

**University of Alberta**

**A Narrative Inquiry into Teacher Spirit**

by

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## Abstract

As a teacher puzzled by questions of spirit, a term commonly used by teachers, I began to wonder what did I mean when I spoke of my spirit? What did other teachers mean by spirit? I began to wonder if spirit was connected to what I know (my personal practical knowledge), to who I am (my story to live by), or to the context in which I live as a teacher (my professional knowledge landscape). If we understand teacher knowledge, contexts, and identity narratively, can we understand spirit as somehow interconnected with these concepts?

In order to explore our teaching lives and our teacher spirit, I have explored the interconnections between our knowledge, contexts and identity, (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000) and how spirit might be an aspect of these concepts. When linked, as they are in Connelly and Clandinin's (1999) term "stories to live by," these concepts create a narrative way to think through and to talk about teacher spirit. Stories to live by are given meaning by the narrative understandings of knowledge and context. Stories to live by are shaped by such matters as "secret teacher stories, sacred stories of schooling, and teachers' cover stories" (p. 4). It is these types of stories that I have included in order to explore the notion of teacher spirit.

Narrative inquiry, as the research methodology, allows me to create an opportunity to explore teacher spirit by attending to the stories that teacher's tell, the events that take place on their school landscapes, and how these events shape their stories to live by. With a small group of teachers, a conversation space was created in order to explore the meaning of teacher spirit by talking about our

experiences in and surrounding our teaching lives. The co-researchers and I attempted to deepen our current understandings of teacher identity in relation with teacher spirit. Through this exploration of teacher's stories to live by, in relation with teacher spirit, new understandings of professional growth and teacher education were also sought out.

The co-researchers and I came together to participate in a conversation group where we attempted to make sense of teacher spirit in relationship to our stories to live by. We explored wonders through monthly conversation group meetings, by reflecting on previous conversations, revisiting our shared understandings and ideas and by looking forward to what teacher spirit might be conceptualized as. Through our collaborative analyses, as well as my own analysis of the transcripts of our conversations, we came to recognize rhythms or progressions that repeated themselves throughout our conversations. It is these rhythms that became the research story for this narrative inquiry.

I present this inquiry alongside my belief that we need to remove the boundaries that place teacher spirit outside our conversations, outside educational research, and outside understandings of life in schools. It is my hope that this inquiry will begin to remove these boundaries and allow us to talk about teacher spirit in a meaningful and informative way.

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## CHAPTER ONE: EXPLORING SPIRIT – NARRATIVE BEGINNINGS

### *A Year in a Teaching Life*

*It was March when the call for applications came to our school. Facing closure of the school where I was teaching, I photocopied the application requirements and began to contemplate my next school move. It was a repeating story for me as a teacher. Having moved several times, and now in my sixth year of teaching, I was about to embark on a new challenge. The school board that employed me portrayed one of its schools as a place where teachers and students learned alongside each other, and where new and cutting edge ideas in teaching and teacher education were developed and implemented. This school was affiliated with a university and housed special conference rooms and observation rooms for education students to visit while learning to become teachers. With the support and encouragement from my current administration and colleagues, I decided to apply to this school where I would be able to further experiment with teaching techniques and with building relationships in an innovative learning environment.*

*I made the short list and was notified of my final interview scheduled for April 17. The process was intense. A panel of highly regarded teachers and administrators asked a list of technical questions. I left the school, confident, knowing I had done well. I excitedly anticipated my work there in the fall. The next morning I got the call from administration. I accepted a position with the school to begin teaching there in September. I was delighted with my achievement, as were my colleagues at my current school. We celebrated my job offer and all was well. I felt happy that I had secured a position for the fall, and proud that the position would allow me to continue to move forward in my thinking about teaching and learning.*

*Organizational meetings began in June and I was relieved of my grade five teaching duties in order to meet with the teachers who would make up my team in this new school. I was excited, uncertain and filled with anticipation as I attended this organizational day for what was to be my best move yet in my teaching career. I was warmly welcomed and immediately immersed with the complex and innovative structure of the school. I felt this was a place that promoted cutting edge teaching. Excellent teachers were doing action research and implementing a constructivist approach to learning. The school was structured in multi-aged settings of grades 1-2-3 and 4-5-6, with groups of approximately sixty students and three teachers, working as a team of facilitators in collaborative learning communities. In order for this teaching structure to be carried out, a traditional classroom set-up was replaced with groups of students at tables, no teacher desks, informal teaching areas and computer labs within each learning area. I was placed in a 1-2-3 grouping, which was exciting for me as I only had experience teaching upper elementary grades. While I felt a move to primary grades would be a great professional challenge, I believed in this innovative grouping arrangement and was anxious to begin. I wondered if the other teachers would be far ahead of me in their understanding of teaching and learning.*

*Our team began on a very positive note. We shared our teaching philosophies and seemed to share in the excitement of beginning the year together. We discussed open-ended activities and the need to be cautious about over-planning, allowing our students to self-direct their learning. With each of us having a healthy sense of humour, the June day passed quickly. I left the school filled with hopes and plans for an innovative teaching year.*

*September arrived. We began in our community with two full time teachers and two part-time teachers. In an attempt to personalize our teaching space, I had painted bulletin boards and redecorated areas of our open area over the summer. I was thrilled to finally see students in the newly decorated area. With September's arrival, our plans and possibilities would become reality. We began that first day with optimism, excitement and some giddiness, as we were finally in our area with students. Somehow, the excitement of their arrival was intensified in this place. I wondered if it was the large number of students in the group, the open area, or the magnitude of the work ahead. It was a day filled with greetings, organizational decisions and beginning to know some of our students.*

*Student-directed learning was the approach at this school and we were eager to implement this type of teaching, however foreign it felt. Our team believed in the notion of student-directed learning. In a positive way, we openly discussed the complexities of achieving all of the curriculum requirements while implementing a student-led approach with three grades. Our initial planning was time consuming and we attempted some difficult and complex innovations over that first month. By the end of September we had spent many evening and weekend hours in order to make the student-directed approach work as we also covered requirements.*

*By the end of October our team began to struggle with the lack of direction for students. We began to worry about meeting curriculum requirements for three grades. The planning time was intense and very time consuming. With caution, some of the challenging realities of what we were attempting began to slip into our daily team conversations. Our once exciting challenge was becoming a difficult problem. We were*

*no longer seeing the innovation in the same positive way that we had when we talked as a team during those early planning stages. My job share partner and I were tiring of the extra planning hours as we juggled professional and personal commitments. We had both recently become first time parents, and we both felt as though we were working full time hours.*

*As we continued our meetings, I noticed the most experienced teacher on the team spoke about a constructivist approach to teaching in an eloquent and knowledgeable manner as we planned. However, after a few months of teaching, I began to recognize that the story she told did not fit the story she lived. As she edited student work and added color to a few paintings her students had completed, I questioned what was student-directed about her activities. I worried that her focus was more on product than process. I saw her looking for perfectly polished pieces to adorn the walls, displaying work only if it fit this school's image. I watched as administration came to praise her on her innovative and sound work within our team. I also began to notice another team member's teaching activities had a creative element that, perhaps, made them appear to be quite student-directed. This fit the school's philosophy of teaching. I admired this teacher's low-key work as she quietly, and without fanfare, made a space for students to learn. I noticed she received little praise from administration. She was rarely acknowledged, yet her students were student-directed in their learning. Her teaching did not appear to warrant any recognition of her accomplishments with some challenging students.*

*My job share partner was very curriculum focused. She integrated art and drama into her lessons and seemed to have a creative strength that enriched her teaching. She*

*openly worried about covering the curriculum requirements for our responsibility grouping. She worried about the grade three achievement exams. She also openly spoke about the unstructured nature of the multi-aged setting. She expressed her worry in our evening phone conversations.*

*I began to contemplate what my colleagues thought of my teaching and how they saw me within our group. What had they noticed about my techniques working in the large group? Did they think I spent too much time with those students who were struggling? Did they see me as a team player or someone working in the margins?*

*By November, I began to struggle to work within the team. I attempted to provide an authentic place for learning, where relationships were at the forefront, and to provide learning experiences, which met curriculum requirements. I started out the year focusing on individuality, with life sized self-portraits as the introductory activity to how the students and I would work alongside each other that year. I took time for story and sharing from the first day, as I believed in relationships with children and felt this was the most successful way to tap into individual student learning. It was difficult to find the time required to establish moments where we could all really attend to each other. The group was large and the grade one students appeared, at times, to be overwhelmed in the large group, so I had to think of ways to meet with them in small groups within our busy and tightly scheduled work times.*

*As time passed, I felt our team meetings were becoming more superficial, and we began to focus solely on curriculum when we planned. We were no longer talking about being innovative or flexible, and we were no longer focusing on student-directed activities. I felt I was the only one worried about students who were struggling within the*

*large group. At each meeting I would bring up my concerns but I felt my team members were not as concerned about these children. They would continue planning, without taking time to think about alternatives for these students, and felt we did not have time to accommodate exceptional needs. Each of us seemed to be pulling back into a safe corner, but we did not acknowledge this or discuss it openly. In my private phone conversations with my job share partner, we both expressed our uncertainty about our teaching situation. I wondered if the other team members were feeling some of the tensions that we were feeling, but I was hesitant to ask. I realized I was not feeling as trusting of my team members as I once had.*

*It was December when I found myself talking secretly to a former colleague who now worked across the hall. I began to question my ability to work in this setting when relationship was so important to my teaching. She, too, with a special education background, struggled to build relationships within a large open area room, and admitted to struggling with the number of students. As I began to feel the difficulty in establishing intimate relationships with children in this large multi-aged setting, I also felt tension created by the contradictions of knowing what I believed and having to teach otherwise. I was compelled, perhaps by my special education background and experience, to worry about those students who were struggling in this setting. I remember approaching administration to talk about a difficult student that required some support in dealing with aggressive behaviour and was simply told that there were no behaviour issues at this school. Students with attention difficulties, learning challenges and English as a second language were struggling here. No daily support was available for them.*

*Christmas break came and went and, as I feared, the time away did not rejuvenate our team. Tension was mounting as our team began to avoid working in the large group together. As the school year unfolded, we continued to pull away from each other and go about our "own thing." We began to fragment and re-position to more separate activities.*

*At the same time, I began to question what I initially thought of as cutting edge technique. While we performed our collaborative efforts for the sake of the children, parents and administration even though this way of teaching was not working for us, I began to feel that what I was doing was not cutting edge. While I had joined this school full of hope and excitement, I was beginning to lose my optimism about this innovative way of teaching children.*

*My worries continued to grow for those children for whom this type of teaching was not effective. With this worry came tension, as my beliefs in teaching and what was happening at this particular school collided. Some parents noticed the distracting nature of the learning situation their children were in. Some began to openly address the issues in the school and to question the effectiveness of the multi-aged groups and open areas. In my discussions with some parents, especially those who had children I felt were not suited to the environment, I discreetly recommended that they begin to look for a more appropriate setting for their children. The discomfort that this interaction brought was at times unbearable, and, in some cases, I began to feel guilty and unprofessional in my actions. I knew it was risky to speak openly to parents at this school and worried that one of them might tell administration what I was saying about the environment. I found myself in a very uncomfortable situation.*

*As January passed, I began to hear other teachers tell a story of our team, a story of our struggles as incompetence. I was horrified as I realized I was portrayed as anything less than an “up and comer.” All of my past teaching experiences had sent me to the next level in teacher development. Never, had I experienced a step backward. Now it was said that we were having team problems. I also heard stories about other colleagues and teams who were not teaching according to the philosophy – others that were also having problems. I felt like criticism was around every corner. I felt the staff becoming untrusting and competitive. I felt children’s voices were lost in this setting, though administration continued to speak of children as central to the philosophy.*

*My tension became devastation when a professional development day was planned for March. We were approached by administration to present what we had accomplished so far this year in this innovative and challenging setting. Our struggles and fragmentation made it difficult to put together a presentation that would not make us look incompetent. As we met as a team, we acknowledged we were not teaching according to the story of this school. But we also refused to paint an incompetent picture of ourselves. We had entered this school with outstanding reputations. We knew we were strong, competent teachers. Before the professional development day, administration approached us and asked if we would be presenting our failures, or if we were going to get it together by then. We knew they had been avoiding us, choosing us less for demonstration and offering no advice, as we encountered more tension and discomfort within our team.*

*At our presentation, we discussed teamwork in a professional and realistic way. We acknowledged many of the difficulties we were having in a non-specific way, focusing*

*on curriculum and grouping issues, and suggesting other ways of working together. We provided an opportunity for dialogue about the challenges facing this school and its teachers. Our colleagues seemed to appreciate our honesty and professionalism even though we were presenting struggles within our team. I sensed this appreciation through their reassuring smiles and nods as we spoke.*

*Perhaps the presentation planted a seed for some teachers. As the year progressed, a gradual shift occurred. This shift took place as I discovered one by one, with great caution, that many of the teachers outside my team were secretly experiencing the same sense of worry about the school. By the end of March I found other teachers who were experiencing tension with the school's philosophy. Well into the spring I discovered a teacher who taught as she always had, in a highly structured and planned manner – no student-directed study for her kindergarten and grade one students, and lots of structured literacy lessons. I discovered this teacher's practices after hearing stories that she was incompetent, and I worried that this was how I too was storied. As I spoke with this teacher we shared our fears and discomforts. We came to believe that this school was not a place that honoured our knowing. Even so, it was difficult to know whom to trust. Any discussion of my tension was filled with trepidation and risk. At times I felt as if I could only hold my breath and hope that nothing disastrous happened to my once glowing teaching career. By this time the staff room at this school was deserted, as places outside of the classrooms felt less safe. Teachers shared secret stories in corners of their learning communities after hours, or even in storage rooms. Space, time and place on this landscape were uncomfortable and unpredictable, tainted with an overall feeling of mistrust.*

*It was late May when I received a note in my mailbox from the administration, and it was, perhaps the final moment I recollect in this teaching year. The note questioned if our team could complete a year-end project, or if we had “completely fallen apart.” I shared the note with my team and we all read it several times with shock and disbelief that it had come to this. The note was like a report card – and we had failed. At this point in the year, I could only look back on the many experiences with defeat. I felt I had lost my status and reputation as a solid and innovative teacher.*

*Finally June arrived. Thirteen staff members left this school, many moving into administration elsewhere, as this school also was a stepping-stone to administrative appointments. The focus was on moving away from this place, and we all talked openly about where we would be going in the fall, creating a final tension for this year – competing for teaching positions elsewhere. I was expecting my second child in the fall. I was so grateful to have an appropriate reason to leave.*

*Reflecting on this story now, I feel that my experience in this place impacted my teacher spirit. I felt fear, tension, and mistrust. I felt incompetent at times, unsupported, and judged by most. At times throughout the year, I questioned what I knew and held to be true, and sought reassurance from colleagues in other schools to regain my composure. I spoke about the notion of spirit often to other colleagues. This teaching experience, my relationships in and out of the classroom and the events and circumstances I experienced were all part of what influenced my teacher spirit. I began the year with anticipation and excitement. By midyear, I questioned my abilities and the philosophy of the school and seemed to move back and forth between my feelings of inadequacy and my knowing that what was going on at this school was not what I*

*believed to be best for children. Teachers started to share – first secretly, and later more openly – the tensions they experienced living on this school landscape. As I began outwardly attending to other teachers at this school, I found many to be sharing similar tensions. Together we began to untangle our own beliefs about teaching and learning. Together we seemed to be trying to sustain ourselves in this school. By the end of the year, I was disillusioned with my teaching, the place of school, and disappointed in the profession that I knew I was not ready to leave.*

It seems then, that this search begins with an ending of sorts. It was an ending to a relatively short teaching career in schools. But, it is a beginning to search out what happened to me and to what I cautiously began to call my spirit. I knew that teaching was still very much a part of who I was. I continued to think about teaching, learning and what I began to contemplate as my teacher spirit. My thoughts led me to explore possible ways to make sense of what I was feeling.

### **Beginning To Compose A Research Puzzle**

*I remember the day I formally began this research. I had relocated with my husband and two young children, and officially resigned my position with a large school board when my maternity leave expired. Even though my teaching career stopped, I continued to think about education, teaching, learning, the children I had taught and my feelings about my professional life. I missed the kids, the classroom, and most of all, the fulfillment that being a teacher once provided me.*

*Not sure what I was looking for, I found myself in conversation with my neighbour, a professor in educational psychology. He asked if I would be returning to teaching upon our relocation. I hesitated and suggested that, perhaps, I needed to look*

*for a change. As I briefly alluded to being somewhat disheartened with the current teaching situation, he suggested that I talk with a professor who I had read of, but knew very little about. It seemed a strange thing to do, as I had not, at this time, decided that continued graduate work was what I wanted to do. I had completed a Master of Education in Educational Policy with a baby on my lap, and was not sure my lap was strong enough to do it again with two children under three.*

*As I approached Jean Clandinin with some of my thoughts and struggles, disappointments and confusions, I began to contemplate what exactly it was that I was struggling to find out. I wondered as we talked of applications and deadlines, what had brought me to this place. I questioned my intentions for our meeting. As we talked, a feeling of comfort and connection arose. Why were so many teachers leaving the profession of teaching? What about voice, power, and authenticity? Why did professional development not address the human issues of teaching? My past graduate work entailed a program plan for profession development. In this plan, I attempted to construct a way for teachers to take control of their own professional development on the school landscape. I believe, looking back on this project, that I thought if teachers could take back this part of their profession, they could create a space to talk about the human issues they face as teachers living out their teaching lives. However, I felt my past graduate work did not represent what was bothering me about my profession. I was worried and confused about my spirit and the spirit of friends, who had chosen to leave school and live out teaching lives outside school. I contemplated professional development for teachers by teachers in order to keep their teaching spirits intact. Even though I left school, I could not let go of teaching, of perhaps my teacher spirit. It*

*seemed to be part of who I was. I left that day signed up as a full-time doctoral student in teacher education. I was given an offer – a place and space to write about what was getting to me.*

*That night I broke the news to my husband – who was somewhat surprised, but not at all shocked. He knew I was not done. That night I remember thinking back to my undergraduate days, of being in the Faculty of Commerce and taking that first special education course and realizing immediately that I was in the wrong faculty.*

*I remembered deciding to choose a profession that we all knew provided mediocre pay at best and hours of dedication with little support (but “great holidays”). I remembered even after my decision, how I continued to try to talk myself into other professions (maybe I’d take a law degree when I finished) to alleviate the stigma I was feeling about my career choice. I remembered sitting in a cafeteria with a group of friends I had come to know so well as we endured the grueling pressures of practicum. We had just written our last final exam. We shared our plans, hopes and dreams now that we had completed our teaching degrees.*

How did I, full of hopes and plans, dreams and spirit, come to walking away, glad to have an acceptable reason to leave teaching in schools? How did this teaching experience deplete my spirit? What about my friends and colleagues who have chosen to stay, despite having this kind of experience shape their teaching lives?

### **The Research Puzzle**

Today I wonder about teacher spirit. I wonder about leaving the profession I resisted and chose and loved. Today I wonder about who I am, my identity, and how I resisted school, schooling, teachers and teaching and, at the same time, was pulled to this profession. I wonder what my identity has to do with what I am now trying to understand as teacher spirit? Does what I know shape my teacher spirit? What is the relationship between schools and teacher spirit? These questions were the questions I first puzzled over. These questions motivated this research. I felt compelled to understand spirit – in the context of a teaching life – my spirit as a teacher amidst the current landscape of our teaching profession.

## CHAPTER TWO: WHAT DO I MEAN – SPIRIT?

I am not sure just when I began to think that what I was pondering was my teacher “spirit.” As I used this term to talk of my puzzle, I began to realize the complexity of this term. Reading more about the meanings of the term spirit, it quickly became apparent that I was taking my understanding of teacher spirit for granted, and that this would be a term I would contemplate and research for many years.

As with most of my learning experiences, things became very confusing for a period before I began to re-understand spirit. As I searched for resources, I realized spirit is a frequently used term in today’s pop culture. I was immediately bombarded with a mountain of books in the self-help sections of bookstores. Among them, Chopra (1999) and Zukav (1989) both with best sellers, spoke eloquently of the meaning of spirit, meaning soul, and the need to return balance to our lives through attention to our spirit, or soul. As it became apparent that the new age take on spirit was equated with soul I was inspired to explore other meanings for the term. I began with history, and located *Phenomenology of Spirit*, written by Hegel, first published in 1807 as part of his philosophical system later published in *Encyclopedia of the Philosophical Sciences in Outline* of 1817. With the development of the concept of a *self* during the 19<sup>th</sup> century, Hegel’s work examined the stages of the mind’s process from immediate sense-consciousness to the position of scientific philosophy. Hegel felt that in order for “spirit” to fulfill its destiny of self-realization, man must bring to an end his being influenced by the external power of society and exist on his own. Spirit, in Hegel’s work, was seen as a sub-conscious part of our personality, but a part that one must begin to take control of. Philosophers (Lauer, 1976; Dudeck, 1981; Heidegger, 1988) attempted to analyze and

argue Hegel's original work on spirit, illustrating its complicated nature, and perhaps the difficulty in philosophically identifying *spirit*.

The nature and origin of spirit and how it is understood appears to be a complex and multifaceted puzzle. I turned next to a brief look at definitions of spirit.

### **Spirit**

Webster's Third New International Dictionary (1986) provides the following definition:

The immaterial intelligent or sentient part of a person: the vital principle in man providing one's personality with its inward structure, dynamic drive and creative response to the demands it encounters in the process of becoming. (p. 2198)

In this sense, spirit is connected to identity – it interconnects personality formation with our drive and our response to experiences. This definition connects our personalities to their inward structure. This might be another way of expressing spirit as an integral part of our identity.

The Oxford Dictionary (1933) provides over twenty definitions of *spirit*. One defines spirit in connection with identity and knowledge stating “the mind or faculties as the seat of action and feeling; especially as liable to be depressed or exalted by events or circumstances” (p. 618). This definition supports a relationship between our spirit and the events we experience. In this definition, spirit is something shaped by our experiences, something that can be depressed or exalted depending on the circumstances. Certainly in my last teaching experience, the events that took place on that landscape depressed my actions and feelings as a teacher. These were not superficial mishaps, but a series of events and circumstances that began to shape my teacher spirit. As these

circumstances bumped up against what I knew, my ability to act in a comfortable and familiar manner became difficult. My feelings as a teacher were shaped by dis-ease, my spirit shaped by the context.

A second Oxford (1933) definition is:

The animating or vital principle in man; that which gives life to the physical organism; the soul of the person. The active or essential principle or power of some emotion or frame of mind operating in a person. Mettle; vigour of mind; ardour; courage; disposition or readiness to assert oneself or to hold one's own.

(p. 617-618)

This definition elicits a connection between the term *spirit* and the sense of self in that it is our spirit that evokes the strength to stay consistent with our beliefs, our knowledge and our identity even when contradicted by experiences and circumstances. In this sense, spirit provides our ability to “hold one's own” or maintain our sense of self.

This definition also connects spirit to that which gives life to the physical organism. This relates spirit to breath. Brenda Cameron, in conversation with me during my candidacy exam, spoke of spirit as breath. Looking at the origin of the word spirit, it comes from the Latin word *spiritus*, meaning breath. An interesting parallel is that at times during my last formal teaching experience, I felt I could not breathe. I felt I had to hold my breath, or that I could not breathe freely as my teacher knowledge collided with the story of that school.

At the same time, my search for others who also felt this way seemed to indicate that I was sure of my self and hanging on to that self that I knew. Perhaps I looked for

others so that strength in numbers would allow me to assert my self and influence the shaping of my spirit on this landscape.

These dictionary definitions seemed to suggest that spirit might be connected to the knowledge we hold, as the “immaterial intelligent or sentient part of a person.” Spirit seems to be tightly connected to the context in which we experience, in which our spirit can be “depressed or exalted by events and circumstances.” Spirit also seems connected to our identity, as the “soul of the person,” or the inward structure of one’s personality. However, I continued to think about my spirit in terms of teaching, and continued to feel something was missing within these definitions. I felt the definitions were not capturing the notion that spirit may be something that is fluid, changing and shaped by the experiences we have. The definitions seemed too static, too permanent. As I continued my search for the meaning of spirit, I turned to the educational literature related to spirit within the context of education and teachers.

There is beginning to be research related to teacher spirit, primarily under the title spirituality in schools (Bohac-Clarke 2002, Jones, 1995). This research alludes to teacher spirit or spirituality, but does not refer specifically to teacher spirit. Special interest groups are now being formed to look more carefully at the human issues in teaching (I am currently involved in one at University of Calgary) at a time when education moves toward a more prescriptive form of education with standardized testing as a central focus. However, there is still very little educational research that speaks specifically of the spirit of teachers. One article, written by Oladele (1998) speaks of spirit specifically, as she reflects on her work with primary age children over a number of years. She describes her understanding of spirit as:

the spark of life that resides within every human being; it is the connection to the fabric of all life and to the source of all creation, and it is the essence of what it means to be a human being. (p. 62)

I tried to make sense of this definition in relation to my teaching experience in chapter one. Perhaps it was the spark of life, specifically my teaching life which resides in me, that was dimmed. As I taught amidst tension and contradiction, I became less enthusiastic, more disappointed and somewhat disillusioned. The spark that I had when I began that teaching position was extinguished by the many experiences that went against my beliefs and my knowledge as a teacher. Although this definition was helpful, I realized that spirit was not just about me, it was about being *in relation*, and its meaning for me included more than an individual spark, an individual spirit.

### **Spirit, Not Burnout**

As I continued to explore the notion of spirit, I was immediately directed by many to the literature on teacher burnout. I soon realized that teacher burnout was a complex and much researched area, and that burnout had been defined and analyzed to include distinct characteristics. Brock & Grady (2000) outline a comprehensive list of symptoms of burnout including “symptoms in five areas: physical, intellectual, social, emotional and spiritual” (p. 5). The colleagues that I witnessed leaving, did not display all or even any of these classic symptoms, which Brock and Grady see as multifaceted, interwoven and interrelated factors that lead to burnout. In their description of the symptoms, I did see a connection between my wonders and the spiritual symptoms they described, such as decreased work satisfaction and lowered self-confidence as an important part of the research puzzle. But the other symptoms appeared not to fit into my thinking on spirit. I

continued my search, realizing that I was puzzled by something other than what the current research on teacher burnout was exploring.

### **Spirit, Not Spirituality**

As I began to discuss this research with colleagues, a new challenge presented itself. It became apparent that I had to distinguish my topic as a religious or non-religious one. People would either shy away from asking if I meant a teacher's religion, or assume I was a religious person doing God's work. Sorting out the connection between spirit, spirituality, and religion was necessary. Hawley (1993) makes a clear distinction between spirituality and religion. He states: "to put it simply spirituality is the goal, religion is the path" (p.3). Religion is a product of a time and place meant for a group focusing on the path through a set of beliefs. I see religion as a community for sharing life's ups and downs, or a way of life. I understand spirituality to be the goal of a religion or belief system.

Adding to the complexity, Hawley (1993) also differentiates 'S'pirit and 's'pirit. "Capital s" Spirit, as he describes, is like a solid rock with squiggly lines coming from it. He believes these lines are the energy, current, juice, and connections that bring about capital s Spirit. He believes capital s Spirit cannot be changed, it is just there. Energy is not the Spirit, but the force of it. He continues to clarify energy (including vitality, gusto, zest, and spirit – "small s" spirit) as the action part of Spirit; or the moving, changing part of it.

The small s spirit seems to fit better with my sense of spirit, more specifically a teacher's small s spirit. I gravitate to the words moving and changing, feeling like it clarifies my thoughts as I continue to puzzle through my wonders about spirit.

Movement emancipates energy, it activates us, and it denotes strength, vigour and vim. Mary Young, a friend and colleague versed in aboriginal ways of knowing, used to smile as I struggled for the meaning of spirit and would tell me simply “it’s just energy.” However, along with this image of movement, I gravitate to the word change. Small s spirit helps me make sense of spirit as ever changing, always active, performing and transforming (Hawley, p. 37) and I believe as impacted by the events that we experience around us as we live a life. Hawley’s (1993) belief is that capital s Spirit “does not change, is immutable and is that which always remains the same – always” (p. 37). It is this belief that forces me to favour small s spirit as I contemplate the meaning of the term, as I can not see spirit as static or solely individual.

### **A Metaphor For Spirit**

As I contemplate movement and change and small s spirit, I am struck with another image, as thinking in metaphors is often helpful when trying to make sense of something (Lakoff & Johnson, 1980). At this point I am reminded of a specific music genre – Jazz – or even more specifically a jazz player. Can seeing a jazz player as a metaphor for teacher spirit help me in my research puzzle? Jazz players improvise – always changing, always fluid, always shaped by context, individuality and technique. Jazz music is shaped and reshaped by its players depending on inward and outward influences. Other players add to the complexity of the jazz composition, also shaping the music as they feed off one another and what surrounds them. They give each other energy as they improvise a melody based on the same chord progressions that are repeated. Each player takes a turn at improvising a melody. Players also create rhythms characterized by constant syncopation (the placing of accents in unexpected places,

usually on the weaker beat) and by swing (the sensation of momentum). Most jazz players believe that an infinite number of melodies can fit the chord progressions of any song. The players repeat the chord progression over and over as each soloist is featured. A jazz player will insist that her melody is inspired and energized by the one before her and each player feeds off another. This can go on indefinitely. In most cases, someone decides (usually the piano player) when the piece should wrap and it comes to some sort of closure, only to move to a new chord progression and new melodies. Maybe spirit, specifically teacher spirit is much the same. Perhaps my spirit is fluid and improvised based on influences both from my knowledge and from the contexts in which I interact. Maybe my spirit is shaped and reshaped depending on these inward and outward influences. Perhaps people, places, and experience shape my spirit and I improvise as I go along. Much like composing a jazz piece with changes in rhythm and melody along the way, maybe my spirit changes as I evolve through experiences that shape my knowledge and my identity.

As I revisit chapter one, I can relate my teaching to that of a jazz player. It seemed that as the chord progression began to change and disappear, so too did my ability to compose a melody. The rhythms and patterns to the teaching day became unpredictable to me and as they changed, I lost the solid base (chord progressions) that I required to teach alongside children, attending to their individual needs (my melody). As time passed, there were moments where I would re-establish a solid chord progression, but these moments were overpowered by the strong story of this school. As I struggled to compose my melody, I continued to lose my sense of rhythm and balance as my teacher knowledge collided with the unfamiliar chord progressions of this place.

I came to this meaning of spirit through metaphor, and a jazz player metaphor helps me to clarify my wonders. The process of puzzling over spirit allowed me to move forward in this work. It is with this understanding of spirit that I begin my improvisation of the syncopation and swing of teacher spirit.

It was a year in a teaching life, one that moved my thinking and feelings about teaching to another place. This experience seemed to shape my spirit as I worked in relation with teachers, stories of teachers, a school and a story of school. Together these interactions with unexpected changes and events and a varied sense of moving forward and backward in this place changed what I am beginning to think of now as my teacher spirit.

### **My Understanding Of Spirit**

After much consideration of the definitions and clarifications and thinking about spirit in relation to my experience in chapter one, I see spirit as something unique and individual, the inward structure of a person, but I believe it is still more than this. Spirit is energy or a sense of vitality that is fluid, and improvised, but I believe spirit only exists in relation to experience. Dewey's (1934) belief is that both the personal and the social are always present in experience. He believed experience to be both personal and social and people could not be understood only as individuals because they live in relation to others, always in a social context. Dewey also attends to the temporal in his criteria of continuity. For Dewey, people bring forward what they know into each new experience. With this in mind, spirit only makes sense to me in terms of a life lived. I find the dictionary definitions and Hawley's definition to be missing the idea of experience and its reflexivity in response to situations. I make sense of what I mean by my spirit in

relation to experiences and situations that I have encountered, some depleting my spirit, others sustaining it and still others rejuvenating it. In turn I respond to those situations and I continue to experience in relation to previous events and circumstances. I believe spirit makes sense in connection with identity, or a life, as the reciprocity of experience shapes and influences it.

### **The Research Puzzle**

I can return to my jazz player metaphor and say I am researching a human improvisation, a composition that resides within each of us in our own lives in context, and would never be the same for all. For the purpose of this research, and because I am a teacher, I can say I am researching the jazz composition that resides within each of us as we each live out our teaching lives in school contexts. As I try to make sense of what I mean, I say that I shape my teacher spirit with both syncopation (the unexpected experiences) and swing (the sensation of momentum), either on or off school landscapes.

As I come to this metaphor to help me understand what I am puzzled by, I continue to think about the connection between identity and teacher spirit, the contexts in which I work and what I know, and how these connections shape my teacher spirit. Finding a language to express these wonders becomes the next step in this composition.

### CHAPTER THREE: A LANGUAGE TO EXPLORE TEACHER SPIRIT

In order to understand teacher spirit based on my definition of spirit, I believe it is important to understand lives in schools. Understanding lives in schools may provide a means to explore teacher spirit as it is interwoven into the experiences and events that ultimately shape each teacher's spirit as they live out their teaching lives in schools. Attending to experiences of lives in schools as a means to understanding teacher spirit leads me again to Dewey. Dewey's (1938a) theory of experience has specific criteria. Continuity being the first criterion of experience "is the notion that experiences grow out of and lead to other experiences" (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000, p. 2). Dewey understands experience to take place in interaction, being the second criterion of experience. An experience is composed of persons in an immediate environment of things, interacting according to certain processes. This means that people engage and are engaged by themselves and others, and at any time there is a dynamic interaction among persons, things and processes. The third criterion of experience according to Dewey's theory— situation – is the attending to physical boundaries of inquiry landscapes. Situations grow out of other situations and all situations are historical. What happened in the past, influences what is happening right now, and in this sense all people have a history and reflect that history. At the same time, situations have a future as they lead to other situations, which contribute to a dynamic temporal sense of experience. Experience is both personal and social and occurs in specific places or sequences of places over time and in relation.

As I make sense of experience according to Dewey's theory, I am led to examine more closely several of Clandinin and Connelly's (1986, 1988, 1991, 1995, 1998, 2000)

terms for thinking about teacher knowledge and identity in an experiential way growing out of Dewey's notion of experience. The terms I find useful in giving this inquiry a language to work from are professional knowledge landscape, personal practical knowledge, and identity, or a combination of these terms, our "stories to live by." I begin with the professional knowledge landscape or, a metaphor for understanding the context in which a teacher teaches.

As I struggled to sort out the puzzling questions of this research I am more and more convinced that I must look at teacher spirit within the context of a life. I wanted to understand teachers' lives in schools. I wanted to understand my own life in schools. As Clandinin and Connelly did, I used Dewey's (1938a) theory of experience to help me to understand the relationship and importance of experience to spirit. In this sense, professional knowledge landscape became meaningful as I connected it to the context of my experience in chapter one. I was surrounded by my own stories to live by, teachers and their stories to live by, stories of those teachers (and administrators), the school itself, and the stories that surrounded that school. All of these relationships make up what Clandinin and Connelly call the professional knowledge landscape.

### **The Professional Knowledge Landscape**

When I read of Clandinin and Connelly's concept of professional knowledge landscape I realized I could think about the school context I described in the first chapter of this work. Clandinin and Connelly (1995) describe the professional knowledge landscape as "a concept developed to give an account of the knowledge contexts in which teachers' personal practical knowledge of school and classroom life exists" (p. 4). Clandinin and Connelly (1995) believe that teachers' professional lives take shape on a

landscape of morally oriented professional knowledge. They clarify the metaphor of landscape in stating “[Landscape] allows us to talk about space, place and time, and has a sense of expansiveness and the possibility of being filled with diverse people, things and events in different relationships” (p. 4). They also state that teachers’ lives take certain shapes because of their professional knowledge landscape. The framework for a professional knowledge landscape of school includes teacher stories, stories of teachers, school stories and stories of school (Clandinin & Connelly, 1996). As an individual’s circumstances change on a given landscape, so do the stories she tells.

The school in which I was employed had a specific philosophy (or story) that was orated on this landscape. This story was the story of school and, interacting with this story, were the stories of teachers. When I think about the teacher who told a creative story without fanfare, I realize she brought her storied knowledge. I realize that I brought my stories of teaching to this landscape as well. I believe in individualized teaching to meet the needs of kids that do not learn in a traditional way. I believe that multi-aged settings are a way of accommodating individual needs. I believe that children need a safe and secure place to work in relation, sharing their stories to live by with each other and me in order to learn and move forward as people. This formed a story of my personal practical knowledge. Teachers came to this landscape with varying experiences and expertise. They came with their own personal practical knowledge of teaching and learning. This integration of their stories with the stories of school together formed the professional knowledge landscape. Upon my arrival to this school I was confused because I began to realize that the story of this school was somewhat of a cover story. Although this school had a reputation for being cutting edge, I began to realize that many

of the teachers on this landscape did not agree with the cover story this school presented. The story told was different from the story lived on this landscape. It seemed to go against what they knew as experienced teachers, along with their knowledge from a lifetime of experiences related to school and schooling. The contradictions I experienced between this professional knowledge landscape and my knowledge and identity created a tension for me as I began to further understand the story of this school. The lack of trust and support that I felt contributed to my formation of alternative stories of school on this landscape. The suspicions and tensions that other teachers and I experienced contributed to the sharing of secret stories on this school landscape. We secretly talked about our fears and disappointment with the situation and the level of trust and competitive nature. These teacher stories also became part of the professional knowledge landscape. As my circumstances changed on this landscape, so did the stories I told. This felt foreign and uncomfortable. At times I felt I was searching for breathing space. I felt somewhat incapable, and at times incompetent. At other times I felt confident in my abilities and worried about the volatility of this landscape and the learning of the children. I felt as though I was taking risks and not meeting the challenges. At times I felt as though I had lost the rhythms, the chord progressions that I had come to know and rely upon as I lived out my teaching days with children.

The diversity of the relationships among the people, place, things and events composed this professional knowledge landscape. It is the changing situation of the place of school that becomes central as I adopt this term to speak of context throughout this inquiry. I gravitated to the term change when exploring the meaning of spirit. "Professional knowledge landscape" provides a language to explore the nature of

changing situations in relation to teacher spirit. As a jazz player experiences, and is then moved to play in a particular manner based on the venue in which she plays and the fellow musicians she improvises with, perhaps a teacher's spirit is shaped and reshaped on the professional knowledge landscape in which she teaches.

Professional knowledge landscape, a metaphor for the place of school, helps me to make sense of the changing situations of schools. It also helps me to think about the moral sense of the landscape – the tensions between teacher's stories and professional knowledge landscape. In this sense, the professional knowledge landscape is the way I will think about the place of school and the contexts in which teachers live as I explore teacher spirit.

### **Returning To The Research Puzzle**

As I return to my research puzzle using the language of Clandinin and Connelly (2000), I question the connection between the professional knowledge landscape and teacher spirit. I question how the landscapes I've lived on as I lived out my teaching life have shaped my spirit. How do the storied landscapes teachers live on over their teaching lives shape their teacher spirits?

### **Personal Practical Knowledge**

#### *Memories From Behind the Piano*

*Perhaps my first story of school began one fall morning from behind a piano in my kindergarten class. It was then that I realized school was not like home. Home was wonderful. I watched "Mr. Dressup," did crafts, ate neat things for lunch, played with toys, read books, coloured, did puzzles and carried on without ever feeling as though I was doing anything wrong. The warmth and support from my mother lingered*

*throughout the house, even though I do not remember her as all powerful, all encompassing, directing or forcing. I do remember her being there when I needed her to open a lid, tie a knot, cut out a difficult piece, provide materials, and most of all to encourage. As far as I could tell from behind the piano at school that day, this place no longer existed for me. I had entered the institution of school. At school, it appeared that right and wrong came to the forefront. I learned that talking was bad; questions were worse; reading when I was supposed to be “whatevering” was enough to get sent behind the piano for not listening. As a five-year-old, I contemplated the place of school from behind that piano. I tried to cope with the devastation I felt when I realized school was not a warm supportive place for learning, but a place where, for me, humiliation and shame were too common. I felt as though I could no longer be who I was – a child with a vivid imagination, an insatiable need to talk and too many questions.*

What do I know and how does it connect to my teacher spirit? *Memories From Behind the Piano* allows me to make sense of what I know and employ a language to explore my knowledge in relation to teacher spirit. Looking back on that morning now, I understand the impact this experience had on me as a student, a learner, a teacher and a person. As part of my personal practical knowledge shaped in those early school days, I lived out this knowing in my teaching practices.

I describe some images of an early experience of school that shaped the stories I lived by in schools in relation with the children I worked alongside. By understanding the work of Clandinin and Connelly (1988, 1995) I now understand how this experience became part of my personal practical knowledge. Personal practical knowledge, (Connelly & Clandinin, 1988) is defined as:

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

My "personal practical knowledge" (Clandinin, 1985, 1986; Clandinin & Connelly, 1995; Connelly & Clandinin, 1988) is embodied knowledge, is "experiential, value-laden, purposeful and oriented to practice. Personal knowledge is viewed as tentative, subject to change and transient, rather than something fixed, objective and unchanging" (Clandinin, 1986, p. 19). Clandinin and Connelly (1995) also define teachers' personal practical knowledge as the "body of convictions and meanings, conscious or unconscious, that have arisen from experience and that are expressed in a person's practices" (p. 7). For them, knowledge arises from experiences and is expressed in teaching practices. For example, my personal practical knowledge was shaped by my experiences of school as a young child as I developed images of what school was. Clandinin clarifies this process in saying:

Images, as components of personal practical knowledge, are the coalescence of a person's personal private and professional experience. Image is a way of organizing and reorganizing past experience, both in reflection and as the image finds expression in practice and as a perspective from which new experience is taken. (p. 166)

Images of my childhood school experiences shaped my teaching practice in many ways. In my first teaching experience, with a group of students with learning challenges, I felt my first priority to the children was to ensure they felt safe. I felt the need to ensure their experiences encouraged them as learners. I felt a need to attend to their lives – the events they lived day to day – and how those events played out when they returned to school each day. I felt a need to remove any notion of humility or shame, which I knew discouraged me as a learner in my childhood.

Clandinin and Connelly (1988) see knowledge as embedded within the “culture and traditions of schooling” (p. 269). They believe that “the sources of evidence for understanding knowledge, and the places knowledge may be said to reside exist not only in the mind but in the narratives of personal experience” (p. 269). Teacher knowledge is based on an individual’s personal experiences. As stories of schools unfold and plotlines are constructed, a teacher’s personal practical knowledge is shaped and influenced. Personal practical knowledge is re-formed, re-shaped and re-established on the professional landscape as teachers move through their lives in schools, negotiating their teacher stories to live by.

The idea of studying personal practical knowledge requires attention to the totality of a teaching life. This includes knowing teaching rhythms (Clandinin & Connelly, 1986), which are critical to the narrative piece. I am again reminded of my first teaching experience and classroom where a rhythm of a predictable routine unfolded. This routine revolved around continuity and safety. Each day we began by reading. We gathered to share stories of the night before, we worked on individual projects, and we celebrated the “V.I.P.” of the week. Each day we gathered at several important times

within the school schedule to regroup, share, and plan. These events became routines in the sense that the children fell into the rhythms of the day with relief, with feelings of safety and predictability in their school lives that they had not previously experienced. Many of these children did not experience this kind of rhythm in their homes as I had. Our classroom became a predictable place for them to be safe and to learn. These children were not risk takers. These children were not secure. They needed a sense of continuity and predictability to reassure them that they were safe in our classroom. I remember my Mother creating this same kind of place for me in our home. I also remember my Mother making time for story and sharing each day. This became a rhythm of teaching in our classroom. Daily, routine times for story and connection became central to our classroom. Literature was shared daily with these children – to remind them of the joy of reading and encourage them to trust books again – after years of discouraging reading experiences. This too, became part of our daily rhythm. Many days, we would read past the allotted time, just to prolong the peaceful nature of listening to someone read. I remember being in awe of my older sister, who would read books to me. They were often too difficult for me to understand, but how I loved to listen to her read. I remember the peaceful tone of her voice and the soothing nature of the printed words as she spoke them. I remember how it nourished my spirit as a child. I tried to pass on this feeling to students by creating a similar soothing environment each day. Oladele (1998) states that her “first awareness of the significance of spirit began in her childhood home” (p. 62). Reflecting now on this story, I too believe that my awareness of spirit and its importance began with the atmosphere created by my family in my home as a child.

Lakoff and Johnson's (1980) work concludes that metaphor is a concept that we live by.

[M]ost people think that they can get along perfectly well without metaphor. We have found on the contrary, that metaphor is pervasive in everyday life, not just in language, but also in thought and action. Our ordinary conceptual system, in terms of which we both think and act, is fundamentally metaphorical in nature.

...The essence of metaphor is understanding and experiencing one kind of thing in terms of another. (p. 3-5)

Clandinin and Connelly (2000) believe Lakoff and Johnson's work (1980) is directly connected to experiential knowledge. I can use a metaphor of an oasis to describe the feeling of our classroom in that first year. It was safe, warm and secure. It was our fertile spot in the desert. This classroom was filled with trust, respect and warmth. Filled with "good" things, it was an oasis for all of us. I distinctly remember hurrying us back to our oasis after assemblies, which always tested the children emotionally. They were so aware of their emphasized differences (simply by being segregated) that it drained them to step outside of our oasis. My personal practical knowledge of having a safe, lush place to spend time helped me to create this space with these children – knowing that they needed this type of gathering place before we could go anywhere else, emotionally or intellectually.

My metaphor of a jazz player comes from my personal practical knowledge of jazz as a genre and as a piano player. It helps me to make sense of teacher spirit, knowing it is fluid, moving and unpredictable. As Lakoff and Johnson suggest, the essence of this metaphor and the oasis metaphor above allow for understanding and

experiencing one kind of thing in terms of another. These are concepts that I live by, pervasive in my everyday life, in my actions, thoughts and language.

Another part of my personal practical knowledge consisted as rules. One rule I lived was to always respect children. These children were examples of what happens when we disrespect those who have differences. The feelings of being disrespected were familiar to me. I remember feeling shy and withdrawn in school. This knowledge led me to identify these children as having low self-esteem. I remember lacking confidence in school and being afraid to take risks. This knowledge allowed me to identify their lack of confidence. I remember learning to avoid the teacher's eye contact for fear of being asked a question to which I might not have the "right" answer. I noticed they too had learned every coping skill available, which unfortunately included avoidance and aggression. I knew that these children required respect, and that gaining their respect would be difficult. These memories lead me to believe I reconstructed my past and my intentions for the future to deal with the present situation in my teaching practice.

My thoughts move to memories of my students in that first teaching experience, to students like Robert, who despite his best efforts, was blamed for most playground disputes, regardless of whether or not he was outside. There was Avery, who had at most a very mild learning disability and was a talented athlete, but who could not take part on school teams, as spaces appeared to be reserved only for the popular boys. There was James, who, on special occasions, brought me presents he had taken from his house, because he could not bear being the only one without a gift for me. We spent many mornings, early, before the bell rang, chatting over a bowl of cereal, sometimes the only food he would have all day. My kindergarten memory allowed me to attend to these

children, assuming that they too felt their stories and their knowledge had no place at school. I attended to these children, to their lives and alongside them knowing how I had felt as a child with no space or voice in my kindergarten classroom.

It is these images of children that live in my personal practical knowledge. It is these images that help me to now better understand the impact of that kindergarten day. My need to protect children who did not feel a sense of belonging or familiarity on the school landscape was nourished by my own experiences of not belonging or feeling safe on the school landscape in my earliest years at school. Perhaps my kindergarten experience is one that shaped my teacher spirit. Perhaps this and other experiences assembled to form my teacher spirit, a spirit that ultimately led me back to school landscapes as a teacher.

And yet, I am filled with wonders: What do I know and why do I think about teacher spirit and how it connects with my personal practical knowledge? I know I was a child who had her spirit shaped and reshaped on the school landscape. I know I am a teacher who worked hard each day to attend to the children I taught and to the teachers with whom I worked. These are the stories I tell myself of who I am and what I know.

### **Returning To The Research Puzzle**

A narrative inquiry (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000) “characteristically begins with the researcher’s autobiographically oriented narrative associated with the research puzzle (called by some the research problem or research questions)” (p. 41). It is these autobiographical stories that make me wonder: How is teacher spirit formed, shaped and established by my experiences throughout my lifetime in schools? Does this shaping and influence impact my spirit? Do the body of convictions and meanings that I hold and value to be true summon teacher spirit? There is something in me that called me to teach, to live my life in schools, to build relationships with children and to nourish their and my spirit through the sharing of experiences. In this sense, teacher spirit seems to be part of my personal practical knowledge. Perhaps my spirit is rooted in my convictions and meanings that have arisen from experiences throughout my life, even from my earliest experiences of school from behind the piano. Certainly, Clandinin and Connelly’s work on personal practical knowledge provides a language for me to utilize as I ponder my own knowledge and its connection to my teaching spirit. It is with the term personal practical knowledge that I can make sense of my wonders of knowledge and teacher spirit. I can now reiterate my wonder to be: What is the connection between personal practical knowledge and teacher spirit?

## Identity And Teacher Spirit

### *Who am I: Living in Contradiction*

*Who am I and why do I think about teacher spirit? I am an Albertan from Saskatchewan, a daughter, a granddaughter, a sister, an accounting clerk, a corporate librarian, a teacher, a spouse, a mother, a student, and a nonconformist of sorts. I questioned the status quo at almost every level of childhood and adolescence, and continue to do so in adulthood. I believe that perhaps this in part emerges from the feeling that amongst my stable family and home life was a feeling of contradiction; contradiction within my own life, within my family's life and within the spaces we lived.*

*Where do I come from? I usually answer "all over Saskatchewan," when this question is posed. However, lately, this does not seem to answer the question accurately. As I think about my grandparents on my mother's side I ponder the notion of contradiction and how it is woven into in my identity and more specifically my teacher identity.*

*My grandfather's family came to Canada from France dating back to the 1700's making my grandfather surely Canadian; my grandmother's family was from Scotland. They found each other in small rural communities in northern Saskatchewan. They built a life together by choosing to homestead in northern Saskatchewan, on rugged farmland that needed to be cleared and worked in order to provide an existence that would sustain them on that landscape.*

*My grandfather led a successful life, although contradictory ~ he was a dirt farmer, a Member of Parliament, and an owner of a construction company. From this I realized that I could be anything I wanted to be. I became an optimist, a risk-taker, and a*

*resistor of the status quo, knowing full well that my grandfather was successful alongside his resistance. Something in his spirit to resist the ordinary and go the extra mile to succeed perhaps became part of my spirit to resist and move forward and succeed.*

*My grandmother, at the age of eighty-nine, continues to spend several days in the bush each year picking blueberries to give to family and friends. She efficiently fed fifteen men on a busy day and worked the land every bit as diligently as they, but also had a quiet and somewhat unsure nature to her that was somehow contradictory to me. From this I realized I could be strong and shy at the same time. I became determined, assertive and at the same time somewhat unsure, realizing that my grandmother was all of these things. Her ability to take care of business and complete difficult tasks and at the same time rejuvenate her spirit as she went off to the bush as a form of meditation for her, has perhaps inspired me to find ways to nourish my own spirit.*

*My mother, a feminist at heart, was born into the wrong era and somehow managed to hold true to her beliefs as she lived through the 1950's and 60's as a traditional "housewife" or "hausfrau" as she likes to refer to it. She managed to sustain herself by passing on her beliefs about resistance and equal opportunity for women by indoctrinating my sister and me into the world of feminism from an age too young for me to specifically recall. I have distinct memories of her emphasis on the importance of education because it was "something that could not be taken away." I remember her criteria for choosing a spouse and have memories of trying to convince her that two out of three was quite good.*

*Although I know now as I ponder her life, she lived through bitterness and resentment, disillusionment and disappointment, it was never apparent in our home,*

*which she managed as effectively as any small business owner ever could. Certainly her spirit was depleted as she felt she had little choice in the life she lived. She lived a cover story in this sense that prevented her from authentically composing her own life. She had to stifle many of the improvisations that could have led her to play a different melody, simply because she lived in the time that she did. Certainly her spirit was stifled as she chose from limited paths. Even so, she seemed to keep her spirit intact and managed to move forward with energy and vitality. Certainly, she had dreams, hopes, thoughts, and ambitions of her own. Certainly, she felt she had few options living her life as a married woman and mother of three children in this era where women were still actively and openly oppressed (Heilbrun, 1988).*

*From this I realized that being female was an extra challenge. I came to know resentment, contradiction, and inequality. It made me strong, resilient, and confident, and at the same time somewhat cautious. Certainly, the contradictions my mother felt then and continues to feel today have had an enormous impact on my identity, my teacher identity and my teacher spirit.*

*My father was a city person; born and raised in Regina to a family I know little about. After leaving home at a relatively young age he met my mother in northern Saskatchewan as a government employee. Their story was one that went against the grain, yet they began to plan a life together ~ an indication to me that my rebellious nature is part of a familiar story. This meeting resulted in my mother leaving her home, her family and her roots for a transient city life with my father. My dad, with a work ethic made of steel, worked diligently to become successful and provide the best for his family. His spirit was nourished in knowing he was accomplishing good things for*

*people. His success came from attending to the human issues of work with a refreshing sensibility. He continues to believe in people and believe in the basics. This wisdom has taken him far.*

*From this I realized a sense of worth in people and in common sense. This shaped my belief in individuality and self-worth; that each one of us has something very special to offer. My first teaching experience strengthened these realizations. My stories to live by were composed knowing this. This shaping of my identity now contributes to my belief that the human issue of teacher spirit is something that must be attended to and explored more deeply.*

How is identity connected to teacher spirit? I begin to understand the language of Clandinin and Connelly (1998) as I ponder *Who am I: Living in Contradiction*. It is here that I begin to understand the notion of identity and how my spirit is shaped and reshaped in relation to my experiences. My spirit is part of my identity. Perhaps it is my spirit that makes me uniquely who I am. As I compose my life I also shape my spirit which remains fluid, open to improvisation along the way. The people in my family have influenced my spirit through their own spirits and unique identities.

My connection to my grandfather influenced my identity and my spirit in the sense that I am able to resist stories that bump up against my stories to live by. In turn, my spirit is what allows me to stay true to my beliefs as I react and interact in new situations and experience events. I also saw this as part of my grandfather's identity.

My connection to my grandmother is perhaps what now allows me to find balance and realize I can be vulnerable while still being strong. This connection shapes my spirit

in the sense that I can understand the connection between my identity – with its strengths and weaknesses as part of what shapes my spirit.

My relationship with my mother is one that has given me most insight into my identity and the connection between my identity and my spirit. I see in my mother the contradictions that I face that shape my spirit as I live out experiences along a path that is sometimes rough and often unpredictable. I see in myself the contradictions that I face and how they shape my spirit in relation to who I am. My mother's determination, strong opinions and quick sense of wit teaches me that even though we might be vulnerable or face challenges (certainly the challenges of being female) we can still respect who we are as individuals.

My father has been a role model for me. He works with determination, dedication and common sense. This common sense is what I value in my own identity as I evaluate my strengths and weaknesses as an individual. In this sense, my identity is closely connected to my spirit and what I see as my father's spirit. I think the energy and wisdom that my father combined to bring about his successes are what connect his spirit to his identity. For him, energy and wisdom became one, working together to make him who he was in his work and who he is today.

It is after looking at these connections in my own life that I can explore identity alongside teacher spirit. This connection perhaps needs to be further examined specifically in relation to teaching and living a teaching life.

### **Teacher Identity And Teacher Spirit**

After considering spirit alongside identity, and as I consider this in the context of teaching, I feel that I am speaking of something unique, part of a teaching life. If I am

looking uniquely at teacher spirit, then I am in part talking about what moves me forward as a teacher in my work. What is it that drives me forward as I teach children in schools? Assuming that I can look uniquely at teacher spirit within the context of a teaching life, then it seems necessary to examine identity more specifically. As I think about my last teaching experience in schools, I now believe it was my teacher identity that eventually was challenged as my spirit was shaped and reshaped on that school landscape. Over time, I began to change my thoughts and beliefs about teaching based on the experiences and the context in which I was teaching. Over time, my teacher identity began to shift. I began to question my knowledge and beliefs in teaching. I began to question my status, my reputation and my standing as a teacher working within a competitive system. There is an abundance of literature that attempts to clarify and explain the notion of teacher identity (Bateson, 1994; Vinz, 1996; Palmer, 1999; Greene, 1973). Because of the interconnection between identity and spirit, I believe it is necessary to examine this literature in relation to teacher spirit.

Greene (1973) addresses teacher identity specifically in her book, *Teacher as Stranger*.

The teacher is frequently addressed as if he had no life of his own, no body, and no inwardness. Lecturers seem to presuppose a man within man when they describe a good teacher as infinitely controlled and accommodating, technically efficient, impervious to moods. They are likely to define him by the role he is expected to play in a classroom, with all his loose ends gathered up and all his doubts resolved. The numerous realities in which he exists as a living person are overlooked. His personal biography is overlooked: so are the many ways in

which he expresses private self in language, the horizons he perceives, the perspectives through which he looks on the world. (pp. 269-270)

Although Greene (1973) is describing teacher identity, I also uniquely sense something of teacher spirit in that she speaks of a teacher's numerous realities (a teacher's experiences). The perspectives through which I look on the world have influenced my identity and in turn shaped my spirit. Interestingly enough, in my last teaching year, it seems that many of the things that Greene refers to were what became vulnerable in me. I felt exposed in the open area with no safe place to return to. I seemed to have less control with the self-direction of students. I felt less efficient technically, working in the large group, and it felt at times that there were too many loose ends to gather up. How then, is my teacher spirit part of my identity? By Oxford's (1933) definition, spirit is a critical component of identity. Thus, it seems teacher spirit is part of a teacher's identity or who she is in relation to schools, children, and the places in which teachers practice. Greene (1973) insists I cannot overlook the identity of a teacher. She believes identity is a critical aspect of what makes a teacher a person, unique and individual, with beliefs, values and understandings unique to his or her own identity as formed by the experiences he or she encounters, by who those experiences shape him or her to be. In my last school experience, I felt that my identity was overlooked and at the same time it began to shift. In this sense, as my spirit was shaped by the events and circumstances I experienced on this landscape, my identity also shifted. It seems that my identity as a teacher was affected as my teacher spirit was depleted.

Kerby (1991) provides thoughtful insight into self-identity and self-understanding. His quote, "self narration is an interpretive activity and not a simple

mirroring of the past” (p. 6) captures the difficult process of self-identity, for, because a person’s existence is temporal, his or her identity is embedded in history. Even though a person is embedded in his or her history, describing this history is not about “truth,” but about sharing an adequate meaning of a person’s past. In Kerby’s discussion of time and memory, he suggests the notion of temporality, and the necessity to examine our lives within a historical framework.

Looking back to *Memories From Behind the Piano*, I can now make sense of this childhood memory in relation to my identity and self-understanding. As I try to interpret memory of that kindergarten day, I can understand how it might have shaped my identity and certainly my spirit in school. Looking forward I can link this memory to my stories to live by in classrooms with children. This experience has become part of my identity, shaping my spirit and shaping how I work in relation to children in schools.

Similarly, historian Carr (1986) expresses identity in relation to individual achievement. He sees identity as a series of parts of a life lived, which together reflect the wholeness of the person. He believes that as people we construct our identity by choosing the stories suitable to how we want to portray ourselves.

The unity of self, not as an underlying identity but as a life that hangs together, is not a pre-given condition but an achievement. Some of us succeed, it seems, better than others. None of us succeeds totally. We keep at it. What we are doing is telling and retelling, to ourselves and to others, the story of what we are about and who we are (p. 97).

I have chosen the stories I tell in this composition. I began with *A Year in a Teaching Life* in order to focus this work on spirit. I included stories of family and history in order

to portray what I am about and who I am in relation to this work. While I was at my last school, I told stories of my teaching life off the school landscape in order to seek reassurance in my beliefs and moral issues I was feeling at the time.

In my first year of teaching, I had to tell and retell others and myself the story of what I was about. My belief in inclusion was opposed in that story of school. It was critical for me to reassure myself, through discussion and journal writing, of my beliefs and values that I had composed over time through experience. I told stories of my students, the staff and the school from that first year to close friends and family. It was my way of reaffirming my stories to live by.

Carr also speaks of the temporality of human existence by stating that a person experiences life narratively. In this sense, he helps me to understand how an individual selects and arranges his or her experiences to suit a particular situation. To Carr, this telling and retelling of stories forms identity, by the selection of the stories I tell and to whom I tell them. People are each engaged in composing a life that “hangs together” based on how well they tell what they are about. By retelling my story of living amidst contradictions, I gain an understanding of my own identity, and, at this point in my life, I gain a sense of who I have become and which experiences have been influential in shaping my identity over time.

In *Composing a Life*, Bateson (1989) presents the notion of life as a composition. She writes that identity is composed as people live their lives, creating a “patchwork of achievements both personal and professional” (p. 15). It is as this patchwork fits together, that a life composition becomes visible. Bateson’s notion of the improvisatory nature of our life compositions is perhaps, a more creative view of identity than that of a

single-track identity. Through Bateson's words, I am reminded of my earlier sense making of spirit through a metaphor of a jazz composition. She speaks vividly of the improvisatory nature of our lives, which I believe links spirit and identity. Although I do not see them as one and the same, I do believe, based on my understanding of teacher spirit, that they are interwoven. Although I left my last school experience feeling somewhat defeated or certainly that my spirit had been shaped, I do not think that my identity was harmed in any way, although it was somehow changed by the events. Perhaps this experience forced me to contemplate my identity as a teacher, which then led me to the notion of teacher spirit.

Re-visiting my own experiences of contradiction, I very much believe my stories to live by have been improvisations that changed and intersected along the way. Unlike a planned chain of events, I see my life as composed by a variety of experiences and situations that for various reasons came together at certain times and in certain places to bring me to where I am today. I can identify what Bateson describes as life compositions. Experiences like the one behind the piano, my first teaching position, working alongside special needs children, and my last formal teaching year, all contributed to the improvisation and created a unique melody as I went along. The improvisation was necessary to navigate through tensions and contradictions, as well as successes and achievements. At the same time, these improvisations shaped and reshaped my teacher spirit.

Vinz (1996) examines the process of becoming rather than being. She believes that identity is more than the mirror images of others' expectations. She insists that teachers need to think beyond the pressures, and that making sense of each past helps a

person to cope with the present. Vinz feels that teachers must think about what could be, rather than what is, when we think of notions of teacher identity. Teachers must see their teacher identity as fluid, and constant change leads to new understandings. As Bateson (1989) refers to improvising lives, Vinz believes teachers create who they are as teachers as they go along. Inquiry into a teacher's past experiences can contribute significantly into developing knowledge about teaching and teaching lives.

Palmer (1998) expresses identity specifically with respect to teacher identity as “a moving intersection of the inner and outer forces that make me who I am, converging in the irreducible mystery of being human” (p. 12). Like Greene (1973), Palmer (1998) believes identity is fundamental to good teaching (more so than technique). He also believes that to grow as teachers, that is, to reshape and expand the horizons of each teacher's stories to live by “we must do something alien to academic culture: we must talk to each other about our inner lives – risky stuff in a profession that fears the personal and seeks safety in the technical, the distant, the abstract (p. 12). Palmer firmly believes that teachers must stop the pedagogical wars and get down to the heart of the matter – who each of us are as teachers. In this sense, identity includes not only strengths and potentials, but also shadows and limits and wounds and fears (Palmer, 1998).

As I contemplate Palmer's words, I now believe I was fortunate to experience my last teaching year because it was this experience that brought the human issues in teaching to my attention. It was this experience that forced me to “wake up” and attend to the heart of the matter. The inner and outer forces that were at work in that last year are what now allow me to bring my thinking about teaching and teacher education to a new level. Prior to this experience, I did not realize or name what I was attending to as

teacher spirit. Although I was aware of the many struggles of a new teacher and wrote a journal to help make sense of these struggles, I focused primarily on the lives of children, attending to their needs and stories to live by.

Day and Leitch (2001) also express the importance of, and concern for, identity. Specifically, they address teachers' professional identity and the importance of attending to neglected emotional dimensions of teachers' selves in professional development. They believe that maintaining an awareness of tensions in professional identity is part of the safeguard and joy of teaching. They conclude that "the professional self in teaching affects and is affected by personal history past and present, as well as the political and social contexts of teaching" (p. 414).

Returning to the story of my identity *Who am I: Living in Contradiction*, I can further make sense of this literature related to teacher identity. I now recognize many of the contradictions that were present in my life became present in my teaching life as well. I was a teacher who resisted and stood by what I believed in teaching and learning, much like my grandfather resisted and stood by his beliefs, involved in federal politics for many years in order to ensure his voice and the voice of rural Saskatchewan was heard. I was a teacher who was strong and competent, and also questioned and felt self-doubt at times in my professional life, much like my grandmother seemed to do. I was a teacher who believed in common sense and humour in the classroom, working with children that needed to feel rhythms and routines. I taught believing in these children and working to establish meaningful relationships so that we could move forward in our school lives. Looking back at my parents' stories to live by, I now believe their unique identities and

spirit influenced these aspects in my teaching life, and in turn in my teacher spirit in a very significant way.

### **Returning To The Research Puzzle**

How is teacher spirit formed, shaped and established by our experiences throughout our lifetime in schools? Does this shaping and influence impact our spirits? Do the body of convictions and meanings that I hold and value to be true summon teacher spirit? I contemplate who I am, my identity, and how I resisted school, schooling, teachers and teaching and, at the same time, was pulled to this profession. I wonder what my identity has to do with what I am now trying to understand as teacher spirit? Does what I know shape my teacher spirit? What is the relationship between schools and teacher spirit? These questions continue to guide this research.

### **Beginning The Research**

The following chapters explore these questions. In chapter four, I continue into this inquiry on teacher spirit beginning with an explanation of the research methodology, including an explanation of the movement from field text to research text, or writing the research story. Chapter five introduces the participants in this inquiry, while chapter six examines some of the tensions discovered through the narrative inquiry process. I then present research text in the form of transcripts, and retellings, reflections and research journal entries in order to make sense of teacher spirit in relation to three teacher's lives. The final chapters of this work are organized into four areas. Chapter seven explores the notion of silence and teacher spirit. Chapter eight examines being "not good enough" and the role of resistance as my participants and I explore repeated stories of feelings of inadequacy. Chapter nine explores the notion of place and space as a critical part of my

participants and my teacher spirits as we struggle to find meaningful spaces to live out our teaching lives. Chapter ten, the culminating chapter of this work, revisits some of the wonders of this inquiry as I look back in order to see forward, drawing out possible contributions of this inquiry.

It is with some trepidation that I begin this inquiry into the current situation of schools and teaching from the context of teachers living and working in schools alongside colleagues faced with challenging expectations, low budgets, fiscal restraint and political forces. At times throughout this research I feared for the profession, for colleagues, for students, for jobs. At times I worried about what has become of the professional landscape that teachers work and live within, a public system that “works with its partners to build a learning system that meets the needs of our children” (Alberta Learning, 2002).

In this sense, this inquiry is about boundaries, about tensions and how they shape my participants’ and my spirit as we struggle to keep direction on our teaching paths. It is about exploring the intertwining and overlapping of experiences both on and off school landscapes to better understand the spirit of teachers in the midst of the current situation of the teachers living both on and off school landscapes.

## CHAPTER FOUR: NARRATIVE INQUIRY

I make sense of what I mean by my spirit in relation to experiences and circumstances that I have encountered, some depleting my spirit, others sustaining it and still others rejuvenating it. In turn I respond to those situations and I continue to experience in relation to previous events and circumstances. As argued in the previous chapters, I believe spirit makes sense in connection with identity, or a life, as the reciprocity of experience shapes and influences it. Judging from the shortage of educational research dealing with this topic, it appears that researchers in the field have not yet directly attended to the notion of teacher spirit. Using my jazz metaphor, I position myself as a jazz player attending to the chord progressions that allow me to create melodies. In this sense, I must attend to teachers' stories in order to more deeply understand the nature of teacher spirit and how it might be an integral part of understanding stories to live by – personal practical knowledge, professional knowledge landscape and identity (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000). This attention to teachers' stories to live by in relation to teacher spirit might begin to remove the boundaries that place spirit outside conversations, outside educational research, and outside understanding of life in schools.

### **What Is Narrative Inquiry?**

My desire to create an opportunity to explore teacher spirit led me to narrative inquiry as described by Clandinin and Connelly (2000).

Narrative inquiry is a way of understanding experience. It is collaboration between researcher and participants, over time, in a place or series of places, and in social interaction with milieus. An inquirer enters this matrix in the midst and

progresses in this same spirit, concluding the inquiry still in the midst of living and telling, reliving and retelling, the stories of the experiences that make up people's lives, both individual and social. Narrative inquiry is stories lived and told. (p. 20)

Using this methodology, I planned to work at the boundaries of what has been examined with respect to teacher identity, personal practical knowledge, and the professional knowledge landscape. This required working in a three dimensional narrative inquiry space (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000), where I could look forward and backward, inward and outward, and locate stories in place. Our lives are storied lives. With this in mind, I walked into the midst of stories of teachers on school landscapes located along dimensions of time, place, the personal and the social, as well as within the midst of my own story as it is being composed. Though this methodology is not unique in its use of story, the outcome of the inquiry is unique. In narrative inquiry, the outcome of the work is the retelling or the "unpacking" of stories, thereby coming to new meaning in the lives of the researcher and co-researchers. In contrast, the essence of an experience is the outcome in a phenomenological study (van Maanan, 1988). The retelling of the co-researchers' and my stories to make sense of them in relation to teacher spirit, to give new meaning to our stories in terms of spirit, is the goal of this inquiry. Narrative inquiry, then, is the methodology that best suits my research purposes.

Clandinin and Connelly (2000) further clarify this methodology, unique in its use of stories. They explain that narrative inquiry allows us to begin with experience, as in this inquiry beginning with my own experience in my last school. In contrast to a formalistic way of beginning research with theory, this methodology allows for the

events, relationships, and tensions to be what they are, not what they mean according to a predisposed framework or theory. With this in mind, this narrative inquiry explores the notion of teacher spirit in the context of three teachers' lives. The narrative inquiry shifted, evolved, and took shape in relation with diverse teacher co-researchers. From my place of beginning, I was puzzled by questions such as: What does identity have to do with teacher spirit? Does what I know shape my teacher spirit? What is the relationship between schools and teacher spirit? These questions were the questions I first puzzled over.

I was led to this inquiry through my own lived experiences of schooling, becoming a teacher, teaching and ultimately leaving the teaching profession at a time when public education was being decimated by political and social forces. During this time, I watched many teachers leave the landscape of school in order to pursue other careers. My opening story, *A Year in a Teaching Life*, describes how many teachers began to question their profession as they lived out their teaching lives at that particular school. Of the teachers I know who left, all left disillusioned, distraught and disappointed. They felt they had let down the children they taught, their families, and friends, and finally themselves. But, they felt they could no longer carry on in the place of school.

I felt a sense of importance in attending to stories told by teachers who experienced this sense of dis-ease. I wondered how many teachers' stories live outside the boundaries of typical educational research. This sense of importance in attending to teacher stories is similar to the work of other narrative inquirers (Schroeder, 1996; Steeves, 2000; Huber, 2000; Whelan, 2000; Nelson, 2003). Teacher spirit must be

*attended* to and made accessible to educators and researchers alike, in an attempt to better understand our profession. As Bateson (1994) describes:

to attend means to be present, sometimes with companionship, sometimes with patience. Its least common meaning is to give heed to, for this meaning has been preempted by the familiar pay attention. Yet surely there is a powerful link between presence and care. The willingness to do what needs to be done is rooted in attention to what is. (p. 109)

### **Exploring Teacher Spirit Narratively**

How will I *attend* to spirit in order to begin to understand? In order to explore our teaching lives and our teacher spirit, I believe we must examine the interconnections between our knowledge, contexts and identity (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000). When linked, as they are in Connelly and Clandinin's (1999) term "stories to live by," these concepts create a narrative way to think through and to talk about teacher spirit.

Connelly and Clandinin describe stories to live by as:

a phrase used to refer to identity. Stories to live by are given meaning by the narrative understandings of knowledge and context. Stories to live by are shaped by such matters as secret teacher stories, sacred stories of schooling, and teachers' cover stories." (p. 4)

As Connelly and Clandinin (1999) developed this narrative way of understanding identity, they explored links between the ways identities are composed, sustained and changed, as they bump up against borders of space and time, and hierarchies of authority.

By attending to the narratives teachers live and tell each other and me, as a researcher of the events that take place on their school landscapes, and how these events

shape their stories to live by, I will deepen my current understandings of teacher identity. Through an exploration of teacher's stories to live by, in relation with teacher spirit, new understandings of professional growth and teacher education may also be presented. This narrative inquiry may also allow one to imagine alternative ways to think about school climate, school culture, and administrative responsibilities in relation to teacher spirit.

### **The Research Puzzle Revisited**

The research puzzle I have attempted to explore seeks to more deeply understand teacher spirit and its interconnections to personal practical knowledge, context and identity. Situated in the conceptual framework of stories to live by, as posed by Connelly and Clandinin (1999) I explored the questions: How is teacher spirit shaped by a teacher's experiences throughout her or his lifetime in schools? I contemplate who I am, my identity, and how I resisted school, schooling, teachers and teaching and, at the same time, was pulled to this profession. How do the identities of the co-researchers help me to understand teacher spirit? Does what they and I know shape our teacher spirit? What is the relationship between schools and teacher spirit? These questions continue to guide this research.

I will attend to my own narratives to better understand teacher spirit. I offer these narratives in response to Clandinin and Connelly's (2000) suggestion that the process of narrative inquiry begins with the researcher's own autobiographical understanding of the puzzle to be explored.

### **The Centrality Of Experience**

Attending to teacher spirit brings forth a multifaceted and complex issue about how to conduct research in education. This research is concerned with the exploration of

teacher spirit and how it is related to identity, personal practical knowledge and professional knowledge landscape (Clandinin, 1985, 1986; Clandinin & Connelly, 1995, 2000). In contemplating this research one can imagine the centrality to include stories of experience in order to explore the topic in a meaningful and personal manner. I believe spirit only makes sense in terms of a life lived and is dependent upon experiences that shape and reshape it, *in relation* to those around a person.

Narrative inquiry, also known as inquiring into experience as lived and told stories, represents personal and human dimensions that cannot be quantified (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000). For this reason, as well, it seemed important that narrative inquiry be used to attend to this topic. With this in mind, I planned to attend to stories lived and told through a conversation group. As a conversation group, I can again return to my jazz metaphor. As a research group, we can position ourselves as jazz players coming together to form a trio. Our conversations become the improvisations not unlike those of jazz players when they come together to create music. As one person begins playing, others join in, and play depending on the beginning. As we take part in conversation, we join in, adding to the conversation as one person's words resonate with another, leading the conversation in an unpredictable, but focused discussion with teacher spirit being the melody of our conversations.

### **A Conversation Group**

“When people meet in social groups, they tell stories. Oral personal experience narrative arises naturally in the conversations of like-minded people” (Florio-Ruane & Clark, 2001, p. 11). Teachers are no exception and when they get together to share and explore ideas of practice, they readily offer stories of experience, or narratives of

personal experience (Clandinin & Connelly, 1987). Florio-Ruane & Clark (2001) refer to conversation groups as a form of discourse they call “authentic conversation” (p. 6).

They describe these conversations as places where teachers who meet together regularly, share personal stories of teaching experiences and pursue teaching challenges together. The conversations also support each teacher intellectually and emotionally.

In *The Courage to Teach* (1998), Palmer discusses the importance of conversation. He makes the distinction between stunted conversations reduced to questions of technique, and conversations that include the human issues of teaching. He suggests that talk that is only technique-focused prevents people from having collegial conversations of significant duration or depth. These conversations ignore the human issues and therefore ignore the human beings that teach. Noddings (1992) states, “stories have the power to direct and change our lives” (p. 5). Not only do I recognize this in my personal life but, I am coming to realize, this is also true in my professional life.

Why a research conversation group? As a teacher, I can no longer underestimate the power of story to shape new understandings. I was led to this belief by the realization that when I spoke openly about my spirit as a teacher, my stories resonated with other teachers, and they too began to speak openly about what they felt they were experiencing during the multi-faceted teaching day, where time is often structured to move through rather than participate in. I began to recognize that from my beginnings in the place of school, I searched for a safe place to speak openly in authentic conversation, both as a student and a teacher. I began to re-search some of those moments that stood out in my life as significant places where what I saw as my spirit was in some way influenced or shaped.

In revisiting *Memories From Behind the Piano*, I now understand my need to find a place and space that welcomed authentic conversation. As a child, I remember having lively discussions around our dinner table. I was encouraged to speak and form opinions. My parents spoke to me as though I had something to contribute. I do not remember being shamed or made to feel silly for talking openly and this led me to believe that talk was something that children and adults alike were meant to do. Conversation was how I learned. Despite my shyness, my parents encouraged me to be social and open. I can now imagine how truly strange that moment behind the piano was for me. It was foreign for me to feel ashamed, and foreign for me to have been reprimanded for talking.

The following narratives are representations of my experiences of searching for spaces where conversation could take place. It now seems, after examining these experiences that authentic conversation was something that I always searched for, regardless of age, situation or the capacity in which I was participating.

#### *Joining the Professional Landscape<sup>1</sup>*

*At graduation, I was one of a handful of teachers hired by a large school board, an achievement in itself that reminded me of some sort of ritualistic dance. If you achieved certain basic qualifications, you were granted an interview on campus. This interview consisted of several institutional questions such as “What is your approach to discipline?” “What do you see as your greatest strength/weakness?” “How would you integrate math and science curriculum?” These questions were such that if you could give the “right” answer, you could, possibly, get another interview. I was one of the*

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<sup>1</sup> Previously published in *Among Teacher* (2001), 30, p. 10-11.

*lucky ones. This led to interviews with principals left with positions to fill at the end of the year; after all experienced teachers were placed and “good” positions filled.*

*My first classroom was a special education classroom, a portable at the back of the school – and it was perfect. I made it beautiful with colourful displays, a carpet area, desks in groups, and lots of secret places. There were twelve children and I in that portable. It was our little oasis on the landscape, and we felt safe from the outside world, for the most part. Despite other teacher stories lived in this school, in my in-classroom place, I chose to make time for story, connection and sharing. Engaging with children in these ways had an astounding impact on my learning experiences as a first year teacher. Through our sharing of stories, our small community, even though diverse, began to form around trust, acceptance and the connections we felt. At the time, I remember the fear of being judged as the teacher who just “sat around and talked” with her students all day. I also recognized that my students felt we were doing something that was not “school.” They would transform our spaces of talk and sharing to something more typically accepted as “school” when administration came by to check up on us. What perceptive children I learned with that year. How lucky I was to be part of their real worlds and secret stories on the school landscape, even if it did feel like our own private little party.*

After reading Greene’s (1995) work I now understand that a critical part of my teaching included place and space in schools for children to tell their stories, something Greene identifies as a necessity. I created these spaces in each of my classrooms even though it was a somewhat secretive part of my teaching life. Greene (1995) also speaks of acceptance, passion, justice, caring, and trust. I now recognize this as our hidden curriculum that year. It was what I needed as a first year teacher, and it was what my

students and I needed after years of negative school experiences. Reflecting on this story now leads me to believe this was my first experience of teaching children how to resist the landscape of school when it alienated them and their stories to live by.

This story is perhaps one of the most important to me when I consider my own teacher spirit. I kept a journal with a friend that first year and after re-visiting it, found it filled with questions – questions about my teacher spirit and how I could possibly nourish and sustain it on the professional landscape. Two entries follow.

*April 19, 1993*

*Dear M.,*

*What a week. Today, one of my kids was beat up at lunch by four grade six kids. He said it was because he is "L.D." I hate that label, and I hate it more that he refers to himself as such. What is this doing to his self-esteem? After eight months of teaching in a special needs classroom, I see nothing but harm coming from the segregation, the labels, and the ostracizing that these kids endure each day at school. Wait until I tell them that I've been surplused and won't be here next year. I can't stand the thought of leaving them with someone else who might not care. I feel so mixed about it ~ I'm glad I'm going, and yet if only I could take them with me. This environment is not a safe place for them.*

*June 3, 1993*

*Dear M.,*

*I'm at home, sick today, and feeling so guilty because it is our sports day and I should be there with my kids. They are having a hard time with my leaving at the end of the year. When I told them I wouldn't be their teacher next year seven of them cried. These kids have never had a teacher look after them before. All thirteen of them have had their hearts and souls damaged by the school system and by being labeled. Even so, they are so concerned about me, and how I'm feeling. We are all kind of working through it together. These kids are so great ~ they're so perceptive and seem to know when I need a hug. Imagine, them wanting to take care of ME.*

My writing did not reflect a fear of not knowing the curriculum, the program and the institutional requirements of school. Rather, I now see my writing expressed worry of how I would possibly nourish my own spirit and the spirits of the children with whom I would spend that first year. Even in that first year, I felt so many obstacles were presented to keep me from seeing, from hearing and from knowing the children I taught. This depleted my teacher spirit.

Revisiting this story, I now recognize that inauthentic conversation was something I could do to fit in or move ahead in some way, if required politically. I realized that inauthentic conversation was common and at some times necessary in order to move forward. The interview conversation was inauthentic because of the political agenda behind the questions and answers. I could say the “right” things to obtain a teaching position. I avoided conversation with most of the staff at that first school because it would have been inauthentic conversation. These would be conversations with boundaries. These would be conversations that would exist in the out of classroom places – where the stories of that school prevailed. These would be inauthentic talks where we superficially shared how things were going in our classrooms. These were conversations that I felt were ineffective and somewhat stressful, as I now realize they lacked the human issues Palmer (1998) discusses. However, as soon as I had created a space within my first classroom, authentic conversation became a priority for the students and for me as a teacher. Our conversations allowed us to reach a trusting relationship, where, for these children, only then could learning take place. With this discovery in mind, I am led back to the value of authentic conversation in learning. I am reminded of Palmer’s (1998) words of the importance of conversation. He makes the distinction between stunted conversations reduced to questions of technique, and conversations that include the human issues of teaching. He suggests that talk that is only technique-focused prevents us from having collegial conversations of significant duration or depth. These conversations ignore the human issues and therefore ignore the human beings that teach.

With Palmer's words in mind, the purpose of this research is to learn something about teacher spirit. Conversation provides a means to learn. Trust and relationship are an important part of conversation, which are a challenge to achieve. Even so, the exploration of teacher spirit seems to require trust and relationship, as the nature of the topic is personal.

Looking back on my experiences as a child in school I recognize my need to experience authentic conversation, which in my memory, school did not provide. Looking back on my teaching assignments as an experienced teacher, I recognize my professional need for more time to talk and be with colleagues, as a way of learning, of exploring, of rejuvenating and sustaining my spirit on the school landscape. As Clandinin and Connelly (1987) explain, teachers readily offer stories of experience or personal narratives as a means of professional growth. I recognize now my search for authentic conversation – conversation where I would be supported both intellectually and emotionally, as described by Florio-Ruane and Clark (2001). I also began to see teachers' professional lives as complex at the very least, intertwined, with every decision and move being guided by personal values and beliefs. I began to consider authentic conversation for the exploration of teachers' stories to live by (Clandinin & Connelly, 1987). I realize now that in each of the many schools that I taught, I immediately searched for a place that I could have conversation with colleagues. Depending on the school landscape and the stories told on that particular school landscape, this place was the classroom, the staff room, the hallway or sometimes a closet in a far off place where stories were told as secrets, as in my experience described in the opening chapter. Secret stories were told when I felt the landscape was too risky to talk openly about my teaching

practice. My search for a place to talk openly with colleagues who also were searching for authentic professional conversations, brought me to consider a conversation group for this research. Perhaps this technique reinforces what I was searching for in my teaching life. Based on this re-search, I felt this would be a meaningful technique for me to look further into my wonders of teacher spirit.

In order to guide my preliminary feelings of the value of conversation and narrative inquiry to think about teacher spirit, I completed a pilot project in April of 2000. My intentions for this pilot were to explore a methodology that I thought would allow me to inquire into teacher spirit. While preparing to write the proposal for this research, I took part in conversations with two other teachers in order to better understand the type of field text that would be gathered through this approach, and what I would do with the transcripts from these conversations. We came together as graduate students during a course on Narrative Inquiry, where we were given the opportunity to develop “works in progress.” Because our venue was a graduate course, we were able to meet weekly to tell our stories. We realized that our stories resonated with each other and that we shared similar experiences in a variety of classroom situations over our teaching lives. Since a space for authentic conversation was built into this course, and provided the opportunity for me to carry out this pilot project, while fulfilling course requirements, I was able to have a “trial run” at the methodology and technique I would use in my inquiry. These experienced teachers agreed to taping our conversations and I transcribed the tapes. With transcripts in hand, we returned to the conversations and reflected on our talk. A split text was used where the text on the right (in italics) was my responses to the conversations as I transcribed. A piece from one of the conversations taken from this

pilot project is presented here to further demonstrate the impact of authentic conversation as a field. Clandinin and Connelly (2000) call the texts created as one lives in the field “field texts.” In this sense, a “field” (Richardson, L., 1995) was created in order to carry out the research using the narrative inquiry process. The following piece provides an example of moving from field text to research text, as I begin to analyze the conversation using the split text format.

February 14, 2001

D: Those relationships with children . . . my most unsuccessful year was when I had 31 grade ones with 12 with special needs in grade one, if you can imagine. I felt that year that I didn’t have time to make meaningful connections with those kids. I was so busy I could never make it. My most successful years were when I had time to listen to my kids, and greet them and acknowledge them, become immersed in their unfolding stories. And those were the times when I felt most happy.

G: When I think back to my first year of teaching, the landscape was so negative, but I was off in the back corner and I had a group of special kids and I had so much freedom, to be with them and do what I thought they needed. It was my first year teaching and I think of it as one of my favorite years teaching. It was because I had the time to be with them and listen to their stories and create that relationship and then it was like I had a magic wand. We did so much more and were so much more successful together because we had time for that sharing and storytelling. Just being with each other was really rewarding.

D: One of the things I liked about keeping the kids the next year was only having to interact and build a relationship with half the class. It was so much easier. I really only started to feel a connection with my grade ones this year in January. And that’s sad because four months went by before I knew who their brothers and sisters were, names and pets, and families, and I really noticed it this year, because I’m in a new school.

*Relationships with children . . . this has become a preoccupation of mine as I consider teacher spirit. I recall many times where after an “out-of-classroom experience” I just wanted to go to our room and close the door and be with my kids. It was our sanctuary, and the comfort and feeling of connectedness to my students rejuvenated my spirit, after a day of experiences that tested my spirit.*

*What are the costs of being denied the opportunity to build relationships with children in the classroom? What do we do to teachers when we test their spirits to the extent that they do not have the time or energy needed to build relationships with children? What happens when we deny the teacher the opportunity to create that sanctuary where the spirit is rejuvenated?*

*Establishing ourselves on a new professional landscape is perhaps one of the greatest tests of our teaching spirits. Interestingly, we tend to take these risks of change when we are in a nourishing environment, where our spirits are sustained, for this gives us confidence to grow professionally.*

This conversation is an example of what this conversation group allowed me to think about and explore in relation to teacher spirit. This example demonstrates the movement from field text to research text. As I transcribed the conversations, that is, created a field text, I also began to theorize and the field text became an interim research text (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000) as I added my thoughts and wonders about the conversations. This interim research text was then presented to the conversation group at the next meeting and we discussed pieces of the transcripts, the field text and the conversation, as well as my wonders and the wonders of the co-researchers after seeing the text in this written form, the interim research text.

As a group of teachers in relation, given a place and space to talk openly about our teaching experiences and going through this weekly process of re-examining the conversations, we began to discover thoughts and experiences that resonated with each other. We were able to move forward, backward, inward and outward as we researched each other's experiences. We began to explore the meaning behind our experiences and we began to have conversations where our experiences resonated. The similarities that became evident as we shared our stories of experience allowed us to construct a story in which it is difficult to depict which parts of the story belonged to whom. The themes from this story were woven together to become a piece that resonated with fellow teachers. I include this story (Appendix A) in order to make more meaningful the impact this conversation group had on my understanding of what could be accomplished by participating in narrative inquiry to further explore my research topic. This pilot project allowed me to understand more deeply the importance of conversation and story to this research puzzle. This project allowed me to live, retell and re-present stories of

experience. It helped me to realize the importance of authentic conversation in my personal and professional life, and understand how authentic conversation allows a research group to share stories of experience and attend to the human issues of teaching. I was able to figure out that creating a field through a conversation group would provide an authentic place to discuss my research puzzle.

### **A Research Conversation Begins**

Our narrative inquiry began in September 2001 with three co-researchers<sup>2</sup> who knew each other as acquaintances doing graduate courses, or were colleagues while teaching. As in the pilot study, I am both researcher and participant. Also like the pilot study, as the author of this inquiry, I am the interpreter of the stories that make up this research. However, knowledge was constructed and reconstructed through the conversation group, and as we continued and revisited the conversations to reflect on what we had shared, and as we continued to change and experience throughout the process. With this, our stories, our selves, and the dynamics of the group were fluid and continual, changing throughout the inquiry process. In this sense, the research story and the written document have been created through our collaborative search for meanings of teacher spirit as we lived out our teaching lives. This type of shared understanding, as constructed through the conversation group allowed for the negotiation of meaning where “the self in relation to other selves and to ones cultural communities is constituted” (Wetherell & Noddings, 1991, p.7). By breaking out of the traditional modes of knowing where we connect inner and outer voices and interpret each other’s lived experiences we allow ourselves to explore other ways of knowing as suggested by Dewey (1938), Friere

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<sup>2</sup> The selection process and personalities of the co-researchers are described in detail in chapter five.

(1990), and Greene (1988). In this inquiry the identity and the experiences of the self and the conversation group are constructed narratively. Polkinghorne (1988) clarifies this stating:

We are in the middle of our stories and can not be sure how they will end; we constantly have to revise the plot as new events are added to our lives. Self then, is not a static thing, nor a substance, but a configuring of personal events into a historical unity which includes not only what one has been but also the anticipations of what one will be. (p. 150)

With this in mind, this inquiry took place in the midst of three researchers' lives. The following section further clarifies the writing of the research story for this inquiry.

### **Writing The Research Story**

The richness of our experiences, specifically in the profession of teaching, tells the three of us as a research group so much about our space and our context, who we are, who we are becoming. Through our research conversation group, which included two co-researchers and myself, we constructed meaning from our storytelling. The co-researchers signed research consent forms (Appendix B) allowing conversations to be taped and transcribed. Conversations were reflected upon by members of the conversation group and re-visited. During this revisiting, new conversations would take place, which were also taped and transcribed. This cycle of conversation and revisiting took place over the ten month research period and throughout the following year, as these conversations were reflected on, elaborated and re-examined in order to identify rhythms and repetitions that have helped to provide answers to my research puzzle around teacher spirit. It was this cycle of conversation and revisiting, or ongoing reflection that

Clandinin and Connelly (2000) refer to as 'wakefulness.' They see wakefulness as key to the state of development of the narrative inquiry. We must be "wakeful and thoughtful about all of our inquiry decisions" (p.184).

Narrative inquiry allowed for creating a space for a small group of teachers to come together to learn from experience. Our research conversations provided insight into teachers' professional lives and teacher spirit, while simultaneously building on each other's knowledge through collaborative efforts.

### **Moving From Field Texts To Research Texts**

Connelly and Clandinin (1990) note that "narrative inquiry relies on criteria other than validity, reliability, and generalizability. It is important not to squeeze the language of narrative criteria into a language created for other forms of research" (p. 7). Clandinin and Connelly (2000) emphasize as criteria for what makes a good narrative inquiry to be the previously discussed notion of wakefulness, along with other criteria. They include van Maanen's (1988) notion of apparenity and verisimilitude, which emphasize the recognizability of the field in the research text. This becomes critical to the narrative inquiry as I try to convey the experiences of the co researchers and my own so that they may resonate with the reader. Also included as criteria of good narrative inquiry are the importance of voice and signature. The voice of the co-researchers must come through as the research text is written. It belongs to the co-researchers as well as other participants and other researchers for whom a text speaks (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000, p. 146). Signature involves the balance between being too vivid within the research as the writer, and being too subtle. Clandinin and Connelly (2000) suggest that being too subtle deceives the reader into believing the research text speaks from the participant's point of

view only, where being too vivid risks obscuring the participants within the inquiry. In this sense, signature becomes a question of balance and a question of identity within the narrative inquiry. Voice and signature are important to the narrative inquiry and make the notion of audience a complex part of the writing process. It was as I began writing this text that I became strongly aware of the importance of audience – who I was writing for, and what I was attempting to convey. This became a tension throughout the writing process as I struggled to convey the meanings and stories to live by of the participants and myself, while attempting to write a research story that might also provide Lincoln and Guba's (1985) notion of transferability, taking the emphasis off generalizability. Specifically, the co-researchers and I felt our conversations and reflections explored my wonders: How is teacher spirit formed, shaped and established by our experiences throughout our lifetime in schools? Who are we in relation to teacher spirit? Does what we know shape our teacher spirit? What is the relationship between schools and teacher spirit? Our narratives became interesting responses to my initial thoughts of teacher spirit.

Bateson (1989) speaks of her narrative work, clarifying that it does not constitute a statistical sample, but an interesting one. She continues:

I have become aware that the portions of these life histories that interest me most are the echoes from one life to another, the recurrent common themes. Teasing these out of a wealth of material and conversation and recognizing aspects of my own experience in different forms has been the process that I found personally most freeing and illuminating. We need to look at multiple lives to test and shape our own. (p. 16)

Our stories were not treated as objective data, but were shared to resonate with others who relate to spirit in the workplace in connection with our stories to live by.

Greene (1995) challenges objectivity through an analysis of representation. She states:

Voices of the long disqualified, the long silenced are being attended to and, wherever possible, decoded. There is an interest in hermeneutics or interpretation, making sense of transitions against the backgrounds of lived experience and location in the world. (p. 208)

As Clandinin (1988) states, narratives are expressions of “personal practical knowledge” which are mixed with knowledge and context to form a type of subjectivity she refers to as “intersubjectivity” (p. 269). In this sense, any lived experience is layered with subjective perspectives.

In keeping with intersubjectivity, this study evolved through a collaborative narrative analysis, working within a three-dimensional narrative inquiry space. As we moved from field texts to research texts, analytical and interpretive techniques became important. Taking on a somewhat archival task, as described by Clandinin and Connelly (2000), I identified meaningful rhythms and repetitions while keeping in mind the three-dimensional narrative inquiry space. As we shared stories, I began to read and reread the field texts and “narratively code” (p. 132) the field texts according to story lines that interconnect, and gaps and silences that become apparent. It is here, through several sortings and revisitings that I looked for rhythms and tensions (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000). Looking at the transcripts and reflections as a collection of our knowing, I began to see rhythms or “chord progressions” that played steadily throughout our conversations from meeting to meeting. Often our stories and conversations overlapped and became

interwoven with previous conversations, creating steady rhythms that became evident after reviewing the text that I had gathered over the ten month period. These rhythms, which I began to identify as silence, being not good enough, place and space, and resistance, were to be played into a series of interconnected pieces that would become the responses to the puzzling questions and the contributions of this inquiry.

Remembering that this inquiry took place in the midst of three researchers' lives, I recognized that lives, situations and circumstances would change as the research year unfolded. Co-authoring this narrative inquiry as a series of papers (as initially planned in the proposal) became more complicated after having my third child and relocating, moving me away from the research group for the last part of the inquiry process – writing the final research story. Due to my relocation, the co-researchers reviewed the research texts periodically, after I had written them.

### **Technicalities**

The decision to tape the group conversations was made as part of the initial meeting. All conversations, both individual and group, were tape-recorded in order to be transcribed. On a few occasions, some early on and some later in the research group, it was asked that the tape recorder be turned off. Even as we established a solid trust as a conversation group, as individuals, we at times continued to feel vulnerable speaking openly about some of our teaching situations and experiences. As the group revisited pieces of conversations, further reflections were made and taped. These reflections became subsequent field texts. This format became standard for each monthly meeting. At times, I would read a piece of transcript and the group would respond. At other times I would give the group a piece of transcript to read. And at other times, the group would

bring in written reflections on something that had previously been discussed, or talk about an experience that had occurred since the last meeting.

Included in the text of the research story are many of the transcripts of our conversations. I include these transcripts of conversations in an attempt to remain authentic to the meanings that I understood to be expressed during our conversations. At the same time, I have interpreted and reinterpreted these conversations within the research story in order to make sense of them in the context of this inquiry.

### **The Research Journal**

After a period of trial and error, my research notes were kept in a separate journal, which are rewritten in italics when included in this work. I wrote in this journal before, during or after conversation group meetings. I had initially planned to do a “split text” as in the pilot project, where I would transcribe the conversations on one side of a page and write in my reflections on the other, as I had in the pilot study. Early on in the conversation group as we were negotiating the structure of the conversation group meetings, we had the following conversation:

Gloria: I think what might work best is if I type the conversation in a split text, with the transcriptions on one side and my reflections on the other side. Then I can give you those transcripts and you can write your reflections on the side as well. I will also be writing in a journal, so I'll see. It may not be necessary for me to type reflections on the field text. Do you think that if you read my reflections that it might interfere with your own reflections?

Carolyn: I think people will see different things in it, but I think when you lay your thoughts along side of the transcriptions it will be difficult to reflect on our own.

(Group conversation, December 14, 2001)

The group negotiated that perhaps transcripts would be given in the raw form, and reflections would be made based on those, rather than on my reflections. On some occasions, a part of a transcript would be read, or I might read a passage to the group to begin subsequent conversations

As with most narrative inquiries, the number of transcripts became quite overwhelming. My feelings are similar to other narrative inquirers (Schroeder, 1996 Steeves, 2000) in that I feel not enough time was spent reflecting on past discussions, and reconstructing our stories. It became apparent to me once the sorting process began, that although there was a multiplicity of stories and reflections we shared through those ten months of conversation, rhythms and repetitions unique to each of us developed over time and without our acknowledgement. It is these rhythms or “chord progressions” that make up the research story. They were shaped and reshaped by our conversation group and by my subsequent analysis of the transcripts over a six-month period upon completion of our group conversations. These repetitions appeared throughout a year in the lives of a small group of teachers, as they lived through the rhythms of a teaching year while talking about spirit. It is these rhythms and repetitions that have become our research story about teacher spirit.

## CHAPTER FIVE: THE PARTICIPANT JAZZ PLAYERS

I purposefully set out to find other teachers to participate with me in this inquiry. I felt it would be important to have an intimate group, and, not concerned with the number of people that would participate, I felt a range in years of experience would be revealing when thinking about teacher spirit. Would veteran teachers speak differently about their teacher spirits? An interesting and intimate group unfolded as I invited people to help me think about teacher spirit. My first co-researcher, Carolyn, was also involved in the pilot project. Knowing the experience we had in the original conversation group, she was keen to continue to explore teacher spirit, as she considered her topic for graduate work and the overlapping of our lives discovered in our earlier conversations. Carolyn led me to Lynn, a teacher librarian with over thirty years experience who was retiring at the end of the school year. Her wealth of experience and diverse background was welcomed as we began to think about teacher spirit – Lynn having a teaching lifetime to reflect upon. A fourth participant began, but left the research early on for personal reasons. Her voice has not been included in any part of the writing of this inquiry.

We came together as a small group of three teachers with varying backgrounds and experiences to participate in a collaborative study on teachers' spirit. Beginning in September of 2001, we began a narrative inquiry into the notion of teachers' spirit in order to make sense of it in such a way that it might become part of our professional conversations on school landscapes. I intentionally wanted to move away from the traditional mode of researcher and participants in order to more authentically explore the questions that guided this inquiry. Bringing with us unique melodies of teaching

experiences, we began to improvise based on what we each called teacher spirit. As we played our individual melodies while thinking about spirit, we began to understand what we meant by teacher spirit. A brief introduction of each co-researcher is presented in order to provide context for the study and the writing that follows.

### **Introducing The Trio**

The research group's narrative beginning took place during a year of graduate coursework where I met Carolyn. She had recently relocated to an alternative school that specialized in the arts and was taking courses and planning her thesis. We developed an immediate interest in each other's work. Carolyn was exploring what she called teacher voice. She was frustrated by what she saw as the lack of voice that teachers were experiencing in the current teaching climate. She was struggling to find her own voice. I can describe Carolyn's struggle with a found poem (Bulter-Kisber, 1998) created with phrases taken from transcripts that feature her voice during our conversations.

*Carolyn*

alternatives

living in open areas

an alternative school

where learning was self-directed

alternative teacher education

where journaling was real, teaching was real

international schools

where turnover was high

but they gave scenarios that were real

knowing what would be ahead of me

no cover stories there

Not like now

searching for voice

whose voice?

where is my voice?

can we have voice?

It's got to be validated

We can't go on without voice

I need challenge, alternatives

Someone to mentor me

My growth is my motivation

I understand losing focus,

changing, giving up

Searching for alternatives

Is it ever going to change?

Treading water and getting nowhere

Losing part of me,

disappointment

Defending, angry

Trying to tell the real story

People coming in have a hard time

try to balance with positives

Knowing where they are coming from and needing to be warned

Never a day when I don't feel challenged by the story

If I leave it would reaffirm what they believe to be true – the cover story

I can't leave - I am not done

Every year people go through terrible shock

when they learn the cover story

They talk the talk, but that's it

I understand not giving up

Struggling to stay

Love of vocation

Having voice – gaining respect

Carolyn's stories to live by encompass alternatives. Carolyn looks for alternatives. She searches for breathing space on landscapes that she believes often stifle her personality, her ego and her confidence. Carolyn attended an alternative elementary school where innovation and cutting edge research in teaching and teacher education prevailed. She thrived in a multi-aged setting where inclusion was prominent long before these philosophies became trend. She remembers the challenging program, the advanced art classes and the open area where learning was taken to a self-directed level.

Carolyn looks for alternatives. She attended an alternative teacher education program, taught at an international school and made her way to her current position in an alternative school that focuses on the arts. Here she was looking for the space to integrate her love and talent of fine arts into the curriculum. Here Carolyn searches for

breathing space. She searches for a place where her voice is heard, where teachers are respected, where her spirit has space.

Carolyn looks for alternatives. She continued to search for voice throughout that first year we met. We talked about the overlap of our questions and how they interconnected. We questioned whether or not our thoughts about voice and spirit were inseparable. It was with these wonders that I asked if we could work together, if we could have conversations that would compose the field text for this narrative inquiry on teacher spirit. She felt it would be important for her to contribute.

Carolyn's involvement led me to Lynn. Carolyn had worked with Lynn at a previous school and held her in high regard for her hard work and dedication to the teaching profession. She was about to retire and had a vast wealth of knowledge and experience. Carolyn was sure her contributions to our topic would be of importance, having lived a teaching life on ever changing school landscapes.

I approached Lynn in the summer of 2001 and asked if she might be interested in reading my proposal on teacher spirit. She agreed and seemed delighted at the opportunity to work on this topic in her last formal year of her teaching career. A found poem created with Lynn's research conversations follows.

*Lynn*

focused tradition

a problem solver

no time for struggling ~ proactive

always a teacher

inspired by grandfather and children

continues to grow  
retiring  
fear ~ enveloped me for many years  
found freedom to choose  
freedom and choice  
new ways of thinking  
what drives me forward?  
innovation and learning  
energy from learning, attending  
creativity, color, flash  
day-to-day conversations with children  
drive me forward  
I'll put my name on it  
Let's speak out  
i feel no risk  
retiring  
i wonder . . .  
where will i go from here?

Lynn is an optimist. She speaks of blocking out the negatives and focusing solely on the positives. She spends little time attending to negative people and situations, and focuses all of her energy on optimistic activity. However, it was not always this way for Lynn.

Fear enveloped Lynn for many years of her teaching. She describes her first years as filled with fear and trepidation. Lynn talked about this fear during many of our conversations. She talks about the point in her career where this fear finally subsided. She began to take control over her feelings, which perhaps is what allowed her to remain on school landscapes with such vitality for so many years. Lynn marks a significant turning point as a time when she chose to resist her fears and insecurities and gained her voice. At this time, Lynn became confident.

Lynn is an optimist. It seems that fear shaped Lynn's spirit, causing her teacher spirit to be that of a determined, strong teacher who had learned to shut out the negative images faced daily on the school landscape in order to keep her spirit intact. Lynn resisted dis-ease and taught with optimism and vitality for over thirty years. Maybe this ability to avoid risk and to keep out those who were not coping was a strategy that Lynn learned over time in order to resist the effects of experiences that intimidated her in many ways, and at the same time made her stronger.

Lynn is an optimist. Living with fear, finally feeling freed from fear, and talking to me about this fear helped me to make sense of Lynn's stories to live by. It exemplifies her belief that we have to endure a certain amount of hardship before we earn respect and are truly acknowledged by our peers and our selves as professionals.

Who am I in this inquiry? My stories to live by presented in the introductory chapters provide insight into my participation in this inquiry. My spirit has been shaped by a variety of experiences on school landscapes, first as a child, a learner, and later a teacher. I continue to shift my thoughts about teaching and learning as I bump up against boundaries that leave me contemplating teachers' lives, school landscapes and teacher

spirit. My passion to explore and make sense of my own teacher spirit is described through a found poem of some of my phrases taken from our conversations.

*Gloria*

wondering about resistance

curious, searching for voice

resisting the story of school

resisting

the code of silence

depleted spirit, rejuvenated spirit

injury and repair

a personal profession

resisting school, schooling,

teachers, teaching

how do i sustain myself?

searching, i look for change

i wonder, i rebel

resist the status quo

remain in the margins

choose the margins

spirit protector

why do we leave?

why do we stay?

how do i remove the boundaries that fix and frame?

explore spirit

alongside friends

centrality of story

finding tension – paying attention

attending to the human issues

feeling guilty, confused

feeling tension

teacher spirit

my spirit

I am a resistor. As my school life progressed from that kindergarten year, I became a resistor of sorts. This resistance led me to leave the place of school – a few times – as a teenager, struggling to understand the institutional story that went against my beliefs and my stories to live by. I remember my feelings of inequality, unfairness and oppression, which were perhaps not unusual feelings for a teenager. However, in my case these feelings about the institutional story of school became central to my stories to live by. I resisted the institutional story and continued to do so in university as an undergraduate student and perhaps continue even today, as a graduate student.

I am a resistor. The choices I've made along the way continue to have elements of resistance in them. Somehow, these improvisations have brought me to this point, a point that many of my former teachers would not believe I have come to, possibly never storying me as a high school graduate. It is perhaps the improvisations of my school life both as a student and a teacher that have brought me to this inquiry. My memories of high school are somewhat dismal. I remember a biology teacher making me stand on a

line in the hallway, as I had forgotten an assignment. I remember my grade nine teacher not letting me go to my locker to get a book. I remember a principal walking home with me talking about life in schools – as he and I felt it should be. I remember a teacher telling me I was like a worm in an apple – once I had found my way out, I would realize it was better to be in.

I am a resistor. It was these “words of wisdom” that led me to greater resistance of the story of school. With these memories in mind, I believe my passion to explore teacher spirit has much to do with my past experiences as a student in schools, the present situation of schools and teachers amidst an ever-changing landscape, and my future role in teacher education.

As a trio of “jazz players” we (Carolyn<sup>3</sup>, Lynn and Gloria) have come together amidst diversity and lives in composition to make sense of teacher spirit. We play melodies inspired by each other to explore our narratives in relation to one another and to teacher spirit. The purpose, then, of this collaborative study that we have engaged in is to look at our own narratives as a means to articulate our understanding of teacher spirit. We hope to present a conceptualization of spirit within the context and experiences of three teachers living out their teaching lives on and off school landscapes. A research timeline follows this chapter as an attachment to give the reader a framework for the research process.

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<sup>3</sup> Carolyn is a pseudonym, Gloria and Lynn chose to use their real first names.

### Research Timeline

September to December 2000	Full course load at University of Alberta in Elementary Education
January to April 2001	Full course load at University of Alberta in Elementary Education
April to June 2001	Prepared proposal for the research
July to August 2001	Presented proposal to interested teachers and had conversations with these teachers to negotiate timeline and purpose of the research
September 2001	Successfully completed the candidacy exam and ethics approval by the University of Alberta.
September 7, 2001	First conversation with interested teachers
October 7, 2001	Second conversation with co-researchers Had third child
December 17, 2001	Third conversation meeting with co-researchers
January 15, 2002	Individual meeting with Carolyn
January 22, 2002	Individual meeting with Lynn
February, 20, 2002	Fourth conversation meeting with co-researchers
March, 27, 2002	Fifth conversation meeting with co-researchers
April 17, 2002	Sixth conversation meeting with co-researchers
May 15, 2002	Seventh conversation meeting with co-researchers
June 30, 2002	Final meeting with co-researchers
July, 2002	Relocated to Calgary
September to December 2002	Analyzed transcripts from audio-taped conversations
January to August, 2003	Wrote the research text in negotiation with the co-researchers
September, 2003	Presented the research to my supervisory committee

## CHAPTER SIX: FEELING TENSION, PAYING ATTENTION

Several tensions can now be examined having gone through the process of negotiating and participating in a conversation group for purposes of educational research. The following pages outline and examine some of the tensions that presented during the narrative inquiry research process. These tensions added to the richness of the research puzzle we were exploring. They allowed me to more deeply understand teacher spirit within the relationships we had formed unique to our conversation group. The shared understanding constructed through the conversation group allowed for the negotiation of meaning where “the self in relation to other selves and to one’s cultural communities is constituted” (Witherall & Noddings, 1991, p. 7). It became clear to me in the midst of this process that shared understanding would not come to be without tension. I believe these tensions allowed for the fabrication of a trusting and meaningful research group, and would consider the experience less effective if we had not worked through these tensions. I present an examination of seven tensions: “Can authentic conversation be intentional?” “Coming together at the seams,” “Does everyone need to talk?” “Being in the midst – seeing through the mist,” “Creating a community of inquiry,” “Milestones in narrative inquiry,” and “Tolerance and respect: when outside the box becomes yet another box.”

### **Can Authentic Conversation Be Intentional?**

I began by setting a time and place for our first meeting. It was to be an informal get-to-know each other session. I thought it would be good to introduce our selves and perhaps speak a little about our initial understandings of the inquiry after perusing the proposal. I wrote in my field journal the night before this initial meeting.

*It is with great anticipation that I begin this inquiry with my co-researchers. I am prepared with a tape recorder and journal for taking field notes. I'm nervous that I will say too much, lead too much and play the researcher role too much. It is so important for us to build a trusting relationship for this conversation group to come together. I am worried that my agenda will be too prominent and it will not be a useful experience for the teachers. I hope we can discuss the proposal a bit and most certainly the methodology. What if I can't answer their questions? I will copy an article for them that they can take home. Maybe this will help. I am fortunate that one of the teachers has been involved in a previous narrative inquiry. This should help. Perhaps she will guide me in the process.*

(Research Journal, September 7, 2002)

My intentions worried me even before the conversation group began. Narrative inquiry required a process of negotiation and I felt that my intentions were too much in the way of an open agenda. These intentions created a contradiction for me as a researcher. I found it difficult to understand how I could begin the research process without intentions, when I knew I had to begin the conversations with purpose. This created a tension for me as a researcher in the very early stages of the study.

### **Coming Together At The Seams**

It was at the early stages of the narrative inquiry process that I began to consider some of the tensions that I might experience as I began this inquiry into teacher spirit through conversation. It was clear that research through a conversation group was not as simple as I thought. Most certainly, the dynamics of this group would be different from my pilot project. I noticed into the first meeting, that this conversation group was

different. There were perhaps a few notable differences that made this group feel different than the pilot study group. First, this time I was the researcher. I did not come to the group to simply “try” something new. It was not coursework. This was the “official” research and just knowing this seemed to change my comfort level and the tone of the first meeting. Second, the group was meeting for the first time as a conversation group and had not come together for purposes other than the research.

The tone of our first meeting was much more uncomfortable than I had hoped. The food seemed to help release some of the initial “meet and greet” tensions we were feeling. To begin, our initially planned place of meeting became too busy and provided little privacy, so we had to relocate before we could start. My feelings of tension about our lack of privacy certainly impacted the tone of the meeting as we relocated to a much smaller and more private setting. Then, knowing what I knew about narrative inquiry and the importance of negotiating purpose, I became uncomfortable as I started the meeting with what suddenly felt like an agenda. I worried that the agenda did not fit with the initial stages of the negotiating process. My tension grew. There was the tension of being in a small group with unfamiliar people, the tension of having expectations both of myself and of the group, the tension to “do it right” and at the same time the tension to keep the conversation natural and authentic. I realized the contradiction that I presented – beginning an authentic conversation group in an inauthentic way, as we had come together purposefully for the research. At the same time I was reminded of Florio-Ruane and Clark’s (2001) words, “When people meet in social groups, they tell stories. Oral personal experience narrative arises naturally in the conversations of like-minded people” (p. 11). We had come together as a group of teachers interested in teacher spirit.

Remembering my previous experience with the pilot project, and, despite the tensions I was feeling, I tried to stay optimistic about the process.

Even with the uneasiness present – we began an interesting discussion about what brought us to teaching. We realized we were from varying backgrounds and experiences – elementary teacher, teacher librarian, special education teacher, ten years of teaching, thirty years of teaching, no longer teaching. It seemed the acknowledgement of this diversity helped to alleviate some of the tensions we were feeling. However, throughout that first conversation, those tensions were evident to me and to the others in the conversation group. The next day, after a rather sleepless night, I wrote in my journal.

*The meeting was tense. We struggled to appear confident and comfortable in the midst of friends, and at the same time, alongside strangers. This situation proved to be quite difficult in the sense that it became very apparent to me how differently we act with people of different levels of trust. I noticed the struggle that Lynn was experiencing – on one hand wanting to reminisce with a close friend, and at the same time feeling the tension of talking comfortably and openly with teachers whom she knew only as strangers. Even with a preliminary understanding of confidentiality within the narrative inquiry space, it is evident to me that trust in the research relationship will take time . . . as all trusting relationships do.*

(Research journal, September 8, 2001)

This coming together created a tension that included fear of the unknown, uncertainty, vulnerability and the absence of trust, all factors that inhibit authentic conversation.

### **Does Everyone Need To Talk?**

During the first conversation, Lynn and Carolyn spoke openly about several colleagues they knew in common. I appreciated their enthusiasm and their willingness to keep the conversation going. I did not feel left out of the conversation, but perhaps I listened with a different ear. I was focused on the notion of teacher spirit and was keen to pick up the talk when I heard something that sparked a related conversation. This made me worry again that my agenda would come out too strongly when we were only beginning to negotiate our purpose as a group. At the same time, I immediately felt a responsibility to “negotiate” and steer the conversation to stay “on topic.” This was a difficult tension and I’m sure I only added to the tension by steering the flow of the conversation. I was also uncomfortable steering the conversation in any direction, knowing that the purpose of our research was yet to be negotiated together as a conversation group. My knowledge of this negotiation process in narrative inquiry caused me to feel tension throughout the first meeting. I kept reminding myself that narrative inquiry aims to understand and make meaning of experience. I worried that I was spoiling the experience with my intentions. Was I to have intentions? Did everyone need to talk? At the same time, I knew we had to take time to get to know and trust each other in order to become a meaningful conversation group. I knew it would take time for me to step back and see my own stories as a participant and the stories to live by (Clandinin & Connelly, 1995) of each co-researcher on this newly created landscape. I also recognized that authentic conversation was not always comfortable. I reflected on the pilot project, where at some points in our talk tension existed *because* of its open nature. In that project one member was drained by the conversations, perhaps because

she was living with trying experiences all day and talking about them was too much. The other member of that group found the conversations to be somewhat therapeutic, providing her with a space to vent and make sense of her daily struggles. Authentic conversation can become quite uncomfortable – perhaps like drawing a picture that suddenly becomes too vivid. I recognized that authentic conversation could be risky and might not always feel good. This first meeting proved to be risky and uncomfortable. At the same time, the complexity of narrative inquiry reassured me that this was the only methodology that would allow me to deeply explore the notion of teacher spirit.

### **Being In The Midst – Seeing Through The Mist**

Perhaps the most challenging part of narrative inquiry is beginning. Stories of experience begin early in a person's life. In this sense, any person conducting a narrative inquiry is walking into stories in the midst. (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000) As researchers, it would be much less complex if we could walk in fresh, with clean slates and begin our inquiry at that moment, but life does not allow us to start a fresh story, each researcher starting in the same place. Our stories are in the midst, our lives in composition, as we experience and live and evolve into who we are at our time of meeting (Bateson, 1989). This makes for difficult beginnings and negotiation becomes key. It reminded me of being in a heavy mist and trying to see, despite the surrounding haze, which prevented us from seeing each other clearly at first.

I began our next meeting posing questions about how the co-researchers felt about the first meeting and our beginnings. Recalling the tensions I felt, I presumed the co-researchers had also felt tension. Lynn felt uncomfortable with the informal nature of the talk. She was sure we required guiding questions or interviews, and showed her

vulnerability by questioning her ability to be reflective within the conversation and throughout the research process. “I think you two are more reflective . . . I’m not sure that I reflect, I get mad and do things but I don’t know if I reflect. I’m working on that. It isn’t always on the surface” (Group Conversation, October 7, 2001).

Carolyn reflected on her experiences in another narrative inquiry, which led to a story about how vulnerable we feel as a profession, and how our conversation clearly demonstrates the fear we feel when we have voice. The conversation group explores these feelings in the following conversation.

Carolyn: I can recall the first conversation that we had [in another study she participated in] and we sort of went down certain avenues, and we went home and went, “oh my gosh, what did we say?” And the next day we had to phone and make sure it was okay . . . and say, I won’t say anything if you don’t! But you know when you cross those boundaries that are so ingrained in your professional life it feels wrong.

Lynn: And have that feeling that you did something wrong. I guess maybe we have a lot of internalized professionalism and it is just really restrictive. I don’t think I’m nervous, but maybe I am.

Gloria: I think that silences are a huge issue in our profession. No wonder we feel so uncomfortable being in a conversation group even where confidentiality is provided.

Carolyn: It's funny, I thought it would be easy for us to "talk" but it really is something that we are not used to – in a group of people we don't know well. What does this say about our voice?

(Group conversation, October 7, 2001)

This conversation reveals the many boundaries that we faced as we attempted to have authentic conversations in a profession where these spaces are uncommon. Carolyn felt danger when crossing boundaries that were so ingrained in her professional life. She and Lynn talked about it feeling "wrong." This reminded me of the feelings I had in my first classroom. We made a space for authentic talk and it felt foreign, not only to me as a beginning teacher, but also to my students who changed the space when we were being checked on. We had this same sense of doing something "wrong." The discussion also brought up an interesting point about silence and voice. We recognized after our first conversation that we are often silent when it comes to authentic professional talk, and our voices are not heard. There seemed to be an element of fear expressed in this conversation – fear that we were going to become targeted or threatened in some way for speaking openly and honestly about our teaching lives.

This conversation also made me question our conversations on and off the landscape of school. Are our conversations stifled in the place of school? Do we feel this uncomfortable talking in schools, where agendas and cover stories prevail? I also wonder what effect this fear had on our conversation group. Even though we were provided with a space to talk, without an established sense of trust and relationship, we were somewhat fearful and uncomfortable with authentic conversation, even in a place we hoped would be safe.

What was I learning from this conversation? This conversation allowed me to realize the foreign nature of our group within the profession and within educational research. I realized just how seldom we are given the opportunity to discuss our teaching lives – and how risky it can feel to share our stories to live by; how foreign authentic conversation is to us professionally. This was both an appalling realization, and at the same time a motivating one, in the sense that I was reassured that we needed this experience to deeply explore the meaning of teacher spirit. At the same time I was reminded of the literature reviewed in preparation for this inquiry. Grumet (1987) reminds us that “if telling a story requires giving oneself away, then we are obligated to devise a method of receiving stories that mediates the space between the self that tells, the self that told, and the self that listens: a method that returns a story to the teller that is both hers and not hers, that contains her self in good company” (p. 321).

Our initial meetings had many moments where I began to pay attention to tensions within the narrative inquiry process. I began to think about negotiation, risk, vulnerability and “good company” (Grumet, 1987), and how best to achieve authentic conversation. These meetings and subsequent realizations also led me to consider a variety of ways to take part in conversations. I wondered if meetings with individual co-researchers to negotiate purpose and create a sense of “good company” might help to better understand who each person was and where they were in the midst of this narrative inquiry. We continued our group meetings, negotiated purpose and established relationships as our group evolved. A variety of situations allowed me to better see through the mist and understand each individual’s stories to live by, while at the same time establish a trusting relationship with each co-researcher. As my contemplation of

teacher spirit evolved, so did my thinking about how to explore teacher spirit within this method of inquiry. Narrative inquiry does not have a formula in which the researcher implements. Narrative inquiry is about the complexity of the journey. Narrative inquiry provides the flexibility to create a unique method for exploring teacher spirit, one, which suited our group, while working at the boundaries of what had previously been explored in relation to teacher spirit.

The initial negotiation process, although challenging and uncomfortable, led me to believe that our experiences and our stories to live by were critical to understanding the notion of teacher spirit. Narrative inquiry allows us to respect each others' voices while including and honoring our own meanings and the new meanings we make as we collaboratively share stories of experiences in a variety of ways – group conversations, individual conversations, conversation notes, and journals. Having different experiences in and of the study and telling different stories about similar events, narrative inquiry allows us to represent our individual voices and also our newly found voice as a collaborative conversation group.

### **Creating A Community Of Inquiry**

Miller's (1990) work "Creating Spaces and Finding Voices: Teachers Collaborating for Empowerment," is an engaging and compelling account of five classroom teachers' attempt to create a community of inquiry. An in depth look at the group's struggles to ask questions rather than set an agenda, and work without a model or methodology for others to follow is described in detail. A continuous and relational process is described, and the struggles in this type of relational research are presented. Open-ended inquiry and the voice of relationship were, at the beginning, very difficult for

us as a research group. Lynn in particular was persistent in her dis-ease about our process. Her comments at our December meeting indicated the continued tension she was feeling.

Are there questions you would like to ask us? I mean are you getting what you want out of this? I'm just not sure that this is useful conversation. I think I would feel better if I had some questions to ponder between meetings, or if we could address one question each meeting. Would that be more helpful?

(Group conversation, December 17, 2001)

This conversation allowed me to better understand Lynn in many ways. Knowing what I know now about her, much of who she is was embedded in her words during this conversation. Lynn found the expectations she placed on herself and her perfectionist nature challenging on a school landscape. For many years of her teaching life, Lynn worried about what people thought of her work and hoped that she pleased parents and administrators. Lynn lived many years of her teaching life aiming to please. This became apparent in her initial concern that we were doing the research "right." She longed for structure, and had an idea in her own mind of what "research" should look like. Narrative inquiry was not the picture she held of research. Perhaps these feelings came from the sense that teachers' stories hadn't been valued to date, and teachers' voices typically were rarely heard throughout her years of dedicated teaching. This led Lynn to be slightly suspect of the methodology, and feel slightly vulnerable. At times she appeared to feel the research was not legitimate enough, and would not please academics. She felt compelled to give politically correct answers at first, stories that were safe and free of controversy.

As we began to discuss transcripts and re-visit conversations over the next several meetings, Lynn's tensions about the process seemed to subside. Over the first few meetings we began to feel reassured that our stories and conversations about our practices and experiences in and out of teaching would guide us to a greater understanding of teachers' spirit. Our community of inquiry began to strengthen as we each came to a better understanding of our group in relation to each other. We began to believe as a group that our stories would teach us and guide this research, even though there was some uncertainty as to how the research project would unfold.

### **Milestones In Narrative Inquiry**

A tension that appeared in these early meetings was perhaps unique to this conversation group – one of the participants had previously been involved in a narrative inquiry of other wonders and was more versed and experienced in the language and process of this method of inquiry. This was something that I initially recognized and hoped would help guide our process (research journal, Sept. 7, 2001). Each of us was coming to the conversation with different levels of understanding of narrative inquiry, and it became evident early on that those of us with little or no experience of this inquiry method would require patience as we struggled through the process. Narrative inquiry is a method that allows us to work outside the box, at the boundaries of what many of us have ever experienced on school landscapes or in institutes doing educational research. It was apparent to me as a researcher that understanding was necessary as we embarked on this project. There were times when this was difficult. Forgetting that someone had a longer journey to take in this area became a form of tension. One evening after a long

meeting that was perhaps scheduled too close to Christmas break (as the group was clearly very tired) I wrote in my journal:

*I am now realizing the importance of my course work on narrative inquiry. I recollect and continue to struggle to understand narrative work. I remember the weeks of meeting with the research issues group at the Centre for Research for Teacher Education and Development, to grapple with the process, the tensions, the negotiations and the complexities. As I recollect this struggle, I understand the importance of respect and tolerance in the process, in order to nurture and guide co-researchers' thinking, so that they too can understand and participate in such a complex adventure. I'm finding it difficult to ensure a group of tired teachers persevere during some very difficult conversations. Spirit is so personal and can be draining to talk about – especially if we are feeling “spirit-drained” as we speak.*

(Research Journal, December 17, 2001)

The following transcript further describes the levels of understanding of narrative work within our conversation group.

- Lynn:           And how about some guiding the questions the week before for me to mull over?
- Carolyn:       Do you think that's good?
- Lynn:           No? Is it against the way the research theory works for this?
- Gloria:         How about I give you transcripts the week before, for you to look at and think about?

Lynn: I don't understand, I don't know what the theory is about this conversation.

Gloria: How did [she] do this? Did she did give out questions at the beginning of every meeting?

Carolyn: Well I've been involved in two kinds of inquiries, one where I was the only person and it was almost, in some ways, I guess it was conversational but I think it was more intentional conversation, very guided and more like a series of interviews, the other was more like a conversation over coffee.

Gloria: Let's just stay with conversation and whatever comes out will guide our subsequent conversations. I think the transcripts can be a good guide and I brought this up in research issues because this is one of the things that I was wondering about too. Can you give questions or thoughts or should I give you some of my thoughts as I read the transcripts to see if it sparks anything?

Lynn: And so when you see something, a comment you've made and it's not full you add to it. Is that what you want us to do?

The tension that arose was that although I could recognize our struggles as we experienced narrative inquiry, I could not help the group to persevere through some difficult conversations. In this sense, as a researcher, I had to model perseverance coming back to difficult choices and decisions we had to make with respect to the research project. I was muddling my way through those early moments and simultaneously, I worried that the co-researchers were seeing the methodology and

conversations to be too vague, or not focused enough. I also worried that they felt the conversations to be too draining. I wondered if their spirits were being rejuvenated or depleted by the intensity of some of our conversations and coming to terms with the intentions of the study.

### **Tolerance And Respect: When “Outside The Box” Becomes Yet Another Box**

Soon into the series of group meetings, another tension arose, forcing me to pay attention to the inquiry process. The notion of how we think, and where we are in our thinking became an interesting aspect of our conversation group.

Our conversation group met monthly for several hours at a time, to try to make sense of teacher spirit. We began with questions about what we meant when we spoke of teacher spirit and tried to see how teacher spirit was linked to our individual stories to live by. We grappled with the philosophy underlying narrative inquiry (Connelly & Clandinin, 1990) while sharing our common belief in the power of story in educational research. Alongside these challenges we encountered yet another tension that led us to contemplate our own thinking and re-examine some of our most fundamental beliefs about teachers, teaching and learning.

Lynn’s December comments indicated her struggle with the open-ended nature of the research. She had a definition of research in her mind based on statistical data and at the very least formal interviewing techniques. She was convinced that narratives and conversation were interesting and helpful, but did not yet see what we were doing as “research.” However, as we began to discuss transcripts and bring up specific comments and conversations over the next several meetings, Lynn’s tensions lessened. It appeared that once she saw the written work, it became clearer to her that the process was a useful

one. At one point in a revisiting of transcripts she was overwhelmed that she had said something so meaningful and was sure it had been edited. It was delightful to watch as she fell into a more comfortable place with the narrative inquiry process. However, even upon her realization of the effectiveness of the process, Lynn continued to slip back into her former ways of knowing and thinking about research. This second-guessing was a familiar feeling to me and reminded me of a teaching experience I shared with the group.

This reminds me of a time I where I was applying a writing method with my grade four classroom. I remember panicking, questioning the technique, and doubting its effectiveness. I would have to re-read the literature to clarify once again in my own mind the effectiveness of this teaching technique.

(Group conversation, December 17, 2001)

This was also the experience for Lynn. Her previous ways of knowing about research continued to re-surface as she participated in our conversation group. Even so, she remained completely dedicated to our group and participated in a lively manner with each conversation. I was beginning to learn that her willingness to learn was indicative of many of Lynn's stories to live by, and very much a part of her identity. We continued to learn and evolve as a group as we discovered the complexities of the process we were involved in.

As Jean Clandinin has said, "once we wake up to things it is difficult to get back to sleep." Once our thinking changes, it is difficult to go back to our old way of thinking. Just as we may not see an optical illusion in an image, once it is pointed out to us, it is then difficult to see the image as we previously saw it. This is much the same in narrative inquiry. Once we understand this type of research, it may be difficult to

understand or accept other types of research. Perhaps this method allows us to see outside the box and we lose sight of what we previously understood and where we came from as we moved toward new understanding.

I recognized this within our conversation group – the difficulty experienced in helping each other to new ways of seeing things. It was sometimes difficult because the diversity in our group’s thoughts about “research” was significant. It became apparent to me that I was not there to judge my co-researchers in their responses to each other’s stories, but I was there to help share my understanding of the process and how it would unfold. This brought me to contemplate the notion of three-dimensional space in narrative inquiry. Clandinin and Connelly (2000) explain the metaphorical three dimensional space as “personal and social (interaction); past, present and future (continuity) combined with the notion of place (situation)” (p. 50). This study was temporal, personal and occurred in a specific place. The co-researchers and I were moving inward and outward; backward and forward as we contemplated each other’s experiences and our own. This is what made our thinking feel outside of the box. We were not simply looking at each other’s experiences for what they were, but living them and retelling them based on our own experiences and thoughts that resonated as we worked in relation. This was challenging at the very least and invigorating at the same time. *In relation*, the group was learning and experiencing new ways of knowing personal practical knowledge, professional knowledge landscape, identity, and teacher spirit through an interwoven series of conversations.

This experience taught me a valuable lesson that I recalled throughout the research. When we think “outside the box” it is important that we ensure we are not just

creating another box. A critical component to thinking “outside the box” is considering all types of thought and thought processes. From this I learned that there is always the potential to create yet another box or boundary – unless we focus on keeping our minds open and thoughts flexible, where we can move inward, outward, forward and backward and ask questions of our shared experiences in each of these directions. Paying attention to the tensions and fostering trust, respect, and tolerance in the narrative inquiry process became my role as facilitator in this inquiry. We began to operate smoothly and the conversations became authentic as we built a trusting relationship within the group. This took place over time amongst a dedicated and patient group of co-researchers.

The research tensions allowed us to grow and move forward in our thinking about educational research in general, while simultaneously providing information to broaden our understanding of teacher spirit. These tensions contributed to the intensity and effectiveness of authentic conversation as a tool in educational research. Throughout our tensions, wonders and stories, we began to make sense of teacher spirit. Rhythms and repetitions began to show themselves over the next ten months allowing me to narratively code our conversations. The following chapters explore our conversations in terms of these repetitions. We explore three rhythms: silence, not being good enough and resistance, and place and space. These chapters are representations of our sense making as we completed this inquiry.

## CHAPTER SEVEN: SILENCE

Our stories of silence and choosing silence resonated with us as we explored the notion of teacher spirit through our conversation group. Silence, as a common chord progression, remained steady as we began to play different melodies pertaining to our experiences of silence and not being heard. The following transcripts and texts explore the notion of silence as it relates to teacher spirit. We talk of our early years in teaching and reflect on silence – how it has uniquely shaped and reshaped our spirits throughout our teaching lives in schools.

Carolyn: Talking this openly really makes you feel like you've put yourself at risk.

Lynn: Yes, like, this is wrong.

Gloria: It has been ingrained in our heads to be silent – somehow we are given the message that it is dangerous to talk openly about what is really going on around us.

Carolyn: This is the grand cover story and it is not only school wide, it is profession wide.

Gloria: Yes, I believe our professional organization, if we can call it that, promotes this type of fear with its professional code of conduct. It stifles our honesty with each other and within the profession. I like to refer to it as the professional code of silence! (laughter)

Carolyn: We seem to have a certain amount of internalized professionalism and it just is restricting. I'm not sure it is professionalism or if it is fear? And the silence around that is horrific.

(Group conversation, October 7, 2001)

After bringing a piece of transcript back to the co-researchers after our first conversation group meeting, we immediately began this discussion about not being heard. As it was early on in our group meetings, we were still trying to get to know each other and negotiate our purpose as a research group. I begin this exploration of silence as an aspect of teacher spirit with this conversation. It was taken from group conversation transcripts (October 7, 2001) that now, after revisiting, I realize just how uncomfortable we were at our first meeting. I realize now just how foreign authentic conversation was for us as a professional group, and how unusual it was for us to talk openly and be heard by each other. I heard this in my naming of the professional code as a code of "silence," in Carolyn's naming of open conversations as "risky" and in Lynn's naming of authentic conversation as something that was "wrong."

Our fear of speaking openly with other teachers is presented in this conversation. We all agreed that it felt very uncomfortable to talk openly, as if we were doing something wrong or unethical. Inwardly, we all felt that what we were about to pursue was risky. Outwardly, we worried about our professional code of conduct, our schools, and our "internalized professionalism." It was early in our conversations that we recognized we had learned not to talk openly. We acknowledged schools were not typically places where we could discuss tensions or human issues. We recognized that

we would have to unlearn our silence – or, this internalized professionalism – in order to make the research group work.

We experienced points of silence throughout our meetings over the next several months, both in our telling of silence and in our conversations. Because of this, I am led to further explore silence within our wonders about teacher spirit. I think about silence and its impact on teacher spirit. I think about choosing silence and the consequences of this choice on our teaching lives. I also think about being silenced, by fear, or by other teachers or by place as a complexity within this exploration. Alongside these wonders, I think about not necessarily silence or being silent, but also about not being heard. What happens to our spirits (the co-researchers' spirits and my spirit) when we feel we are not heard in the schools where we live out our teaching lives? What happens to our spirits when our voice is stifled by fear and we can no longer participate in authentic professional conversation? What happens to our spirits when we feel vulnerable speaking our thoughts even outside the place of school?

When people are silent, they remain undiscovered or unrecognized. They make no utterance, or are indisposed to speak, not loquacious, but free from sound or noise (Merriam Webster online, 2003). With this meaning of silent in mind I question how the research groups' spirits are shaped by being undiscovered or unrecognized, or by making no protest or outcry. Does choosing not to exhibit the usual signs or symptoms of presence shape our spirits? The notion of presence (or the absence of) becomes an interesting way to think about being silent as teachers, both on and off school landscapes.

In contrast, looking at the word silence – meaning noiseless, I question how this other state might also shape the research groups' spirits. As a verb, silence means to

compel or reduce to silence, to restrain from expression, or to cause to cease hostile firing or criticism. How does this silence shape teacher spirit?

Throughout our conversations we shared stories where we have felt compelled or reduced to silence in our teaching lives. In many experiences, silence became the only alternative in our minds as we experienced using our voices and not being heard. If we speak and are not heard, are we eventually led to silence? This chapter attempts to explore these wonders about being silent, silence, and not being heard in relation to teacher spirit.

Carolyn and I had a conversation in January 2002 about what motivated us to teach. Carolyn spoke of her current situation. She spoke of frustration with her professional life and how her personal values and beliefs get in the way of what she morally thinks she, as a teacher, should do to re-present the profession to the public. After years of contract disputes, heavier work loads, and decreased public support she now recollects that her frustration and, in turn, her silence began with feelings of not being heard. Looking back, Carolyn felt she always had a positive perception of teachers and school. She felt the place of school was where she first realized that she was smart and had special talents. While her parents were perfectionists and always encouraged Carolyn to do better, she believed she was encouraged in school and by teachers throughout her elementary and secondary school experiences. Carolyn remembers school being a very positive place where she created many good memories. She remembers she felt free to speak. Carolyn felt safe and encouraged in school and felt she was heard. School was a positive space for her.

Carolyn took a year off after high school to contemplate her direction and chose to pursue a teaching career. Although she does not speak of regretting her choice to teach, she consistently searches for alternative teaching experiences. Carolyn felt that teaching was where she was meant to go. She completed an alternative program in teacher education seeking any alternative that might provide her with an opportunity to stand out, knowing that she would graduate in a time when the job market for teachers was extremely tight. Even though she feels her teacher education program was innovative and well delivered, she now feels, looking back, she was not all that well prepared to teach. She felt she was missing key skills (i.e. assessment) when she first started. Carolyn's outstanding success as a student teacher, along with her confidence and strong use of voice, as well as her alternative teacher education program gave her the edge she required in a tough job market. She was awarded a teaching position with a prominent large school board, in a high profile school with active and vocal parents and a staff of devoted teachers. She now believes significant changes have taken place in schools since she began teaching twelve years ago, and she sees the profession steadily becoming even more challenging for teachers.

I shared with Carolyn that I had felt fairly well prepared to teach when I started out. I too was looking, in part, for an edge in a tough job market and I felt my immediate connection to a special education program would give me an advantage. Given my specialization, good student teaching experiences and confidence speaking, I too received a first year teaching position with a large urban board and was placed in a small segregated classroom, where I was not required to "cover" every bit of the mandated curriculum. This alleviated initial teaching stresses for me, even though I was working

with a very challenging group of kids. I think the segregated setting in which I was first placed, with its small class size, allowed me to feel more confident in those first few years.

During our conversation, I found myself intrigued by Carolyn's purposeful choice to become a teacher. I had no intentions of teaching when I began university studies, but seemed to fall into the profession. Now looking back, I believe as Lortie (1975) showed, that teachers are motivated to teach because they had a positive experience, or motivated to make change due to negative school experiences. In contrast to Carolyn, I saw myself as one of the ones motivated to make change. I believe I pursued special education knowing I would be a teacher in the margins. It was the way I wanted to proceed. I was in the margins in high school and was not fond of any teachers. I didn't aspire to be like "them." My mom accommodated and facilitated my learning, and I wanted to accommodate and facilitate too. And I wanted to look out for the "underdogs." I wanted to be that kind of teacher, even if it meant continuing to be in the margins.

As Carolyn moved forward to the present day in the recollection of her teaching years, she began to speak of feeling "not heard."

I had such high hopes as a new teacher, not delusional, but high hopes. Now I am starting to feel so much more resentful of every bit of extra work I do at school and at home. Last weekend I looked at my bucket of work that I brought home and I was so resentful. You know I never used to be this way, but I am becoming more and more so as time goes on. I hear all the negative talk about teachers and I hear it from family, and those summer holiday comments from friends, and I read it in the newspaper and I'm tired of constantly feeling like I have to defend

my profession. And I talk and talk and yet I am not heard. I feel like I continue to bang my head against the wall with all the conflict and controversy in our profession and I really don't know what to do anymore. I can't explain what it is about our profession. Remember during our work to rule [a political action initiated by the teachers' union] how much conflict we had inside of us? We [teachers] want to teach well and to the best of our ability, yet we feel like we are doing so much more than we are given credit for and when we do try to speak of this we are not heard.

(Individual conversation, January 22, 2002)

Carolyn begins with optimism in her beginning years of teaching. She recollects how she was so positive and full of hope. She moves forward to the present day and now resents the extra work, the "bucket of homework" each night, and the negative talk she hears about teachers. She feels surrounded by negative images, portrayed by media and newspapers, family and friends who criticize the teaching profession. Even though Carolyn feels compelled to defend her profession, she strongly believes she is not heard and is wasting her time trying to persuade those outside the profession of its value. She has an inner conflict. On one hand she wants to ensure schools and her classroom are safe and caring environments where children are encouraged and challenged as she was. On the other hand she feels she is not credited for what she does. She continues to feel unheard, both on the school landscape and when she moves outside to public places. Carolyn further explains her feelings.

I worry about what comes next. Do I stop being the good teacher that I know I am so parents will see what I do that is over and above the "required" job? You

know, thinking back, “working to rule” was not radical – it was logical. It showed how much we do over and above [the actual teaching of curriculum]. If we would have sent [extra] homework home it says we are disposable. Yet, are we disposable? I have a child who is often left at school waiting for her parents to pick her up – for an hour and a half after school. I can’t stop ensuring that that student is safe and taken care of while she waits. Does anybody hear when we talk about this part of our job? When this student is left to fend for herself while she waits, do I as a teacher ignore her and hope that she shows up tomorrow and that she was finally picked up by her parent and taken home safely? There is this expectation from the school that we are going to take care of kids when parents are late picking them up, or give them lunch money when their parents have forgotten. The expectations are there, yet they are not discussed or acknowledged and they are kept secret from parents and the general public. The public does not want to be responsible, yet they do not want to acknowledge that teachers are.

(Individual conversation, January 22, 2002)

Carolyn speaks of both herself and of teachers in general during this conversation. As I listened, I understood her to be speaking in general. She speaks of being frustrated by responsibilities that she wants to uphold as a teacher, but for which she is not recognized. She strives to make school a place similar to what she was socialized to expect. For Carolyn, school was an encouraging and happy place, where she felt she was heard. She strives for school to continue to be that kind of place for children, regardless of what this might entail. She begins by explaining what she tries to create as a classroom space for children, but she links how creating such a space for children

paradoxically makes a space of frustration for her. She continues with another experience to further express her frustration.

Even today – it was very cold outside so we have indoor supervision. No routine action takes place when this happens even though there are several days throughout the year when weather is not suitable for children to be outside.

Today, I walked down the halls to help teachers take a break. At the same time I questioned, “why do we automatically assume that for the good of the children we will have no break and we don’t mind staying with our classes?” This is my nature, but it is becoming so eroded. The fact that we [teachers] need to have administration come and relieve us on those days is not formally discussed. We need the support in these small and insignificant situations, because these are the things that become significant when we are depleted. These are the things that pile up on me and make me resentful. If we received recognition for staying with our class on cold days or giving lunch money, or staying with deserted kids after school, maybe we would not be so frustrated. All of these little things are frustrating and I find that no one hears these arguments. I really think the public does not actually believe these stories. They would never go all day without a break from their work!

(Individual conversation, January 22, 2002)

Carolyn lives with tensions created by her struggle to be heard, as she describes how there is no place for her storied experience. She believes that it is the many things that she does daily to create a caring classroom for children that are not recognized, which make her resentful that she is not heard and that results in her silence. How does

being unheard contradict Carolyn's stories to live by? How does this conversation make sense when we visit Carolyn's stories to live by?

It was at school where Carolyn learned that she was smart, talented and capable. She participated in an innovative multi-aged setting as an elementary age student. There, surrounded by diversity, she was taught in responsive and innovative ways where self-directed studies were a critical part of her learning process. Fine arts were integral to most activities allowing Carolyn to experience her talent at an early age. School was a caring and safe place where, with encouragement and recognition of her strengths, she could freely explore challenging projects. Because school was that way for her, she strives to create school so that it is this way for all children, and as she tries to create her classroom to be a place that is like this, it takes her an incredible amount of effort. What she is feeling is that this incredible amount of work, the unheard of part of every teaching day, is not noticed and when she tries to express this to those both on and off the school landscape, she feels she is not heard. Carolyn refers to these many moments throughout the teaching day that are not known as the "unworded" expectations. Carolyn feels she was heard as a student and has been confident in using her voice – until now.

### **Being Silent**

Carolyn's story of taking care of children over and above her professional duties illustrates for me the tension she feels as she tries to reconcile her feelings of the undervalue of herself and the profession in general. It is part of Carolyn's spirit to look out for others. She cares about children, their safety and happiness as well as their academic success. She believes school should be a place of trust and encouragement. The lack of recognition for this belief and her implementation of it creates tension for

Carolyn. It is this professional tension that frustrates her and she is beginning to find it difficult to not attend to this tension. It seems that Carolyn's feelings of not being heard and acknowledged are beginning to deplete her spirit. This depletion of her spirit seems to be leading her to consider where to go next.

The tension that is critical to this chapter is that Carolyn is faced with difficult questions about how she should continue professionally, and at the same time worries about being less of a teacher than she is capable of and willing to be. This is her moral view of who a teacher is, and it is being challenged in the current teaching situation. It is this tension that leads her to be silent. Referring back to the definition of silent, when we are silent we make no protest or outcry (as in the silent majority). When we are silent we do not exhibit the usual signs or symptoms of presence.

*Carolyn and I had an interesting discussion tonight about tension – about not being heard. As she spoke, I was reminded of my first year teaching. My special education class was filled with needy souls that had bad experiences in school. They had been pulled-out, tested, moved and finally segregated with “designated” needs. Carolyn’s words reminded me of my anxiety when I went home each night, how I worried about their well being, and how hard I worked that first year. We know the story of the first year teacher – the cutting, and gluing, and writing and responding and planning that goes on until late each night. A colleague once told me her father worked out her hourly wage in her first year of teaching to be \$2.73 an hour. I remembered early on, the feelings of being undervalued and even discouraged from working hard. A principal made it clear that I was not to over-extend myself and make others [teachers] look bad. I remembered being*

*successful with that group of students that year, yet being cut from the staff for a “must-place” person, and being resisted as I promoted inclusion for my students. It was tense and as if I was walking on eggshells. I was given no choice but to silently go about my quest to improve my students’ school experiences.*

(Research Journal January 22, 2002)

Through these conversations we discovered a connection between not being heard, being silent, and silence in the teaching profession. Carolyn, Lynn and I began to see this as a critical aspect of our teacher spirit. When we feel unheard, we experience tension that may lead us to being silent – reduced to silence by our own frustrations. It seems the tension that Carolyn speaks of when she is forced to put her stories to live by aside and keep her work strictly “professional” depletes her teacher spirit. As she feels her value is not realized, she speaks about it and is not heard. As she recognizes her voice is not heard, her feelings of undervalue for the profession is reinforced. By definition (Merriam Webster online, 2003) Carolyn becomes silent and remains undiscovered and unrecognized. She knows that successful teaching experiences for her are dependent upon her personal touch in her work with children.

Belenky et al (1997) examines the “roar which lies on the other side of silence” (p. 4) in *Women’s Ways of Knowing*. In her study she found that while describing their lives, women commonly talk about voice and silence: speaking out, speaking up, being silenced, not being heard – all with connotations of a sense of isolation from or connection to others. Belenky links silence and conflict. She claims that once a woman has an experience of voice, she wants to be heard. Many women in her study spoke of

anger when they were not heard, or when their words were dismissed as soft. A successful professional woman in the study stated:

The older I get the more I realize that I'm willing to talk about things I care about only if I know the other person is really listening. If I don't feel that, I find myself falling into a silence, even when I'm at work or in the middle of a professional meeting. (p. 147)

Carolyn has experienced having voice as a student in school, and wants to be heard as a professional adult. As her words are dismissed, she too becomes silent. Even though Carolyn felt valued and heard at school as a student, she feels she is not heard now, as she describes her teaching life as a struggle to recreate for her students what she valued as a child. She finds it difficult to create a place in her classroom to ensure children feel valued and heard without going beyond the professional requirements of her job – teaching core curriculum, which is all she feels she and the profession in general is acknowledged for. It is the “extra” touches that Carolyn participates in to make school a place where children feel acknowledged and worthwhile that allow her to live her story of “good teacher” and that appears to contribute to her feelings of worth and satisfaction with herself as a teacher and a person. But, she does not feel parents or the public acknowledge this work. She feels enough tension to consider ending these activities. However, if she ends these activities she will no longer be a good teacher in her own eyes. This paradox depletes her spirit, as she feels she is left with no alternative way to live her life as a teacher.

Although administrators seem to understand the tension that is created by the lack of acknowledgement for her story of herself as a teacher, Carolyn feels the disparity

between the public (and parental) story of teacher and her story is not openly discussed among teachers in schools. She feels she has to be silent about what she feels, or she would just be labeled a “whining” teacher. She feels administrators do not openly acknowledge this tension. She feels administrators want her to be silent and not complain. As she struggles to voice her opinions she feels she remains unheard. She is sometimes hesitant to continue to voice her beliefs, like the woman in the Belenky (et al., 1997) study. Perhaps part of Carolyn’s stories to live by also influence her hesitance in becoming a “whining teacher.” Perhaps Carolyn learned somewhere over time that to complain is not acceptable. Heilbrun (1988) talks about “forbidden anger” where women could find no voice in which publicly to complain (p. 15). Although Carolyn is vocal and puts herself at considerable “risk,” always questioning and challenging, she worries that voicing her concerns is seen only as complaining, and feels that this will get her nowhere. This only provides another derogatory label to the list of already unpopular images she believes teachers face.

Heilbrun’s (1988) work helps me to make sense of some of the tension that Carolyn struggles with that lead her to feel unheard. Her frustration lies in the sense that she must speak carefully about the contradictions she feels, or she would be labeled a “whining” teacher. Heilbrun’s notion of the woman who does what is “intended” of women – or the acceptable chain of events carried out in an acceptable nature partially applies. Perhaps this belief in doing what we (women) are expected to do and be leads us to give up using our voice when we discover tensions and frustrations. Perhaps Carolyn and I have learned that it is not worth the struggle, and that we are too often speaking in vain.

## Teaching In Silence

In another conversation a week earlier, Lynn discusses how she remained silent and vulnerable until very late in her teaching career.

I think until I was about fifty I was absolutely terrified. I was terrified that something dreadful would happen at school and I would be responsible, or that my work wouldn't measure up. One day not too long ago, I assessed my situation, I discovered, "Hey, not much they can do to me. My pension isn't going to increase and I haven't done anything wrong to kids and if they don't like my job they can fire me. I'm going to do it my way from now on." And it freed me. All of a sudden I was free. And occasionally I do. I put my hands on my hips and look them [administrators and parents] straight in the eye and say, "I'm sorry. That has nothing to do with the priorities of what I'm doing. I'm not doing that. Sorry." And I don't.

(Individual conversation, January 15, 2002)

Lynn talks about her fear as a teacher and how this fear left her feeling she had no choice but to be silent. She takes us back to her early days of teaching when she was filled with fear. She worried that she would not "measure up" or that she would do something awful and have to take responsibility. She lived with a fear based on the expectations she felt were placed on her as a teacher early in her teaching career and for many years after. Lynn's fears were perhaps based on a story she had told herself of what a teacher must be. She felt she needed to be perfectly prepared, perfectly responsive as a teacher. She found living this story of teacher challenging even though in

some ways this was her story to live by, as Carolyn's story to live by was that a teacher created caring, safe, voice-enabling spaces for children.

Finally at a point in Lynn's career, where she assessed her financial situation, she suddenly felt the vulnerability created by her story of how she was as teacher for so many years fall away. She now told herself a new story of who she was as a teacher. She felt "freed." She chose to break her silence. At this time Lynn firmly began speaking what she believed to be right for schools and children, in spite of any risk. Previously she felt she could risk being fired. She no longer feared failure or firing, and it freed her of her silent teaching days. She continues to explain how she gained voice as her feelings of vulnerability slipped away.

A parent was screaming at me on the phone, because her little boy had wet himself half way home. I said, "Excuse me, this is not appropriate. When you are calmer call me back." And I hung up on her. And then she didn't sue me and the principal didn't come down and get mad at me, but the little boy came back the next lunchtime. He got really close to me and he sort of snuggled up to me and... leaned on me. He was apologizing for his mother you know. I thought, "You dear little soul." Freedom lets you do that. Now I have voice, but you have to be fifty and have your pension and then you can do that.

(Individual conversation, January 15, 2002)

Lynn talks about how a little boy openly shows affection, which she perceives as an apology for his parent's behaviour towards her. How did this make Lynn feel? She stood up to a parent and nothing happened to her. She had used her voice. This action, along with the little boy's show of affection towards her helped her recognize that fear

was not a necessary part in her story of who she is as a teacher. She felt free, as if she could finally speak without fearing vulnerability or reprimand. This experience helped Lynn to gain confidence and, in turn, voice. It allowed her to change her feelings of what a teacher should be (quiet, fearful, silent, vulnerable) to a more powerful, vocal, confident story of who she is as a teacher. For Lynn, this occurred late in her teaching life, when she no longer felt financially dependent and was ready to risk losing her job. It was then that Lynn was able to establish her voice on the school landscape.

Neumann (1997) speaks of how closely life and story are intertwined – how “life is lived through story and how story lives in life itself” (p. 110). She also adds that story often lives “unworded” in people’s lives though it is often rendered in other ways without words. She believes this “meta-story” exists in untold and unrealized form. In this sense, Lynn’s meta-story could also be seen as her story to live by. It is the story that makes her fearful and silent for many years of her teaching life. It is only later that Lynn brings this story to the surface, examines it, and gives it words, as she chooses to overcome fear and break her years of silence.

Lynn now vividly describes how she sees fear as part of what she experienced in the teaching profession and how her fear kept her from using her voice and being heard. She believes that fear made her silent for many years. She describes feelings of being vulnerable, “shell-shocked,” and fearful. Lynn describes her first years as filled with fear and trepidation.

I think that fear zapped so much of my energy, over time, it got so much in the way of my creativity and when I think back I’m so mad at myself. I was such a worrier, such an intense perfectionist. I was so fearful of not cutting it. I

remember I used to come home late in the evening and look at my husband and put my head on his shoulder and cry. He would wonder what was going on. I had to have everything totally in place for the next day before I could go home. I had to have everything handed out down the rows and counted out perfectly so that there were no extras. Everything had to be absolutely perfect. I was worried about every child, parent and every pencil that had to be sharpened. I think I had to be in complete control, or I thought I would be overpowered. These were in the days when children did not give you a problem! It's just me – I am a perfectionist. But, when you look at my library now, it's not like that any more. The fear is gone – but I'm also retiring. When that fear actually left me was not that long ago. When I evaluated my life and felt I was free to go if I wanted. That's when my fear left me, or I left fear.

(Individual conversation, January 15, 2002)

Lynn described herself as a perfectionist and felt pressure to have everything in her classroom perfect so that she could live out her story of teacher. She put pressure on herself to live out this story. This was part of Lynn's story to live by and, using Neumann's (1997) term, this story (her story to live by) was "unworded" for many years. She grew up with perfectionists. Her grandfather was a multi-talented pioneer – a medical doctor who came to Fort Saskatchewan to be the military doctor at the fort on the river, a self-taught botanist, and a master of prose and poetry – which he taught to Lynn as a small girl. Her story of her grandfather shaped her sense of achievement, perfection and intelligence. She knew perfect. It was a family story to live by. With this in mind, Lynn remembers always being a teacher. She speaks of teaching children to read and

write when she was age six or seven, when visitors would come to their home. She was always fond of books and waited with great anticipation for the trunk of books that would be sent from the city library to their small town, as the town had no library of its own. She describes the trunk as though filled with precious treasures. This was an intriguing story of Lynn's childhood given that she later completed a masters degree in library science, after completing a teaching degree. Lynn also believes there were few professional choices for women when she was growing up. She says, "you could be a nurse, or you could be a teacher, and I wasn't fond of blood!" (Individual conversation, January 15, 2002). Perhaps Lynn's love of books and ability to read and write at a young age were what shaped her spirit toward a lifetime of teaching. Perhaps living up to the expectations she placed on herself as a teacher were too difficult. Her fear was rooted in fear of failing, when she had rarely failed before.

Palmer (1998) devotes an entire chapter to fear. He describes fear in the following passage.

Fear is everywhere – in our culture, in our institutions, in our students in ourselves – and it cuts us off from everything. Surrounded and invaded by fear, how can we transcend it and reconnect with reality for the sake of teaching and learning? Fear is so fundamental to the human condition that all the great spiritual traditions originate in an effort to overcome its effects on our lives. With different words, they all proclaim the same core message: "Be not afraid." . . . . As a young teacher, I yearned for the day when I would know my craft so well, be so competent, so experienced and so powerful, that I could walk into any classroom without feeling afraid. But now, in my late fifties, I know that day will never

come. I will always have fears, but I need not *be* my fears – for there are other places in my inner landscape from which I can speak and act. (p. 56-57)

It seems that it is at this time in Lynn's life where she finally felt secure enough to choose to break her silence. But, I ponder, what did many years of teaching in silence, in fear of failing, of not living up to her own and others' expectations of being perfect do to Lynn's spirit? Was she aware of her silence? What made her recognize that she must speak her voice for the sake of libraries and teachers and kids, regardless of her fears? I wonder if her feelings of vulnerability changed her ways of thinking about teaching and learning throughout her teaching life. Lynn realized that she no longer needed to teach from a fearful place. She recognized that she could have fear, but she no longer needed to be her fears in her teaching life.

Lynn takes us back to her first years of teaching where she would rely on her husband for support and encouragement, as she felt so vulnerable and overpowered at school. The silence surrounding her fear of failing to live up to her own and others' expectations certainly shaped her spirit as she lived out her teaching life with children in schools for many years in silence.

### **Choosing To Be Heard**

Although Lynn appears to have set aside that story to live by that required perfection and silence and is willing to be heard, she continues to believe that teachers face very difficult expectations. Although she does not say that these expectations and the expectations that teachers place on themselves are too great, what she and Carolyn both seem to struggle with is that they are not heard when it comes to being acknowledged for their professional accomplishments, and the profession gains no

honour. Like Carolyn, Lynn finds the need for excellent organization and thoughtful planning each day taken for-granted as in the following comments. Lynn discusses her continued tension with the expectations that teachers are faced with.

There is not another job where you need a firm plan and material all laid out for the next day and everything is prepared so that it will go smoothly. You have time artificially divided up into fifty-minute periods and we don't work that way. Other professions might make a little list for themselves – “to do” – but if it doesn't work out it's no big deal. They won't have thirty co-workers waiting for them to come up with something for them to do for the day!

(Group conversation, May 15, 2002)

Even though Lynn voices these feelings now, she lived many years of her teaching life in fear of not meeting or exceeding these expectations and felt too vulnerable to say how she felt. Her fear of failure brought with it feelings of worry for children, parents and teachers, and the stress of these worries led Lynn to be silent for many years.

Returning to Heilbrun's (1988) work I am given some insight into Lynn's decision to use her voice. Heilbrun writes “it is perhaps only in old age, certainly past fifty, that women can stop being female impersonators, can grasp the opportunity to reverse their most cherished principles of ‘femininity’” (p. 126). For Lynn, this may be her newly found voice, as her previous principles of being a woman may have included being fearful, vulnerable and silent. Heilbrun speaks of this newfound bravery with a fictional character in one of her detective novels saying:

[S]he has become braver as she has aged, less interested in the opinions of those she does not cherish, and has come to realize that she has little to lose, little any longer to risk, that age above all, [...] is the time when there is very little “they” can do for you, very little reason to fear, or hide or not attempt brave and important things. (p.123)

Certainly, this is the case for Lynn as our previous conversation indicates she no longer feels fear and risk and now chooses strongly to be heard. The following conversation further illustrates how much Lynn has chosen to be heard, as she is about to retire. She is now willing to speak out and take risks. In contrast, Carolyn continues to struggle with feelings of vulnerability and the tensions between being unheard and the necessity to talk about what she believes are real school issues.

Carolyn: For the same reason you don't want to offend the parents that support you at your school, it's the same reason that I would be reluctant to put my name on a letter that came out hard on parents. As you know, this has been absent in this argument all together. You can't malign your parents. You have to go face to face with them.

Lynn: Not malign the parents! The idea that says schools must provide childcare? You're maligning the idea that schools' purpose is corralling children for the day so parents can be free. You're maligning the fact that people don't see schools as having a mission and goal to teach!

Carolyn: But by doing that I'm opening myself to giving examples. And by doing that I'm putting myself in a difficult position. In order to illustrate what we're talking about [not being heard] and the ways that parent's expectations are so in addition to what we do that is the exact precise place where teachers feel uncomfortable about speaking. They are still interacting with parents and their children and it feels controversial, and that's why parents were out of this issue [teachers not be recognized or acknowledged] all together. Even though they're a core part of our job frustration.

Lynn: Yes they are the core part of our frustration because it's something we've done to ourselves. We're no longer speaking of ourselves as having a limited job mission. We aren't putting out what we are really for to the public when you tell them we're here to teach your kids to do this and this and this and this.

Carolyn: You're right.

(Group conversation, March 27, 2002)

Carolyn speaks firmly of being reluctant and opening herself up to controversy by having to provide examples as she speaks of her issues with parents. She feels she would put herself into a "difficult position" and would feel uncomfortable and controversial. I sense that Carolyn feels the risks are too great to speak about the issues she perceives.

Carolyn and Lynn passionately take part in this conversation of silence about parents' expectations of teachers, and how teaching jobs have taken over so many parenting jobs that the job description of a teacher is now limitless. The conversation

examines not being heard and being silent, and telling oneself stories of what teachers are supposed to be, leading to silence. It is at this point in our research conversations that I am suddenly aware of them taking some risk as they speak. They are both passionate with voices slightly raised and I can sense their feelings of frustration during the conversation as they both begin to talk about what is getting to them. Carolyn makes it clear that she feels parents are not implicated enough and it is because she feels teachers are too vulnerable to speak openly about any unrealistic expectations that parents might have on them. She is frustrated that she cannot openly talk about issues regarding parents. To do so would be controversial and uncomfortable. Lynn speaks clearly and assertively about what she feels the issues with parents are and identifies teachers as part of the problem for not speaking about the issues in schools and the expectations of society on teachers. Keeping in mind that this is Lynn's final year of teaching, as she has decided to retire, Carolyn and I witnessed her openly speaking her mind about the human issues, about what is going on in her view, and about what frustrates her. It seems that Lynn has made a choice to change her story of what a good teacher does. She is prepared to speak about issues and feels this is part of her responsibility as a teacher living out her senior teaching years.

Carolyn is at a different time in her teaching career. She continues to feel she must, at times, revert to silence. She feels some talk is not heard or is too risky. As she speaks of "putting herself in a difficult position" and making herself vulnerable by talking openly about parents, I sense that outwardly she feels frustrated because issues are not being discussed. Outwardly she feels there are some constraints such as the Professional Code of Conduct that restrict what she is able to speak of ethically.

Outwardly, she knows she has voice; she is strong-willed and highly capable of speaking her voice. But, inwardly she too seems to have a story of a good teacher – one that doesn't make a fuss and one that continues doing extraordinary teaching without acknowledgment, in silence, and in the safety of her in-classroom place. Outwardly she feels it is too controversial and too risky to talk about parents' expectations, like staying with children after school, providing lunch, and staying in with kids during inclement weather with no break. She would continue to see parents and students every day amidst the tension she would initiate by choosing to speak her voice. She feels that having these conversations would make her teaching life too uncomfortable and too stressful.

Carolyn and Lynn continued their discussion trying to uncover why they become reduced to silence as they live out their teaching lives in schools.

Lynn: You see we [teachers] have become a basket in which they [government and parents] put everything they want children to do and they get away with it.

Carolyn: And all these expectations are placed on me. That's what's silencing me and causing this tension. No one hears us when we talk this way – about logical solutions to real problems in schools, issues we know of first hand.

(Group conversation, March 27, 2002)

As this conversation continued, I could sense that both Carolyn and Lynn were emotionally drained. Keeping in mind that the difficult issues arising through this research were being examined after long and hard days at school, and this conversation took place amidst a teachers' strike, we took a break and talked about classroom practice

for a few moments. Often throughout the transcripts we realized that in order to bring us back to a more neutral place, we would slip back into comfortable conversations about technique or a wonderful child we connected with that day. However, this conversation was important in that it was perhaps the first of many in that we heard each other's voices within our conversation group. Throughout these conversations about choosing silence and being silent we hesitated, risked, rambled, and revealed how we felt about what was going on in our classrooms and schools. This conversation was one of the first where we felt we had established a trusting relationship and where we were genuinely listening to each other.

### **Is There Place To Be Heard?**

I am led to question if there is a place to be heard on school landscapes? As a teacher doing research off the school landscape, I carry with me the "internalized professionalism" that forces me to be careful of what I say. Even when outside the place of school, I continue to maintain a degree of silence, unsure of what my words might say.

More specifically, I question if there is a place to explore our own stories to live by as teachers in schools, as our stories bump up against other stories of teachers and teaching. Some of the stories we tell ourselves as teachers may be what silence us in our work. If there were a place, would exploring these boundaries and beliefs help to rejuvenate teacher spirit while living out teaching lives amidst our school lives? Perhaps addressing silence would alleviate some of the tensions that Carolyn, Lynn and I feel as we ponder our careers and our ability to remain teaching in schools while sustaining our spirits.

As I lay our stories alongside each other it is these wonders that come to mind. Carolyn chooses to stay in school and be silent in the public places, hopeful that the situation in teaching and schools will reform and teachers will someday have voice in what goes on in their professional lives. She refuses to speak if she is not going to be heard. Lynn chose to stay in school and lived in silence as she worked amidst her feelings of fear and vulnerability. Finally as she reconciled that fear, she felt the importance to be heard far outweighed the vulnerability and risk that she may experience. She began to construct another story of herself as teacher, one that included voice and speaking out to the issues she perceived in her final teaching years. I chose to leave the place of school, after I struggled to maintain a healthy professional outlook living in schools. I learned about silence in schools early on, perhaps on that kindergarten day behind the piano. I knew that silence was something that was expected, and I was never very good at being silent about issues I felt needed to be addressed. Silence was at the very core of my last teaching experience – cover stories prevailed and teacher stories were told secretly amidst the silence in that school.

### **Being Heard As A Human Issue**

“Let’s get to the real issues.” That is what so many teachers say to me as I converse with any teacher that will listen, explaining my work on teacher spirit. “Don’t lose sight of what you are doing,” they tell me, “and don’t water it down!” I now realize that they see this work as a venue for breaking some of the silence that we know exists in schools and within our profession. The teachers I speak to typically feel they are not heard at school or in public. They feel they are “not supposed” to be vocal or outspoken about what really is going on. They see this work as getting to purpose and meaning and

to feelings of emptiness. We might see the connection between silence and spirit as a way to address purpose and meaning and feelings of emptiness. We might see visiting our stories to live by in the context of schools, teachers and teaching as an important part of professional development and growth, as a way to rejuvenate teacher spirit as we live out our teaching lives. I see the connection between being heard and spirit as a venue to examine how much I believe in my work and how I can begin to believe again. Being heard as a teacher, through authentic conversation (which we have learned takes much time and patience), through safe and open debates in school staff rooms with administrative support might nurture our spirit. Acknowledgement of the human issues by addressing topics such as silence may be a way of rejuvenating the many friends and colleagues that I talk to regularly who are losing sight of why they do what they do. As a conversation group, we began to break our own silence during this research. We recognized that being heard is an instrument for getting to the human issues. As a research group, we recognize that we need to be heard to sustain our teacher spirit.

## CHAPTER EIGHT: NOT GOOD ENOUGH

### *An Injured Spirit on a School Landscape*

*I remember the situation clearly in my own mind, a teacher struggling, a staff that was tightly-knit, and challenging students in a high needs community. It was mid October when whispers began about the grade five teacher. She was new to the school, as many of us were that year. A new principal had pulled us together in the attempt to bring a multi-talented staff to a group of students and parents that were struggling with school and its institutional story.*

*We began to hear stories at first, stories that she wasn't doing well – again. Her class was difficult and behavior was becoming an issue. She was losing control of her kids and some said that they were “walking all over her.” I lived next door to this teacher. Her classroom was large, challenging and we shared a wall, so I heard the escalating noise that usually occurred early in the morning and lasted most of the school day. I never heard her voice. I never heard her lose control. But I saw her face and it said that she was struggling.*

*Over time, this teacher's anguish became the secret talk of the staff. As she began to deconstruct, we began to pull away from her. Once she became unable to keep a cover story going, we ran in the other direction. After Christmas break she returned somewhat rejuvenated, but by mid February it was over. She did not return to school after that. The more difficult things got for this teacher, the more the staff backed away from her. It was done silently. I did it too. Not wanting to be pulled down by her diminished spirit and professional struggle, I too avoided and turned away from this teacher. The staff*

*ostracized her, adding to her grief and I imagine her fear, as she tried to cope on this increasingly difficult landscape.*

*A new teacher arrived to take her place in a temporary position. I felt the relief that her leaving brought. I no longer had to cope with the choice made to let her fail, fall and fade away.*

I begin this chapter with this story because I now recognize that it weakened my spirit to watch that teacher fall and fade away. It made me feel guilty that I didn't try to help her in some way. My research beckons me to explore the meaning of this story on my life as a teacher, a researcher and a person, alongside my co-researchers and their stories to live by. This chapter attempts to uncover the meaning of this story on our teaching lives. It is problematic in that it describes an experience that allows for a teacher to sustain a "spirit injury" (Dei, 2000).

### **Spirit Injury**

Spirit injury (Dei, 2000) intrigues me as I continue to compose this work. In the many stories that had repeated chords of something that resonated with us during our conversations, the experience of what I now refer to as being "injured" comes to the forefront. It is "injury" that we all recognize we have experienced at some point in our teaching career as we spoke of experiences in our teaching lives. Many of these stories seemed to suggest we felt we were "not good enough" or made to feel not good enough at what we do, as our colleagues reacted negatively (and silently) to our experiences. I wonder what it means to teacher spirit to sustain this type of injury. I also contemplate what it means to participate in the injury of another colleague on the school landscape. I wonder if teachers recover from this type of injury and what it does to teacher spirit as

they carry these experiences with them, becoming part of their stories to live by. I am drawn to question what happens to the spirit of teachers on school landscapes after such experiences occur.

In *Removing the Margins*, Dei (2000) introduces the notion of attending to spirit by suggesting that educators must begin to ask questions about how they understand the self, and what their role is as teachers in schools as they respond to the diverse needs of children. He defines spirit similarly to the dictionary definitions included in this work and also includes a definition given by a Faithkeeper of Onondaga Nation of Native Americans, but this definition uses spirituality, rather than spirit. Dei clarifies the Faithkeeper's definition by saying that "spirit or spirituality is what moves us in our everyday lives" (p. 71) using spirit and spirituality interchangeably. He also adds that these definitions are not particularly helpful when it comes to making sense of spirit in relation to our daily lives, as they become de-contextualized. In Dei's lecture at the University of Alberta entitled "Anti-racism and spirituality: Making discursive connections" (March 25, 2002), Dei referred to "spirit injuries" being sustained by our students, sometimes by the very teachers that are to be nurturing them as they learn. Throughout his discussion of the notion of spirit injury, Dei interestingly assumed that his audience understood what it was that he was describing. It is interesting that I and others, like Dei, so often assume to have an intuitive sense of what spirit is – and more specifically what a spirit injury might be. Despite the complexity of this notion, in this inquiry I attempt to link this same idea to that of teachers living their teaching lives on school landscapes. Spirit injury, then, becomes a way to think about memories, events

and experiences related to school, schooling, teachers and teaching in relation to teacher spirit.

Looking back on this experience, I see a depleted spirit. This teacher appeared to be failing in her classroom, and the more she struggled the more depleted she appeared to become. On top of dealing with the stresses of losing energy, purpose and meaning, she was then rejected by the staff as she began to lose control of her teaching life. She sustained injury that eventually forced her to leave the place of school. This injury depleted her to the point of failure. I can position myself as an injurer in this story. I did not help. I did not reach out to a colleague in need. I added to her injury by pulling away from her, by resisting her at a time of need, by letting her lose that chord progression and rhythm that we rely on to complete each teaching day. Perhaps it was fear that forced me to contribute to this injury. In this case, fear, as seen in the previous chapter, continues to shape my spirit and the spirits of my colleagues in intricate ways. What is complex about this experience is that it is reciprocal. As something is happening to this person, it seems something also happens to those connected to the experience. As this person's spirit was injured, I chose not to help or become involved, and also sustained a spirit injury. Now many years later, I feel compelled to look back on this experience and explore its shaping on my teacher spirit. I ponder what my involvement with this spirit injury has done to my spirit, especially now as I re-examine it in terms of injury, something I had not considered before or at the time of the experience.

In order to understand this experience I begin by examining the co-researchers' responses to this story in relation to their stories to live by. Through this examination of

our responses to the story and what our responses say about our own identities, we may broaden our understanding of teacher spirit on the school landscape.

### **Coping Or Copping Out?**

After I shared this story with Carolyn and Lynn, we spent hours discussing the incident with the teacher who was no longer coping. Many of the conversations turned to feelings of inadequacy, or, being “not good enough.” In some ways we positioned ourselves as “that could have been me.” First, we contemplated the other teacher. Almost immediately for each of us, we were drawn back in our own memories to experiences where we sustained what we could now see too as injuries to our spirits. It soon became apparent to us that all three of us had struggled with feeling we were not good enough at some point(s) in our teaching careers. Where do these feelings of inadequacy come from and how are they fostered as we each live out our teaching lives in schools? Do we tell ourselves these stories of not being good enough? Are these feelings fostered by our stories to live by? Or, do our colleagues make us feel this way as we compose our teaching lives in schools?

Many of the transcripts that follow can be revisited in order to make sense of these feelings in relation to teacher spirit. I examine these conversations with questions in mind. What fosters the competition among teachers even though there is no merit in being better than their colleagues are? Why did this staff turn away from the person who was falling, rather than come to her as supportive professionals?

This conversation was uncomfortable for me at the time, as I had not expressed this experience before and was not sure what the co-researchers would think of the experience. Making sense of this person’s spirit injury was difficult, and our stories to

live by were challenged by each other's strategies in making sense of it. There were some critical points that Carolyn, Lynn and I shared as we thought about this teacher in relation to ourselves as teachers, as people and to the professional knowledge landscape in which we teach. The following conversation captures our initial responses to the story after I shared with the group.

Gloria: And you know she was pigeon holed as the one who couldn't cut it – even though we were all having a very difficult time teaching on this landscape. I wonder what it was that made her fall, rather than me or someone else?

Carolyn: What scares me in a sense is that there is some satisfaction in this story for me. It is proof that what we do is hard, or something. . . there is something strange in me saying that. It feels wrong, but at the same time this is what I thought. It came to my mind. I guess I'm so tuned into anything that validates what we do. I don't know.

Gloria: You are feeling a similar tension to what I felt being there. There is something strange about it, something that doesn't feel comfortable when I think about what I should have done in that situation and what I did. It causes me a lot of tension. There is a contradiction that does not feel comfortable. I knew what I should have done, yet chose to do nothing. As I struggled, perhaps I was glad the focus was on her and not me.

Lynn: My gut reaction is that you did nothing wrong. I think this teacher couldn't cut it and she couldn't cope and she is not doing any favours by staying. She was not a good teacher in that situation, so leave the situation. I don't know how you help people like that, and when you can't cope, not in meanness, but if they can't cope I don't think there is anything you can do.

Gloria: But, the strange thing is that we all started out the same. We all struggled at the beginning and most of us were new to the school. For whatever reason, you know, we managed to hide that we were struggling, and she couldn't.

Lynn: You didn't start out all the same. I don't think I agree with you. I don't think we all a) start out the same, and b) can cope with similar situations in the same way. Maybe you had skills or tools that carried you through that she just didn't have.

Gloria: Well, we all started out the same in the sense that we were struggling in the school. The problems were very much the same school wide – this was not one difficult classroom. It was a very high needs school with very difficult students and parents. None of us coped well in this situation.

Carolyn: But obviously this teacher was overwhelmed with the situation – whereas you were not. You managed to keep some sense of control in the classroom. Perhaps she was not as capable.

Gloria: You might be right. I don't know. I think I just covered up my struggles better than she did. But I know I feel guilty about her leaving. And I mean, sure, maybe it was part of her personality. She was very musical, very artistic, and very soft-spoken and you know these kids just trampled on her.

Lynn: But lovely people are not necessarily good teachers. No, they often become doormats and often get walked on – unfortunately. And you know Gloria, I don't think you should feel guilty. I suspect there was no way to have given her the backbone she needed.

(Group Conversation, December 16, 2001)

Lynn really felt that this teacher was best leaving the place of school. Her initial reaction was that the teacher couldn't cut it and should leave. There was nothing else that anyone could have done for her at that point and that it would be best for the profession in general if she left. Inwardly, Lynn feels there was nothing that could have been done to give her the “backbone” she needed to work in a tough school with challenging students. Outwardly she thinks that she was in the wrong school and that being a lovely person does not necessarily make a good teacher.

Britzman (1999) outlines several cultural myths that are summoned by teachers in order to provide a “semblance of order, control and certainty in the face of uncertainty and vulnerability of the teachers' world” (p. 222). She claims that cultural myths are persuasive “because they reorganize contradictory elements of authority and internally persuasive discourse” (p. 222). Her myths include: “everything depends on the teacher,”

“the teacher is the expert,” and “teachers are self-made” (p. 222). Britzman’s first myth of “everything depends on the teacher” is important to examine in this context. Within this myth, she explains the notion of the rugged individual, one who can overcome any circumstance through pure ingenuity and individual effort. This myth also somewhat explains our belief in the notion of “sink or swim” typically faced by teachers new to the profession, but potentially faced by all teachers, as the “not good enough” story suggests.

This widely held myth is continually challenged by the complexity of classroom life in which the teacher’s authority and control is tested. It is also a somewhat dismal view of teaching in that the teachers’ work becomes about controlling learners and authoritative rules. What does this belief do to our identities as teachers? How might this myth affect those teachers starting out, who feel so much pressure to control and make it look like they are more than competent in their newly chosen profession?

In this experience, it seems that Lynn believes that “everything depends on the teacher.” Unless the teacher gains complete control, there will be no learning and the students will control the teacher. In this sense, a power struggle is a natural part of a teacher’s life and if a teacher loses this struggle, she is seen as incompetent (Britzman, 1991). Lynn feels this teacher has lost the power struggle and should not be in this situation any longer as she can’t “cut it.”

Lynn went through a trying experience in her teaching career, where, when a school was faced with losing a position, several teachers attempted to prove that Lynn’s position was not necessary or critical to the function of the school. This group of teachers watched Lynn and even checked her daily plans to try to make a case to remove

her position. This was a traumatic experience for Lynn, as she had previously always felt she was valued and made significant contributions to her school environments.

Even though Lynn experienced what I now see as a spirit injury, I don't believe these are parallel experiences of injury. Lynn sees this story of the failing teacher as one that does nothing for our reputation as professional people doing complex work. In Lynn's spirit injury, at no time was she storied as being "incapable" or someone who couldn't "cut it." In contrast, she was a very strong teacher librarian, with solid programs for children and a strong library program in the school. The group that tried to oust her from her position tried to paint a picture of her position no longer being necessary, or that the days of the teacher librarian were obsolete. There is another critical difference in these stories of injury. A group of teachers rallied behind Lynn, supporting and encouraging her, and eventually were key players in finding her a new position. Although Lynn was made to feel "not good enough" in the sense that her teaching position became vulnerable, and the shock she must have felt that colleagues would do this to her, she received support from other colleagues. She was hurt by the experience, and it certainly shaped her spirit, but she was not left to fail, fall and fade away.

Gloria's feelings about this experience are clear, now, as she looks back on the experience. She felt guilt, fear, and as though she betrayed the "failing" teacher in some way. Inwardly she felt as though she had let down a colleague and as though she should have gone to her aid in some way. At the same time, outwardly, she felt fear of associating herself with the woman in case she too would be storied as incompetent. At the time Gloria felt she had no choice but to silently disassociate herself with this teacher in order to keep clear of the fall out that might follow her failure.

Today as Gloria contemplates this experience, she wonders what really kept her from helping. Although her words during the conversation seem to suggest that she no longer believes this teacher was the problem, looking back, she now suspects she believed “everything depends on the teacher” at the time of this incident. Why did Gloria remain silent for fear that she would be associated with the victim and also be storied as not good enough? Looking back on this experience now, it seems that the guilt that Gloria feels from this story of spirit injury is that she truly believes this was not an incapable teacher who could not cut it. This was a teacher who needed support, and a staff in general turned away from this person rather than rallying around her. The tension that Gloria continues to feel about this experience on her teaching life comes from now believing that this teacher, although challenged by the situation, was only storied as incompetent or incapable when perhaps she was not. Today Gloria continues to ponder what was working against that woman in order for her to sustain such an injury

Carolyn’s comments about this incident made us think about the complexities of our profession. Her comments also bring us back to the context of the situation, rather than the teacher. In the following conversation, Carolyn thinks about the situation and the principal at this school. She questions the context and although she feels compassion for this teacher and seems to relate to this type of experience, she attends to feeling that this story provides some proof that teaching is a complex and challenging profession. She feels that our skills and techniques are taken for granted in most situations both publicly and on the school landscape. Outwardly, however she believes the public would simply see this as yet another inadequate teacher who finally couldn’t hide it any longer. This suggests that the public also believes the myth “everything depends on the teacher,”

which is what makes it a myth – a cultural belief that is widely held regardless of its factual extent. Thus it is not surprising this is what the general public would believe. As Carolyn looks forward she sees this type of injury as a common occurrence for teachers as they are faced with a heavier workload and increased negative public perception.

After examining these responses, I must question: do my colleagues believe I am copping out or giving up if I can't cut it? If I were forced out does it mean I could not cope as a teacher? What does this type of experience say about context and how it shapes teacher practice on a specific landscape? At this point in the conversation, Carolyn seems to shift her thoughts to that of context as well as the individual teacher.

Gloria: This teacher was hired because she was so successful with high needs kids and you know because she used a lot of her music skills.

Carolyn: Maybe she was storied as really successful in her previous school and maybe never really was. Maybe she was able to tell a cover story on that landscape and this one was just too challenging to keep the cover going?

Lynn: Yes, maybe she was just really good at hiding her weaknesses.

Carolyn: I think these are the situations where principals all need to do their jobs. Teachers need to be assessed and guided and supported, and at the same time poor teachers need to leave. But what is it that makes us protect these people? Ultimately that is why we're judged so harshly. It's the one bad teacher everybody knows that they remember.

Lynn: And it makes us look like the lowest common denominator. I'm old enough to have an antenna that goes off when I meet people like this and I don't spend much time dwelling on their problems. I would lose myself if I did.

(Group Conversation, December 16, 2001)

Carolyn and Lynn both feel that perhaps this person was living a cover story and found herself in too deep to continue to maintain it. Carolyn feels it is the protection of teachers that are not capable that potentially give the profession a bad name. She feels teachers whose performance in the classroom is marginal damage our reputations. We all agreed that we could not protect the "deadwood" of the profession, and those that can't do the complex work that teachers do on a daily basis should leave the profession. As a group, we could not deny there are incompetent teachers teaching children in schools.

I now think that the reason this particular experience significantly shaped my spirit was because I knew inside, as this injury took place, that it was a "story" of an incompetent teacher and that story contradicted my story of this teacher. And, even so, I did nothing to come to her side.

I struggle with this experience and continue to see it as a critical shift in my thinking about teaching and the professional knowledge landscape. Perhaps being marginalized as a teenager in high school allows me to relate to this teacher's marginalization. Perhaps working in my first classroom with children that were marginalized allowed me to live their struggles in a similar way. I wonder if my experience in my last formal teaching year, where I now sense I sustained a spirit injury, leads me to further explore this experience – now also as a spirit injurer. Perhaps this

experience bothers me as I contemplate teacher spirit because I have been involved in both sides of a spirit injury where a story of being “not good enough” was the reason the injury was sustained and a teaching life ended.

At the same time, knowing that Lynn, too, experienced a spirit injury on a school landscape, it seems she realized she must be strong and her own best advocate. She feels it is all up to her to make her teaching life a success. It depends on the teacher. Perhaps this is how her experience shaped her teacher spirit. Certainly the support she received from colleagues helped her to survive this injury and continue to compose a strong teaching story.

Part of Carolyn’s story to live by is to seek fairness and respect. She understands this situation, but at this point in her teaching life, she is drawn to the logistics of such an experience. Thinking back to Carolyn’s frustration with the paradox she currently finds herself in, it makes sense that she is drawn to the position she takes. She already feels the public has a poor perception of teachers and their work. She senses this in both the out of school places as well as the in school places, where she feels administrators would rather she didn’t “whine” and remained silent. She sees the impact this type of experience has on the profession in general, on public perception, and how it influences administration and colleagues. She sees these experiences as important learning opportunities for the profession, but feels frustrated that they are opportunities missed.

Carolyn too had experience with “not being good enough” when she arrived at a new teaching position. The school brought a group of high caliber teachers with unique talents together to create a highly innovative education program to talented children. Immediately upon her arrival, she felt “not good enough,” as the competition within this

group of teachers was stiff. These were teachers who were stars on their previous school landscapes. Now they had come together at this one school, struggling to win that title amidst a group of teachers who storied themselves as exceptional in one or many ways. Carolyn felt hurt, confused, marginalized and that she had no status on this landscape. Her confidence in her abilities as a teacher and a leader rapidly declined as she struggled to find her place on the staff. She realized her voice had no place, as she had lost the status to be heard, and was reduced to silence as she experienced the shock of this new landscape.

The competition and lack of collegiality that surrounded her disheartened Carolyn. But, she stuck it out, perhaps feeling the benefits outweighed the risks, and now after regaining her confidence, she has taken her teaching to a new level. Carolyn's confidence in her abilities and beliefs has allowed her to remain in this place reconciling her earlier feelings of being "not good enough." As she now looks back on that first year, she recognizes how injured her spirit was and how much this experience shaped her spirit, as she now struggles to find balance, and, at the same time, continue to perform her best work.

Carolyn's experience is very similar to my experience in my last school, where I now recognize I sustained a spirit injury. As with Carolyn, I was also disheartened early on, realizing that the school was not what it seemed in those early planning months. We both watched with great anticipation and admiration and worried about keeping up to the innovative staffs, which we had willingly joined. As presented in the opening story in chapter one, during this time I was made to feel "not good enough" either through administrative comments, or through my own perception of what was required to be a

“good” teacher in this school. Carolyn was made to feel “not good enough” when she realized her voice had no place, that she didn’t count. As I gradually made a choice to stand by my beliefs and values as a teacher, I was marginalized and left to fend for myself. What carried me through this time was building relationships with kids. As I limped through the year holding tightly to the relationships I had established, I uncovered a cover story of sorts. I believed in innovation and change, but not at the expense of storying other colleagues as incompetent.

Looking back at the experience of the failing teacher in my previous school, it now makes sense to me why I resisted those stories on this new landscape. With little consideration for the growing needs of teachers and students, this place became inauthentic to me. At the same time, I wavered back and forth between being strong in my beliefs and feeling I was not good enough, depending on my inner strength at the moment, and the activity in the out of classroom places.

Although all of these experiences of spirit injury carry different feelings and consequences for each of us, it seems that context or the place in which we chose to live out our teaching lives played a common role in the spirit injury. The relationships within those contexts were at the heart of our feelings of being “not good enough.”

I now question how believing the myth “everything depends on the teacher” can result in a spirit injury. In a sense, as teachers, we injure ourselves by personalizing our work and believing we are ultimately responsible for our successes and failures in classrooms with children. By believing that everything is within the teacher’s domain and judging ourselves according to our success in controlling our classrooms – or apparently controlling our classrooms, we risk injuring our own spirits. Do teachers

believe that they must compete with their colleagues in a power struggle as they prove to each other that they are ultimately in control of their own successes as teachers?

What is interesting as I look back on this conversation now, is that this was perhaps the first time where I was in a situation to talk about my experience with the failing teacher, and also my own spirit injury. I also know that Lynn had no professional place to talk about what happened to her, and Carolyn too had to seek out people and places outside of school to talk about what she was going through during her experience of spirit injury. It felt too risky to talk about it on school landscapes where there was no sense of trust. In all of these experiences of spirit injury, trust was at the heart of the injury – trust in colleagues, trust in change and innovation and trust in the profession. In all cases, there was no place or space to talk about these experiences on a school landscape amongst colleagues. The silence around these types of injuries that occur on school landscapes is horrific. And, until now I have remained silent about these silences. This wonder leads me to think more about the notion of place and the ever-changing landscapes in which we live our teaching lives. Perhaps place becomes an integral part of teachers' abilities to sustain their spirits, and also their ability to move forward as teachers living their teaching lives in schools.

## CHAPTER NINE: CREATING SPACES

Feelings of being “not good enough” are connected to place, even though we see in the previous chapter that this feeling is also sustained by believing the myth that it is all about the teacher. It becomes clear that, although this myth is widely believed, it is not just about the teacher. Place appears as an important factor in the feelings that teachers harbour of being “not good enough,” these feelings strengthened or weakened depending on popular beliefs of the place in which they practice, or the professional knowledge landscape. What do I mean by place, and how can I make sense of place in relation to teacher spirit? How does “place” shape teacher spirit?

Much research is currently underway, in a variety of disciplines, exploring the notion of place (Ellis, 2002). Contemporary research on place takes into account the changing world in which we live, thereby giving the notion of place a modern meaning. Drawing from the literature review presented in “*The importance of attending to children and place*,” (Ellis 2002), Tuan (1977) and others (Brey, 1998; Agnew, 1989) define place as a source of comfort, security, belonging, identity and meaning, having somewhat of an individual meaning apparent to those who create it. This sense of “placeness” (Smith J.M., Light, A. & Roberts, D., 1998) is subjective and in this sense I believe important to examine in the context of teacher spirit. Eyles (1989) believes we must begin to pay attention to place in studies involving human experience – attending to the contexts of everyday life. Crang (1998) states that “crucially people do not simply locate themselves, they also define themselves, through a sense of place . . . the place says something not only about where you live or come from but who you are” (p. 102). This is an interesting statement when I begin to connect this understanding of place to what we

yearn for as teachers and how this search shapes our teacher spirit. From this statement, it would seem that place helps us to define who we are as people and specifically who we are as teachers in schools.

After reviewing some of the literature pertaining to place and space, I found that some studies differentiate between the term place, and space, as Smith, et al. (1998) refer to “placeness.” Turning to the dictionary, I find a distinction between the two. Place is seen as the physical environment or the physical surroundings. Place refers to a building or locality used for a special purpose, or it can be a particular region, center of population, or location. Place can be a building, part of a building, or area occupied as a home (Meriam Webster Online, 2003). Space in contrast is seen as a boundless three-dimensional extent in which objects and events occur and have relative position and direction. This includes not only the physical place but also what occupies it (Meriam Webster, 2003).

For the purpose of this discussion, I can clarify my understanding of place and space as having significantly different meanings. I use the term place to describe the physical building, having measurable boundaries, and physical presence. In this sense, place does not include the people, things, events, and experiences that go on inside the boundaries of this physical construction. The school is seen as place – the physical building that teachers and children work in.

I see space as the emotional “inner” part of place, or it’s “placeness.” This space includes relationships, beliefs, values, things, events – everything that is within those boundaries of place. In this sense, the diverse people, things, and events in relation create space. Returning to Clandinin and Connelly’s (1995) notion of professional knowledge

landscape as “the context in which teachers’ personal practical knowledge of school and classroom life exists” (p.4), this can be seen as the created space that I refer to throughout this chapter. The landscape of the physical place then becomes the created space, in all its complexity. It is important to acknowledge here that some research does refer simply to place as all of these things, the word space used as part of the description of place as a term that encompasses the “outer” structure and it’s “inner” landscape.

This is an inquiry of human experience, of teacher spirit, of a jazz improvisation that includes chord progressions and melodies interacting to become a piece of great complexity. If we believe that human identity is in part, composed through place and space, then it must become an integral part of this research on teacher spirit.

The following introduction of Carolyn, presented in chapter five, captures many interesting ideas that now, after revisiting, I see relate to our wonders of place.

Carolyn’s stories to live by encompass alternatives. Carolyn looks for alternatives. She searches for breathing space on landscapes that she believes often stifle her personality, her ego and her confidence. Carolyn attended an alternative elementary school where innovation and cutting edge research in teaching and teacher education prevailed. She thrived in a multi-aged setting where inclusion was prominent long before these philosophies became trend. She remembers the challenging program, the advanced art classes and the open area where learning was taken to a self-directed level.

Carolyn looks for alternatives. She attended an alternative teacher education program, taught at an international school and made her way to her current position in a school that focuses on the arts. Here she was looking for a space

where her love and talent of fine arts can be an integral part of the curriculum.

Here Carolyn searches for breathing space. She searches for a place where her voice is heard, where teachers are respected, where her spirit has space. (p. 80)

As I revisit this work, I am struck by Carolyn's search for breathing space, or what I might refer to now as "spirit space," returning to the Latin meaning of spirit – breath. Carolyn searches for alternative places that allow her to create spaces where she can express who she is as a teacher. As she composes her teaching life she searches for respect and fairness. She searches for a place where spaces can exist for her voice to be heard, and also valued.

The importance of identity is well documented in teacher research (Greene, 1973; Vinz, 1996; Steeves, 2000). I am reminded of Greene's (1973) words insisting that educators and researchers cannot overlook the identity of a teacher, that identity is a critical aspect of what makes a teacher a person, unique and individual, with beliefs, values and understandings unique to her own identity as formed by the experiences she encounters, by how those experiences shape her to be. Vinz (1996) believes teachers create who they are as teachers as they go along, that our identity is fluid, and constant change leads us to new understandings of ourselves. As Greene, Vinz, and Steeves (2001) believe, and I believe, identity is integral to a teaching life. Returning to Crang's (1998) belief that place is "something not only about where you live or come from but who you are," (p. 102) it seems that exploring place contributes to our understanding of a teaching life and in this work, a teacher's spirit.

Carolyn writes a story of her arrival to a new school, one that she sought out as a potential place for her to create a space to compose her teaching life. The story provides

vibrant images of not only the physical place, but also the emotional aspects of the space.

Carolyn wrote this story as part of an assignment for doctoral course work and it is reprinted here with her permission. It is presented in unique font to distinguish her writing from my own.

### **Carolyn Looks For Space**

*I recall the drive back to my school the excitement felt as I told my colleagues all the details: my new school had a child centered philosophy which reflected so many of the learning practices I was passionate about - the teachers were strong, dynamic and POSITIVE - ready and excited to team plan and collaborate - they liked what I believed about learning and children and were excited about what I could offer their school. The staff room reflected a place that respected its teachers. It had a long eating table, a fridge with water and ice, new comfortable furniture to lounge in and real ceramic cups! Best of all, my classroom had a phone!*

*In the middle of September, I sat at my ancient desk and surveyed my classroom. Although the room had now been cleaned up, complete with paint, mac tac and hours of scrounging for useable pieces of furniture - I chuckled to myself as I realized that the only contribution my school had made to the renovation of my room thus far was - a phone. It still lacked a computer, printer, sound system, computer table, chair and bookshelves: all of which were standard in other classrooms. On top of which a paint job ordered to cover the grimy walls that I hadn't painted, still had not been completed, and a more immediate concern in the bright fall sunshine was the absence of blinds. Funniest of all was the elegant staff room I had been so impressed by during my interview didn't exist for teachers at all. It was an administrative conference room. The room we huddled in each lunch hour had no sink, fridge or furniture to speak of and looked more like someone's garage before a weekend sale - filled with the discarded remnants of teaching lives past.*

*I had tried to keep the faith, feeling more secure with each need that had been attended to. After all, at least I had a parking stall and keys now, and just yesterday my name place was delivered with my correctly spelled surname. Still a growing sense of unease stirred me.*

*Finally over a period of months, I began to build enough courage and trust to talk to a fellow new teacher. Most cautiously I approached her one day after school, when all the children had finally left the classroom and the chaos of the day was coming to a close. It was as though I had opened the floodgates.*

*Those conversations continued through the next year, during recesses, spare moments, before and after school and at other moments when I would dash next door for a quick word of support. We would meet furtively in the hall, our classrooms, for lunch - anywhere privacy would allow - just for a chance to share and deconstruct together our experiences on this foreign landscape. Somehow this growing together shifted our place on the landscape too. Our being together allowed for space for voices and ideas that had previously been diminished and disregarded.*

## The Physical Place

An unheard story among teachers is the frustration with the physical place in which we work. In every classroom I have ever taught, there is not one that I haven't painted, mac-tacked, begged, borrowed or stole furniture. There is not one classroom where I haven't spent my own money fixing the place up to make it somewhere that I felt was a warm, inviting and acceptable living environment for children and for me to work in. This is a familiar, though unheard, story among teachers. It is a common topic of conversation and when teachers get together, there is often a conversation about furniture and trades, and moving and locating "stuff." Sometimes this "stuff" is furniture and structural items, other times this stuff might include resources we need to better do our work. Sometimes, if we are lucky, the custodian might help move the file cabinet from the basement, or the discarded shelf in the storage room to our classrooms, or he might just provide a cart. Then we begin the task of painting, fixing and finishing the discarded piece into something usable in our classroom. The physical place is a common bone of contention with teachers. As a conversation group, we found this to be a topic of common ground, one that we could rely on to break the ice, or work us out of a complex meeting as one such conversation demonstrates:

Carolyn: I remember at our former school, they [administration] even controlled the Kleenex – the kids brought theirs and the secretary had a whole cabinet of Kleenex, but the teachers were not allowed to have any and they locked the cabinet! (Laughter)

Lynn: I remember a teacher ordering atlases and the secretary saying, "there must be at least five in the library already! Why do you

need more? And then she trotted down to the library and said to me, “does this stupid machine, referring to my computer, show how many atlases there are?” How do I know how many atlases there are!

Gloria: Yes and not to mention they are from 1968! (Laughter)

Even though this seems like a meaningless discussion as I write it, I know it is not. Smith, et al. (1998) outline a process in which we create space out of a non-descript physical place by marking, reorganizing, naming and narrating the place in order to establish a significance and identity for it. As Carolyn painted walls, and cleaned, and organized, and scrounged for furniture, she struggled to establish a significance and identity for her physical place that reflected her beliefs and values as a teacher and also reflected her identity. She was creating a space for her to live out her teaching life. When we “set up” our classroom we bring in personal artifacts and display them in prominent locations around our room. We bring our most treasured pieces from children who have passed through our teaching lives. These activities bring meaning to a place, which before this is a meaningless room, many of which (having never taught in a “new” school) are marginal at best as suitable places for children to learn and grow. Carolyn comments on her newly received nameplate and much to her surprise it was spelled correctly. As she hangs up this nameplate, she names this place – and it now becomes her personal space. As teachers, I think I can assume that we all have experienced these feelings of the personal space and establishing our identity in the physical place of school. Carolyn’s attempt to set up the physical place as one that she could live out her

teaching life leads me to contemplate how our teacher spirits are shaped by the places in which we teach.

### **Spaces That Deplete Teacher Spirit**

Why is it that some places seem to deplete our spirits, where other places seem to make us feel sustained or even rejuvenate our spirits? Thinking back to the many places in which I've composed my teaching life, I begin to see the importance of our personal practical knowledge on place and our teaching lives in relation to place.

As I look at Carolyn's story of her new school, I read between the lines and know this story is about much more than the physical place in which we live our teaching lives. It is about much more than paint, blinds, or furniture. I can imagine Carolyn's disappointment when she recognized a cover story in her new school, that first being the cover story of the physical place. She was led to believe through a highly impressive job interview in the beautiful room that she was sitting in a place for teachers on this landscape. Assuming this would lead Carolyn to make other conclusions about this place – perhaps most importantly that its teachers were valued, I can understand how she was disheartened. Having never seen anything like it I can only imagine her excitement when she entered this room, and also her strong sense of disappointment when she realized the reality was this room was off limits to teachers. The reason for her disappointment was much more complex than the staff room that was a façade, or the lack of activity around the renovation of her "classroom." As I make sense of this story, I think Carolyn recognized very early on in her time at this school that things might not be what they seemed. It is almost as if the physical place, and her overwhelming disappointment in it, was somewhat of a red flag for Carolyn as she set out on this new journey.

In one of our conversations (group conversation transcript, March 27, 2002) we began to try to make sense of place:

Gloria: We seek out the places that we will be valued and places where we fit and where we can be ourselves. I seek out places where I know my way of teaching will be valued, and where I can grow as a teacher. I think I need the challenge.

Carolyn: I think you've just hit on what has been the biggest spirit-sucking thing for teachers right now and that is when something is not working on your landscape and you are trying to contemplate another one, there is a really difficult and complex issue to face. I know a couple of people who have just decided that they are not going to be teachers any more because there are no alternative landscapes for them to go to.

Carolyn's term "spirit-sucking" gives us an image to understand the way we feel when we are feeling depleted. It is as if something is physically sucking the spirit out of us, slowly perhaps, draining us of the very energy and vitality we need to live our teaching lives. What connection does this spirit-sucking have with place? I can return to the notion of personal practical knowledge (Connelly & Clandinin, 1988) to begin to make sense of this wonder. Briefly, Connelly and Clandinin define personal practical knowledge as "the knowledge we hold from our past experience, our present mind and our future plans and actions" (p. 25). Found in the teacher's practice, personal practical knowledge is that embodied knowledge that comes from our lifetime of experiences.

This knowledge exists as we develop images and ideas of what we value and believe, formed by images and experiences in our lives.

When I think of place, specifically schools, I see that when we enter into a place of school our personal practical knowledge becomes vulnerable. As teachers, we do not know the story of this new place. We do not know the beliefs, values and images that exist in this place. As we come to know the place in which we teach, a number of dynamics become critical to our ability to create a space where we can live our teaching lives. If the place collides with our personal practical knowledge – our beliefs, values and images of what we know – perhaps this is the critical point where we begin to feel depleted. We continue to struggle to create a space where we can live our teaching lives and we may overcome the collision, reconciling the “bumping up” that is present, or we may realize that we cannot create a space that allows us to teach in this place. I believe it is our struggle to teach in places where our fundamental beliefs about who we are and what we know collide with other beliefs that depletes our spirit.

As our spirit is depleted we begin to recognize that we must move to a new place and attempt to create another space where we can live out our teaching lives. We realize that something needs to change. I can return to Carolyn’s comment at this point. She feels the issue that arises for teachers in the current climate is that there seems to be fewer alternatives, and teachers she knows are leaving the profession feeling that there are no other alternatives to seek out. They also feel that that nothing will change on their existing landscape. As their spirit is sucked from them they begin to search for a new place and realize more and more places bump up against their stories to live by, and their personal practical knowledge. This in turn depletes their spirits, forcing many to leave

the place of school, giving up on creating spaces where they can teach. Many choose to live out their teaching lives elsewhere.

### **Spaces That Sustain Teacher Spirit**

If a place collides with our personal practical knowledge, we may be unable to create a space that allows us to live out our teaching lives in a comfortable and meaningful manner. It makes sense then, that if we can find a place where we can create space that values our personal practical knowledge, our voice, our contributions as teachers, we can create a dynamic space that sustains our teacher spirit. This space is complex in that it consists of a relation of people, places, things and events becoming what Clandinin and Connelly (2000) refer to as the professional knowledge landscape. No longer just about place, this created space incorporates the teacher's personal practical knowledge and becomes a space where a teacher can continue to compose a teaching life. I now see this as a critical role of place in shaping teacher spirit. The following narrative further expresses my understanding of what it means to sustain my teacher spirit.

#### *Finding a Castle in the Attic*

*After reading *The Castle in the Attic*, by Elizabeth Winthrop to my grade four/five classroom, they were so taken with the concepts of knighthood, magic, and medieval times, they decided to plan a medieval feast in the classroom. This would be the culminating activity for their keen hard work. The students were immediately excited with the idea and began to make a list of guests that they would invite to the feast. They planned food, costumes, music, entertainment and decoration. The students planned every detail with bursting enthusiasm as they prepared for a party - their party at school, something they surely felt was unusual and a bit mischievous. Honored guests were*

*invited, including the principal of their school, a principal whom they loved and trusted and were so excited to have attend. Of course, she replied with a beautiful calligraphic note on a burnt scroll informing the students of her enthusiastic attendance.*

*Finally the day arrived. Jesters entertained, ladies danced, guests ate venison donated by a parent, and drank wassail, and enjoyed every moment of the feast. The students felt genuinely proud of their accomplishment and of the knowledge they had eagerly gained of medieval times.*

*Many parents and friends joined the party that day, but it was the principal's participation that nourished our in-classroom place. Confirming her belief in the need for teachers and students to learn in self-directed and connected ways without constraints from institutional stories and plotlines allowed for the students, parents and me to come together in an authentic celebration of learning. This principal provided sincere encouragement and acceptance to the students. She provided me with positive acknowledgment of my work with a large group of high needs students that had limited experiences outside of their transient lives, growing up on military bases. Thank you cards streamed into our classroom over the next week as guests acknowledged the amazing effort the children put forth in celebration of their own learning.*

*Many times throughout the year the children would talk about medieval times and about the special feast, which they created, transforming our classroom into a medieval experience. As I think back on this event in my life, I can now make sense of this experience and why it has become such a fond memory of my teaching life. It was not because it was a party, although it was a most enjoyable experience. It was not because the children had learned so much, although it was gratifying to see them perform. It was*

*the fulfillment that this experience provided me as a teacher and as a person. It was the confirmation that this experience brought to me that teaching was what I wanted to do and being a teacher was part of me. This experience sustained my spirit. I enjoyed the event, the children, the support and enthusiasm of the principal, and the sharing of a special celebration with parents whose children I had come to love over two years. I was reminded that teaching comes from the depths of my being, an expression of my personal practical knowledge. It was much like finding a treasure such as a castle in an attic, sustaining my spirit, which had been shaped, reshaped and changed by the many circumstances of teaching life.*

As my personal practical knowledge was respected and valued in this created space, I felt a sense of belonging and a comfort that sustained my spirit. I was respected, treated fairly and my voice was heard. The question that arises is why I would consider leaving such a place? This place, that sustained my teacher spirit, where I enjoyed the children, administration, and staff, where I had much freedom to live out my teaching life in ways that I believed to be valuable and important for children, became a place I would choose to leave.

### **Spaces That Rejuvenate Teacher Spirit**

It seems for both Carolyn and me that although places can sustain our teacher spirit, once they become places where we are respected, treated fairly and where our voices are heard, the spaces may no longer rejuvenate our teacher spirit. In this sense, we seek out change – knowing that it is risky and difficult – willing to take the risk in order to rejuvenate our teacher spirits. Ellis (2003) speaks of “road energy,” (p. 9) as a term colleagues use to describe the rejuvenation they feel when they re-establish themselves

on new landscapes. I can relate to this surge of energy that we seem to obtain as we put ourselves at risk and remove the surroundings that give us security and feelings of confidence. As I look back on my teaching life, I see the cycles of sustaining and rejuvenating, as I moved and planned my teaching path as I went along. I also understand that circumstances sometimes force us to change, when perhaps we weren't ready, as in my first year when a teacher who had to be placed took over my position. Although my move at that time was not my choice, I remember the nervous excitement of starting again in a new place, not sure what I would discover.

In contrast, my last move and final school (described in chapter one) was chosen. Previous to this move I was at a place where my spirit was most sustained. I had established a trusting relationship with the staff. I had a voice that was heard and respected. From the feedback I received I knew parents, students, and administrators valued my teaching. I created new and innovative ways to work with colleagues to challenge myself professionally. My move to an innovative and challenging school came at a time when I was feeling very confident in my abilities as a teacher, and felt I needed a challenge to continue my professional growth. For me, it seemed that as soon as things got easy or comfortable, I chose to leave. As I continued to grow professionally, I felt I would be best suited in a place where I would be challenged. I now contemplate why I feel this need to be challenged and resist the status quo when things become easy. I was willing to give up a strong sense of belonging to challenge myself and re-establish myself on a new landscape. It seemed that at my most confident point in my teaching career that I began to look forward, to what would come next.

As I try to make sense of this self-inflicted movement that Carolyn and I choose, I begin to think that it is just because a place sustains us (we feel security, belonging and identity) does not necessarily mean it rejuvenates us.

Carolyn's search for places where she can create spaces that rejuvenate her spirit show in her search for alternatives. Her ability to teach overseas, where many of the securities of home were removed, as well as the professional familiarities, demonstrates her ability to handle risk and uncertainty – and actually choose it. Carolyn's last move tested her teaching life. She made a decision to move to an alternative school, knowing that it would be challenging and “good” for her career. She went there because she believed the context would be in sync with her ways of knowing – her personal practical knowledge. After the difficult process of obtaining a position at this high profile school, she began to uncover a cover story that caused her to lose her confidence, her voice and her ability to be heard. This test most certainly has shaped Carolyn's spirit. The place she chose in hopes of rejuvenation significantly depleted her spirit.

Perhaps this is the natural progression in changing places. We are knocked down a few levels and then begin the process of climbing back up, testing our ability, hoping to move further than our past places allowed. Perhaps this is one of the processes of rejuvenating our spirits. Carolyn has now moved passed the initial depletion she felt as she discovered the cover story. She held strongly to her beliefs, to her personal practical knowledge, and slowly (and I sense early on, painfully) she is beginning to create a space that allows her to grow professionally. At the same time, I believe Carolyn feels it has been a lot of pain for the gain she now sees as she takes her teaching to a new level, her spirit shaped and reshaped by the depletion she sustained.

## **Resistance And Creating Spaces**

This makes me think about the notion of resistance and its relation to place. Looking back on Carolyn's experience, perhaps what changes the place from one that depletes her spirit to one that rejuvenates her depends on her ability to resist. She began to resist the cover story very early upon her arrival. Perhaps her first steps of resistance began in her classroom, the in-classroom place was safe and she had nurtured it throughout the summer months to give the physical place a warm and inviting feel, despite the poor conditions. Resistance began then, when she refused to let the physical disappointments get the better of her and spent much time and effort to fix it up. As she experienced the shock of the school over the first few months, Carolyn focused on her in-classroom space and her students, establishing trust and relationship with them – her reason for being there. However, by January she had sought out others who also were new to this place. She began to share secret stories as she met “furtively in the hall, our classrooms, for lunch – anywhere privacy would allow.” This was how Carolyn began to resist the story of this school. She began to speak in staff meetings, in the makeshift lunchroom where teachers gathered, to administration whenever she had the chance. Although Carolyn's voice had been stifled on this landscape, she resisted the silence and spoke to those she knew were listening. As Carolyn's ability to resist the story of this school grew, she began to create a space where she could live out her teaching life.

In this sense, resistance allowed Carolyn to move from a place where her spirit was depleted to a created space where she began to feel rejuvenated. As her feelings of space became less vulnerable, she was able to focus on her reason for moving – to rejuvenate her teaching spirit.

My last move was one that perhaps depleted me to the point of seeing no alternative but to leave the place of school. I believe I resisted the story of school by forming alternative stories of school on that landscape. I also gradually sought out others new to that place, shared secret stories and talked about my fears and disappointment with the situation, something I now consider resistance. I resisted the competition and the untrusting nature of the staff. I possibly could have created a space over time. However, I now believe the story embedded in this landscape would have been very difficult to overcome through my resistance. The level of impact was far too great for me. Perhaps I sensed this when I left on maternity leave, with no intentions of returning.

However, looking back on this experience, I recognize resistance was not something new to me as a teacher. I believe I have always been a resistor – a resistor of stories that contradicted my values and beliefs, even as a small child. It was my resistance to being quiet and doing what everyone else was doing that got me sent behind the piano. It was contradiction and a sense of unfairness that led me to resistance as a high school student, resisting the institutional story of the school I attended, where I believed individuality was not something celebrated. I resisted becoming a teacher, knowing that I would have challenging work ahead of me given my stories to live by. I resisted institutional stories that came down the conduit, when they threatened the very spaces I had created for children and myself to learn. And, I continue to resist now, the sense that as teachers, we should remain silent about the changing faces of schools and children and teaching and education. Perhaps this work is part of that resistance.

Lynn showed strong resistance during her spirit injury. She confronted the principal and did not stand by passively and let it happen. She resisted the stories, the

ganging up, and the pressure to give in. Even though this was not at a time in Lynn's teaching career where she was most vocal, she resisted and spoke up for herself at a time when she knew she must be her own best advocate.

Lynn's move to her final school seems to be of a different nature. Nearing the end of her formal teaching career, she relocated to a small and closely-knit school, where teachers supported each other and parents were highly supportive and involved in the education program. She joined a landscape where she knew libraries and librarians were valued, where she could speak about what she felt was important, where she was respected and acknowledged as an expert and where she could exude confidence and ability in her final teaching years. She no longer searched for a place where risk would be high, but a more peaceful place that would sustain her in her last formal teaching years. Perhaps Lynn returned later in her career to a safe and caring place where she did not have to test her spirit in such a way as to risk depleting it. Lynn felt so fortunate she had re-storied her own beliefs in what a teacher "should" be, and that she let go of her fears and found voice in her final teaching years. She felt she had more energy and vitality than ever before. She enjoyed the children and the day-to-day events that make teaching the rewarding work that it is. She basked in the glory of those final years, and by alleviating the pressures she lived for many years of her teaching life, she was able to sustain a lifetime of teacher spirit.

This said, we have each struggled and coped, remaining on school landscapes and moving to new and foreign landscapes where we could practice what we love and what we believe in. We manage, in part by searching for places that we think will value our teacher identity and our stories to live by, where we can create spaces that affirm our

personal practical knowledge. Through resistance we create those spaces that sustain and rejuvenate our spirits in spite of the ever-changing, ever-challenging place of school.

Most certainly, place shapes our spirit – depleting it, sustaining it or rejuvenating it – depending on the spaces we are able to create within a school landscape.

## CHAPTER TEN: EPILOGUE

If the teacher agrees to submerge himself into the system, if he consents to being defined by others' views of what he is supposed to be, he gives up his freedom to see, to understand and to signify for himself.

Greene, *Teacher as Stranger* (1973) p. 270

### **Narrative Understanding Of Teacher Spirit**

This inquiry has demonstrated a narrative understanding of teacher spirit. I have worked at the boundaries of what has been examined with respect to teacher identity, personal practical knowledge, and the professional knowledge landscape in relation to teacher spirit. This work, using a three dimensional narrative inquiry space allowed me to look forward and backward, inward and outward and locate the research group's stories of spirit in place. Through the exploration of teacher spirit in the context of three teacher's lives, we have uncovered new understanding, learning that has now shaped my spirit, and my embodied knowledge. The co-researchers, too, have experienced a shift in their thinking about spirit, now also believing spirit is fluid, improvised and only exists in relation to experience. Spirit makes sense in terms of a life lived. We can better make sense of spirit in relation to experience and circumstances that we have encountered, some depleting, others sustaining, and still others rejuvenating spirit. This inquiry demonstrates spirit makes sense in connection with identity, or a life lived, as the reciprocity of experience shapes and influences it.

### **Returning To The Research Puzzle**

I began this inquiry thinking about the connection between identity and teacher spirit, the contexts in which I work and what I know, and how these connections shape my teacher spirit. Through narrative inquiry the co-researchers and I have found a

language to express these wonders. Better understanding lives in schools has provided a means to explore teacher spirit as it is interwoven into the experiences and events that ultimately shape our spirits, as we live out our teaching lives in schools.

I return to Dewey's theory of experience (1938a) to summarize the narrative understanding of teacher spirit, gained through this inquiry. Through our attention to the continuity of experience – the belief that experiences grow out of and lead to other experiences – we have followed the shaping of our spirits through our stories to live by, the many experiences that construct who we are as we compose our lives. This journey began for me as a child, where I was first taught by my mother, and moves to the present, as I complete this work, revisiting memories, events and circumstances of my life that looking back on now, I can make sense of in terms of spirit. For the co-researchers this journey moves also through their lives from childhood to the present day as they continue to live their teaching lives both on and off school landscapes. The continuity of our experiences has helped us to explore the nature of teacher spirit, and discover not only that it is shaped, but how this shaping occurs over time, as we compose our teaching lives.

As our experiences grow out of and lead to other experiences, they also take place in interaction. Our immediate environment of things interacts according to certain processes. We discovered through this inquiry that people do engage and are engaged by themselves and others. The dynamic interaction among people, things, and processes shapes our spirits. The experiences we have in relation to those around us shape our spirits as these experiences bump up against what we know and who we are. These experiences compose our identity. Returning to my definition of spirit as something

relational that exists only in relation to other people and events, these experiences also shape our spirits.

Situation is the attention to the physical boundaries of inquiry landscapes. We learned through this inquiry that what happens in the past influences what is happening right now – that all people have a history and reflect that history. At the same time, situations have a future as they lead to other situations, which contribute to a temporal sense of experience. Certainly, throughout the inquiry we can see how history has shaped our spirits, how the present continues to shape our spirits and we can be sure the future too will continue to shape our spirits as we continue to improvise our lives after this inquiry experience.

Does the body of convictions and meanings that we hold and value to be true summon teacher spirit? My experience of my last teaching position demonstrates the connection between my personal practical knowledge and my teacher spirit. As I realized the story of this landscape collided with my stories to live by, I became uncomfortable and experienced dissonance. This experience tested my identity as a person and specifically as a teacher. Through this dissonance, my spirit, like a jazz composition, was shaped and reshaped by the players depending on inward and outward influences. Other players and events added to the complexity of that shaping. Most certainly, the body of convictions and meanings that I hold to be true summon my teacher spirit. As the three of us worked together, spirit made sense in connection with identity, or a life, as the reciprocity of experience shaped and influenced it.

### **Looking Backward To Look Forward**

The narrative inquirer does not prescribe general applications and uses but rather creates texts that, when well done, offer readers a place to imagine their own uses and applications. (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000, p. 42)

For those colleagues and friends who have patiently awaited this work, who worried about me losing sight of what was really “important,” I offer the following wonders. As I look back at this work, I can also look forward to what these wonders might allow me to imagine.

Connelly and Clandinin (1988) summarize the necessity of teacher education programs to attend to teacher identity formation in their statement “we believe the most ‘critical’ question in anyone’s education is to determine the meaning of life’s past experiences” (p. 16). As I look forward, I revisit this necessity. It was not until the research group attempted to make sense of the meaning of our past experiences on our present world and future living that we became so intensely aware of the connection experience has to the composition of our teaching lives.

As I began to make sense of the experiences in my past, and as my co-researchers also participated in this work, we were at times overwhelmed with the revelations we could make in our life as we now made sense of our experiences. The more I understand the composition of my identity, the more I also understand of my spirit, specifically my teacher spirit. As we made sense of our experiences, we began to realize the significance of attending to these experiences in relation to our spirits. I now believe it is only through attending to our experiences and making sense of them that we can influence our own teacher spirit. In this sense, sustaining and rejuvenating our spirits as teachers

becomes something that we can become active participants in, rather than feeling that events are done to us, and we have no control over the shaping of these events on our lives. This is not to say that we will never experience a depleting moment again in our teaching lives, but that through attending, we can become much more aware of that shaping as it occurs over time.

I now wonder what my first year teaching in the portable at the back of the school might have been like had I entered the teaching profession attending to the experiences in my past and the experiences that occurred in my everyday teaching life. After completing this work I now believe I would have been better prepared to handle the complexities of the important work teachers do. As I contemplate the necessity of attending to our lives within our teacher education program, I am not suggesting that we need a pre-service course on spirit. What I do see as an outcome of this work is the importance of attending to our lives and our identity as part of our introduction to teaching, something that we, as teacher educators, suggest, model and make part of our discussions as we explore the complexities of teaching life.

As voiced in the early pages of this work, one of my initial motivations to complete this work was a concern that many teachers (including myself) were leaving the profession prematurely. These were not first and second year teachers overwhelmed by a complex teaching life, but people who showed no symptoms of burnout, having successful track records with children, as they provided responsive and innovative education programs on a variety of school landscapes. I now understand that in part this premature leaving occurs when we feel that there are no alternative places where we can create teaching spaces that allow us to teach what we value and believe to be true about

teaching and learning. Now, looking forward, I suspect if these teachers had a venue to speak of these issues they face daily in their teaching lives, many could stay and would choose to stay. As I look back on my final teaching experience, I question what could have been different had I a space to talk about my feelings of tension faced on that school landscape. As I left teaching, I knew somehow that I was not finished – hence this work. I felt as though my teaching life had been cut short, and at the same time that I would not be able to continue in the current situation. Now, knowing what I have learned from this inquiry, I believe strongly in the importance of creating spaces where teachers can begin to discuss those “unworded” silences that exist in our teaching lives.

Throughout this inquiry, the notion of silence becomes a common chord progression repeated over and over. These silences – of voice, of not being heard, of the physical place and the created space in which we teach, of the contradictions we face in teaching and learning, of feeling “not good enough” – must become legitimate professional conversations (as opposed to secret stories) in created spaces on school landscapes. Hopefully, reading this work offers readers a place to imagine their own uses and applications in relation to their own silences as they live out their teaching lives on school landscapes.

My previous graduate work consisted of a plan for use by teachers to implement their own professional development spaces, based on the unique needs of the teachers living on their school landscape. Although I felt this project did not fully address what I was trying to get at (and looking back, I’m not sure I knew what that was) I now recognize this work as a critical stepping stone in the completion of the present inquiry. That work, and the re-examination of that work, led me to contemplate what I now

confidently refer to as teacher spirit. I now wonder what looking at some of the key elements of this inquiry in the name of professional development would perhaps provide in the way of beginning to create spaces to address some of the complexities of our teaching lives in an authentic and meaningful manner. I hope that reading this work allows the reader to recognize some of the boundaries teachers face on their school landscapes when contemplating their own professional silences.

One of the many strong statements Carolyn makes throughout this inquiry is about the role of the administrator. In our discussion of feeling “not good enough” (chapter eight) Carolyn believes that teachers need to be “assessed and guided and supported.” Situations that arise on school landscapes often provide opportunities for teachers to learn together – perhaps these situations are difficult or uncomfortable like in the case of the failing teacher – but silence typically surrounds these experiences. Carolyn sees these experiences as important learning opportunities for the profession, but feels frustration in that they are so often opportunities missed. It is with this feeling that I question, now looking back on my experience at my first school, why administration was resistant to diversity and the complexities of school life. I think about the school where the teacher failed, and think about the learning opportunities missed as we silently watched that teacher fade away. I wonder how teachers and administrators might be able to work together to remove these silences and revisit experiences as learning opportunities. I question what we could have gained as a staff if spaces were made available to talk about the failing teacher’s predicament, where problem solving could have been at the forefront. I wonder what our schools would look like if spaces were created where discussions about complex and difficult situations could be honoured.

Perhaps administrators and teachers working together to create these spaces for authentic conversation would allow for learning opportunities to be gained, rather than feelings of loss to prevail. By acknowledging the complexities and situations that surround our teaching lives, together, principals and teachers might support each other by opening communication on many silent issues.

We learn from experience. Important learning opportunities occur daily on the very landscapes in which we teach. Authentic conversation as explored in this inquiry might help to alleviate some of the uncertainty teachers feel about those “unworded” conversations. As we discovered over the year that this inquiry took place, authentic conversation provides us with a venue for working through the complexities of everyday teaching life. It is getting to a trusting place where this conversation can take place that presents us with a challenge. Through the experience of this inquiry, we learned that this takes much time, patience, and understanding with a group of people who are willing to listen and to trust, through difficult moments and also moments of celebration. Through authentic conversation, opportunities for more deeply understanding our work can be explored. By attending to teacher’s past experiences, their beliefs and values, and their personal practical knowledge, perhaps teachers and administrators can begin to work at the boundaries of professional conversations that exist on school landscapes.

As a final wonder in this inquiry, I think about my own experiences as a teacher and my ability to find balance. As I worked in relation with teachers, stories of teachers, schools and stories of schools, I was interacting with unexpected changes and events and a varied sense of moving forward and backward in places that shaped what I can now call my teacher spirit. I can return to my jazz player metaphor and say this research was into

that of a human improvisation, a composition that resides within each of us in our own lives in context, never being the same for all. As I look back on the shaping of my own teacher spirit with both syncopation and swing, I recognize the growing importance of attention to balance. Just as balance is important in the creation of a jazz piece – we have to find a balance that is satisfying to the ear, and also unique in its entirety.

With this in mind, I encourage teachers to create balance in their everyday teaching lives through authentic conversation, through attending to their own lives, both in and out of teaching, to remember their stories and tell their stories, so that they might remain hopeful amidst the stresses and complications of teaching life.

Working in the current situation of teaching alongside colleagues faced with challenging expectations, shrinking budgets, fiscal restraints, and political forces, teachers are faced with daily choices that do not always allow them to feel they are putting children first. Having a space to speak openly about the tension this creates might help teachers to continue to move forward with the energy and vitality the teaching profession requires.

Through this inquiry I have deepened my current understanding of teacher identity. Through an exploration of our stories to live by in relation to teacher spirit, new understandings of professional growth and teacher education have surfaced for me. This inquiry has allowed me to see alternative ways to think about school climate, school culture and attending to our own lives as teachers by naming some of the silences and working together to create spaces that support our unique teaching lives.

As a final word, I hope that that this inquiry has comprehensively conceptualized teacher spirit, so that it may finally become a useful and meaningful term in future educational research. I urge both teachers and teacher educators to use this term with confidence and meaning as they talk about their teaching lives, so that it may become part of their professional language as teachers endeavor to address the human issues in teaching.

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## APPENDIX A

The following story is pieced together to represent the experience we shared during a pilot project completed in April 2000. This pilot project was completed in order to explore the usefulness of conversation groups for my exploration into the notion of teacher spirit. This story is included in order to demonstrate the experience of living, retelling and representing stories for the purpose of educational research. Different fonts denote different speakers. Excerpts were pieced together to create one story of a common theme, in this case, beginning on a new school landscape.

The school board that I was employed with portrayed one of its schools as an authentic place for learning, where teachers and students learned along side each other, and where new and cutting edge ideas in teaching and teacher education were developed and implemented. This school was affiliated with the university and housed special conference rooms and observation rooms for students in teacher education programs to visit while learning to become teachers. Since I was faced with the decision to relocate once again in my short teaching career, I decided to apply to a school where I could further experiment with teaching techniques and building relationships in an authentic learning environment. The interview process was intense, with a panel of highly regarded teachers and a list of technical questions. I passed and accepted a position with the school.

I recall the drive back to my school the excitement I felt as I told my colleagues all the details: my new school had a child centered philosophy which reflected so many of learning practices I was passionate about – the teachers were strong, dynamic and POSITIVE - ready and excited about team planning and collaboration – they liked what I believed about learning and children and excited about what I could offer their school.

The staffroom reflected a place that respected its teachers. It had a long eating table, a fridge with water *and* ice, new comfortable furniture to lounge in and real ceramic cups! Best of all, my classroom had a PHONE!

*As I was packing boxes, and sorting through my teacher materials in preparation for leaving my old school and classroom, I had mixed feelings - excited and sad - at the same time. I had been at my last school for many years. I was very comfortable in this place and felt valued for the contributions I had made there. Everything from the tapestry covered chairs I had spent my whole summer recovering, wall murals I had painted, as well as the philosophical contributions that helped define the organization of the school. It had the "special touch", other staff, parents and kids had come to expect from me. Deep down I knew that I needed to make a change. I was looking forward to going to my new school. Friends, family, and colleagues all supported my decision to move because in their words "it was a perfect fit" for me. So I packed up the moving van, full of boxes and optimism and headed off across the city to my new school. Here begins the story of disillusionment. In most schools it is common practice for a classroom to be cleaned and readied for new staff members. This was not the case here. My first glimpse of the space that I was to work in with my children still causes me to shake my head in disbelief. I opened the doorway of my new room to find: garbage, broken furniture, mismatched junk, and layers of dust.*

The staffroom was deserted at this school and within the first week the new teachers went searching for security and support. We searched in vain. We were about to uncover a cover story at this school. It was a place of secrets where competition was clearly evident. Oddly enough, it seemed we were all somewhat similar in our teaching

philosophies initially. We planned open-ended activities for the first few months, cautious about over-planning and the need to let our students self-direct their learning. This was the story that was promoted on this landscape and we all felt pressure to buy into this method of teaching. We all struggled with the lack of direction that this approach provided, and we all worried about meeting curriculum requirements for three grades. One veteran, who had the most experience, could talk about this method of teaching in an eloquent and knowledgeable manner, yet within a few weeks of teaching; I began to recognize that this was not how she taught when she had her twenty-five students to herself. Her focus was very much on product, not process when it came to her expectations of her students. She did not hesitate to add a little more colour to her students' artwork to give it the pristine look that was expected on this landscape. I began to question where I fit in this cover story. I began to worry about my students and the impact of the cover story on their learning. I struggled to nourish my spirit as I began to feel more and more isolated in this place. I longed to be back at my old school. In the middle of September I sat at my ancient desk and surveyed my classroom. Although, the room had now been cleaned up, complete with paint, mac tac and hours scrounging for useable pieces of furniture - I chuckled to myself as I realized that the only contribution my school had made to the renovation of my room thus far, was - a phone. It still lacked a computer, printer, sound system, computer table, chair, and bookshelves: all of which were standard in other classrooms. On top of which a paint job ordered to cover the grimy walls that I *hadn't* painted, still had not been completed, and a more immediate concern in the bright fall sunshine was the absence of blinds. Funniest of all was the elegant staff room I had been so impressed by during my interview didn't exist

for teachers at all. It was an administrative conference room. The room we huddled in each lunch hour had no fridge, sink or furniture to speak of and looked more like someone's garage before a weekend sale - filled with the discarded remnants of teaching lives past.

*I had tried to keep the faith, feeling more secure with each need that had been attended to. After all, at least I had a parking stall and keys now, and just yesterday my nameplate was delivered with my correctly spelled surname. Still a growing sense of unease stirred me. I thought back to the end of summer, the last time I'd met with my grade partner, and to the growing number of incidents which would lead me to believe she either had no sense of what teaming was or she wasn't interested in becoming involved.*

*As I watched the other new teachers in the school they seemingly had found ways to work with their grade partners. I would see them laughing and talking in the hallways, or heads bent over resources, or their grade level partners showing them where to find what precious resources we had. I felt what was wrong with me? My partner would either ignore me completely, belittle what I was doing, or openly dismiss my ideas. One evening I went home totally frustrated and desperately unhappy. I wrote in my journal.*

*"I am struggling. In many ways I feel like a first year teacher again, only worse because now I know what I am missing. Today I felt disjointed, disheartened and lonely at school. The children seemed to pick up on my*

*feelings and were not as focused or cooperative as I had come to expect of them. As I left the school I questioned my ability as a teacher-the problem was all mine and I felt an urgent need to rush home, reorganize my plans, my classroom, everything."*

It was just one week after this journal entry when two other teachers new to the school and I were all in the school on a weekend morning. By chance each of us became aware of the frustration and sense of alienation and loneliness the other was feeling. Over coffee we laughed, shared and cried our personal stories. It felt so good to have someone hear my story and to hear the similarities in each of their stories. It was a turning point for each of us. We may not be able to work collaboratively with our grade level partners but at least we could find ways to work together, help and support each other.

My spirit was lifted only by the secretive conversations I had with the other "new" teachers, off in storage rooms or in far corners of the classrooms. We whispered our fears and worries and although we felt some sense of belonging, we were not sure who could be trusted. Conversations were often blurted out in frustration, and then I would worry that I had said something that would come back to haunt me. My grade partners were friendly and collegial, but I also felt I could not trust them to talk openly about my concerns about the cover story. Finally one "new" teacher with twenty years experience approached me late one afternoon. She cried, she yelled and she shared her

uncovering of the cover story. She too was feeling discouraged with the inauthenticity of the "talk." Her spirit was depleted to the point she was thinking of trying to transfer out - she was disillusioned, distraught and disappointed. I went home that evening feeling more drained than usual, but somehow I knew that having that one other person would make a difference. We could sustain ourselves on this landscape, and we could make it through. That night I was given a little piece of hope.

Those conversations continued on through the next year, during recesses, spare moments, before and after school and at other moments when I would dash next door for a quick word of support. We would meet furtively in the hall, our classrooms, for lunch - anywhere privacy would allow - just for a chance to share and deconstruct together our experiences on this foreign landscape. Somehow, this growing together shifted our place on the landscape too. Our being together allowed for space for voices and ideas that had previously been diminished and disregarded. Carefully, we "took turns" bringing up new and contentious issues or offering alternative ways to do things. Gradually, we began to see how the cover stories were constructed and slowly were able to encourage other marginalized players to reveal their perceptions. These were the most hopeful moments.

*An entry in my journal illustrates one such moment.*

*"I am finding a renewal of spirit and energy. My relationships with my new colleagues are strengthening through shared stories and experiences. I'm finding my place and I have my voice back. Little ripples are being felt and noticed. I do not find myself continually comparing everything to how it was at my old school and find this school lacking."*

At a recent staff meeting time was given to teachers to work in grade level groupings and pairings. The purpose was to start to define an instructional focus for the next school. After partners shared with the whole group. I was amazed at how similar many of the concerns were, how each teacher voiced similar beliefs about their practice and how each teacher genuinely wanted to do their best. The conversations are beginning that may allow the old cover story to become uncovered and replaced by a newer more authentic real story that echoes the voices of all participants.

## APPENDIX B: RESEARCH CONSENT

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**Title:** **Exploring Teacher Spirit: A narrative inquiry into spirit as an aspect of teachers' stories to live by**

You have been invited to explore the topic of teacher spirit, and how it may be an aspect of teachers' stories to live by. The University of Alberta requires that I must fully explain to you the details of the inquiry, the terms of your involvement, and any expected risks and benefits before you sign the attached form and give your consent to participate. Your participation in this inquiry is entirely voluntary and you may refuse to participate or may withdraw from the inquiry at any time without jeopardy.

### **Purpose of the Research:**

As a teacher puzzled by questions of spirit, a term commonly used by teachers, I wondered what did I mean when I spoke of my spirit? What did other teachers mean by spirit? I began to wonder if spirit was connected to what I know (my personal practical knowledge), to who I am (my story to live by), or to the context in which I live as a teacher (my professional knowledge landscape). I intend to explore the interconnection of these concepts to that of teacher spirit. Specifically, the purpose of this inquiry is to explore the puzzling questions: What connection does teacher spirit have to personal practical knowledge, professional knowledge landscape and identity? Is teacher spirit a component of teachers' stories to live by? I invite you to explore these puzzling questions with me, as co-researchers, in order to more deeply understand the notion of teacher spirit and its significance in the personal and professional lives of teachers. This narrative inquiry honours the relationships we will establish throughout the inquiry as we share stories of teacher spirit and explore spirit as an aspect of our knowledge, identities and contexts. I am therefore asking that you be willing to be involved in a small conversation group, which will be audio recorded. These audio recordings will become the field text of our inquiry. I am hoping that we will write research texts collaboratively with the participants/co-researchers. The number and length of meetings of our conversation group will be negotiated as the inquiry unfolds.

**Risk Statement:**

Potential risks associated with this narrative inquiry will involve personal risks taken in exploring our identities, our knowledge, and the contexts in which we live and teach in order to attempt to reveal a sense of teacher spirit. Both personal and professional stories may become part of the research texts in order to provide insight and a deeper understanding of the notion of teacher spirit as an aspect of teachers' stories to live by. Being part of this inquiry may involve questions and wonders that allow us to question our selves.

**Questions of Anonymity:**

When the research is put into written form, you will be referred to in the text. It is your decision as to how this is done. You may choose to remain anonymous. If so, I guarantee that your responses will be treated with confidentiality and that I will use a pseudonym when referring to you. Or, you may choose to use your first name in the written text. Selecting this option indicates that you understand the risks associated with this decision.

Thank you for considering this inquiry. If any questions arise regarding this work or your participation in it, either before or after you sign the attached form, please contact me, or my supervisor at your convenience.

Sincerely,  
Gloria Yusishen

**CONSENT FORM**

Name: \_\_\_\_\_

Address: \_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_

Telephone: \_\_\_\_\_ Email Address: \_\_\_\_\_

I \_\_\_\_\_, agree to participate in the study. I understand that I will participate in a series of audio-recorded conversations.

(Please circle one) YES NO

I wish to remain anonymous. YES NO

I wish that my first name be used in the research. I understand the risks involved in using my first name. YES NO

I give my permission for the research to be used beyond the dissertation project in presentations and in other forms such as academic journals. YES NO

I understand that I am free to opt out of this project if I so choose YES NO

DATE: \_\_\_\_\_

SIGNATURE: \_\_\_\_\_