses could be categorized in two ways: student focused characteristics and teacher focused characteristics. Student focused characteristics were evidenced when the teacher would refer to traits that were beneficial to students. This is similar to Kelchtermans' category of the way teachers are viewed by others. Conversely, teacher focused characteristics were those that had a direct benefit to the teacher or those

that could be classified as "part of the job" such as hard-working, prepared, and organized. This category shares points of contact with Kelchtermans' category of professional behaviour.

Adele, Brad, Emma, and Theresa all gave reasons for their choices in terms of the benefit this particular characteristic would provide to students and subsequently, the way they may be viewed by their students:

> I think my top one would be enthusiasm. You need to be enthusiastic about kids and about the subject or whatever you are doing. If you're not, the kids know and you know and it is not good for anybody. (Adele)

> You have to care about your students and everything that is going on there. (Brad)

> You need to understand different learning abilities and working with all types of students and their abilities. (Emma)

> It is important to be engaging and passionate. It is also important to be a learner. I think our biggest role as teachers is to model the things that we most want our students to be. (Theresa)

Janice's explanations included reasons which were helpful for the student:

> If you don't have an understanding of where kids come from, it is hard to help them go forward.

And also for the teacher:

> Hard working because you need to put in the time or there are no rewards. And organized because if you can't manage your time you go crazy.

Peter selected humble, passionate and motivated. His explanation, like Janice's, included both categories:

> Humility, because a lot of the time when you are working with kids you can feel like you are superior to them or that you know more than they do. But I'm always learning with my kids and that is why I think it is important to be humble, you can

> always be learning. And motivated. You always have to stay on top of things. There's so much work to be done and it is an easy trap to fall into by using the same practices over and over and never improving your practice. Motivated teachers are the best because they are always trying new things and looking for new ways to teach (p. 2).

According to De Ruyter and Conroy (2002), "An individual regards the ideals that are part of her ideal identity as highly desirable and consequently aspires to become like these images" (p. 512). However these aspirations can easily be dashed as was evidenced in a study of beginning teachers by Flores and Day (2006):

> The tension between (ideal) beliefs about good teaching and (real) practices [was] well illustrated . . . Some of them reported on the way in which their beliefs and views of teaching and being a teacher were challenged and revisited as a consequence of their making sense of the 'real world' of teaching in different contexts. (p. 228)

Based on my data, there was some evidence of these "ideal" characteristics in the narratives of my participants. Consider these examples. Adele's enthusiasm was evidenced in her excitement about introducing a new picture book to her students: "The most success I've had is when I find a good book that I am excited about". Peter mentioned the importance of being humble and learning from students:

> The other day my kids asked what a lariat was and I had no idea. But every kid in the class knew what it was. It is a rope for a lasso. If anything new comes into my life, I like to take that as a learning opportunity.

Theresa described the way she learned about a new gardening system along with her students: "I asked, how does this work? You guys tell me. I'm learning this with you". Being easy to relate to was important to Emma and she spoke directly about this in relation to her writing lesson:

> The one thing that made me feel like a teacher? I think it goes back to one of my three qualities. Being relatable. They could relate to me. I think a lot of kids forget

> that we are just human beings. The one thing I try to do as a teacher is let them into my personal life to an extent.

De Ruyter and Conroy (2002) speak about the loss of self-esteem and self-respect that can happen when one cannot achieve his or her ideals. In a similar vein, Flores and Day (2006) speak about their participants' views of teaching as a "contradiction between *what it is* and *what it should be*" (emphasis in original, p. 228). Based on my data, such a contradiction did not appear to be a factor for my participants. Nor did they speak of the impossibility of actualizing their ideal characteristics. Taken together, these factors could have contributed to my participants' teacher identity.

Transition Tension

> It should not come as a surprise that I would remember my first day of teaching as clearly as I would have remembered sailing on the *Titanic*. Learning the 'correct answers' not only had *not* equipped me for the complex and confusing world of the classroom but, even worse, had led me down the garden path. Implicit in what I had learned was that teaching was merely a matter of stockpiling certain pieces of information about teaching . . . My training in learning the answers was as useless as yesterday's pizza. I was entering a profession in which there are few, if any, clear-cut answers, a profession riddled with ambiguity and moral dilemmas that would make Solomon weep. (Wassermann, 1999, p. 466, emphasis in original)

Wassermann addresses the difficulties and tension associated with transitioning from pre-service to in-service teaching that is well documented in the literature (Alsup, 2006; Britzman, 2003; Hebert & Worthy, 2001; Ruohotie-Lyhty, 2013; Saka et al., 2013). According to Hebert and Worthy, "Many begin this transition filled with uncertainty, find their jobs more challenging than anticipated, and rethink career choice" (p. 898). My participants did not mention rethinking their career choice, but some did echo what is indicated in the literature in that the transition was more difficult than they expected or was different than what they expected:

> I student taught in Grade 1 only, so both my practicums were in Grade 1 and then my first job was in junior high and it was fun but it was definitely a very, very steep learning curve. I felt I wasn't exposed to the actual amount of work a full time teacher has to do and how to cope with that amount of work and making sure that your students are learning. (Peter)

> So probably the first three months were a challenge to say the least, but now it has all smoothed out and I feel like I've got a hold on everything. But it is just more overwhelming than I thought it would be. (Brad)

However, these teachers also listed positive factors associated with being an in-service teacher. Some noted the benefit of having more time to try out new strategies. Others spoke of the freedom that came as a result of not being constantly watched or told what to do. This newfound autonomy also enabled them to try out new ideas without waiting for the approval of others. Janice explains:

> For me it was a good transition. It was nice to take everything that you learn and to actually be able to try it. It is so much different in your own classroom because you are not doing what someone else wants you to do. You are not always being told, 'do this, do this, do this'.

Several also spoke of the opportunities for reflection afforded to them by having their own classrooms and teaching for a longer period of time than they did in their student teaching experiences.

According to Alsup (2006), there is a correlation between tension and teacher identity:

> I found that the number of narratives of tension told by the pre-service teachers was associated with the level of difficulty they had developing a teacher identity, whether these narratives were describing tensions between student and teacher subjectivities, personal and professional ideologies or university and practical orientations. (p. 183)

Janice alluded to some tension between personal and professional ideologies as she spoke about being told what to do in student teaching, not allowing the feedback of others to

affect her too much and not being able to incorporate the suggestions offered to her by the administration. As was previously mentioned, some of my participants spoke about the tension associated with transitioning into the profession but they also indicated how this tension was remedied over time and by the support of others.

Five participants mentioned the theme of tension between university and practical orientations and this will be thoroughly discussed in a later section. It is important to note briefly here that this tension was lessened through the support of colleagues. As a whole, my participants did not experience much tension and this might have contributed to their sense of teacher identity and their success in terms of transitioning into teaching.

Feedback and Success Stories

Alsup (2006) studied six pre-service teachers and their teacher identity development. The following finding from Alsup's study is likely the one that most strongly parallels mine. "Perhaps not surprisingly, the students in this study who told positive stories seemed to live them . . . much narrative theory says that stories are our identity, so it follows that if a pre-service teacher tells positive stories about educational experiences, then she or he might actually experience a positive teaching life" (Alsup, 2006, pp. 184-185). In terms of success stories for my teacher participants, my interview data revealed at least two sources. These are feedback and narratives about successful or memorable lessons. This section will focus on feedback and narratives about lessons will be discussed in a subsequent section.

All six of my participants mentioned the positive feedback they had received from various sources including parents, students, family of origin and administration. Additionally, this group was unique in that they *all* had jobs at their same schools for the

upcoming year. Before Brad completed his first year of teaching he was offered a continuing contract for the next school year. Being hired for the upcoming year is a very positive form of feedback yet is relatively uncommon for beginning teachers. For example, the participants in a study by McClay (1998) faced uncertain job prospects in addition to negotiating the realities of being a beginning teacher.

Positive feedback could contribute to a teacher's sense of self-efficacy as explained by Bandura (1997):

> Social persuasion serves as a further means of strengthening people's beliefs that they possess the capabilities to achieve what they seek. It is easier to sustain a sense of efficacy, especially when struggling with difficulties, if significant others express faith in one's capabilities than if they convey doubts . . . Evaluative feedback highlighting personal capabilities raises efficacy beliefs. (pp. 101-102)

However, negative feedback can have a detrimental effect on the teacher. Alsup (2006) recounts one of her experiences as a beginning teacher:

> To make matters worse, the principal didn't really support me – on the contrary, I 'got in trouble' as much as the students did, it seemed to me, whenever I sent one of them to the office for chastisement. In those situations I would have to defend my reasons for referring the student to the office, as if I was to blame for the situation (p. 3)

Unfortunately, for some teachers, negative feedback is a reality. This kind of feedback was notably absent in the narratives that my participants chose to share with me.

My participants differed in terms of their most trusted sources of feedback. Adele mentioned role models, mentors, teacher assistants, and the constant feedback from students. Brad's mother was a teacher and he cited familial feedback as very important to him. Peter and Janice both mentioned feedback from the administration and Emma mentioned the administration and the students. Theresa responded that the parents of her students were her biggest source of feedback.

There was a range in terms of the impact feedback had on my participants, both in the ways they viewed themselves as a result of feedback and in the ways they changed their teaching practice as a result of feedback. Adele mentioned that the kind of week she was having and even her emotional frame could influence the way she would receive feedback:

> Sometimes we all have hard days or hard weeks. Sometimes I really see myself as a poor teacher during those days and also the opposite. When you have a few good days where the kids are engaged and are able to focus, then you start to feel good about yourself. So it is kind of a roller coaster in terms of your own self-impression.

Brad explains the feedback he receives from his students:

> Kids are so loving, if you ever need encouragement in your day they will give it to you.

Theresa also points to the encouraging nature of the feedback she receives from the parents she works with. Emma views feedback as essential to her practice as can be seen in the following statement:

> I really look for feedback in everything and appreciate it. I will hopefully always be like that because you have to be reflective through the years.

Adele, Emma and Peter all mentioned the impact that student feedback can have on changing their teaching practices. When I asked her if student responses ever resulted in her changing her practice, Adele emphatically responded: “Everyday! Yes, for sure! Constantly”. While Janice also agreed with the importance of feedback, the potential impact was tempered:

> Well you definitely take what they say. What does this say about who I am as a teacher? You try to not let it change too much of what you think, right?

All six of my participants mentioned receiving *only* positive feedback. A caveat must be made before I discuss this finding in detail. I find it interesting that there was no mention of negative feedback and I have four possible reasons for this. First, the positive feedback that was mentioned was context specific. It is possible that some of these teachers might have experienced negative feedback in other teaching contexts such as pre-service teaching. Because I focused on only one teaching context, it makes sense that only the feedback given there would be discussed. Secondly, my participants could have chosen not to share any negative feedback with me. Although I did try to establish a relationship of trust and rapport, this cannot be fully accomplished in the course of one interview. Thirdly, "positive feedback" is a term that is open to interpretation. What was deemed positive feedback by my participants could possibly be categorized as negative by others, especially if the feedback was constructive in nature. Finally, my sample size of six is relatively small and therefore it is not wise to make broad generalizations based on the nature of the feedback this group received. The main finding here is that none of my participants mentioned any type of feedback that had the potential to discourage them, alter their sense of teacher identity or shake their feelings of self-efficacy.

Even though my participants all spoke of positive feedback, they viewed the feedback in different ways. Emma explains how feedback is a learning tool and can help to change her practice:

> The feedback I've had has all been positive, never negative. I take it as someone trying to help me improve my teaching. I ask for feedback. When you're teaching, you don't always recognize what is working and what is not working. I am a new teacher and this is the first time I've taught this grade. If someone gives me feedback, I would change the lesson the next time.

Janice explains the confusion that can result from feedback:

> I find that in our school there is a lot of involvement with special education, the administration and the kids. And sometimes one person says, 'Well this might be a good way' and one person says, 'Well this might be a good way' and you feel, how can I meet both? I can't do it all. I can't physically do what everyone wants.

Peter views feedback in terms of helpful suggestions:

> The administration is just really a positive group of people. I've never been reprimanded for doing anything. It is more like, 'Try this and try that. I think that would resolve the problem'. It is an open line of communication but the dialogue is about learning and improving instead of you did something wrong type of thing. I don't feel any stress from the administration as far as what I am doing in the classroom. I mean stress comes from a bad practice that I need to change or maybe just the kids.

The views of Janice and Peter are interesting as they teach in the same school yet view feedback quite differently. Based on my participants' views, feedback can be seen as: a way to spark a change in practice, both confusing and helpful, and a tool for learning. Consider Adele's words:

> Your colleagues don't always give you the most honest and open feedback. The students will be very, very, very honest.

Adele highlights the importance of seeking out honest feedback. This finding is significant as she points to the *students* as the most honest source.

School Context

Context plays a vital role in terms of the freedom or restriction that teachers face. Often times, beginning teachers find it difficult to transition into teaching because of the particular school context and culture (Alsup, 2006; Britzman, 2003; Hebert& Worthy, 2001; Flores & Day, 2006; Saka et al., 2013). According to Smagorinsky, Cook, Moore, Jackson, and Fry (2004), "Contexts provide tools, constraints, and practices that channel people towards certain ends" (p. 9). It could be that the acquisition of a secondary

Discourse (Gee, 1989) may be dependent on the particular school context. Some contexts are easier for beginning teachers to transition into than others, thereby making it either easy or difficult for beginning teachers to acquire the Discourse of a teacher. Flores and Day (2006) explain the difficulty some of their participants faced as they attempted to negotiate the school context:

> Perceptions of school culture and leadership impacted upon the ways in which new teachers learned and developed over time. By and large, balkanization and competition amongst teachers, the 'normative' and bureaucratic side of teaching, the existence of 'vested interests' and unwritten and implicit rules at school affected negatively new teachers' attitudes and practices . . . As a result, learning became more and more a lonely process as identity became both bounded (by the culture) and boundaried. (p. 229)

Flores and Day (2006) indicate that while the majority of their participants viewed their teaching contexts as a negative influence, some of their participants did not. However, *all* of my participants viewed their teaching contexts, specifically their collegial support in a positive way. Instead of competition, there was collaboration:

> If honestly, I was in a school where you didn't have a good collaborative work environment, I have no idea how I would have come in and taught language arts. Like at all. I'm so fortunate to have people so willing to share what they do and let you watch. Definitely lots and lots of support from colleagues. (Janice)

Instead of unwritten and implicit rules, there was freedom:

> The climate of the staff is just really nice, compared to another school I was at. It was still a good school but not anywhere near the open door that there is here. I feel like I've done most of my growth at Bayside. This school just really fits. I feel like I have a place here because of the way the staff is. They are very collaborative and open to try new things. Really anything you want to try, they 100 percent say 'Go for it'. They'll provide you with resources and anybody will go above and beyond to get you what you need. (Peter).

Contrast Peter's statement with the following finding from the study by Flores and Day (2006): "Most of the teachers reported on the ways in which they became socialized into the school culture by adopting its norms and values" (p. 229).

This pressure to conform is noticeably absent for Adele:

> I have met with teachers in other grades to look at their language arts programs. You find out what works for you and it is totally different than what works for somebody else. So I think the biggest help was that I had somebody sit with me and say, 'This is what I use. This is what I don't use. Take a look and just pick what works for you'.

While Flores and Day (2006) found that "little importance was attached to colleagues as influencing elements in learning at work" (p. 229) my participants felt the opposite. Their colleagues were very influential:

> They are free to give you whatever you need, but they also have an open door. You can come and ask questions, you can talk about what you do, just very open and welcoming. (Brad)

> The willingness my colleagues show to work with me. They answer any questions I've had. Anything they can do to help me. (Emma)

> It is a really awesome school here. I can go to anybody and say, 'Look, I'm really stuck'. (Peter)

> My teaching partner has been teaching some thirty years and is a fantastic mentor to me. She claims that I mentor her in ways as well. (Theresa).

The school contexts that my participants were a part of appeared to be places where these beginning teachers found support and freedom.

Teacher Talk

Alsup (2006) speaks about the importance for new teachers to have a means to speak about their experiences:

> New teachers [need] to talk to other new teachers and/or knowledgeable others about their teaching lives . . . when new teachers engage in discourse to describe an experience, feeling or idea, the language simultaneously influences their understanding of this experience, feeling, or idea. Therefore, talking through beliefs, philosophies or ideologies with others can be commensurate with increased self-understanding" (p. 187).

Alsup explains that during such talk, if beginning teachers have an empathetic listener, not only can this lead to better understanding of teaching experiences but it can also positively affect their teacher identity. As was mentioned earlier, all six of my participants seemed to have the opportunities for such "teacher talk" with their colleagues. Not only were their colleagues there to help with resources, they were also there to listen and to share their experiences with these beginning teachers.

I hoped that the actual interview could serve to fulfill the role of "teacher talk" and I believe it did. When appropriate, I would share some of my experiences with my participants and that served as a dialogue between us, as opposed to a question and answer type of interview. Emma remarked, "This has been a really good reflective experience". And in a follow up email, Peter wrote: "If there's anything else I can do for you, let me know. I had a good time doing the interview".

As I mentioned earlier, it is important to understand who these six individuals are as teachers. This provides context and gives the reader a more complete picture of my participants. Based on the findings from this previous section, we know more about the beliefs these teachers hold and therefore can understand, even on the surface level, some of what is important to them. Their transition from in-service to pre-service teaching has been outlined as well as the positive and negative factors associated with this experience. The sources, impact and nature of feedback have been explained. Finally, their school

contexts have been established as ones of support and freedom thereby positively affecting their teacher identity.

The Subject of Language Arts

> What do teachers need to know about the subjects they teach? Various versions of this question have long interested practitioners, policymakers, and researchers alike . . . we begin with the assumption, grounded in research, that teachers should possess deep knowledge of the subjects they teach. (Grossman et al., 2005, p. 201)

Not only should teachers possess content knowledge, but they should also possess pedagogical content knowledge defined by Grossman et al. (2005) as "what it means to understand one's subject matter for the purpose of teaching it to others" (p. 207). Therefore literacy teachers must understand the subject of language arts and how to teach it effectively. Grossman et al. further stated that this pedagogical content knowledge is best learned in teacher education; however, whether this knowledge actually *is* learned in teacher education is a completely different matter. To this end, it is important to examine the pre-service teacher preparation of my participants to ascertain what they learned about language arts in their post-secondary education and how prepared they were to teach this subject.

Pre-Service Teacher Education

> Pre-service teacher education seemed to have had a relatively weak impact upon the way in which new teachers approached teaching and viewed themselves as teachers. The classic and widely cited gap between theory and practice was a recurring theme . . . Reflecting upon their experiences as student teachers at university, the majority of the teachers spoke of the inadequate preparation provided to them. (Flores & Day, 2006, p. 224).

The above finding reflects the way my participants felt about their pre-service teacher education. Brad was the only one of my six participants who felt adequately prepared to

teach language arts. Janice and Theresa expressed strong reactions when asked if they were confident to teach language arts based on their pre-service teacher education.

> Not confident at all, not even. Not based on what I learned in post-secondary. (Janice)
> No, no! Are you kidding? No. (Theresa)

Four of my participants took one pre-service course in language arts. Conversely, Brad and Adele each took more than one course. Brad expressed confidence in his language arts pre-service preparation. However, Adele did not:

> I didn't feel confident at all when I started to teach. When I first came out of university and I had to teach language arts, I had no idea where to start.

While it has been established that the majority of my participants did not feel confident with their teacher preparation in language arts, it is not sufficient to end the discussion here. It is important to examine what these teachers would have liked included and/or what they felt was missing from their teacher education curriculum course in language arts.

Ideal Pre-service

Two of my participants wished they had taken more than one language arts curriculum class. The cliché, "if I knew then, what I know now", is actually quite fitting here.

> Had I known what I know now, I would have tried to take some of the other language arts classes that were offered. (Emma)

Emma further explained that she was not aware of the vastness of language arts until she began to teach. Peter also expressed the need for more language arts curriculum classes: "I felt like I could probably do away with a few courses and have more language arts".

The statements from these participants are encouraging as they prove that these two teachers, at least, can see the merit of curriculum classes in terms of helping to prepare pre-service teachers.

Adele, Janice and Peter all mentioned the need for a more practical focus in the language arts curriculum classes.

> We were given the opportunity to teach a small group of students a language activity which was helpful. But I didn't really know how that one activity connected into a continuum of learning. It didn't really fit into the broader context. The biggest thing would be more practical experiences whether it is observing or teaching or both. (Adele)

> I just don't feel like it gave me any skills to help kids. Yes, we looked at books and looked at making lessons for that. But how does that tie into the bigger picture of what you are doing all year in your language arts classroom? It felt so separated out. (Janice)

> Maybe there could be a theory course and then a completely practical course. (Peter)

Taken as a whole, it seemed that the teachers in my study felt they were missing some of the context in terms of what language arts teaching would look like in a classroom. They had part of the requisite knowledge but they had trouble making connections or seeing the "big picture". And it was practical learning that they felt was missing in their pre-service teacher education.

Does Pre-Service Education Make a Difference?

It is important to note that these participants did not place the blame for their struggles in language arts squarely on their pre-service education. Most realized that the university could not completely prepare students for the world of teaching. However, the following anecdote is a very encouraging remark on the power of pre-service curriculum

courses in shaping beginning teachers' pedagogical content knowledge. Here Adele speaks to the reason she is the *most* confident teaching science:

> One of the biggest reasons was because of my teacher training at the University in my science curriculum class. I had a really good professor and of all my curriculum and instruction courses, the science was the one I enjoyed the most. There was a textbook for the courses and other sections were required to buy it and we were advised that if we wanted to we could but we would never use it. We didn't need it because we did so many scientific explorations and we did science in there and we really talked about how teaching science should be structured. It is the hands on learning and asking questions and finding out the answers and having the skills to figure out how to get that information. That I think was the first thing that changed my mind about science and how to teach it.

Adele explains the way science had been taught when she was a secondary student:

> In junior high and high school biology and chemistry we learned from the textbook. It was all about the textbook but that is not what science is.

Adele's experiences speak strongly to the power of pre-service teacher education to affect change.

Adele recounted positive experiences with language arts as a student and she had a minor in language and literacy as a pre-service teacher, yet she was the *least* confident teaching it. For Adele, one pre-service curriculum course in science had the power to boost her confidence with this subject area *and* to change the way she previously viewed this subject based on her formal education experiences. This is a hopeful commentary as to the potential for the language arts curriculum courses to effect change in terms of the way pre-service teachers view the subject matter of language arts. If Adele's views about science could be countered based on one pre-service course, could the same be true for students in a language arts curriculum class?

Views about Language Arts

It is quite fitting that my participants' views about language arts mirrored the limitlessness of the subject itself. Each teacher shared unique views and this resulted in a comprehensive perspective on the differences with which individuals can view language arts. There were four themes that emerged in relation to the subject of language arts: vastness, importance, confidence and support. Of these, the only one where there was consensus among the participants was the theme of importance.

In the introduction, I spoke about the discrepancy between the way I viewed language arts and the way my pre-service teachers viewed it. I loved the limitlessness of this subject. They did not. Here too, some of my teacher participants found the vastness appealing while others did not. I used McClay's (1998) explanation of the vastness of language arts in the introduction of this thesis but it is equally fitting here:

> English language arts as a school subject has been both applauded and condemned as a 'contentless' subject, sometimes by the same people in different moods. Enthusiasts relish the developmental nature of the subject, noting its limitless expanse and possibilities . . . To others it seems a vague, amorphous discipline, lacking in objectivity and not encompassing a body of knowledge to be mastered. Indeed, the duality of these perceptions of English language arts is both virtue and vice. (p. 177)

Brad speaks of the "virtue and vice" referenced by McClay:

> With language arts, my most confident part is being creative. I like to be very creative in my lessons. It is very open in terms of how you want to deliver it. The weakest part is being unsure if you are actually hitting all those outcomes because there is so much to language arts you are always wondering, did I hit each part?

Brad's statement is particularly interesting in that the vastness of language arts boosts his confidence while simultaneously causing him to question his effectiveness in targeting the outcomes. Emma speaks favourably about the vastness and freedom:

> Because language arts is such a huge subject there's so many ways to reach the kids. I feel there is so much out there you are not scrambling to try to pull something together. Language arts is so broad you can kind of put your own spin on things while still reaching the outcomes.

Peter's views are quite different:

> I feel like I really have a hard time challenging my kids to really push themselves in language arts. I feel like the goals are kind of unclear. The curriculum itself is unclear. In math, it is really specific and in science, you can get them to ask all those good questions. But in language arts I don't know what to do really. I see why all the stuff is in there but then on the other side, I think why is it in there? I guess with my teaching experience now, or what I know now, there is no way I could cover it all.

Theresa recognizes the need for continued learning in language arts:

> Do I feel at all superior in my language arts teaching? No. I'm constantly reading and learning about language arts because to me, it's just that huge.

McClay explains, "English language arts teachers face the exhilaration or bewilderment, depending on one's perspective, of freedom in relation to the provincial program of studies" (p. 178). Based on my findings, in the area of language arts, my participants appeared to feel either exhilarated or bewildered. Brad appeared to feel both simultaneously.

My participants were unanimous in their feelings about the importance of language arts. They did however give different reasons for their opinions.

> It is extremely important, whether we are in school or not. So it's very broad and it's very important. (Adele)

> If you can't read or write, you are getting yourself into trouble. So I think it's the most important subject. (Brad)

> I think language arts is monumentally important because it is the basis of all the other subjects. If you're not able to read and write then math, science and social all become more difficult. (Emma)

> It is so important because if you can't read and you can't write, how are you going to be successful? I look at my kid that reads at a low level. How is he going to get groceries? In social, it is not going to affect the rest of your life if you don't know the regions of Alberta. But if you can't read and you can't write, that is forever . . . It is so important. We spend three periods a day on it. (Janice)

My participants understood that language arts is important. The reasons for this can be summarized: the use of language arts both in and out of school, affordances of language arts, foundational learning gained in language arts and the instructional time spent on language arts.

Responses to the question "What subject are you the most/least confident teaching?" yielded significant findings. For a complete breakdown of these responses, the reader is invited to consult Appendix F. Two teachers were most confident teaching language arts and three teachers responded that language arts was the subject they were the least confident in teaching. Of the three who were the least confident teaching language arts, the vastness and open-ended nature of this discipline was the main reason as Janice aptly explains:

> I think it is mostly that everyone does it so differently. You don't go through school being told, 'this is how you should teach language arts'. One person does this and one person does that. There are a million and one ways of doing it and there is no one right answer.

Even the teachers who were not confident teaching language arts could easily respond to the following question, "What are you the most confident with regarding your ability to teach language arts?" This was an important finding. McClay (1998) describes why *confidence* matters within the broad area of language arts:

> Given such freedom and such responsibility, confidence matters. Although new teachers typically develop confidence with teaching experience, the development of such confidence is especially complex for teachers of English language arts.

> Their developing confidence in their teaching practices may be affected by their sense of proportion and propriety in language arts learning. (p. 178)

Continuing to speak about beginning teachers, McClay elaborates: “The areas of language arts that they focus on vary according to their sensibilities and strengths (p. 178). For my teacher participants, there was definitely a link between their strengths and the area of language arts on which they focused. For Adele, Brad, and Peter their confidence was linked to their strengths as language arts students. Adele felt the most confident with using literature and developing writing lessons with it. As a high school student, Adele had the unique privilege of being a part of a “book club” that met on Saturdays and read literature from many genres. This sparked a love of literature in Adele and she continued to use this in her classroom. Brad felt confident in terms of the potential for creativity that the vastness of language arts allowed. He enjoyed developing his own lessons and not being constrained by an overly narrow curriculum. When he was a junior high student he had enjoyed the same freedom there:

> I liked being able to relate it to what I was passionate about, having that flexibility to kind of take your criteria for what you need to accomplish but put it towards what is important to you.

Peter enjoyed writing as a student and that is the area where he is most confident as a teacher as well. Story writing is a school wide focus at Peter’s school and his students write every day. Peter explains:

> The story writing is what I’m the most confident with. We write everyday first thing in the morning. We go through the writing process. I’d say that’s what I’m most confident with because we do so much of it and over the summer I was able to reflect on what I did and really improve that aspect of it.

Peter continued by saying how much he enjoyed creative writing as a student and began to miss it as he progressed through his formal schooling:

> When I taught Grade 3 and we wrote stories, I was excited because I even felt like I was learning how to write a story again. I started writing along with the kids. That was pretty cool for me.

Emma, Janice and Theresa gained confidence from their actual teaching experiences. This finding underscored the importance of successful teaching experiences and positive feedback from others as ways to increase self-efficacy (Bandura, 1997). Emma felt confident with helping children read. She believed this strength had developed through her professional development in Balanced Literacy and through the support of a more experienced colleague. Emma explains:

> I feel like I've grown a lot in my ability to read with my kids and provide strategies for them. When I was doing that at the beginning of the year, I felt as though I didn't always know how to help them when they were stuck on a word. I've really improved in that ability and am able to walk them through using strategies.

In the previous school year, a colleague had helped Janice with the mechanical aspects of writing and she felt she had a lot of experience in this area. When asked about her areas of confidence with language arts, Janice responded, "the grammar aspect of writing". Theresa's teaching assignment includes a high degree of parental involvement. Many times, she is called on to present workshops to help parents guide their children in the area of language arts. She is confident in her ability to help the parent and the child grow together in their language arts learning.

All of my participants expressed feelings of uncertainty as related to their ability to teach language arts with some feeling more overwhelmed than others. This is not an uncommon feeling for beginning teachers (Bainbridge et al., 2009; Helsing, 2007).

However, it is important to note that none of my participants remained in this tentative state. They used whatever means necessary to mitigate their feelings of uncertainty. This speaks volumes as to the insight and resiliency shown by these teachers.

While most of my participants did not feel adequately prepared to teach language arts, many referred to the ways in which their colleagues were able to provide support and mentorship.

> I've learned so much more through discussion with colleagues and professional development than I did in university. (Emma)

> I feel really fortunate. One of our Grade 4 teachers has been teaching forever. She has so many resources. So you learn from the people around you, not from university. (Janice)

Resources and professional development were also mentioned as ways to boost confidence and competence in teaching language arts. Balanced Literacy[6] and the Daily Five[7] were the most commonly cited professional development and resources.

In addition to knowing where and how to get the support they needed, my participants did not express any indication that they were pressured to adopt certain practices or reject others. Such an expectation for conformity is present in certain contexts:

> Applied to new teachers, one can imagine that they might experience feelings of incompetence, whether grounded or not, that often leave them hovering around the margins of the community of teachers in which they practice. A strong desire to be accepted into the community could, in fact, propel novice teachers to improvise practice and, at times, abandon their own belief in themselves or their practice to adopt the authoritative discourses in place. (Philpott & Dagenais, 2011, p. 86)

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[6] There are several components to Balanced Literacy including guided reading, making words and shared reading and writing. A major tenet of this program is moving students from support to independence (Brailsford, 2002).

[7] The Daily Five (Daily Cafe, 2014) is a framework to help students establish the habits of reading, writing and working independently. There are five literacy activities that occur in the Daily Five; reading to self, working on writing, listening to reading, reading with someone and word work.

While some of my participants did experience feelings of incompetence and uncertainty regarding their ability to teach language arts, such feelings were not perpetuated by their colleagues. Instead, their colleagues provided support in terms of providing an arena to talk about these feelings, providing options in terms of resources and providing advice where needed. Although all my participants expressed gratitude for the support they received, none of them indicated any pressure to abandon their own beliefs or practices.

Literacy

> The primary teacher has long been considered a custodian of literacy. 'Literacy' is, in itself, a concept that defies easy definition . . .The teaching of literacy – and the various aspects of it – has always been a demanding task because of its complexity and also because of its undeniable status. (McDougall, 2010, pp. 679-680)

I asked my participants to define literacy because in essence, this definition helps to describe what they do as literacy teachers. In many ways, this section parallels the first section of this chapter in terms of teacher beliefs. Just as it was important to understand my participants' beliefs in order to understand who they are as teachers, so too is it important to understand their definitions of literacy in order to understand their positioning as literacy teachers. In addition, teachers' views about literacy have the potential to orient them towards certain pedagogical practices and perhaps away from others. As Moje (2000) explains, "Teachers' . . . beliefs about and practices of literacy shape their interpretations and enactments of various literacy pedagogies" (p. 13). Brad, Emma and Janice had similar definitions of literacy:

> Being able to read and write, being fluent in reading and writing. (Brad)
>
> I think of somebody's ability to read and write. (Emma)
>
> The ability to read and write. (Janice)

Adele, Peter and Theresa responded differently:

> I see literacy as an ability to use language fluidly without a lot of effort and without consciously thinking about it or thinking about the strategies to use when you want to be involved or engaged with some kind of text or some kind of a language activity. You are able to do that and nothing is hindering you from doing that. (Adele)

Peter referred to the power of books and reading as helping people to "think in a different way", perhaps touching on critical literacy:

> Being able to read what you want to read or to get the information you need. Or reading books for entertainment or reading books that make you think in a different way. And also being able to write, to communicate to whoever you'd like to. You shouldn't feel like you couldn't write an email to somebody for example. That type of thing. Having no closed doors. (Peter)

Both Adele and Peter speak to their views about the power of literacy when they state, "nothing is hindering you" and "having no closed doors" respectively. Theresa appears to allude to the multimodal nature of literacy: "Communicating your thoughts, ideas, passions, values, in a variety of different ways". Although there was some differentiation in these definitions, most appeared to focus on literacy within the individual. According to Gee (2008), "Literacy as 'the ability to write and read' situates literacy in the individual person, rather than in society" (p. 31). It is interesting to note that for three of my participants, literacy was different in theory than it appeared to be in their narratives of practice. This will be explained in a later section.

Literacy Teacher Identity

To Be or Not To Be

One of my most significant findings was that my participants did not explicitly identify themselves as literacy teachers. This was one of many "surprises" and a

seemingly unwelcome one, at least initially. Consider my research question: "What does it mean to be a beginning elementary literacy teacher?" How could this question be answered if my participants did not view themselves as literacy teachers? Granted, as a novice researcher, I have more to learn in terms of more precise wording of interview questions. Perhaps I could have explicitly asked a question that would have provided me with a more direct response. However, after analyzing my data, I knew that my participants had provided me with significant findings. While explicit answers may have been easier, my job as a researcher was to work with what I had been given and indeed to search for hidden surprises which is exactly what I did.

Actions Speak Louder Than Words

Based on the data, my first impression was that my participants did not see themselves as literacy teachers as no one mentioned such an identity outright. However, their narratives of teaching practice tell a different story. As I listened to these narratives, I could begin to understand what it might mean to be a beginning elementary literacy teacher. Although I did not have the opportunity to observe my participants while they were teaching, several of my research questions targeted their teaching practices by asking about memorable or successful lessons. It is in the description of these lessons that the actions of these teachers begin to speak.

Literacy Experts

As I looked over these lessons, I felt that there was something about them that necessitated their inclusion. The lessons were interesting, creative, and most importantly targeted many areas of literacy teaching. The teachers were animated and excited as they spoke about them. Their descriptions of the relative "success" of the lessons had nothing

to do with any type of performance-based criterion. But that still wasn't it. After several readings, it hit me. Both teachers mentioned student engagement several times. And there is only one person whom I think of when I hear student engagement: Brian Cambourne (1995), a literacy researcher who is well known for his work on the conditions of literacy learning *and* student engagement. After I read through the lessons again, I noticed how authentic and meaningful the literacy lessons were. I also noticed how much collaboration was involved. Then I began to wonder about what Frank Smith, a well-known literacy researcher, would say about these lessons. My participants provided me with what I thought were exemplary literacy lessons. Now it was time to rally the experts to see what insights they could provide.

The literacy club. "How do children learn all this . . . usually without anyone being aware that they are learning – by participating in literate activities with people who know how and why to do these things. They join the literacy club" (Smith, 1984, p. 7). Just as parents readily initiate their children into the literacy club at home, so too should teachers initiate such membership at school.

> The role of teachers in all of this is very clear. Teachers should facilitate and promote the admission of children into the literacy club . . . This means that every reading and writing teacher should be a member of the club, of course. (Smith, 1984, p. 9)

Smith does not speak directly about literacy teacher identity, but he does allude to the role of a literacy teacher. He posits, "The prime responsibility for any teacher concerned with literacy must be to ensure that clubs exist and that no child is excluded from them. In simple terms, this means lots of collaborative and meaningful reading and writing activities" (p. 12). This prompted me to read over my participants' lessons while searching for evidence of meaningful literacy activities to which Smith refers.

Literacy lessons from a literacy researcher. As I explained earlier, while reading over the interview transcripts from Adele and Emma, I found that student engagement was a dominant theme. It was this focus that brought the work of Brian Cambourne (1995) to the forefront. Cambourne is a well-known literacy researcher who identifies student engagement as pivotal to literacy learning. He also provides seven conditions of learning in relation to literacy teaching and learning; immersion, demonstration, expectation, responsibility, use, approximation and response. I read over the transcripts again, with respect to the literacy lessons cited by Adele and Emma. This time I paid particular attention to student engagement and the seven conditions of literacy learning (Cambourne, 1995).

Cambourne (1995) discusses four principles that should be met in order for student engagement to be actualized. These are: students must feel that they are capable of a measure of success with the demonstrated activity; the activity must have some merit or value to the student; the students need to feel relaxed and not anxious or stressed in the classroom situation; the individual demonstrating the activity should be one whom the students admire or respect (Cambourne, 1995).

Literacy Lessons: Adele and Emma

By examining the literacy lessons of Adele and Emma, it is possible to form some conclusions about the literacy pedagogies of these two teachers. McCarthey and Moje (2002) explain:

> Literary practices – whether reading a class novel or tagging up a wall – can shape, or at least have an impact on, identities and identifications. That is, readers and writers can come to understand themselves in particular ways as a result of a literate engagement. (p. 229)

Although these authors are speaking to the power of the actual literate engagement in terms of shaping identities, the teacher is the one who most often chooses the particular literary engagements or activities. Therefore, an understanding of literacy teacher identity may be garnered by examining teachers' literacy practices. In doing so, this may help to answer my research question: "What does it mean to be a beginning elementary literacy teacher?"

What follows is an excerpt of two lessons; one from Adele and one from Emma. I have chosen to present each excerpt in its entirety as opposed to summarizing it. I believe the participants best explain their lessons. I also chose to present the lessons together and follow up with a discussion. These two lessons share many points of contact so it makes sense to address them together. After I present each lesson, I will explain which of Cambourne's (1995) conditions of literacy learning are present, what aspect of student engagement did occur and then I will comment as to whether Adele and Emma could be viewed as inviting their students to join the literacy club (Smith, 1984).

Adele

This lesson was on just predicting the end of the story – a really simple thing. I used a book that I'd never seen before and I found in the library. It was "How Georgie Radbourn Saved Baseball" by one of my favourite authors, David Shannon. It is always amazing to me how when you are reading a story, there is something, there is always something, no matter what the book is that connects to your teaching context in another area. So we dissected the book and we discussed every page and we made connections like crazy. The kids were so excited. I turned the page, to the last page that I was going to read them, but they didn't know that. I read the page and it was very dramatic and

exciting and then I closed the book. They, all the kids, went "AWWWWW", you know they let out kind of this moan. I told them they had to predict, they had to write, they had to write the end of the story. Some of them were really upset but some of them were so excited and they all went to their desks and wrote it as quickly as they could so that I could get on with the story. What they were coming up with was also so interesting because they'd had the chance to get into the story. They were genuinely curious, interested and engaged. They were given that chance to be creative too. So they all wrote their own endings and that made them even more engaged. It was just really interesting seeing how engaged and how excited they could get about a little thing, right?

Emma

I build in critical thinking quite often with my kids and from the beginning we've talked a lot about criteria as a general concept. This activity was a writing lesson where they had to distinguish between items. They had to choose a treasure, something that was a treasure to them in their life. I brought different objects and one was a treasure to me and one was something that wasn't. I just started the lesson by talking about the two objects and explaining my attachment to each object. I asked them to distinguish between the two objects without using the word, "treasure". They decided that it was this special box I had. They listed the ways that they knew this was my treasure. And at this point in the year they had already heard of the word criteria so it wasn't new to them, I used it in math. I said, "So that is the criteria for what makes this a special thing to me and that's the criteria for treasure". So then we brainstormed the criteria for a treasure and why the other object wasn't a treasure.

This was a lesson that kind of went on over time but by the end of it they picked their own treasure and they wrote about why it was a treasure to them and why it fit the criteria and they had images that they brought in and they shared. I think what made it work so well was the connection that it built between me and the students and how they were so interested in things that were special to me and they wanted to share what was special for them. It really got the kids connected on a lot of levels too because some of their treasures were similar or we talked about how things that are a treasure when you are younger may change when you are older and just brought on a bunch of other things too that I didn't see coming out of it I think.

They were VERY engaged. I was getting evaluated and so I got feedback on my lesson. My principal recognized that they were just super into the idea. That's probably why I felt it was so successful because even my chatty kids or kids that maybe lack engagement a lot of time were engaged so it stands out to me.

The one thing that made me feel like a teacher? I think it kind of goes back to one of my three qualities of being relatable that they could relate to me. I think a lot of kids forget that we are just human beings. One thing I really try to do as a teacher is let them into my personal life to an extent. I might talk about my dog a lot or my husband. They know their names. So I think that in this lesson they were able to relate to me.

The Experts Weigh In

Although Cambourne (1995) lists seven conditions for literacy learning, within Adele's and Emma's literacy lessons, five conditions were prominent; therefore only these five conditions will be discussed. I am choosing to focus on the conditions that were the most noticeable, not to indicate the absence of other conditions.

Demonstration means that the teacher provides ample modelling experiences (Cambourne, 1995). Students are given an opportunity to understand the activity before they are expected to tackle it independently. This is precisely what Emma did when she explained her treasure and asked the students to help her come up with the criteria for it. She also explained,

> I always speak out loud and give them an example of what they will be doing. The word has escaped me, but it is where I say out loud what I'm thinking. Then they are able to understand the steps. I just said out loud to them 'I'm thinking about my home and I'm looking around my bedroom and I'm saying, what stands out to me as something that is really important and that fits into this criteria?'

Not only was Emma providing evidence of the condition of demonstration, she was also scaffolding for her students.

Adele addressed the condition of expectation when she expected her students to all write the ending of the story. She mentions some reticence associated with this. "I told them they had to predict, they had to write, they had to write the end of the story. Some of them were really upset but some of them were so excited and they all went to their desks and wrote". Adele knew her students were capable, she viewed them as writers and was confident that they could complete this task. This is Cambourne's (1995) condition of expectation. Adele did not absolve the responsibility for those who felt hesitant. She expected all to write and she communicated this to her students. She set them up for success.

When teachers provide their students with an adequate amount of time to engage in authentic literacy activities, this is the condition of use (Cambourne, 1995). By reading and thoroughly discussing the book, Adele provided her students with the *time* to think about ideas. She helped them to make other connections. "We discussed every page and

we made connections like crazy". In the same vein, Emma mentioned that her treasure writing activity was a lengthy one. It went on for quite a while and students were again given the time they needed to complete the task. It is also important here to consider authentic and meaningful literacy experiences. Both of these teachers developed lessons that were meaningful to their students. Student agency and free choice was prevalent and the teacher was not solely responsible for making choices for the students. In Emma's lesson students were able to bring in images and objects which added a personal dimension. Both of these lessons focused on writing and both were meaningful writing experiences.

Cambourne describes his condition of responsibility as allowing the student to essentially be responsible for his or her learning: "Learners who lose the ability to make decisions become disempowered" (p. 187). Adele's students chose what parts of the story to include in their story ending. She did not tell them what to include nor did she require their stories to adhere to a specified story organizer. Similarly, Emma's students were provided with choices as well. Emma and her students collaborated on a list for the criteria for a treasure. However, the students had complete choice in terms of what item from home would fit that criteria.

"Learners must be free to approximate the desired model" (Cambourne, 1995, p. 187). This is the condition of approximation and it was evident in both lessons as well. Adele mentioned that she also spoke about some of David Shannon's writing techniques as she read his picture book. This serves as both a model of writing and a scaffold. Both are important supports for learners. Emma explains the end result of her lesson:

> This was a lesson that kind of went on over time but by the end of it they picked their own treasure and they wrote about why it was a treasure to them. They had

> images that they brought in and they shared. They were VERY engaged and they were just super into the idea. That's probably why I felt it was so successful because even my chatty kids or kids that maybe lack engagement a lot of time were engaged so it stands out to me.

Now that these five conditions for literacy learning have been explained, it is important to return to student engagement. Cambourne (1995) explained, "Learners are more likely to engage deeply with demonstrations if they believe that learning whatever is being demonstrated has some potential value, purpose, and use for them (p. 188). This highlights the value of authentic literacy activities. This is in direct contrast to what Britton, Burgess, Martin, McLeod and Rosen (1975) term "dummy runs":

> When within the school situation a pupil is called upon to perform a writing task in order (a) to exercise his capacity to perform that kind of task, and/or (b) to demonstrate to the teacher his proficiency in performing it, a special context of 'apprentice to master' has been created . . . A class which has been set the task of writing ballads in order to show that it can write ballads is likely to produce many 'dummy run' ballads. (p. 105)

The writing activities used by both Emma and Adele were certainly not "dummy runs". Adele did not have her students create their own ending to the book using a specified formula or story organizer, nor did she implement this lesson simply to learn how to create story endings. Although ending a story was the by-product of her lesson, she was focusing on making predictions and spent sufficient time talking about the book with her students and making numerous connections so that the students would have many ideas to draw from when they wrote. Similarly, Emma did not simply design a lesson about "writing about a treasure". She too spent a lot of time discussing criteria, providing examples and allowing for ample student talk in order to develop an interesting, meaningful lesson. Both teachers spoke about student engagement and both noticed how engaged their students were. Such engagement is certainly achieved when teachers strive

to create appropriate, interesting and authentic literacy lessons as both Adele and Emma did.

Although these teachers may not have been aware that they used many of Cambourne's conditions for literacy learning, the fact remains that they did. It appeared that these teachers invited all of their students to join the literacy club (Smith, 1984) by involving them in authentic literacy experiences. No "dummy runs". These teachers both presented lessons that when juxtaposed against insights from literacy researchers proved to be very strong literacy lessons. In my opinion, this speaks volumes as to who they are as literacy teachers.

The lessons described in the previous sections were taken from the participants' responses to the interview question relating to sharing a memorable or successful language arts lesson. Allowing my participants to talk about these success stories has a direct link to Bruner's (2004) narrative way of knowing. Bruner explains, "The self-telling of life narratives achieve the power to structure perceptual experience . . . In the end we become the autobiographical narratives by which we 'tell about' our lives" (p. 694). Speaking about their own successful teaching narratives may in some part help my participants to think of themselves as successful *literacy* teachers.

Surprise in the Box

> 'Surprises can be quite lovely at times – quite useful.' It seems to us that this excitement of discovery should be one of the hallmarks of qualitative research, and is much more likely to happen when we have left ourselves open to the unexpected. (Ely et al., 1997, p. 238)

While the previous section focused on the lessons from Adele and Emma, this section includes a discussion of the lessons from Adele and Theresa and the "surprise" that I found. As I read over the lessons presented by Adele and Theresa, I was struck by

the strong underpinnings of literacy within the context of science lessons; however, connections to constructivist learning were equally strong. Constructivist teaching is not easy (Gould, 2005) as it requires the teacher to give up a considerable amount of control in favour of flexibility. Relinquishing control is difficult for experienced teachers. It could be argued that it is even more difficult for beginning teachers who are still learning how to balance classroom management, pedagogy and subject matter simultaneously. This is why I was surprised to find evidence of constructivist teaching within the narratives of my participants. Based on my experience as a classroom teacher, experienced teachers taught lessons like the ones Adele and Theresa described. I was both surprised and impressed to find evidence of constructivist teaching in beginning teachers.

Gould (2005) writes about constructivism and language arts and includes a description about literate environments. Adele and Theresa explain their most memorable teaching moment in the context of a science lesson. Gould's insights are still applicable. There are strong literacy underpinnings in each of these lessons emphasizing literacy across the curriculum. In Adele's own words, "language arts is embedded in everything you do". I might change that slightly to "*literacy,* but her words are still very fitting for this section. Both Adele and Theresa referred to these lessons as science lessons. While I would agree that these were in the *context* of a science class, *literacy* was most definitely embedded. That is why it is fitting to juxtapose these lessons against constructivist teaching and literate environments (Gould 2005). In a previous section in this chapter, I spoke about actions speaking louder than words. Here, Adele's words are just as

powerful as her actions – as she describes her science lesson. Adele proves that literacy is embedded in everything and so does Theresa.

In her book, Wiltse (2005) presents a hypothetical dialogue between two theorists. This represented the possibility of such a conversation occurring and resulted in an effective literary device. Drawing on Wiltse's idea, I will provide a dialogue in the form of direct quotes between Gould (2005) and Adele and Theresa. This conversation represents what could potentially occur as Gould explains constructivist teaching and Adele and Theresa provide evidence for this in their narratives of practice. While I could attempt to interpret and summarize for Adele and Theresa, much could be lost in translation and I felt that was not worth the risk. The science lessons are not presented in their entirety here. However, they appear intact in the Appendix (Appendices G and H) should the reader wish to read them.

Gould: "Constructivist frameworks challenge teachers to create innovative environments in which they and their students are encouraged to think and explore" (p. 99).

Theresa: I knew what they knew when we got started. "How does this work? You guys tell me. I'm learning this with you." And I was very nervous at first.

Adele: We came up with this list of really rich and dynamic questions and we turned that into an experiment. I just handed out plants and the students set up their own experiment with their manipulated variables and set the controlled variables. I really love those moments because I felt like I wasn't doing very much. All I did was ask one question or two questions to try to guide what they wanted to know.

Gould: "Learners must play an active role in selecting and defining the activities, which must be both challenging and intrinsically motivating" (p. 99).

Adele: I really wanted to see what the students would be able to come up with and what they'd be interested in learning about how different factors contribute to the growth of a plant. So what I did was I left it open, I came with a tray of tomato plants. We just started asking questions about what would happen if we put a plant in the dark and left it to grow for a month. We started building on that and the students started asking more and more complex questions. And it elevated to a level where some of them wanted to know what

would happen if you watered a plant with coffee instead of water and how that would effect the growth of a plant.

Gould: "Teaching this way, collaborating with pupils and negotiating the curriculum with them is not easy. It requires a considerable degree of flexibility and an ability and readiness to meet the needs of children by providing information and materials that children will be interested in and wish to pursue. It also demands a constant creative stance with children – receptivity to children's ideas and a willingness to take them seriously, even why, from an adult point of view, they seem naïve or immature" (pp.99-100).

Adele: I had a fear of chaos. Especially in your first year when you just don't know. Any situation that's somewhat outside of your control is going to end in horrible consequences! It has been really interesting taking that step back and seeing how much they really are able to do on their own. I think that we often times don't give kids that opportunity or give them enough credit for the skills that they have and the knowledge that they have already.

Gould: "Classrooms and schools that encourage the active construction of meaning have several characteristics: They focus on big ideas rather than facts; they encourage and empower students to follow their own interests, to make connections, to reformulate ideas and to reach unique conclusions" (p. 100).

Adele: Then they were responsible for basically every step of that experiment and that lesson. So to me, that makes me feel successful. I don't have to do this stuff and I don't have to constantly be telling my kids step by step by step to get them from point A to point B. They are constructing their own understanding and their own questions even about the world. So that really made me feel like I was a teacher. To me that's being more of a facilitator in learning rather than a, I guess, a director of the learning. An un-folder of knowledge.

Theresa: The kids in the gardening course have been totally and completely in charge of this system and they've learned everything there is to know about it. They have researched. They check the pH every week they fill it. I don't have to ask them to do anything because they are on task. The other course that I'm teaching is foods as well. It has worked beautifully with that because we have made green smoothies, we have done salads, we have done dressings, you name it, and we've done it. They talk about full spectrum lighting and what it means. And what vermiculite is and what minerals are needed to produce a good plant and the importance of organics. And how we are not going to be able to grow enough food feed because we have so much room taking up horizontally. But when you do aeroponics, you grow vertically. We are using less space, less soil. Anyway it was a shining moment. I felt really good as a teacher that I was able to see them shine.

Gould: "Teachers informed by the new constructivist theories seek to support learning, not control it" (p. 100).

Adele: Really that's what I want to know because there is no point in me teaching a lesson if the kids are not interested or if they already know that information. And in fact this year that has been my primary focus for my improvement. My professional development is trying to step back and having the students take the driver's seat and really control and construct their own learning.

Theresa: I thought, "Oh my goodness, I'm supposed to teach this? I don't know it". It's funny because my principal used me as an example. I switched mentally from someone who provides information to someone who encourages the finding of information. And it was a whoosh in my brain. That just changed from teacher to facilitator.

The narratives of practice provided by Adele and Theresa align closely with Gould's (2005) description of constructivist teaching. Modelling, experiential learning and collaboration were strategies that Adele and Theresa used. These strategies are associated with a constructivist theory of learning (Courtland & Leslie, 2010). Evidence of innovative and challenging lessons, flexible teachers, and students who are constructing their own understandings were present in both Adele's and Theresa's narrative of practice. The literacy lessons of Adele and Emma and the science lessons of Adele and Theresa all contained two poignant themes. Theory and practice work well in tandem. The social nature of literacy is very much a factor in all four[8] of the lessons discussed in this chapter.

Actions and Words Both Speak – Literacy Redefined

So while it has already been established that Adele and Theresa did indeed create literate environments within a constructivist framework, it is important to briefly summarize the literacy activities that occurred in each of these lessons. Researching aeroponic gardening, communicating instructions, collaborating, presenting information

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[8] Four lessons in total: two from Adele (literacy and science); one from Emma (literacy) and one from Theresa (science). I have differentiated them in terms of literacy and science but it is evident that literacy was very much a part of the science lessons as well.

to adults, asking questions, expressing cross curricular connections, creating recipes and reading recipes were some of the activities in Theresa's lesson. Adele's students were formulating hypotheses, describing variables, asking inquiry questions, extending their learning by communicating what they wanted to know about plant growth and change. These literacy events will be used as a backdrop against two definitions of literacy for comparison purposes. First consider the definition of literacy from Alberta Education (2014):

> Today's learners must develop expertise with a wide range of literacy skills and strategies to acquire, create, connect, and communicate meaning in an ever-expanding variety of contexts . . . In the 21st century, literacy is much more than reading and writing. (para. 2)

Gould (2005) provided a similar definition: "Literacy develops in response to personal and social needs. It is an extension of speaking, listening and interacting with one's environment. It is a state of becoming, not a point to be reached. It is functional, real and relevant" (p. 108).

The literacy practices of both Adele and Theresa are very closely aligned with the above two definitions. In each lesson, the students did use literacy to acquire, create and communicate meaning. The social nature of literacy was evident in both lessons. The literacy activities that the students were engaged in were not limited to a set of isolated skills nor were they focused solely on reading and writing. These teachers were able to incorporate a broad range of literacy activities which would fit very well with the above two definitions.

I will begin the summary of this chapter with a quote from Ely et al. (1997):

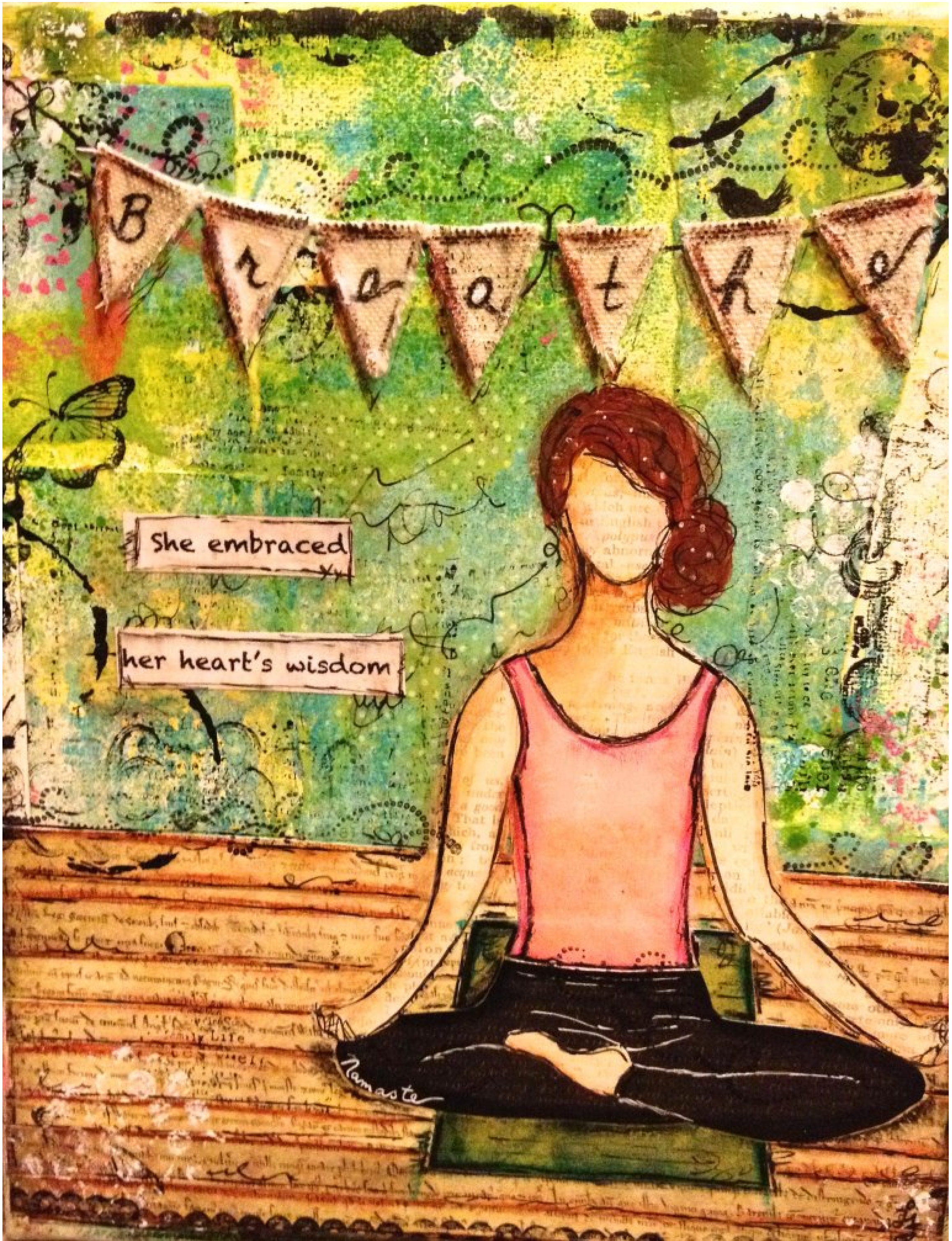
> Data can be construed and reconstrued in many different ways . . . Write about questions, uncertainties or contradictions that lead you inside the literal data to

> grapple with meaning at particular moments. Buried in the notes that describe literal happenings, quote passages of dialogue, or catalogue events or actions, we find the subtle, blurred, and often important meanings that are the essence of the most obvious parts of the data to us. In some ways, the process could be likened to the pearl encased in the mat and shell of an oyster – it's not so obvious at first. (pp. 24-25)

I did indeed have to search for the subtle and not obvious answer to my question: "What does it mean to be a beginning elementary literacy teacher?" Even though I did not directly ask my participants what it meant to be a literacy teacher, some questions targeted this indirectly. When answering my questions about their literacy lessons, definitions of literacy and literacy practices my teacher participants did not mention being a literacy teacher. Therefore I answered my research question by searching for subtle answers. I did this partly through what Wassermann (1999) termed "intuiting":

> While intuiting is not a comfortable mode of operation for everybody, those who use this skill recognize that they have entered the murky waters of 'hunches' and 'guesses' and 'reading into' the data what is actually not observed . . . Those who intuit may be correct in their hunches, but they know well enough that their surmises are not data and must be treated with caution. (p. 467)

Partially through intuiting, partially through searching for meaning by analysing my data and partially through insights from the literature, I have reached an answer to my question. This will be presented in the following chapter.



© Lori Follis – Girl at art

CHAPTER FIVE – DISCUSSION AND IMPLICATIONS

> The other day my kids asked me what a lariat was. I had no idea. The whole class knew - it is a rope for a lasso. They knew because they are around livestock and rodeos. I get excited about a lot of different things. If anything new comes into my life I like to take that as a learning opportunity and see that there are always ways to improve yourself. (Peter).

Summary of Key Findings

Just like Peter, I like to learn and improve and in many ways, this work has helped me to accomplish both of these goals. The aim of this final chapter is to synchronize my participants' insights, my learning, and the existing research and to use that trifecta to lead to new understandings and insights about what it means to be an elementary literacy teacher. In this chapter I will discuss the key findings that were introduced in the previous chapter. These relate to: teacher identity, theory and practice and becoming a literacy teacher. This will be followed by a section on implications for practice. The limitations of my work, areas for future research and contributions to the field will also be highlighted. I will conclude with my reflections as a researcher.

Teacher Identity

As was mentioned previously in this thesis, because teacher identity is socially constructed it is subject to change and is susceptible to outside influences. It must be addressed in the context of teacher education so pre-service teachers may be better equipped to deal with affronts to their teacher identity (Alsup, 2006; Danielewicz, 2001). Alsup claims, "Only the teacher who has developed a rich, well-rounded identity, or sense of self, is truly successful in the classroom" (p. 25). As a sessional instructor, I did not focus much on teacher identity, although I wonder if the following story might have ended differently had I paid more attention to that topic.

Andrea (pseudonym) was one of my pre-service students. She contributed to discussions, asked insightful questions, made connections between theory and practice, and completed well thought out assignments. Andrea seemed to have a very solid understanding of constructivist teaching and all indications pointed towards her using such a philosophy when she transitioned to an in-service teacher. When I thought about her teaching future, it made me excited for I truly believed this prospective teacher could affect change.

When Andrea received her first teaching assignment, she continued to communicate with me. During the course of our conversations, she mentioned that a veteran teacher helped her plan her language arts program. We decided to meet so she could show me this plan. While I anticipated a program that might resemble some of what she learned in my course, she produced a stack of worksheets. I shook my head wondering if this was the same student who appeared to believe in teaching literacy through literature, student agency and choice, differentiation, and teaching skills in context. Using worksheets as the basis of an *entire* language arts program negates student agency and choice (students typically work through the whole sheet answering all the questions), makes differentiation impossible (everyone is working on the same sheet at the same time) and relies on teaching skills in isolation (worksheets are usually devoid of context).

Why did Andrea seem to experience a direct contradiction between her views as a pre-service teacher and her views as a beginning teacher? The following quotation from Alsup (2006) may help to provide a possible explanation:

> Teachers must be confident enough in their own personal pedagogies . . . to take a stand and herald their educational beliefs . . . Pre-service teachers should reflect

> on how they can fit into and even transform a world that encourages them to be such service workers, a world dominated by pre-packaged curriculum materials, standardization, and multiple-choice tests. (p. 194).

Andrea's teacher identity was malleable and it was influenced by this particular context. Beginning teachers are at risk of abandoning their emerging identities depending on the context. Andrea's experience appears to reflect a discrepancy between the teacher identity she was developing as a pre-service teacher and the teacher identity she embraced as an in-service teacher.

While the teachers in my study did not explicitly mention philosophical contradictions between their emerging identities and the school context I wonder if such contradictions existed. I include this here as a point to consider, not as a conclusion. The following is Emma's response about her preparedness as it relates to teaching language arts: "I thought I was prepared and then when I started teaching I realized, 'Oh, you don't have a clue'!" What factors caused this disconnect between thinking she was prepared and realizing that she was not? Were the philosophical contradictions that were present for Andrea present for Emma as well?

Theory and Practice

Danielewicz (2001) validates the connection between theory and teaching practice:

> To teach is to theorize . . . if theory is an accounting for action, then every act of teaching is embodied in theory. Therefore, action, or practice, never stands outside of theory but resides inside of or exists as a result of theory, and vice versa, theory always enables or informs practice. (p. 159)

It was evident that the teaching of Adele, Emma and Theresa was indeed "embodied in theory" (p. 159). Strong connections between sociocultural theory and Cambourne's

(1995) conditions of literacy learning appeared to be present within these teachers' narratives of practice. If I had the opportunity, I would meet with Adele, Emma and Theresa to discuss the theoretical links found within their lessons to help them see how theory and practice need not be mutually exclusive. I would ask these teachers about the choices they made in the lessons they described to me. For example, why did Adele use a picture book to discuss story endings rather than a commercially produced story organizer? Why did Emma ask her students to brainstorm a list of criteria for a treasure instead of making the list herself? Why did Theresa choose to make her students responsible for presenting the vertical growing system? The theory that I had to fight so hard to "sell" to my pre-service teachers seemed to be easily incorporated into the lessons of three of the in-service teachers in my study. Discussing the theoretical underpinnings of their lessons with Adele, Emma and Theresa could be beneficial. Danielewicz explains, "This kind of analysis, feedback and sharing . . . makes it easier to see how to put theoretical ideas into practice" (p. 161). Adele, Emma and Theresa did not appear to require analysis or feedback to put theoretical ideas into practice. However, they might require a discussion to heighten their awareness of the theory behind their teaching practices. Becoming explicitly aware of the link between theory and practice is crucial.

The participants in my study expressed strong beliefs about their pre-service teacher education and are included here for reference:

> I've learned so much more through discussion with colleagues and professional development I've gone to than I did in university. (Emma)

> Not based on what I learned in post-secondary. You learn from the people around you and what they are doing. But not from university. (Janice)

> No, no are you kidding? No. There's no way university covers that. Professional development is the only way I'm going to achieve what I want to do. And practice of course, you know, and just seeing what works. (Theresa)

The words of my participants do appear to indicate that experiential knowledge is valued while the knowledge gained in pre-service teacher education is not. According to Britzman (2003), "The deeply held myth that one learns to teach solely by experience works against teacher education, because if teachers learn by experience, why should they attend classes in schools of education?" (p. 55). As I listened to my participants describe their teaching practices, including their successful lessons, I immediately noticed the strong theoretical connection. Could such a connection be *solely* learned through experience? While I cannot unequivocally answer this question, it does shed light on the issue of theory and practice. I will end this section with a quote from Linda, a beginning teacher who was a participant in Danielewicz's (2001) study:

> I absolutely need those theoretical ideas to hold on to. I need to know what I believe because, once you get out there, everybody is telling you what to do, what to think! . . . So it's hard to know what to do, how to sort things out. Theory helps you do that . . . They just tell you a lot of stuff to do. And they even tell you to *forget* the theory. (p. 160)

Evidently, not every beginning teacher devalues theory. This is an encouraging statement. The fact that practicing teachers are asking this beginning teacher to "forget the theory" is a testament to the need for continued discussion about the link between theory and practice. These discussions are equally important for both pre-service and in-service teachers.

Resources. The use of resources was frequently mentioned by my participants in terms of support wished for in the area of language arts. Putting a useful resource in the

hands of a teacher most definitely makes his or her job easier. However, resources are also connected to theory and practice as Philpott and Dagenais (2012) maintain:

> Competitions between theory and practice are further complicated as theory becomes stripped of its intent and is packaged in teacher's textbooks, curriculum resources and professional development seminars. This dilemma is further exacerbated when new teachers enter the profession and try to make sense of the barrage of information. (p. 87).

This is precisely what happened to me. In my second year of teaching, all three Grade one teachers were required to use the same resource. While the resource itself shall remain nameless, suffice it to say, it was highly prescriptive in nature. On the surface, it appeared to provide the right answer and the right way to teach language arts. It was organized into days with corresponding vocabulary words to be taught on each day. Included in the resource was a dialogue for the teacher to read as a way to introduce the vocabulary words for each day. After introducing the vocabulary, the teacher gave students a worksheet, expecting them to complete it independently. While this resource appeared to encompass the right way of teaching language arts, it was the wrong way for me. I abandoned it after one month in favour of developing my own language arts program. The prescriptive resource I described is in keeping with Britzman's (2003) "methods as ends" model of teaching. This model "reduces the complexity of a pedagogical activity to a technical solution" (p. 62). Many of my pre-service students expressed a desire for resources that would ultimately result in a technical solution to the problem of teaching language arts. Janice sought this too. Unfortunately, a technical solution is counterintuitive to the intricate pedagogy of teaching language arts and literacy.

Resources can also allow for creativity on the part of the teacher while still providing a framework for lesson ideas. Several authors point to the use of children's literature as an authentic resource for language arts teaching (Bainbridge et al., 2009; Tomkins, Bright, Pollard, & Windsor, 2011). A pertinent example is Adele's use of a picture book as a resource to teach her students how to write story endings. Using authentic resources does appear to connect to providing students with authentic literacy experiences.

To Be a Literacy Teacher

Although my participants did not explicitly state what it meant to be a literacy teacher, their narratives provided some insight into this. Bruner's (1986, 2004) narrative way of knowing was mentioned in the literature review of this thesis and it fully comes into play here. These teachers' narratives allowed me to see who they were as literacy teachers. Bruner speaks of learning about others through their autobiography and in many ways these teachers were providing an autobiographical account of their teaching. By listening to the narratives of my participants, I could get a stronger sense of their literacy teacher identity. As Watson (2006) recognizes:

> The importance of the concept of professional identity lies in the assumption that who we think we are influences what we do, i.e. there is a link between professional identity and professional action (in a sense, professional action is doing professional identity). (p. 510)

As I interviewed my participants, I could get a sense of their professional actions. As Watson suggests, those actions are linked to professional identity. Even though my participants did not explicitly mention a literacy teacher identity, I could determine some of this identity by listening to their narratives of practice which also included their professional actions. Although they used different approaches to accomplish this, it

appeared that all my participants strove to create a context for literacy learning in their classrooms. Even though they did not self-identify as literacy teachers, I believe they indeed were. “What does it mean to be a beginning elementary literacy teacher?”. Based on my data, the six teacher participants in my study:

1. are aware of their strengths and weaknesses related to their literacy teaching
2. understand the importance of literacy and are mindful of the aspects of literacy that they focus on in their teaching
3. appreciate the vastness of the subject of language arts including the limitations and benefits that this vastness entails
4. know how to get the support they need to strengthen their literacy teaching (resources, professional development and colleagues)
5. define literacy in a fairly narrow fashion, focusing mostly on the ability to read and write, but likely could expand this definition as they interact with others who view literacy in a broader way
6. endeavour to create a context for literacy learning in their classrooms

The above seven points were mentioned to various degrees in the preceding chapter but are included here as a summary.

The fact that my participants did not explicitly self-identify as literacy teachers does bring the notion of self-identification to the forefront. Danielewicz (2001) illustrates why this is important:

> If identity happens through processes of identification, then students require avenues through which they can self-identify as teachers . . . Seeing themselves as teachers is one part. The other crucial aspect of the process is identifying with others who represent or embody the identity in question. (p. 48)

It could be argued that Danielewicz's insights could be applied to teachers who are establishing a literacy teacher identity. Beginning elementary teachers need to see themselves as literacy teachers and need to identify with other literacy teachers. Based on the findings from my study, my participants did not explicitly state that they were literacy teachers. This suggests that their literacy teacher identity may not yet be established *or* they may not be aware of such an identity. However, there is potential for literacy identity to be actualized through discussions. Danielewicz points out the importance of discourse in pre-service teacher education: "Discourse constitutes self and experience. Through discourse – acts of language that communicate and connect with others – we make our identities and, reciprocally they are made for us" (p. 141). In the post-secondary classroom, students need opportunities to talk about literacy teacher identity.

As I examined the key findings from my study, I could identify one potential issue that could preclude teachers from seeing themselves as literacy teachers. This was the illusory quest for the right answer. Consider Janice's response as she answered my interview question about the subject she was most confident in teaching:

> Science and social because it is so fact based. You can look it up and teach it to the kids. Even if you don't necessarily know, you can look it up and it is easy to remember. It is either *right* or wrong. So as a new teacher, that is the stuff that is the easiest to wrap your head around. It is cut and dry. Just get what you need to know. (Janice, emphasis added)

And here is her response as to why she is the least confident teaching language arts:

> Everyone teaches it so differently. Some people do it thematically, some people do spelling, and some people do worksheets. There is a million and one ways of doing it and there is no one *right* answer. (Janice, emphasis added)

Finding the right answer was a prevalent issue for the pre-service teachers whom I taught. It also appeared to be an issue for Janice. However, the right answer is seldom found in

teaching especially in the areas of language arts and literacy. Janice's views shared points of contact with Britzman's (2003) cultural myth of teacher as expert. Britzman explains, "The construct of the teacher as expert also tends to produce the image of the teacher as an autonomous and unitary individual and as the source of knowledge" (p. 229). Dispelling this myth is necessary for teachers especially in the area of language arts. This subject area is vast. The pedagogy associated with it does not lend itself to easy, right, or cut and dry answers.

Limitations

Although I was satisfied with my choice of data collection, using observations in addition to the semi-structured interviews would likely have added another layer of depth, contributing to the richness of the data. Based on the knowledge I gained as practicing teacher, I know that there are many unplanned events that can happen during the course of a lesson. This would necessitate more than one observation. I also knew that asking permission to conduct observations would have required a lengthy ethics approval process and that timeline was not in keeping with the timeline I had set for myself.

One interview coupled with a relatively small and homogeneous sample did not allow me to make broad generalizations based on my research. For the most part I was pleased with the interview protocol (see Appendix D) that I used with my participants. I felt that each question directly targeted an area that could provide significant findings. However, as a neophyte researcher, I realize my interview questions could be improved. I might have asked: "In what ways do you see yourself as a literacy teacher"? As I was designing my protocol, I considered asking this question, but I

wondered if my participants would *self-identify* as a literacy teacher without me directly asking them. Consider once again the statement that was part of the impetus for this study, “Every teacher is a literacy teacher”. I wanted to test the validity of this statement, and perhaps that bias stood in my way. While I did ask my participants about memorable/successful lessons, asking them about unsuccessful lessons might have resulted in some thought-provoking discussions. Because I requested only one interview, I am not sure if I would have developed a strong enough rapport for my participants to be entirely confident sharing negative experiences. That can be a risky endeavour. I also gave my participants the option to skip or to not answer certain questions. I do not regret giving them this option, but when dealing with a smaller sample, this lack of information could potentially impact the findings.

Recommendations for Practice

In the introduction of this work I spoke about the narratives of teaching and research that I heard growing up. The narratives were from my mother, a teacher and my father, a research scientist. As I segue into the conclusion of this work, it is fitting to return once again to teaching and research, albeit in a different context than I referenced in the beginning of this thesis.

Moje (2000) asserts, “Too often we forget that teacher education involves teaching, and that we must draw from pre-service and in-service teachers’ insights as we plan teacher education” (p. 16). Indeed, it is the insights from pre-service and in-service teachers that have a direct bearing on the implications that follow. These two demographics represent the blend of teaching and research that has contributed to my work. Although I did not conduct research with pre-service teachers, I did teach them.

That experience was the impetus of this research. These pre-service teachers were not part of my study in a formal way; however, their insights changed the way I viewed language arts and literacy and helped to shape my position as a researcher. Suffice it to say, the insights from in-service teachers factor heavily here as beginning teachers were the participants in my study.

The implications that follow are directly linked to my study findings. I will discuss the link between theory and practice; the value of mentorship; definitions of literacy; the use of resources; and disrupting silences around literacy identity.

It is crucial that theory and practice be viewed together, not as separate entities. Elementary teachers need to be encouraged to see the value of theory especially as it relates to their teaching practice. In my personal experience, I did not fully recognize the value of theory until I began graduate work. However, not every elementary teacher has the inclination or the opportunity to enrol in graduate studies. Elementary teachers could be encouraged to participate in research studies like the one that Wiltse, Johnston, and Yang (2014) discuss in their article. The authors explain, "Researchers and teachers in the group read and reflected upon their pedagogical understandings of social justice framed by collaborative readings of articles"(p. 3). Although the research area of their study is different from mine, providing teachers with research articles to read and discuss is an example of how theory and practice can be blended.

Mentorship and collegial support was mentioned by all six of my participants as a means to strengthen their language arts teaching. The importance of such support cannot be over-emphasized. Three of my participants were part of a structured mentorship program; three of my participants were not. The type of mentorship did not appear to

have a bearing on its effectiveness. It is the relationships that are important. Mentorship need not be formal, structured, or time-consuming. Both beginning and pre-service teachers would do well to seek out a mentor. Philpott and Dagenais (2011) mention mentorship as an impetus for innovative practice. They also cite the benefits of a reciprocal mentoring relationship where beginning and experienced teachers learn from each other. As was mentioned previously in this thesis, identity is formed in relation to others. It could be that beginning teachers could establish an identity as a literacy teacher by having a mentor with whom they could discuss their literacy practices and talk about their identity.

Discussions about the expanding definition of literacy are essential. The teachers in my study were beginning teachers and recent graduates. The way literacy is changing was a focus in the pre-service teacher education class I taught. I naïvely assumed that my teacher participants would be aware of this yet almost all of them defined literacy as the ability to read and write. This definition does not account for the social influences on literacy nor does it take into consideration the different modalities of literacy. Pre-service teachers should be given opportunity to discuss their views of literacy and hopefully expand on them. Several definitions of literacy were referenced in the introduction to this thesis. Perhaps elementary teachers could be encouraged to refer to some of these definitions as they may help to expand their definition of literacy. Of prime importance is the fact that teachers may not identify as literacy teachers if they perceive literacy as only reading and writing. Viewed in this way, literacy is too easily relegated and confined to language arts. If literacy is not understood as all encompassing, the importance of establishing an identity as a literacy teacher will be diminished. While I addressed

language arts in my study, I mentioned numerous times that elementary teachers are teaching literacy throughout the course of their teaching day. Literacy is so much more than reading and writing.

The use of language arts resources is also an area that needs to be addressed. Most of my participants mentioned the use of resources as a way to support their language arts teaching. While I agree that resources can enhance teaching practices, prescriptive resources are not the best way to accomplish this. As a classroom teacher, I was given the opportunity to participate in professional development where children's literature formed the basis of a writing program. The basic premise of this program was that children learn to write in part, by reading. Authors are writers and as such are a type of mentor for young writers. Pre-service teachers should also be encouraged to use authentic resources such as children's literature as a basis for their lessons and units. The use of picture books was a required element for both of the assignments I gave to my pre-service students. This allowed them to see how resources like these could be simple yet highly effective.

It is time to disrupt the silences. There is silence around literacy teacher identity and there is silence around the assumption that every teacher is a literacy teacher. We need to talk about what this means. The discussion cannot end with this work.

Recommendations for Future Research

As I have mentioned before, my area of research is an under-researched field. In the process of writing my literature review, this was a drawback since there was very little research specific to literacy teacher identity. However, now that it is time to discuss recommendations for future research, my eyes have been opened to see how working

within an under-researched field can provide the researcher with vast possibilities for future studies.

A follow up study would likely yield meaningful results. My research question and methodology could remain intact. The interview protocol could be refined and observational data could be incorporated.

Studying how literacy identity develops and changes over time would lend itself to a longitudinal study. A study where pre-service teacher education students were recruited during their coursework and then followed during their beginning years of teaching would yield significant findings.

Further study in the field of mentorship is also needed. Although Theresa was the only participant in my study to mention a reciprocal mentoring relationship, it would be interesting to investigate this area further as I believe the mentoring teachers likely learned from these beginning teachers as well. I certainly did.

Significance of the Research

The significance of my research and its contribution to the field can be summarized in four key phrases. My work has the potential to: *reinforce* the importance helping new teachers develop their teacher identity; *expand* the way literacy is defined by some teachers; r*eiterate* the link between theory and practice and *disrupt* the silence previously shrouding literacy teacher identity.

Reinforce. The existing research on teacher identity points to its importance. A strong sense of teacher identity appeared to be instrumental in the teaching success that my participants experienced. My research reinforces the importance of establishing teacher identity. Especially for beginning teachers.

Expand. My research can help to expand the way literacy is defined and understood by both pre-service and in-service teachers. The definition of literacy is changing and it is the broader view of literacy that needs to be embraced by pre-service teachers, beginning teachers and experienced teachers alike. Literacy is so much more than reading and writing. Although my participants defined literacy quite narrowly, their actions were indicative of a broader view of literacy.

Reiterate. The discussion around theory and practice is not new. But my work has brought it to the forefront again. The link between theory and practice was tangibly evident in the lessons of my participants. This helps to reiterate this connection.

Disrupt. There is a lack of research on elementary literacy teacher identity. My work can be used to disrupt the silence and hopefully move this research area forward. It is impossible to know how far reaching this work will be but I hope it doesn't end with this study. My work has drawn attention, even on a small scale, to the notion and importance of establishing an identity as a literacy teacher. Disrupting the silence means starting the dialogue.

Researcher Reflections

"I'm a very reflective person. I will always be like that because you have to be reflective through the years" (Emma). Emma's words are the perfect introduction to this section where I reflect on my research. Included here are reflections on the research process, the writing process and my personal reflections.

Research is hard work. Over the course of my undergraduate and graduate work, I have read hundreds of research articles in blissful ignorance of the amount of work that was represented. Until now. I read widely as I prepared for my own work. I've read about

longitudinal, multi-case, multi-site studies. Based on what I know now about the work that went into my study, I can imagine the work that was involved in other studies as well. It leaves me with an overwhelming sense of respect.

Research does not always go as planned. I carefully completed my ethics application expecting a quick approval. That did not happen. I thought recruiting participants would take a long time. I was wrong, this happened quickly. I planned to find an explicit answer to my research question. That did not happen. I did not plan to find evidence of constructivist teaching in my participants' narratives of practice. That did happen. The more I read about qualitative research, the more I realize that my experience is not atypical for many qualitative studies. There were many surprises along the way and I have learned that when conducting qualitative research (perhaps even research of any kind) one must adhere to what I term the "flexi-plan". Planning is still important but the researcher needs to be flexible.

Writer's block is awful. I love to write and I consider myself a good writer, albeit one who is continuing to grow and improve. The difficulty I faced with writing is succinctly expressed in the following quote:

> As we face that blank paper or screen, most of us wrestle with moments of silence and with our inabilities to find the words powerful or honest enough to describe what we've seen, heard or felt. Fear often overtakes us, carrying us down that path of insecurity where we question whether or not we really have the insight, knowledge, or skill to write up what we are beginning to understand. (Ely et al., 1997, p. 9)

Viewing my writing from this stance, near the end, I am glad I was able to overcome this struggle largely because of the mentorship of my advisor and another trusted faculty member. At the time, I could not see the value in this writing struggle but I do now as I was tangibly reminded of the importance of literacy. I was able to draw on my literacy

competencies to get me through this writer's block. It reinforced how much we need good literacy teachers and how important it is for elementary teachers to view themselves as literacy teachers.

Reflection can happen when you least expect it. Interviewing my participants caused me to reflect back on my transition into teaching, something that is not regularly at the forefront of my mind. This reflection prompted me to see how far I've come; from elementary classroom teacher, to graduate student, to sessional instructor and now to researcher. The support I have had during all these transitions was also brought to mind. I have also come to value the narrative way of knowing. It was my participants' narratives of practice that sparked my own reflection and caused me to witness firsthand how powerful narratives can be.

My stance as a constructivist researcher and teacher is now even more firmly entrenched. I know constructivist teaching works because I have used it successfully in the elementary classroom and the post-secondary classroom. I listened to the narratives of practice of several of my participants who spoke about constructivist teaching, although they did not specifically name it. I know our understandings are developed in relation to others. When I began to teach EDEL 305, I naïvely assumed that everyone shared my belief about the "awesomeness" of language arts. My feelings about this subject have not changed but they have expanded to include a deep understanding of why this subject can be problematic for some. And it is that understanding that I hope to capitalize on if I am ever in the position to teach pre-service teachers or to mentor beginning in-service teachers.

> I have the big picture of what I am supposed to be doing in language arts. Now I've got to get the smaller pieces in place to make my instruction better. (Peter)

Peter's statement is a fitting way to conclude this thesis. I would argue that part of the "big picture" to which Peter refers is related to what it means to be a literacy teacher. Perhaps the bigger picture could be brought into sharper focus as teachers view themselves in this way. When teachers see themselves as literacy teachers they may realize *that* is indeed the big picture. And once the big picture is in place, the smaller pieces begin to fit.

EPILOGUE

People talking without speaking,
People hearing without listening
People writing songs that voices never share
And no one dared
Disturb the sound of silence
(Simon & Garfunkel, "The Sound of Silence")

Through this work, I dared to disturb the sound of silence. But in some ways, the silence still remains. If teachers do not self-identify as literacy teachers then what does that mean? The statement, "every teacher is a literacy teacher" must continue to be addressed. Hearing that statement reframed the way I thought of myself as a teacher. Listening to those words did produce a shift in identity for me, but I have a favourable view of language arts and literacy. Would hearing those words produce a change in identity for those who find language arts teaching inherently more difficult? Although my work disrupted the silence, questions still remain. Those questions are not easily answered. While this work helped to better understand what it means to be a beginning elementary literacy teacher, there is still more to be done. The silence that has been disrupted can easily return.

Silence like a cancer grows.
Hear my words that I might teach you.
Take my arms that I might reach you.
But my words like silent raindrops fell
And echoed in the wells of silence
(Simon & Garfunkel, "The Sound of Silence")

It is not my words alone that have the power to teach. It is the words of my participants who have trusted me to tell their stories. I hope that their words will not be like silent raindrops. The conversation has been started. It must continue.

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APPENDIX A – COPYRIGHT CONSENT FOR IMAGES

July 27, 2014

Dear Lori:
I am completing a Masters Thesis at the University of Alberta entitled "More than generalists: Towards an identity as a beginning elementary literacy teacher". I would like your permission to include the following digital images (8 x 10 prints of mixed media original artwork) in my thesis:

Being Known © Lori Follis girl at art
Watervalley Fairy © Lori Follis girl at art
Heart to the Wind © Lori Follis girl at art
Possibility Girl © Lori Follis girl at art
Breathe Girl © Lori Follis girl at art

The requested permission extends to any future revisions and editions of my thesis.

My thesis will be included in:

- the University of Alberta Libraries theses collection and the NEOS Library Consortium, to which University of Alberta Libraries belongs
- Library and Archives Canada's electronic Theses Canada Portal, Library and Archives Canada's microfilmed collection.

These rights will in no way restrict republication of the material in any other form by you or by others authorized by you. Your signing of this letter will also confirm that you own [or your company owns] the copyright to the above-described material.
If these arrangements meet with your approval, please sign the letter where indicated below and return it to me. Thank you very much.
Sincerely,

Julie Teske

PERMISSION GRANTED FOR THE
USE REQUESTED ABOVE:

____
Lori Follis
Lori Follis girl at art

Date:____________________________

APPENDIX B – ETHICS APPROVAL

RESEARCH ETHICS OFFICE

308 Campus Tower
Edmonton, AB, Canada T6G 1K8
Tel: 780.492.0459
Fax: 780.492.9429
www.reo.ualberta.ca

Notification of Approval (Renewal)

Date:	April 29, 2014
Amendment ID:	Pro00039148_REN1
Principal Investigator:	Julie Teske
Study ID:	Pro00039148
Study Title:	More than generalists: Towards an identity as an elementary literacy teacher
Supervisor:	Lynne Wiltse

Approved Consent Form:	Approval Date	Approved Document
	06/05/2013	Participant Information and Consent

Approval Expiry Date:	May 4, 2015

Thank you for submitting this renewal application. Your application has been reviewed and approved.

This re-approval is valid for one year. If your study continues past the expiration date as noted above, you will be required to complete another renewal request. Beginning at 30 days prior to the expiration date, you will receive notices that the study is about to expire. If you do not renew on or before the renewal expiry date, you will have to re-submit an ethics application.

Sincerely,

William Dunn, PhD
Chair, Research Ethics Board 1

Note: This correspondence includes an electronic signature (validation and approval via an online system).

APPENDIX C - INFORMATION LETTER AND PARTICIPANT CONSENT

INFORMATION LETTER

Study Title:
More Than Generalists: Towards an Identity as a Beginning Elementary Literacy Teacher

Research Investigator: Ms. Julie Teske **Supervisor: Dr. Lynne Wiltse**

Background

I am a graduate student in the Department of Elementary Education at the University of Alberta. I am conducting research for my thesis to fulfill the requirement of my Master of Education degree. My study centers around the perspectives of beginning Elementary generalist teachers and their views on what it means to be a literacy teacher. My study is titled, "*More Than Generalists: Towards an Identity as an Elementary Literacy Teacher*".

As a beginning Elementary generalist teacher (with two years of teaching experience or less), you are invited to participate in my study along with a small number of other teachers. This research focuses on perspectives of beginning Elementary generalist teachers and their views on teaching Language Arts. My overarching research question is, "*What does it mean to be an Elementary literacy teacher?"*

The results of this study will be used to support my thesis and the findings may also be submitted for publication in academic journals.

Purpose

There is a gap in the research on beginning teachers and their quest to develop an identity as a literacy teacher. The practical objectives of the study are to understand how to support these professionals as they realize their potential as literacy teachers and to open discussion about changes to pre-service teacher education which could more effectively prepare pre-service teachers to become capable literacy teachers.

Study Procedures

Should you choose to participate in this study, your involvement will include one 30-45 minute interview with the possibility of a follow-up interview only if necessary. The interview will be scheduled at your convenience and held at a location which is convenient for you. If you so choose, the interview may be held in my office, 251 Education South, University of Alberta. Your interview will be audio recorded, and then I will transcribe it. After the transcription is complete, I will send the transcript back to you so that you may review it and revise if necessary. Findings based on the interviews will be used in my thesis and may subsequently be published in peer-reviewed journals or used in academic presentations.

Benefits

If you choose to participate, you may find the interview a useful, positive experience. The interview will give you an opportunity to articulate your beliefs about your own teaching practice. As a result, you may develop a stronger sense of your own identity as a literacy teacher.

Risk

This study is low risk for teacher participants. Any slight discomfort that may arise as a result of the interview will be minimal. To reduce any discomfort, you will be provided with the interview questions in advance and you may choose not to answer particular questions if you wish.

Voluntary Participation

Your participation is entirely voluntary. You are free to withdraw your consent at any time until data analysis is complete which is two weeks after the transcription has been returned to you. If you withdraw consent after the interview, I will not include your data in my thesis or in any subsequent publications. There is no penalty for non-participation or withdrawal of consent.

Confidentiality

To provide for confidentiality and anonymity, all participants will be given pseudonyms. The pseudonyms will be used in all publications and presentations of this research. Normally, my supervisor, Dr. Lynne Wiltse, and I will be the only people who have access to the data; however, the Research Ethics Committee always has the right to review study data if it so chooses. I will strip identifying information from the data after the participants have reviewed and revised (if they wish) their interview transcript. Research data will be stored at my place of residence, within a locked cabinet. My computer is password protected, for the security of the digital files. Study data will be securely stored for 5 years after the study is over, at which time it will be destroyed.

Further Information

If you have questions or concerns about this study, you may contact me at julie.teske@ualberta.ca. If you have any questions regarding your rights as a participant, or how this study is being conducted, you may contact the University of Alberta's Research Ethics Office at 780-492-2615. This office has no affiliation with the study investigators.

CONSENT FORM

Title of Project: More Than Generalists: Towards an Identity as a Literacy Teacher

Principal Investigator: Julie Teske, University of Alberta

Supervisor: Dr. Lynne Wiltse, University of Alberta

Do you understand that you have been asked to be in a research study?	Yes	No
Have you read and received a copy of the attached Information Sheet	Yes	No
Do you understand the benefits and risks involved in taking part in this research study?	Yes	No
Have you had an opportunity to ask questions and discuss this study?	Yes	No
Do you understand that you are free to refuse to participate, or to withdraw from the study at any time, without consequence, and that your information will be withdrawn at your request?	Yes	No
Has the issue of confidentiality been explained to you? Do you understand who will have access to your information?	Yes	No

This study was explained to me by: ____

I have read and understood the attached information letter and agree to take part in this study:

_____________________________ _____________________

Signature of Research Participant Date

____

Printed Name

I believe that the person signing this form understands what is involved in the study and voluntarily agrees to participate.

____________________________________ _____________________________

Signature of Investigator or Designee Date

APPENDIX D – INTERVIEW PROTOCOL

Interview Questions

When did you graduate?

How many years of teaching experience do you have?

What is your current teaching assignment and FTE (Full-Time Equivalent)?

Are there any subjects you are not required to teach?

How many students are in your classroom?

If you were to list three characteristics or traits of an "ideal" teacher what would they be? Why are these three characteristics important to you?

Not long ago you were a student, now you are a "teacher".

- What has changed?
- How is it different?
- Describe the transition.

What has influenced the way you think of yourself as a teacher (for example, your colleagues, students, resources you use, professional development workshops, University courses)?

How does the feedback you receive from others (administrator, colleagues, parents, students, friends), or what others say to you, influence your perception of yourself as a teacher?

Think back to one of your most successful teaching moments.

- Describe what you were doing.
- Describe what your students were doing, or the way they responded to your teaching.
- What subject were you teaching?
- What about this experience made you feel like a "teacher"?

Of the subjects you teach, which ones are you the most confident with? What contributes to that confidence? Which subjects are you least confident with? What contributes to your lack of confidence?

Tell me your view about the importance of teaching Language Arts?

- What are you the most confident with regarding your ability to teach Language Arts?
- What is your greatest concern regarding your ability to teach Language Arts?

Think back to your time as a student. Can you remember a positive Language Arts (literacy) experience or lesson? Describe it.

How do you define literacy? What primary aspects of literacy to you emphasize in your teaching?

Describe your pre-service teacher preparation specifically in the way it relates to Language Arts.

- How confident do you feel in your Language Arts pre-service preparation?
- Did you feel adequately prepared to teach this subject?

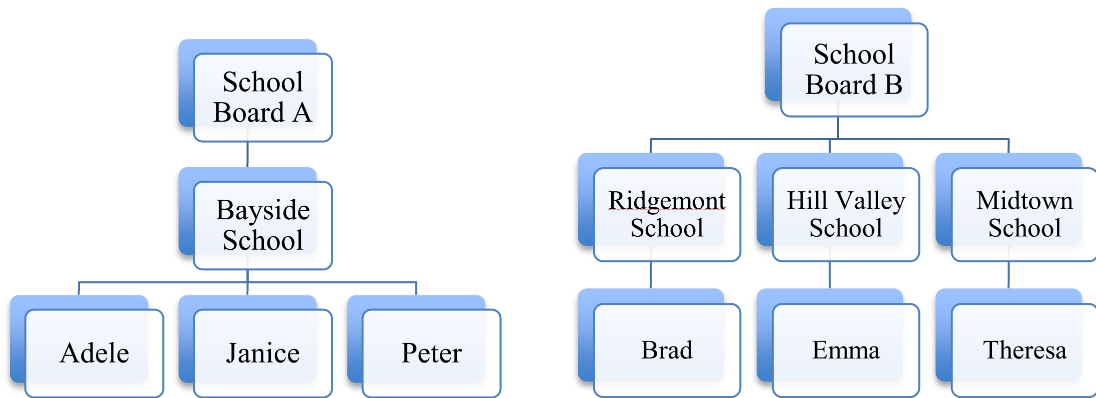
As a practicing teacher, describe your most successful Language Arts lessons.

- In your opinion, what contributed to the success of this lesson?

In your current teaching practice, what support have you received from colleagues?

What additional support, if any, would be beneficial to you in the area of Language Arts?

APPENDIX E – PARTICIPANT CHART



APPENDIX F – LANGUAGE ARTS FINDINGS

Name	Subject most confident	Subject least confident	Number of LA courses	Areas wished for in pre-service	Support wished for with LA
Adele	Science	LA	more than one (L and L minor)	more practical	more time to try new strategies
Brad	LA	Social	more than one (L and L minor)	less repetitive	resources/PD
Emma	LA	Social	one	more context specific	resources/PD
Janice	Science	LA	one	more context specific	resources/PD
Peter	Science	LA	one	one theory course + one practical one	opportunities to observe other teachers in LA
Theresa	Science	Music	one	more practical	resources/PD

APPENDIX G - ADELE

We are doing a science unit right now on plant growth and change. That is one of my favourite subjects. I love teaching science. We are doing an experiment with some tomato plants and so I really wanted to see what the students would be able to come up with and what they'd be interested in learning. Specifically about how different factors contribute to the growth of a plant. We were also learning about manipulated and controlled variables in science. So what I did was I left it open, I came with a tray of tomato plants. I had no idea of how many I was going to need. I had 30 of them for my 15 students and we just started asking questions about what would happen if we put a plant in the dark and left it to grow for a month. We started building on that and the students started asking more and more complex questions. And it elevated to a level where some of them wanted to know what would happen if you watered a plant with coffee instead of water and how that would effect the growth of a plant. We came up with this list of really rich and dynamic questions and they all started from what the students wanted to know and what they already knew. And then we turned that into an experiment. So I just handed out plants and the students set up their own experiment with their manipulated variables and set the controlled variables. It is actually going on in my classroom right now. They are observing them and watering them and caring for them every day and monitoring them. But I really love those moments because I felt like I wasn't doing very much. All I did was ask one question or two questions to try to guide what they wanted to know. Really that's what I want to know because there is no point in me teaching a lesson if the kids are not interested or if they already know that information. So they were all asking questions and they were all very excited to start and they all planted the plants themselves, potted them. Then they were responsible for basically every step of that experiment and that lesson. So to me, that makes me feel successful because if I don't have to do this stuff and I don't have to constantly be guiding my kids step by step by step to get them from point A to point B and understand this. They are constructing their own understanding and their own questions even about the world. So that really made me feel like I was a teacher and to me that's being more of a facilitator in learning rather than a, I guess, a director of the learning. An un-folder of knowledge.

APPENDIX H - THERESA

We have this garden tower. I will take you around the corner and show you. You can kind of see the glow of the light right now. It is an aeroponic gardening system. It is a vertical growing tower, a soil-less system. The roots grow within the system, the water comes up and rains down on them. It can be an indoor garden or an outdoor garden. So anyway, we started this in March and the kids in the gardening course have been totally and completely in charge of this system and they've learned everything there is to do about it. They have researched, they check the pH every week, they fill it, I don't have to ask them to do anything because they are on task. The other course that I'm teaching is foods as well. That has worked beautifully because we have made green smoothies, we have done salads, we have done dressings, you name it, and we've done it. So this afternoon we had our superintendent, our assistant superintendent, we had our human resources director, we had the big wigs all for lunch today. And these students shone. And I realized that a teacher is someone who is behind, not in front. A teacher is someone who presents the information and allows the children to learn it themselves. And then gives them a platform on which to share their voice. I'm going to cry! So as I was sitting there just an hour ago, I was thinking this is a shining moment for me. I said nothing. It was listening to them and hearing the comments from these people saying, "wow, what are you going to do with this?" And to hear the students say, "this was fun". And to hear them talk about full spectrum lighting and what it means. And what vermiculite is and what minerals are needed to produce a good plant and the importance of organics. I felt really good as a teacher that I was able to see them shine.

And I knew what they knew when we got started. It was how does this work? You guys tell me? I'm learning this with you. And I was very nervous at first. Because I thought, "oh my goodness, I'm supposed to teach this? I don't, know it". And then it's funny because my principal used me as an example from my switch mentally from someone who provides information to someone who encourages the finding of information. And it was a whoosh in my brain. That just changed from teacher to facilitator.

And it think that's my age. I was a business owner before I became a teacher. I sold my business so I could go back to school and that was amazing for me. I don't think I would be the kind of teacher I am now if I'd been one twenty years ago. So for me, I am just, this is brilliant for me. Because I love it.