

**WHERE DO THE MERMAIDS STAND?
BREAKING THROUGH MYTHS IN
CURRICULUM AND RESEARCH**

by

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Where do the Mermaids Stand?

Breaking through Myths in Curriculum and Research

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Abstract

This thesis is the story of my struggle with coming to better know the art and the craft of teaching, what is important to me as a teacher, the students in my charge through their life stories, and how to build meaningful connections between their life stories and the curriculum.

Marilyn Cochran-Smith (1994) stated that teachers must provide learning experiences intentionally designed to "improve students' life chances". In my endeavour to do this, I reflect on my practice, looking for places and ways I have provided opportunities for deep, memorable learning (Grimmett, 1992) for my students, and recognizing situations where those opportunities were missed. Fundamental to my discussion is the notion that, in order for deep, memorable learning to occur, the content must in some way connect personally with the familiar environment and the social context of the learner.

I began my research as an ethnographic investigation. However, my version of ethnography did not satisfactorily recognize my membership within the community I sought to investigate. Instead, I had to construct research methodology where all classroom members, including myself, were integral to the research landscape. I became a teacher - researcher in my classroom, a role which recognized and accepted my place among the other members of the classroom community. Through interviews with students, observations, fieldnotes and personal /professional journals, I looked seriously at how I connected the external curriculum with the daily life events of my students, intentionally trying to build a foundation of common experiences for the classroom members.

Reflecting on my experiences as a teacher, I can see where I incorporated my learning from those observations into my practice over time, and changed the way in which I

interacted with my students and the curriculum. The impetus for change stemmed from a desire to make a difference to students' learning and to help them make sense of the world. By telling my story, I hope that other readers might reflect on their experiences and use those reflections to shape their teaching practices.

*To my husband, Kevin,
to my daughter, Jalayna,
and to K.
with love*

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CHAPTER 1

MANIPULATING THE STRUCTURES OF DEFINED CURRICULUM: FINDING WAYS TO CONNECT CURRENT LEARNING WITH PAST EXPERIENCES

The page is white
It is hot
It will burn out your optic nerves.
No up or down
Without vistas or sound
you can become lost in it forever - ...
(Margaret Atwood, 1976)

I have been lost in the page for a long, long time. Many times I have begun the journey into creating this thesis; now I work toward returning from the page. Atwood's further definition of "the page" gives words to my experience.

... The page itself has no dimensions and no directions. There's no up or down except what you yourself mark, and there's no thickness and weight except what you yourself put there, north and south do not exist unless you're certain of them. The page is without vistas and without sounds, without centers or edges. Because of this you can become lost in it forever. The question about the page is: what is beneath it? It seems to have only two dimensions, you can pick it up and turn it over and the back is the same as the front ... But you were looking in the wrong place, you were looking on the back instead of beneath. Beneath the page is another story. Beneath the page is everything that ever happened ... Have you never seen the look of gratitude, the look of joy, on the faces of those who have managed to return from the page? Despite their faintness, their loss of blood, they fall to their knees, they push their hands into the earth, they clasp the bodies of those they love, or in a pinch, any bodies they can get, with an urgency unknown to those who have never experienced the full horror of a journey into the page ...

As I document my journey, my process in writing this piece of work, Margaret Atwood's words resonate in my ears, giving name and substance to my experience. The page, or beneath the page, has such potential power that I have felt too intimidated to tell my story. The commitment to the page, or rather "finding [my] own way" (Newman, 1990) through the page, through the story, has been a difficult and lonely journey.

The physical act of writing this document has been tortuous. The most difficult challenge has been finding a framework or theme around which I could build my story. Several years ago one of my student teachers gave me a book of stories written by Robert Fulghum. She highlighted one of those stories, telling me that its message about children and individual differences served to remind her about me, the students, and the classroom environment. The story follows:

Organizing a roomful of Wired-up gradeschoolers into two teams, explaining the rudiments of the game, achieving consensus on group identity - all this is no mean accomplishment. But we did it with right good will and were ready to go.

The excitement of the chase had reached a critical mass. I yelled out, "You have to decide now which you are - a GIANT, a WIZARD, or a DWARF!"

While the groups huddled in frenzied, whispered consultation, a tug came on my pants leg. A small child stands there looking up, and asks in a small concerned voice, "Where do the mermaids stand?"

Where do the Mermaids stand?

A long pause. A very long pause. "Where do the Mermaids stand?" says I.

"Yes, you see, I am a Mermaid."

"There are no such things as Mermaids."

"Oh, yes, I am one!"

She did not relate to being a giant, a wizard or a dwarf. She knew her category. Mermaid. And was not about to leave the game and go over and stand against the wall where a loser would stand. She intended to participate, wherever Mermaids fit into the scheme of things. She took it for granted that there was a place for Mermaids and that I would know just where.

Well, where do the Mermaids stand? All the "Mermaids"-all those who are different, who do not fit the norm and who do not accept the available boxes and pigeonholes?

Answer that question and you can build a school, a nation, or a world on it.

What was my answer at that moment? Every once in a while I say the right thing. "The Mermaid stands right here by the King Of The Sea." says I. (Yes, right here by the King's fool, I thought to myself.)

So we stood there hand in hand reviewing the troupes of Wizards and Giants and Dwarves as they roiled by in wild disarray.

It is not true, by the way, that Mermaids do not exist. I know at least one personally. I have held her hand. (Fulghum, 1986, pp. 81 - 83).

The idea of "mermaid" has become important to me, and serves as a metaphor for both myself and my students. The mermaid in Fulghum's story represents all those individuals who do not necessarily fit exactly into the imposed framework or guidelines of a particular venue, yet believe there is a place for themselves among the others. For me, the work I am doing on my thesis sets me apart, in some ways, from my peers. I am not a member of the academic community of the university, but I believe there is a place for me to join in the discussions about students, teachers and learning. As well, the type of thesis I endeavour to write does not fit into the traditional thesis format, but again I think there is a place for my work among other theses. I bring an empirical perspective into the world of academia where dwell giants, wizards and dwarves. My daily life is as a teacher of children, not an academic scholar. In this venue, I am not a giant, a wizard or a dwarf ... I am a mermaid.

Within my professional world of teachers and teaching, I challenge the system which puts the importance of curriculum content before the importance of student learning, and I manipulate the curriculum to try to make its content more meaningful for students, I believe there is a place for me and my style within my profession. Again, I am not a giant, a wizard or a dwarf ... I am a mermaid. Throughout my work, then, I will return to the metaphor of the mermaid, and weave this image throughout my story. Sometimes I have had to look really hard for the places where the mermaids stand.

This story documents my journey over my first seven years as a teacher. My discussions focus primarily around the issue of how to connect the occurrences and histories of the

daily lives of my students to the content I, as a teacher, am mandated to teach ¹ (by the British Columbia Ministry of Education). My purpose in trying to help my students make those connections comes from my belief that deep, memorable learning (Grimmett, 1993) occurs most often when the content being taught has personal meaning for my students.

I found myself resisting the structure of the mandated curriculum, looking for different, more effective ways to utilize the time I spent with my students. I agree with Marilyn Cochran-Smith's (1994) suggestion that teachers have the responsibility for "improving the life chances" for their students, and I did not believe that "delivering" mandated curriculum to my students was necessarily the best means to meet that end.

Throughout my journey, I have learned I can rely on my students for a great deal; they have given me the courage to trust in them and myself. I have used their life stories to help me to shape and tailor curriculum content in order to foster deep, memorable learning. The tools I have used to access their narratives included Writing Workshop, speaking and listening, building trusting relationships among members of the classroom community, and recognizing and making a place for unique individuals. These themes I have woven throughout this text. The richness of my experiences in the classroom and my desire to make a difference for kids in the classroom has given great purpose to my journey.

¹ Throughout the text, I will refer to the British Columbia Ministry of Education as simply the "Ministry."

The Journey of Metamorphosis: My Beginning Evolutionary Trek into "T"eaching and "L"earning

Seven years ago I began my teaching career in an intermediate classroom where I relied completely on text books to supply the necessary information that my students were to gain over the course of their ten months with me. I knew of no other way. Ministry guidelines in terms of curricular expectations were made very clear to me, and although I had a split grade 5/6 class, there was a certain body of content I was expected to present to my students.

My understanding of a good teacher at that time was one whose students were generally quiet (under control) and could prove (through tests) that they learned (from their mark for regurgitating information) what the teacher had taught them.

Through overheard conversations between my students, I suspected that most of them experienced volatile, topsy turvy lives. I struggled to keep their experiences completely separate from the world of the classroom. Events were occurring in their lives which, on reflection, could have been used to build exceptional, meaningful curriculum. Now, I think it would have been possible for me to have used their stories of rage, violence, destruction and anger, to look carefully at the world we were living in. Sylvia Ashton-Warner (1963) states, "There is only one answer to destructiveness, and that is creativeness. And it never was and never will be any different" (p. 96). At that time, I did not realize there were any alternatives to the Ministry mandated materials laid out for my grade level and that there were choices I could make around curricular content decisions. I did not possess the knowledge and the skill necessary to connect the two.

In my beginning, I thought of teaching as a completely external act, where the curriculum, like a blanket, was laid on by me, the teacher, completely disconnected from students'

lives. Sometimes that blanket was appropriate, often times it was incongruous with the experiences of the students, having no connection to their daily lives and smothering out the real learning opportunities that my students came with everyday. Laying on the curriculum presupposed that there was a more important learning agenda than a student's own life experiences, and at times I actually fought to keep my students' experiences from interfering with what I came to call the "external curriculum". However, as I watched my practice disregard the real stuff about life that was coming into my classroom on a daily basis, I had to question the purpose of the external curriculum. Although I had many questions, I had no answers at all. I felt restricted by the expectations written in THE book that stated, "All grade 5 teachers must teach...", and "All grade 6 teachers must teach...". While I was still fresh out of teacher training with new and exciting ideas, I quickly understood the fundamental difference between discussing what is best for kids in schools and actively doing something about it.

Incentive for Change

Early in my teaching career I implemented a decisive shift away from what I understood to be good teaching. What prompted me to change was the behaviour of the students. I watched their animation die as they settled down to their writing. Work was listless; I sensed their feeling of boredom and unfulfillment. I could entertain them, or tease, cajole or otherwise manipulate them into completing assignments under threat of poor marks or phoning home to explain to their parents their failing grades, but all the motivation was external. This was not what I had in mind as a teacher. I knew the reason that many of my students completed the tasks I assigned had more to do with the power I held over

them as the teacher ² than their desire to seek out more knowledge and information about a particular subject. This power relation was often exemplified in a desire to please me on the part of the students. Again, I was forced to look at my practices. What kind of power did I have over some of the students? What were the students learning from me? Was I being true to myself and my beliefs about children and learning if students were completing tasks only because I had the power to make their lives happy at school if they did and miserable if they did not? This was not what I had in mind as a teacher.

I knew of some teachers who provided a steady diet of "teacher as actor", dressing up in character, catching students by surprise. In these instances, the teacher seemed to be the center of the classroom universe. When I tried this method, I initially found instant gratification. Students looked forward to my acts, parents spoke to me about what a good teacher I was. I had a stage and an audience, and lots of good community publicity. The fact that people told me I was a good teacher made me believe I was. The truth is, I was a good entertainer. I now understand that the public environment and recognition at that time had become more important to me than providing opportunities for deep, memorable learning for my students. The acts wore thin on the children, and wore me out as the teacher. My character and script were not based on any content that I was passionate about, but rather on the Ministry prescribed curriculum. I was trying to trick or fool them into learning factual information that had no connection to their daily lives. Had my intent been to share with the students some thing or some topic I found compelling, then any teaching method I chose, including "teacher as actor" would have been an authentic effort to share a passion of mine. Once I had reduced myself to "actor on stage", I had trivialized the business of teaching and learning. Acting for the sake of delivering curricular content reduced teaching to a series of empty performances, either single

² For further discussion of "power," see Chapters 2 and 4.

repetitious acts, or numerous, individual unconnected ad lib performances, void of any passion on the part of the actor. This was not my vision of education. Although learning and teaching suggested a give-and-take relationship, my performances left my students out of that equation. My discontent forced me to seek out and begin to apply alternative teaching methods.

Being True To My Philosophy, or Practising What I Preached

Even then, my teaching practices dictated that I encourage my students to be risk-takers, to try a new idea or a new way of thinking; to stretch themselves into new dimensions, yet I was not modelling that act of taking a risk myself. In retrospect, I really did not know what it was like to take a risk. I did not understand how to challenge the status quo in order to resist the structures of the external curriculum. The phrase "risk-taker" had been used prolifically by myself and several of my colleagues, but I felt trapped by teacher expectations and Ministry guidelines. There were no explicit connections being made between student life experiences and the external curriculum, unless they occurred incidentally, perhaps because I was not yet looking for any. However, it became increasingly important for me to find those connections between students' lives inside and outside the classroom as I believed that deep memorable learning took place for students only when the content had meaning for them. As the teacher, my purpose in connecting their life experiences with curricular content was based in the belief that by doing so, it would make a significant difference to the learning occurring for the students in my classroom.

Nea Stewart-Dore (1986) discussed the need for teachers to create classroom environments where students felt safe enough to take risks, to make connections between the classroom world and their own life experiences, to make sense of new learning experiences (pp. 11, 17). Unless such an environment was present, Stewart-Dore suggested, students would stay with familiar routines and familiar learning processes. Yet for me, as a beginning teacher, there was no scaffolding to support my risk-taking. I was told to rely on prefabricated programs, to use the materials that some depersonalized others had developed and approved. Although Ministry documents included the names of committee members who had developed curriculum, I did not know how to challenge these decisions regarding grade-specific mandated curriculum. As well, the staff I worked with were very content, and there was no one planting new ideas into my head and encouraging me to try something new.

One of my mentors who worked at another school, but had been my school associate during my student teaching tenure, had taken a course in Whole Language and began talking to me in reference to students reading and writing about topics in which they were interested. I wondered what would happen if I invited my students to bring some of their outside lives into our classroom. Until then, I had chosen many different writing activities for my students to complete, each one with specific intentions and directions on form and content. This is what I understood "teaching skills in context" to be, except that often the context was meaningless to my students. I realized that for the context to have deeper meaning, the content had to be more in tune with their daily lives. Therefore, for me to take a risk in my practice, I had to rely on my students to share enough of their life experiences through written and oral narratives that I could, in turn, find ways in which to use this information to develop curricula. After having fed students, often by force, a steady diet of mandated curricular content material, I had to believe they would accept my invitation to share some of the life experiences that mattered to them. The idea of

extending to my students the invitation to write about what they know, then looking for meaningful themes in their writing, and connecting those themes into teachable content seemed a massive challenge. However, it became more and more apparent to me that if I was to be true to my philosophy, I had no choice but to accept the challenge.

Michael Rosen (1989) related his childhood experience of writing about what (you) know.

His story reads:

Every week for five years I had a "composition" to do which would be a piece of writing entitled 'Rain' or 'Trees' or 'A Day In The Sun'. Each week a little ritual would take place in and around this event.

Dad: Had any homework tonight?

Me: Yeah, a bit.

Dad: What was it?

Me: Nothing much.

Dad: What was it?

Me: English.

Dad: What did you have to do?

Me: No, no, nothing much.

Dad: What did you have to do?

Me: A composition

Dad: Let's have a look at it then.

Me: No. It's O.K. It's O.K., it's in my bag.

Dad: Let's have a look at it then.

(I get the composition)

(He reads it)

Rain
There are many types of rain...'

OR

Trees
There are many types of trees...'

Dad: Why have you written this?

Me: What do you mean?

Dad: You're not an expert on rain, are you? You're not a meteorologist are you?

Me: No, I know, but it was what we were asked to do.

Dad: But you don't have to know about all kinds of rain. Just write about the rain you know.

Me: Uh?

Dad: The time you saw the rain coming across the hillside in Devon, the time you got rained on when you were cycling home from school...that sort of thing.

Me: oh yeah...

And so each week, whatever the subject it went on for five years. Somewhere along the line, the message sunk in - write about what you know. (Rosen, 1989, p. 5 - 6).

One of the biggest issues I struggled with was where this new agenda would fit in my already busy teaching schedule. Given that I was responsible for delivering all of the prescribed curriculum to my students, I was initially at a loss as to where in the day I could allow students some choice in their writing. The timetable was full. Change meant giving up some of the other stuff. I remember I chose to eliminate journal time and one reading time per week. Although students were invited to read or write what they wanted in these times, the content of the activities was never used in other aspects of classroom activity. I wanted to be doing something that would lead to new places.

Even this little shift in content, changing the timetable to accommodate my change in practice, was a scary step. It meant I had to abandon at least some portions of the familiar external curriculum and risk trying something different.

My Personal Experience with Engaging in the Writing Process

While theoretically and practically I was aware of the purpose of writing in learning, the power of personal narrative was not revealed to me until my experience in the Summer Writing Institute ("Writing Across the Curriculum", Simon Fraser University, 1988). One of the assignments in the course asked students to engage in a personal writing piece about an experience in their lives, and take this piece of writing through to the published stage of the Writing Process (See Appendix A for an explanation of the stages of the Writing Process). Although I had begun to understand the notion of whole language in teaching (Newman, 1985; Goodman, Goodman and Hood, 1989; Graves, 1983; Graves and Stuart, 1985; et al.) and the power of writing, I had done very little "writing from the heart", or personal writing. Any personal writing that I did engage in was not only sporadic, but also discarded soon after it was completed. The writing course invited me to experience the writing process with personally meaningful content and build on my understanding of the purposes for writing. I came to know that personal writing was a generative process which helped develop and deepen my understanding of myself, my experiences, and my ideas. According to Wendy Strachan (1989), writing serves three primary purposes: it frees the memory and reminds the individual of his / her previous knowledge by recalling information and past experiences; it invites and requires the individual to interpret experiences, or to know those experiences more and to know them better through rewording, thus gaining a deeper understanding; and it permits the

composing and constructing of knowledge and experiences. Original narratives can be reformatted and reworked to fit into other situations and scenarios. For me, personal writing became a way for me to find out about myself, to interpret meaning from the substance of my personal narratives.

After a pre-writing activity where participants brainstormed possible writing topics, we began to draft our first works. Over the course of the three weeks, we sought feedback on our work from small groups of students in the course. We were given the opportunity to write, revise, listen, offer ideas, write some more; in short, we were invited to experience what it was like to own, work, share and publish a piece of personal writing. At the end of the course, our colleagues were to be our audience as we each shared our writing with the group.

This exercise had a tremendous impact on me. As a student wanting to do well in the course, I agonized over which, if any, of my life experiences would have any substance or meaning for the audience of intellectuals who shared the course with me. I felt I would be evaluated both on my ability to engage in the writing process, as well as on the content of my story, which, to me, translated as the content of my life. I was forced to endure the frustration of trying to use words to relive and express an experience which had a deep, passionate meaning to me, and I hoped would impact on others in a similar way. I recognized my desire to choose a "safe" writing topic which revealed little of my inner passion. However, I had no interest in investing time and effort into a piece of writing where the topic was one I was not passionate about, or which held little interest to me. Also, because my engagement in and sharing of personal narrative had such a limited exposure to a public audience, I could not foresee what was to occur.

After much deliberation, I risked exposing a part of my private life to strangers. I did not know how my life story would be accepted by my peers. I chose my topic based on its impact on me. I watched the student in me decide what to write about, and later, I thought about how the children in my class might benefit from a similar experience.

The topic I initially chose to write about was a weekend away my partner and I had managed to steal in the recent past, and in particular about a wonderfully romantic dinner we had together in an intimate little restaurant. I did not realize how important this event had been for me until I was reading my first draft out loud to my revision committee. As I relived the experience, through my own words, I felt a catch in my throat, and suddenly, I was weeping abashedly, tears streaming down my face, deep emotion choking my vocal chords. Everyone in my group tried to honour my feelings by giving me time to collect myself, looking anywhere but at me. They had no idea what was going on for me. I finally managed to croak out that it had been such a wonderful experience, I felt sad that it had ended and we were back in our rat race again. When the groups came together that afternoon, the instructor asked for feedback on the process in which we had all been involved. My group was suspiciously quiet, feeling, I assumed, confused about what to say. Finally, I spoke out, explaining my tears as a reaction to my own writing, and talked a little about writing something that moved me in such a way. That was the first experience I had sharing my personal writing. My class response journal from that time reads,

I feel so stupid about what happened today in class. There I was, reading my story, and suddenly I started crying. What an idiot!! No-one knew what to do. I guess they all thought I was going through a divorce or that Kevin had died or something awful had happened. They didn't know what to do or where to look. I was so embarrassed. I tried to explain it to them, but I didn't have the words. They don't even know me. What would I do if one of them had started bawling? Then in group time Wendy asked for feedback and they all just sort of looked at the ground, not knowing what

to say. I finally spoke up and said why my group was so quiet. I never knew my writing could do that for me. I better go back to the topic list (I generated) and write about something safer (Class Journal, summer, 1989).

This incident taught me that I could be moved by my own words in print, my life experiences are powerful and emotion-laden, and I could choose to change my writing topic, depending on my audience and my comfort level. The experience also helped me to understand how my students might feel in similar classroom situations. I came to know that travelling through the different stages of the Writing Process has much more meaning to the writer when the content of the material had a personal connection to the author.

Since that time I have incorporated and revised "The Writing Process" program with all of my students, keeping in mind that the content my students choose to use tells me much about their comfort level in the classroom, their lives, and their personal making of meaning (Wells, 1986). My understanding about the power of writing from one's own experiences has a significant influence on my teaching practices. It is from these narratives that I can begin to know my students. By extending the invitation to the children to write from personal experiences, by honouring those experiences as meaningful moments in my students' lives, I am given glimpses of each students' personal curricula and I can begin to shape my classroom curriculum to connect in some way to their lives.

Defining the Scope of Inquiry

As I began to ask serious questions about my practice and its impact on my students, I found that my inquiry was multi - faceted. I was interested in a series of questions and issues around teaching and teachers such as, the ethics of care in the teaching profession (Hargreaves, 1990), educational change and staff development (Hargreaves and Fullan, 1990, 1992), staff professional development and teacher leadership (Warren-Little, 1991; Wasley, 1991; Liberman, Saxl, Miles, 1989), teacher isolation and control (Fullan, Hargreaves, 1991), the purpose and practise of mandated curriculum (Ministry of Education), as well as other related issues.

I was also compelled and completely hypnotized by the day-to-day goings-on in the classroom. I compiled a different but related set of practice/classroom-based questions such as, Why do I do what I do? What impact does this have on my students? More specifically, What is the definition of my classroom culture and what role do I and my students assume in playing out that definition? What kind of inconsistencies do my students see between what I (and other significant adults in their lives) say and do, and how does this impact on their learning? How do they feel about it? What life experiences does each child bring to the classroom and how can I access and use this information as a basis for developing meaningful curriculum?

Later, I came to recognize different themes within the students' narratives, such as violence, friendship, love, and anxiety. I wondered where the experiences of which children speak fit into their making sense of their world, and how in turn does this fit into the classroom fibre? Finally, I asked myself the question that others were asking of me, but I was avoiding, Why does any of this matter to me, as teacher and as human being?

What I have come to know is that all of these issues connect deeply to my own life experiences, and surface in my personal writing. Learning moments in my life are built on memorable, meaningful experiences. This is not to suggest that the only things I learn are based solely on memorable moments, but the experiences which have shaped my course of action, my focus of inquiry, my interests, have been born of a passion within me aroused by a particular set of events or circumstances. Sometimes, writing about those moments has helped me to know what is truly important to me. This knowledge has, in turn, led me to reflect on the invitation I received to engage in personal writing and, as a result of that experience, ask: If my own personal writing had such a profound impact on me at the age of 30 and told me what really mattered to me, what would happen if I extended that same

invitation to my students? What would they be willing to tell me about their lives? How could this impact on developing classroom curriculum? Once I framed my inquiry in such a way, I found that I could, in fact I must, speak to all of the issues about classroom practice that I found so compelling such as building classroom culture, the role of power in teacher/student relationships and creating deep, memorable learning experiences for my students. This included looking closely at the content of their narratives, noticing what kinds of things kept surfacing in their stories, and gently questioning them about the content of their stories to see if my interpretation of their words was in fact on the right track. I had to try to get to know my students better in order to shape learning activities which would connect with their realms of experience. As well, I could realize their individual capabilities, which often far exceeded my expectations.

Our greatest problem is that we underestimate what children can do. We underestimate their will to make sense of the world around them. Children are curious and want their curiosity satisfied. But we don't know children, nor the interest that arouses their curiosity, nor the learning process well enough to know how to respond to them. We constantly try to trick them into learning things that have nothing to do with them. Most of our classrooms are reflections of what teachers do, not of what children do. If our classrooms are to be effective, they should be filled with stuff, the stuff of what children know and what they want to know more about. This is how children learn at home. And this is how they will learn when they have left formal education and are working on the job (Graves, 1985, p. 18).

The Writing Process in Process

We are the meaning makers - every one of us: children, parents and teachers. To try to make sense, to construct stories, and to share them with others in speech and in writing is an essential part of being human. For those of us who are more knowledgeable and more mature - parents and teachers - the responsibility is clear: to interact with those in our care in such a way as to foster and enrich their meaning making. (Wells, 1986, p. 222)

Making meaning suggests making sense of personal experiences, using narratives as a vehicle for building understanding and constructing foundations to which other experiences could be connected. I wanted my students to have the opportunity to share their oral and written narratives with me so that I in turn could build on their experiences and help them make connections to new material. As well, I wanted to teach different learning methods using relevant content.

I had initially learned about the Writing Process in my teacher training and I knew it was becoming more popular with some teachers. The Writing Process allowed for realistic connections between reading, writing, speaking and listening, and sought to model learning experiences in writing (and reading) upon the method parents used in teaching infants to speak. Frank Smith (1986) suggested that children actively seek out new words and phrases as a way of making meaning of their lives. Language acquisition is not a passive activity children engage in as mimicry, but rather is active and intentional, and most children undertake this endeavour with great gusto.

All children except the most severely deprived or handicapped acquire a vocabulary of over ten thousand words during the first four or five years of their lives. At the age of four they are adding to their vocabulary at a rate of twenty new words a day. ...By late adolescence the average vocabulary is over fifty thousand words ... teachers have told me it is impossible to learn words at such a rate, whatever the research shows. I ask these teachers how they can be so sure. They tell me it takes an hour to teach children ten words on a list, they forget five by the next day, and by the end of the week they might remember only two ... [However] Children not only learn words, they learn how to put words together into conventional phrases and sentences, so they can understand and be understood. ... Children learn to talk like the people they see themselves as being. They learn to talk the way their friends talk. Children learn the vocabulary and grammar of the language spoken around them, its idioms, and jargon, its distinctive patterns of intonation and gesture, and its complex rules of eye contact, body posture and interruption ... (Smith, 1986, pp. 19-20).

As I read passages such as this, I puzzled over the notion of oral language acquisition as a skill, taught incidentally and successfully to all students in my class before they ever reached the formal institution called public school. I marvelled at the simplicity and sensibility this afforded me, as a teacher, and wondered how this same methodology could be applied to learning to write prolifically and fluently in school. My students did write daily, and with some of their writing we went through all stages of the writing process, with other pieces only the first few stages. However, I was still deciding, for the most part, what the content of that writing would be. There was little personal or individual input by the students into writing topics chosen by me. At my insistence, each student went through the process in a linear fashion, completing one step before they "moved on" to the next step. Because of my unfamiliarity with allowing students to move at their own pace, I insisted that all students have each stage completed at a given date, before we as a class would move onto the next stage. Consequently, those who could write did, and they completed the daily "writing requirement" within class time. Those who struggled with the skill of writing often had writing homework to complete, and while I was proud that my students were learning and implementing the different processes in writing, I noticed there was little passion in their work.

The Writing Process served as the scaffolding for students to record some of their experiences in print. However, teaching the tenets of the Writing Process, embracing the notion that students would guide the development of classroom curriculum, took some getting used to. Letting go of the externally imposed structure that was inherent in text-based programs, where all students were moved through the work at the same rate of speed, and had the same lesson at the same time, whether or not they needed it, did not fit into the philosophy of the Writing Process, although it took me some time to realize this. Rather, I had to learn to accept the messiness of process - oriented work, and not only

say, but actually believe and honour the fact that children moved through their work at their own rate.

In looking for connections between acquiring language and learning to write, I sought the opinions of other professionals who had also explored these connections. Cochrane, Cochrane, Scalena and Buchanan (1984) outlined six factors which they believed were necessary to foster the growth and development of writing skills, and parallel these factors both with previous experience children have had in their lives prior to attending school, and the notion of how classrooms must be shaped in order to facilitate this process. They state,

Learning to write is a language learning activity. It is learned in the same way as learning to read or learning to talk. Considering that young children learn to talk with such apparent ease, it makes sense to look at the environment that fostered this language learning ... First, the child was immersed in oral language from birth. ...In our classrooms, then, we must immerse our children in oral and written language, because this serves as a demonstration for the child's writing ... Second ... oral language that surrounds the child is both meaningful and purposeful ... Real life language encounters are the goal for the classroom ... Third ... the child sees important* people in his (sic) community using oral language. Therefore the child needs to see his (sic) teacher using written language at school ... The fourth factor is the support a child receives while he (sic) is learning to talk. This support is key to successful learning ... In our classrooms the sense of belief and trust must be presented. There is no room for anxiety over less than perfect writing. Writing, like any other learning, is developmental ... Fifth is the amount of time a child spends learning to talk ... In our classrooms children must have opportunities to write and express their ideas and feelings everyday ... coupled with time to practise is the sixth factor ... Our job, then, as teachers, is to set up classrooms with an environment that is conducive to written language learning. (pp. 80 - 81).

* "Important" in this sense is interpreted as significant people in the child's life.

It took me some time to gradually let go, to resist the safety of the imposed structure of the external curriculum. I had to learn to listen to what my students had to say about their lives and their interests, and allow that information to inform my practice, in order to

influence my curricular decisions. Although I continue to work toward shaping the curriculum and classroom environment to promote deep, memorable learning in each of my students, I have discovered that I must first come to know my students, build a relationship of mutual trust and respect with them as individuals and as a community.

Graves' earlier quotation suggested that teachers do not know their students. I know that to be true. How can a teacher immediately know thirty new students in his or her room? ³ My task is to come to know them, but the question is how? In public school classrooms, teachers spend infinite hours with their students, but this does not always lead to knowing each other. In my experience, academic curricular objectives too often override the affective curriculum and interfere with building trusting relationships between students and teachers. With such a focus on content, students become willing or unwilling receptacles of information. This was never my intent as a teacher. Somehow, what often ends up being taught is content that is disconnected from students' lives, and I suspect it has little meaning for them.

The First Forages; Writing Workshop at Work in the Classroom: The beginning of Understanding the Connections

³ Several years later my journey through the craft of teaching has connected me with students ranging in age from fourteen to sixteen years, or junior high school students. I now see over 160 different students in one week and many other teachers have even more students than I. The school is organized around a five by eight timetable, which means that students see eight different teachers for eight different subjects over a period of five days. In my opinion, this organization ensures that no connections will take place between students and teachers. I think it is crucial to come to know students in order to be able to develop relevant curriculum, or to shape and tailor curriculum to the needs and interest of the community. Within the system that I am now working, I see this as a challenging task. There is so little room to build community, commitment or come to know one another.

It was not until my mentor suggested that I invite my students to write about their own experiences that I began to let go of the conventions I thought were so important to running a successful, productive classroom (see page 9). As my mentor cautioned, my students floundered for a while, waiting, expecting me to "lay on" the topic for writing. I was trying to break away from the comfortable role and routine with which both I and my students were familiar. It was very hard not to give them what they wanted, to assume the role of the keeper of all knowledge, wisdom and experience.

I found that their first forages into writing included stories around commercial familiarities such as characters on popular TV programs, in movies or video games, or about each other. Once my students had exhausted this pool of characters, they complained that they had nothing left to write about,⁴ and they soon sat bored and listless. I encouraged, cajoled, brainstormed possible topics, and conferenced endlessly with individuals and small groups of students. Eventually, finally, they began to bring their stories of their lives into the classroom. That their life experiences could be worthwhile enough to write about during writing time was a new idea for them.

I registered for a course in Whole Language where I read Atwell, Calkins, Graves, Britton and various others who provided insight on how to further expand my students' reading

⁴ My experience parallels a similar incident told by another teacher:

Usually the class wrote without enthusiasm. Today, they were belligerent. For the first time Ms. Hansen told them they could write about topics of their own choosing. Some glowered, some were panic-stricken, a cluster raised their hands in protest, "But I don't have anything to write about! We don't know what to choose. What do you want?" ... Children who are fed topics, story starters, lead sentences, even opening paragraphs as a steady diet for three to four years, rightfully panic when topics have to come from them. (Graves, 1983, p. 21)

and writing skills using the content of the students' writing within the context of the Writing Process. My purpose was to build lessons that would be meaningful learning experiences for my students. I focused on the Writing Process as the foundational tool for teaching all reading and writing. I incorporated the Writing Workshop (Atwell, 1987; Calkins, 1986) into my daily classroom routine where students not only could choose what they were to write about, but could progress at their own speed, with my deadlines and due dates spaced out to once per month or six weeks. As a further refinement, I attempted to teach the students writing skills using the mini lesson (Calkins, 1986; Atwell, 1987). These mini lessons were ten to fifteen minutes in duration and were built around errors I saw in the students' writing.

Over time, through their writing, the conferencing, conversations and observations, I began to come to know my students. As students became more comfortable telling some of their life stories, I was given glimpses into their daily lives. Each one of those thirty-nine students wrote during writing workshop: E.S.L. students, learning assistance students, all of them wrote without hesitation. The mood in the writing classroom where students chose their own topics was very different than the mood in the writing classroom where I had chosen the topics. The difference I noticed was, the students wrote with purpose when they chose the venue. They were safe. They did not have to write about a prescribed topic, such as a pet that died, or a time when they were scared, or anything they did not feel comfortable writing about. They owned their own writing. The choices came from them. Over time, our relationship changed. I sensed a trust developing, by the stories they were willing to share with me.

I began to see how I could include and connect real life experiences with some components of the external curriculum. For example, many students included family members in their stories. A study on family heritage allowed students to research their

history, learn about their family's country of origin, and compare it to their life in Canada. This connected with the grade 5/6 mandated social studies curriculum while including a personal perspective from which students began their research. As mentioned earlier, I began to incorporate this method of teaching within my first year of teaching, with intermediate aged students. The next year I was in a new school with primary aged students, and many of the methods I had used had to be modified for this new age group. Here I was, starting again, but this time I had a trust in my students. I believed they came to school with many different experiences, and they wanted to share them. As well, the Primary Curriculum was less defined, and I felt more freedom to spend time on Writing Workshop. Interestingly, I still found that students who were unfamiliar with the notion of choosing their own topics were always initially taken aback when asked to write about whatever they wanted. Because some of them had not yet learned how to write, I quickly realized I had to adapt my vision of Writer's Workshop. Instead of the Writer's Workshop, it should have been called Composer's Workshop, or Creator's Workshop, because that was truly what I was asking them to do. There did not necessarily have to be writing during Writer's Workshop, but there did have to be some kind of representation or creation. For the younger students, the ability to choose to write or draw seemed to relieve what appeared to be a pressure they felt to perform. The primary aged students came to love the time we spent in Writer's Workshop. This was apparent by their total immersion in their activity during Writer's Workshop.

When the students were first introduced to the idea of Writer's Workshop, without fail at least one student anxiously asked, "Do we have to write?" I replied that they could write or draw. Now I would be more inclined to ask them what medium would best help them to express themselves, whether it was paper and pencil, plastercine, paint, pastel or some other. However, at that time, I was still channelling their options.

Contrary to what I feared, students did not automatically opt for drawing because it was easier; there was always a combination of writers and drawers in the room, with some students always choosing to write, and some students always choosing to draw. Over time, I "nudged" these beginning creators along, sitting side by side with them, helping them sound out and write down individual words. Some students wrote and / or drew the same story or picture over and over again, seemingly reluctant to move into unfamiliar territory. Some only wrote if I was there beside them, preferring to stay with drawing and telling their story when left on their own. Regardless of what format their stories took, I often found out what was important to them, and many of the conversations we had around their writing allowed me to slowly get to know them better. Two journal entries from one of my students help to illustrate my point.

Know what? I'm so excited! because today's the day we become STARS!
It's Spring Concert! I'm used to talking and singing in front of people
because I did a speach for Student Council and the Canata at Church. I
sung and said two speaches! I'm not nervus, I'm just really really, very
very, excited and feeling really wonderful.

Another entry from the same student reads:

I really like working with Mandy and Gregory on reserching for (racism) the books are very helpful and I enjoy the Marten luther King jr. (it's a book we got out!) The only thing I don't understand is in the book it said that white people used to call black people "Jim Crows" and I've no idea what that is!? But I absolutely hate that black people just because their a different colour they were slaves and yesterday I saw the movie Huck Finn: but Huck met a guy named Jim (he's a slave) and he got whipped and I can't believe it! (female, age 8) These kinds of passages helped me to get to know my students better, understand their feelings and their thinking about different issues. Over time, the

knowledge I gained about my students and their lives has helped me integrate the life experiences of my students with curricular content.⁵

Initially, I was not aware of how knowing some of the stories of my students had the potential of affecting the way I dealt with the students. Individual differences became more defined. Expectations I had of individual students changed as I got to know their life experiences. At times, I knew that some of them were sharing their deepest secrets with me. I learned about their fears, families, relationships, and other influences which had tremendous impact on the way they saw the world. It became clear to me that having this information put me in a position of power over some of my students, and I had to be mindful that there existed a potential to destroy the trust entrusted to me, and misuse the power (see Chapter 2).

Deep, Meaningful Learning: What is it?

What, then, is meaningful learning for kids? Is it high marks on a test? Is it voluminous notes? Is it stories of trips? Is it bad experiences that stay with children all of their lives? I would say yes to all of the above, and more. I characterize deep, meaningful learning by the number of times a learning incident comes to impact on a person's life in profound and recognizable ways. Learning incidents are made up of moments in an individual's personal history when some occurrence or experience has come to impact itself so profoundly in a person's memory that the incident is relived over and over again, in its original and in different forms, and makes a significant contribution to a person's experience and

⁵ All my students did accept the invitation to engage in writing, and their writing skills improved over time.

knowledge base. The impact of memorable learning moments can only be determined by the learner him or herself, and only after time has passed.⁶ Learning memories, those that come back to haunt a person in all their vividness or glory, are the moments where time and experiences reflect back and look ahead at the same time. I believe that content based memorable learning moments occur more by accident than by intent and seldom exist within the context of public school and mandated curriculum when there is no effort to or no way of connecting the content to existing memories in the students' lives.

The balance of this paper will trace my journey over the last seven years, and how my learning process has become intertwined with that of my students. Students' writing and oral anecdotes will be used to clarify and validate my intentions and meaning. As well, I will refer to my personal/professional journals over the last years to trace my thinking during that time. At no time do I intend to arrive at a definitive answer or method for "proper" teaching, but rather I seek only to make sense of my own practice, see how I can build on that understanding and become more effective in my classroom. Perhaps my story will encourage others to reflect on their own professional journeys and lead them to places yet unknown, for the purpose of building more meaningful learning experiences for themselves and their students.

Throughout this paper I will refer to the works of various authors who have sought to make experiences in classrooms more meaningful for the students. In some cases I have found that the philosophy and ideology of some works simply do not match with the practical day-to-dayness of classroom teaching. In other instances I have experienced great difficulty practising a method that appears to be so fundamentally simple. As I

⁶ See Herbert Kohl's book, I Won't Learn From You (1994) as a good exemplar of individual differences and interpretations of memorable learning moments.

reflect on these past experiences, I piece together the shifts in my beliefs and discuss how this reflected on my practice.

Thesis Outline

This thesis consists of five chapters. In chapter one I present the reader with the dilemma I have been struggling with over my teaching career. Although I list numerous related questions throughout the chapter, and my explorations touch on each of the areas I noted, the questions I keep returning to are, What life experiences does each child bring to the classroom, how can I access the narratives students choose to share about specific life experiences, and how can I use this information to develop meaningful curriculum? and Why does any of this matter to me, as a teacher and a human being? This chapter outlines the journey I have been on over the last seven years, my search for ways to connect the external curriculum to the real life experiences of my students.

Chapter two forms the foundation of the literature review and makes entry into the professional conversations regarding teacher/ student interactions and development of purposeful and meaningful curriculum. I enter into the discussion of classroom dynamics, primarily the power relations between students and teachers and how I have become more aware of the delicate balance of trust and relationship within the classroom domain. Here I continue to define, and in some cases elaborate on, writings from various authors, both from the philosophical and the practical domains of education, to help illustrate and support my comments and conclusions. Although the professional writings on this topic are woven throughout this thesis, chapter two stands as the primary critical dialogue in this piece of work.

Chapter three traces the methodology of my work and my struggle with my growth as a teacher, and where I fit into the conversation with other educators on the same or similar topic. In chapter three I try to make sense of my professional journey, and how the events of my personal life have impacted on my professional life.

In chapter four I focus on the research gathered from my students in the form of oral and written narratives. Through their stories and my interpretations, I piece together the forces at work in my classroom, and how coming to know these forces serves to inform my practice.

Finally, in chapter five, I make sense of my musings, and project what is in store for me as a teacher working with children. As well, I show how this piece of work fits into the pedagogical framework of classroom - based education, and the necessity of building the link between the external and the personal curricula. I do not attempt to make any recommendations for "fixing" the educational system or recommend any one method for creating memorable learning experiences for all students. I articulate the restructuring I have done as I have come to learn more about myself and my students, and how the external curriculum can be used and manipulated effectively to connect and build upon the daily life experiences of my students. As well, I project further refinements I can make in my teaching practices to impact learning in my classroom in the future.

Because I am and have been the teacher, I come from a privileged position. Interpretation of information is always subjective, but I have built a history with my students no other researcher could duplicate. I have lived on an almost daily basis with the children to whom I refer, and, in some cases, for three consecutive school years. I have become a part of their lives, I have come to know their parents to varying degrees, and I have shared some of my life with them. At no time have I had a "control" group in which one bunch of

students received a different methodology of teaching practices from me for the purpose of comparing and contrasting methods and outcomes. I have been a classroom teacher. There is no possible way that I could be dispassionate about my findings and conclusions, yet I see this as an asset to my writing rather than a liability. Where possible, I have checked out my interpretations with the students themselves, and when that is not possible, I have interpreted the information to the best of my professional ability. But teaching is my passion and my life, not my job. Therefore, all of this work has been filled with personal emotion. After all, I can only write about what I know, and only I can best know my own experiences as a teacher.

CHAPTER 2

CHALLENGING THE IMPRISONMENT OF THE SPIRIT: JOURNEYING BENEATH THE SURFACE, LOOKING FOR CONNECTIONS

... The fantasies of any group form the basis of its culture; this is where we search for common ground. That which we have forgotten how to do, the children do best of all: They make up stories. Theirs may be the original model for the active, unrestricted examination of an idea ... Somewhere in each fantasy is a lesson that promises to lead me to questions and commentary, allowing me to glimpse the universal themes that bind together the individual urgencies ... Once we push deeply into the collective imagination, it is easier to establish connections and build mythologies. The classroom that does not create its own legends has not travelled beneath the surface to where the living takes place. (Paley, 1990, p. 5 - 6)

It has been with great and determined effort that I have tried to understand and build the connection between what my students already know, what they want to learn, and the experiences I want them to be a part of. Always at the core of my inquiry is, What is important about this and why is it important to me?

The human dynamic inherent in teaching children, to a large extent, excludes curricular content (which, by some teachers, students and parents, is often considered to be the most important aspect of teaching), but includes affective considerations such as relationships, trust, power, conformity and human diversity. Classrooms are places where teachers are expected to teach and children are expected to learn. Little consideration has been given to the social aspects present when a group of people is confined to a room or rooms for five hours a day, five days a week, in hopes of accomplishing a pre-determined mission, that mission being the learning of a particular body of content. In my opinion, the diversities inherent in any classroom of individuals is not taken into consideration. Yet, these different personalities are what make up the personality of the classroom.

My journey has forced me to closely examine many of the affective considerations that are the daily reality for those of us who live in the classroom. It is the interactions between the teacher and his or her students, not the mandated curriculum which is to be taught, which help to create and define curriculum and make the classroom the place it is.

This chapter will look at five different dynamics constantly interplaying with one another in any one classroom, and my ensuing commentary will describe how I have managed myself and my students in response to these various dynamics. I suggest that it is within these dynamics that opportunities present themselves where I am able to interact with students in such a way as to hear and act on their life stories for the purpose of building curriculum which will make a difference to their learning.

The first dynamic I discuss is the role of power in the class, and how this affects the social and academic interactions in the classroom. Secondly, I look at the bigger picture of curriculum, and the power a teacher has to shape that curriculum. Thirdly, I discuss the writing connection and how writing can weave its way into many facets of the curriculum and reveal some of the genuine interests of the students. Fourth, I further examine relationship building with students through written and oral narrative sharing, and the work I have done to build trusting relationships with my students. Finally, I take time to discuss those students who do not fit into the tight constraints of the classroom or school, and what impact these mermaids have had on my conscience and my practice.

Power

The first thing we must acknowledge as teachers is the extent of our power, for, in large measure, the understanding (or misunderstanding) and

the application (or misapplication) of that power determines our success or failure as teachers. Power, obviously, is a loaded word ... Many of us have the power, through a few chosen words, to bring a young person's world crashing down. We have the power, through careful selection and manipulation, to divide the students against themselves and break them into warring factions ... We have the power, through simply ignoring certain students, to make them feel insecure and fearful ... Conversely, we have the power to do the opposite. With a word or a gesture, we have the power to make a kid's day... (Elliot Wigginton, 1986, pp. 193, 197)

This sobering observation is all too true in the reality of the public school classroom. Many young students depend on their teachers for approval of their efforts and behaviors, and for their understanding of how they must fit into the system in which they are functioning. The power teachers have over the classroom environment is astonishing. It rates close to parental status, which I see as the ultimate source of control and power, at least in a young child's life. Not only is it imperative that teachers recognize the power they have, but that they treat it as a gift and learn the potency of their words and actions.

Currently, I am teaching junior high school aged students. At the beginning of the year, I heard a teacher chastise a group of new Canadians for using their first language to speak to each other. This teacher stopped by the small group, who were eating their lunch in the hall, and said, "Speak English. You have to speak English here." I saw the students dip their heads and nod, seemingly embarrassed for their actions. I felt embarrassed, not only for them, but to be a teacher. All day long these students struggle to understand and be understood in a language they are only learning to master, and when they have a break they are told, by one who holds the power, they cannot even relax for that short time and communicate in the language they feel most comfortable using. In my opinion, this was a blatant misuse of power on the part of the teacher.

I struggle with my role in the classroom, how I use the power afforded me in my position as teacher, and how my actions and words impact on my students. I have come to

understand how I feel when I am rendered powerless in situations where I am a key participant. For example, an administrator once challenged me on the way in which I was manipulating the curriculum in order to help build some connection between the content of the courses I was teaching and the life experiences of my students. Apparently, some parents had been complaining to him that the way in which I was presenting the course was not as effective as the methods used in the past by the other two teachers, one whom I had replaced, and the other who was still teaching the same course at the same school. Both of these teachers had taught a textbook based program where, for the most part, students were fed facts and were asked to regurgitate those facts on a regular basis in the form of tests and quizzes. The mermaid in me rejected this approach. However, the king of the sea told me that I had to "move my teaching more in line with [the other teacher]" so as not to create such a shift away from the status quo. I felt a total lack of support for my work and efforts. I felt powerless, and I understood how a student might feel when he/she did not get support from the king of the sea when he/she wanted to step away from "normal" practices. I know that I too have been a "king's fool" on occasion and have made decisions which rendered my students powerless. I try to be mindful of that scenario and avoid it where possible.

Seth Kreisberg (1990) discussed the link between the ethics of care teachers show towards their students and the power/domination teachers hold over their students. He described a personal school experience with a teacher who was loved and admired by all of his students, yet this teacher would routinely publicly spank students. Kreisberg states,

In (Mr. Smith), and in our relationships with him, concern, care, humour, violence, humiliation, and submission were all mixed together in the complex web of the relationship of domination. This is domination at its most effective and most insidious, creating relationships in which people accept, even enjoy, being dominated. (p. 4)

I have seen this phenomenon occur in many different arenas, and I continue to wonder why some people respond favourably to abuse.

As an adult, I am often caught up in conversations with co-workers and other peers regarding past personal and public relations with others who were in a position of power and/or domination over them. I am saddened by the number of people who continue to believe that their experiences around being dominated, controlled or ruled by fear are still seen as positive experiences in their lives. Comments about past teachers such as, "Everyone was scared of him because he'd crack that ruler over anyone's desk, anytime, but I sure learned a lot from him. He was a good teacher", and "Oh, you didn't mess with _____, and you sure got your work done, or look out!" continue to haunt the hallways of public schools. In many cases, these traits are used as models to which other teachers are to aspire, particularly in the higher grades. Power, control and discipline can become so intertwined for some teachers that the silent classroom controlled by the frightening, dominant teacher is seen as the most effective environment for "delivering the curriculum" (Kreisberg, 1990, pp. 3 - 6), and managing the students. The message this gives to students is that where they can dominate others, they can control the environment, and controlling others may be seen as having power over others. However, teachers can be trapped into feeling the need to exert a great degree of control over their students in order to complete the job they have been given, that is, delivering a body of content to a group of (sometimes unwilling) students.

The ethics of care (Hargreaves, 1990) that teachers assume towards their students can put them in a power / protector role, a position which can be abused. I believe most teachers feel a keen sense of responsibility for the care, safety and education of the children in their classroom. This responsibility includes being accountable for the whereabouts of thirty children at any given time of the school day, thus making it necessary for certain rules and

regulations to be in place in all classrooms. Accountability is not only present in the social organization of classrooms, but is also expected within the curricular definitions of the public school system. This also supports the need for social control factors to be in place.

Teachers accept, with serious conviction, the awesome responsibility of minding and teaching their students. Sometimes, as a result of this conviction, the realm of decision-making, in terms of both behavioral expectations and curricular content, is often held by the teacher him or herself. Professional responsibilities, in terms of student care and curriculum mandates "power over" (Kreisberg, 1990) teachers, and in turn, teachers, "power over" their students. This "powering over" another may well manifest itself within the student body, in that some students appear to have more power and influence over their peers than others.

By kindergarten, ... a structure begins to be revealed and will soon be carved in stone. Certain children will have the right to limit the social experiences of their classmates. Henceforth a ruling class will notify others of their acceptability, and outsiders learn to anticipate the sting of rejection. Long after hitting and name-calling have been outlawed by the teachers, a more damaging phenomenon is allowed to take root, spreading like a weed from grade to grade. (Paley, 1992, p. 3)

The models children see in adults they trust, love and/or respect in terms of power, control and domination are played out in the social arena of the students' lives. This is where they practise and test their social skills and vie for position within their peer group. The school offers the necessary social platform where these interactions can take place. Even in the most tightly controlled classroom environment where the external curriculum seems to be most important, the social curriculum of the students continues to be developed. In tightly controlled classroom environments, the dynamics of social development and academic development can be seen as much more separate because they are treated as separate. In my classroom, the social context of the students was

considered important and often provided the content which drove the curriculum. When there are no clear lines between social and academic development, the environment can be misinterpreted by those who do not understand how these forces interconnect. I believe that the social curriculum of the students must be invited in to become a part of the classroom in order to find connections between what is being taught and what is being learned. I suspect that the administrator who was uncomfortable with my teaching methods did not relate to this philosophy, and therefore considered my program to be less than adequate in terms of academic rigor. I think it is important that teachers and administrators recognize that the academic curriculum is only a small part of what schools actually teach.

Curriculum

Elliot Eisner (1979) defined the "Three Curricula That All Schools Teach" (ch. 5). These are the explicit curriculum, the implicit curriculum, the null curriculum.

The explicit curriculum is the public curriculum, the content based, studies related, task oriented assignments and lessons.

In that culture called schooling there are certain publicly explicit goals: teaching children to read and write, to figure and to learn something about the history of the country, among them ... There are goals and objectives for the sciences, the arts, physical education, social studies, and foreign language instruction. Not only do these goals appear in school district curriculum guides and the course-planning materials that teachers are asked to prepare, the public also knows that these courses are offered and that students in the district will have the opportunity to achieve these aims, at least to some degree if they want to. In short, the school offers the community an educational menu of sorts; it advertises what (it) is prepared to provide. From this advertised list, students have, at least in principle, an array of options from which to choose. (p. 74 - 75)

The "implicit curriculum", or the hidden curriculum, may be better learned than explicit curriculum. Eisner stated, "Schools socialize children to a set of expectations (which are) profoundly more powerful and longer lasting than what is intentionally taught or what the explicit curriculum publicly provides" (p. 75). Competition provides an example of "implicit curriculum", where one team or individual wins only because all the rest have to lose. This curriculum was not only adopted, but highlighted within the public school system. Letter grades based on normative curves forced students into unco-operative, unsupportive roles as peers and friends. The fact that "your higher mark means that mine will be worse, therefore I can have no joy for your achievements" forces unfriendly actions (Bodell, 1994) in an unfriendly system. As well, the implicit curriculum which Eisner describes further supports Paley's observations regarding the emergent "ruling class" beginning in kindergarten.

Finally, the third curricula Eisner called the "Null Curriculum" referred to what is not explicitly taught by teachers, what is left out of the external curriculum. An example of this is the historic account of the settling of western Canada as told by the First Nations people. In public school with predetermined prescribed curriculum, students are denied access to many potential learning experiences. They have almost no opportunities to learn in areas other than those outlined by the Ministry. The external curriculum allows for very little personal choice and does not recognize individual or cultural differences between and among different public school communities. Under these circumstances, both students and teachers have almost no power or influence over the content of their school day. Prescribed curriculum that is taught year in and year out is ignorant in its repetition and leaves no room for district diversities. Although in theory up to 20% of classroom time is to be devoted to "locally developed programs" (Ministry of Education Curriculum Guidelines), the prescribed curriculum is so dense with material and learning objectives

that the 20% is soon used up trying to over provincially mandated programs. Eisner seems to suggest that the use of mandated curriculum is in fact a planned form of control.

... what schools do not teach may be as important as what they do teach ... Ignorance is not simply a neutral void; it has important effects on the kinds of options one is able to consider. The absence of a set of considerations or perspectives or the inability to use certain processes for appraising a context biases the evidence one is able to take into account. A parochial perspective or simplistic analysis is the inevitable progeny of ignorance. (p. 83)

It has been my experience that some students actively refuse to "learn" what is being taught as a way of rebelling against the tight constraints of the external curriculum. Herbert Kohl (1994) further describes this behavior in some students as active refusal to conform to the expectations of certain academic disciplines within public school with an effort on their part not to learn.

I have witnessed and to some extent participated in all three forms of curricula outlined by Eisner. The power I have as a teacher to make decisions regarding my students in terms of homework assignments, recommendations and referrals, specialized testing and special attention ⁷ is quite far reaching, and I have not always, in the past, taken the time to discuss my actions with the students involved. In truth, I have made recommendations to parents, other teachers and administrators about altering behavioral or academic interactions with certain students without their knowledge or consent, and in retrospect I can imagine how powerless they would have felt over their own lives if they had known what kinds of decisions were being made about them. I have had my students tested and not shared the results with them. I have manipulated and cajoled, even threatened my students to complete tasks which I suspected each party knew were meaningless and time wasting. Through all of this, I was dissatisfied with my work. Where were the children in my practice? The external, public curriculum was, at least in the beginning, too important. The classroom looked great, but the students' work on display was simply a representation of assignments I had determined. The social "life" of the classroom was not reflected in the many activities in which the students were participating on a daily basis, such as teacher determined research projects, math assignments and novel study choices. We

⁷ Special attention given to students by teachers is meant here as including recommendations for testing for such things as attention deficit syndrome (A.D.S.), academic giftedness, hand - eye coordination, dyslexia, and is not limited to the "positive" definition of "special."

were, by Homan's (1950) definition, a "human group", or "... persons who communicated with one another often over a span of time, and who are few enough so that each person is able to communicate with all others, not second hand, through others, but face to face" (p. 1). Yet, I owned all of the curricular decision-making. I did not invite input from the group of which I was a part. I needed to shift my focus from the external curriculum and the student body to the individual students who made up my classroom human group. This shift was crucial if I wanted to find ways in which to make learning experiences more meaningful to my students and achieve more satisfaction from my work.

... Because each child is an individual, learning environments we plan should recognize individual learning through a range of contexts which supports what children already know ..., while extending them to new realizations. (Stewart-Dore, 1978, p. 19)

The academic reality of the classroom ⁸ often keeps students as receptacles of pre-chosen content. Students continue to be disallowed into the curriculum decision-making processes and, in fact, often have no place in discussions about curricular and content choices. ⁹

Within my classroom I have guidelines which are meant to be followed, but I have some flexibility to shape curriculum. I make decisions regarding the content I teach to my students, I have some leniency in timetabling, I choose how to present the information to the students, and how the students represent their learning or understanding of the

⁸ I use the term "academic reality" to describe the guidelines and mandates outlined by the Ministry for each grade level and the expectation of the parents, and in some cases, the students, in terms of content being covered in the classroom.

⁹ Ministry mandated curriculum is developed by teachers seconded by the Ministry for the purpose of writing content lessons for a particular subject area. Students are not invited to be any part of the process. Another good example of who affected policy making was the Royal Commission on Education. Adults from many different social and professional arenas were asked for their input, yet students were not.

material to me. These factors fall mostly within my control and allow me to tailor curricular content to a certain extent to suit the needs and interests of my students. However, I cannot ignore the defined content specific to the age level I teach. The expectation, by students, parents, and other teachers that I cover the prescribed curriculum is quite powerful.

During my first few years teaching, I questioned why I had not regarded students' input as one of the factors I should have been considering. My students came to school with a wide range of life experiences, academic and social abilities and different expectations for school. Each year provided a unique blend of individuals, and if I was to talk about tailoring programs to suit different needs, I had to consider the differences in each group.

The unique, individual experiences and abilities that each person in the classroom arrived with served as my guide into curriculum development. Now, it is no longer enough for me, as a teacher, to plan my school year without the input of my students, yet I am required to submit a "preview" for the entire teaching year by the early part of October.¹⁰ Writing previews gives the illusion that the status quo is maintained, that is, that the teacher makes all the decisions regarding what will be taught over the course of the year without first having the opportunity to get to know the students. I suspect that some teachers follow their previews quite closely. I know of other teachers who follow their previews for the first month or two, then make different decisions about the content they choose to teach. However for me, handing in a preview is more out of political necessity than a desire to have my entire teaching year planned. Once it is handed in, I resist the

¹⁰ This is true within the school district in which I work. Other school districts ask their teachers to submit a personal growth plan instead of a preview. The personal growth plan asks teachers to outline and later evaluate their own plan for professional development throughout the year.

constraints previews necessarily intend and, over the course of the school year, shape my content choices with the input of my students. I then look for ways in which I can connect the mandated curriculum with my students' lives.

Within most public school classrooms, a group of children is placed together in a classroom with a teacher, age and gender often being the only considerations in organization, in hopes of building some kind of learning community over the next several months. The ways and means by which this growth occurs is largely up to the teacher. Therefore, for me, planning curriculum is a collaborative endeavor; my silent partner is the Ministry. As I become aware of curricular mandates for the different grades I teach, I look for ways in which they can be built into the natural fibre of the classroom learning environment. I run the risk of being controlled by these curricular guidelines, and administrative and parental expectations often do not recognize that deep memorable learning occurs only when the learner is engaged in the material. The content of the material is crucial to the individual learner. Unfortunately, curricular mandates often do not encompass student interests. Dewey (1940) goes so far as to suggest that laid on curriculum was an "educational management tool" which runs counter to learning. The dictation ... of the subject matter to be taught, to the teacher who is to engage in the actual work of instruction, and frequently, the attempt to determine the methods which are to be used in teaching, means nothing more or less than the deliberate restriction of intelligence, the imprisoning of the spirit ... It is no uncommon thing to find methods of teaching such subjects as reading, writing, spelling, and arithmetic laid down; outline topics in history and geography are provided ready-made for the teacher; gems of literature are fitted to successive ages of boys and girls. (p. 67)

Again, the external curriculum, the public advertisement of content covered at each grade level, comes to haunt my practice. Having mandated curriculum by no means assures that all students will leave public education with the same body of knowledge. Kreisberg (1990) suggests that this type of mandated control,

... cultivates passivity, conformity, obedience, acquiescence, and unquestioning acceptance of authority. It makes objects out of students, it dehumanizes, it denies students' experiences and voices, it stifles creativity, it disempowers. It tells our children there is something wrong with them; that it is they, rather than their schools, that need fixing. (p. 8)

Friere (1970) refers to the delivery of mandated materials as "banking education" which serves to maintain the status quo in terms of the dominant and the submissive (p. 59),

where teachers make deposits into the minds of their students and later make withdrawals in the form of test and quizzes. Although I see the banking of information occurring in some classrooms, my plan as a teacher is to honour the individuals who make up my classes, build on their foundation of knowledge, introduce them to new ideas and teach them how to learn about the things that interest them.

I have become more comfortable with shaping curriculum to suit the needs and interests of the students over the last few years. I have broadened my understanding of curricular objectives and recommendations in order to keep my practice more in line with my constantly evolving philosophy about teaching and learning. This philosophy embodies my personal beliefs, values, and experiences, and reflects my understanding about teacher/student relationships and how they fit into the fabric of the classroom.

Personal philosophy is a way one thinks about one's self in teaching situations ... Personal philosophy goes beneath the surface manifestations of values and beliefs to their experiential narrative origins. Studies of beliefs and values usually refer to a coherent account of a teacher's stated beliefs, values and action preferences, whereas personal philosophy refers to a reconstruction of meaning contained in a teacher's actions and his or her exploration of them expressed in the form of narrative of experience. Explanations contain beliefs, values and action preferences, but within a narrative they are grounded and contextualized in terms of the classroom events ... We mean much more than just an "explanation" and/or a statement of what we believe. (Connelly, Clandinin, 1989, p. 66 - 67) ¹¹

¹¹ I do not accept wholeheartedly Connelly and Clandinin's thesis statement that suggests that people live storied lives, therefore the narrative of the lived experience and the lived experience itself are one and the same. I believe that the life experiences students bring to the classroom are the pool from which they draw certain narratives to share with other classroom members. Their life experiences help to build their perceptions of the world, and shape them into the person they are. The narratives they share publicly are only a sampling of their life experiences. The lived experience stands separately from the narrative of the lived experience because the meaning changes in the retelling of the story. However, there are some passages in Connelly and Clandinin's writing that resonate as true to my philosophy and understanding of the power that personal experience has to shape the classroom experience.

I have taken the risk to step away from the black and white prescriptions of the Ministry and come to know my students better in order to build their experiences into the fabric of the curriculum content. As well, within this shift to a more personalized curricular content, I have to also honour my intentions as a teacher and recognize when I need to stand back and watch my students construct new understandings based on the experiences they are a part of, or step in and share some new information, adding to my students' knowledge base by introducing new elements, ideas and facts into the learning landscape.

This shift in perspective, where I intended to ask for, and act on student input, was met with mixed reactions by my students. Shorte and Burke (1991) describe my early teaching experiences to a "T" in their discussions about beginning teachers and their notion of curriculum.

As beginning teachers we assumed that "curriculum" referred to the content prescribed by textbooks, teachers' guides and school curriculum guides. These guides provided us with a list of skills and facts, in particular sequences and with sets of materials to teach those skills and facts. While we brought other materials and ideas into the classrooms, these guides were the real curriculum and we were held accountable for their use and for determining which sets of students were ready for which particular sets of skills and facts. (p. 2)

In fact, the Latin root of the word "curriculum" translates as race course (Connelly, Clandinin, 1988, p. 4). Does this mean teachers must race through a body of information? Does it mean that students must run a pre-determined course and win (pass) or lose (fail)? Suggesting that all students born in a certain year are responsible for learning a fixed body of content is as ridiculous as mandating that all 33 year old teachers must attend an inservice on Renaissance architecture, regardless of their teaching disciplines. Broad statements such as these are not designed with individuals in mind. While no school district would ever assume to categorize teachers' professional development needs according to age, it is the primary organizational method in grade school public education.

This method disacknowledges that students come to school with a wealth of experiences related to their life, that kids in different areas have different needs and these interests and experiences vary according to geographic location. I wonder what good it will do a new student from Asia to learn about the ancient civilizations of the world ¹² when he or she is not familiar with the customs of living in a metropolis such as Vancouver. I wonder what benefit will be gained by children living in British Columbia to learn about the Amazon Rain Forest when they have not yet been introduced to the west coast rain forest in their provincial back yard? Connecting new learning experiences with previous knowledge gives students a place to accommodate and assimilate new information. Without using this experiential scaffolding students come with, real learning opportunities are missed. What real learning takes place when the lived curriculum, the real life experiences, are ignored by educators? Sylvia Ashton-Warner (1963) passionately states "It is not beauty to abruptly halt the growth of a young mind and to overlay it with the frame of an imposed culture. (p. 34)" The external curriculum is often an imposition in, rather than a compliment to, the lives of students.

Although I better understand the power of the stories and experiences of children and how they can be used to shape curriculum, I continue to struggle with how to do it and my efforts meet with mixed success (see Appendix B for an example of utilizing students' interests to build more meaningful activities in the math curriculum). As is evidenced in my earlier writing, at the beginning of my teaching career, I had no idea how to use the information the kids were giving me in a manner that could help me build content-based curriculum, with some connection to Ministry mandated curriculum. Although I did not know how to connect the two sources of information, I was beginning to understand the power of my students' stories and how this information might be used in the classroom.

¹² "Ancient civilizations" are grade seven mandated social studies curriculum.

I extended Writing Workshop time in order to allow students more time for the writing and sharing of stories. Teaching writing skills and different types of writing came directly from errors found in the students' writing. The reading/writing connection I sought was at first the sharing of personal narratives between members of the class. This meant the students had to generate several pieces of writing. This writing provided several possibilities in terms of building curriculum from students' interests, and led to interesting conversations about their lives.

The Writing Connection

Michael Rosen (1989) spoke to the merits of writing and learning, and making sense of experiences. He stated,

Writing is a way of opening up a conversation of a specific kind because it is potentially based on personal reflection ... All oral conversations can be as deep or as frivolous as we choose. However, in classrooms, we know that it is frequently very difficult to slow things down enough to get children to reflect slowly and carefully, and then share their reflections with each other. Sharing writing is a way of doing this. All those 'silly, childish things' like being jealous of one's brother, or not liking housework can be dealt with as real experiences of that human stage called childhood [and beyond]. By treating it as real and valid now, we acknowledge that the child is not simply a pre-adult with incomplete or immature feelings. We give the child the possibility of valuing his or her own experience. (p. 26 - 27)

Learning to write and compose must have a contextualized framework for the person writing. Without it, the content has no form and therefore no meaning. Because time in schools is so finite, it is important to have students engaged in purposeful, meaningful activities as often as possible. When students are asked to compose through the written word and make sense of their own thoughts and experiences, a host of different skills are incorporated.

The act of writing calls into play many different kinds of thinking: synthesis, analysis, transformation and organization to name just a few. There is hardly any aspect of human thought that isn't part of the composing process. Many schools have started instituting special programs in "thinking" but the exercises they contain often have no context. They are disconnected from the child's life and other school work. These programs have come about because children aren't really being challenged in many classrooms. If they are regularly writing and discussing their work in science, math and social studies, as well as language arts, I see no reason at all to have extra think-sessions. (Graves, 1985, pp. 113 - 114)

As mentioned earlier, when my students began to write about their experiences, the topics they initially wrote about centered around characters with whom they were familiar, and the plots often followed familiar good guy/bad guy stories. Some of my younger students wrote continually about the Teenage Mutant Ninja Turtles to the point of over-saturation for me, but that told me a great deal about the students' lives.¹³ One of my older students wrote endlessly about two teachers who were boyfriend and girlfriend. The male teacher had his name, and the female teacher had the name of a young, attractive, caring teacher in the school. From his story I learned a lot about his feelings, and the kinds of issues and changes he was dealing with in his life at that time.

As a beginning teacher, when there was a particular method of writing I wanted to teach, I chose the topic and presented the process or frame. For example, when I wanted my primary aged students to become familiar with research report writing, I chose "Pigs" as a research topic, gathered the literature (both fiction and non-fiction), and presented the students with the process of research report writing suggested by Borman (1986). The students engaged in the process, completed the project, and had the opportunity to try out

¹³ For example, when a student wrote about Teenage Mutant Ninja Turtles, I knew that he/she was very familiar with those characters, and had spent much of his/her time watching them on the TV. As well, I knew that the writer felt comfortable using the story of these characters, or these characters in another setting. The importance of repetition for young students was reinforced for me.

a different style of writing (expository writing). However, in retrospect, "Pigs" had little to do with the daily lives of my students who lived in suburbia, except (as they insisted on sharing with me) the "pig" present in the ham sandwiches in their lunches. My decision to choose "Pigs" as a topic was based on the resources available to me as a teacher and to my students. I have since altered that process by asking students what they were interested in learning about, within a particular field (animals, precious stones, countries, communities, etc) and guiding them through the process with self-chosen materials, rather than assuming that my interests were theirs as well. This is not to say that I never make decisions regarding content, but where possible I try to reflect the interests of my students.

Building Trusting Relationships: Listening and Sharing

The art and the dance of teaching lies within the teacher's ability to weave together the individual spirits within a classroom, co-operatively build a place for all participants to share and extend their personal life experiences, and connect them with new learning. There are a few factors which are crucial to the success of the classroom as a community and as a positive learning environment for all its members. One of them is the teacher's ability to interact with the students, both individually and as a whole group, so each child feels valued and appreciated. This not only models behavioral expectations for the students, it also begins to build an environment of understanding, tolerance and acceptance. When this is successful, the children and the teacher are seen as contributors to the classroom community, and that community becomes a place where it is safe to share life stories and experiences with other members.

Another crucial factor which contributes to the success of the classroom community is the teacher's investment of time and energy in, and patience with, the students. Again, this sets the model and expectations for other members of the classroom community. When the teacher models respect, as well as genuine caring, attentive listening and gentle questioning skills when listening to or reading about the life stories of the class population, it helps make students feel safe enough to share their narratives. When these factors are not present, it is difficult, if not impossible, to "travel beneath the surface [of the classroom community] to where the living takes place" (Paley, 1990, p. 5). I wanted to bring the living my students were doing into my classroom.

William Purkey (1978) discusses the notion of "inviting school success" as a means of increasing positive experiences for teachers and students during school years. While Purkey speaks mainly to the philosophy of extending an inviting invitation rather than using coercive force in education, I refer to his works mainly as a way of inviting students into relationship with teachers that will allow both parties to get to know each other better. Purkey states that,

At heart, an inviting message is "doing with" rather than "doing to" process. It is an effort to establish co-operative interactions. These messages are intended to inform people that they are valuable, able and responsible, and they have opportunities to participate meaningfully in worthwhile activities, and that they are invited to take advantage of these opportunities. (p. 4)

Therefore, the invitation to build a personal relationship with the teacher must be extended to all students.

This "doing with" rather than "doing to" is similar in philosophy to Seth Kreisberg's "power over" and "power with" relationship dynamic described above between teachers

and students. In both examples, the authors stress the importance of and need for teachers to build positive relations with students.

I have learned that the delicate relationship between student and teacher must be treated with great care and respect. A student's experiences and his/her previous learning impacts greatly on his/her ability or willingness to trust, to feel a part of something, and to make a personal and cognitive connection with the people and events in the classroom. The better I come to know my students, the more informed my practice becomes in terms of building curriculum and learning experiences which make sense to the students.

In order to value the experiences of my students, I had to begin examining my own life stories to better understand how those stories impacted on my life as a teacher. Connelly and Clandinin (1988) state,

Personal, practical knowledge is a moral, affective, and aesthetic way of knowing life's educational situations ... as teachers it is important we learn to read our own text", our own narrative ... as a way of gaining some understanding of our students' curriculum.
(p. 59)

What I came to know about myself was that my commitment in education lay in the students, not in the prescribed curriculum. I was much more devoted to the development of the affective self than the academic self, and I believed it was important, as a teacher, to develop a personal relationship with my students, to hear what they had to say, to ask for their opinions, and to give explanations as to why I did things the way I did them. This was important to me because I felt unheard as a child, as a student, and as a young adult. I knew that my students had valid opinions regarding different matters and I wanted to

hear those opinions. By listening to their ideas, I gained a deeper understanding of their views of the world. Other mermaids emerged and were given a place to stand.

Seth Kreisberg (1990) discussed the power of coming to know the students and the importance of building trusting relationships between teachers and students.

When teachers and students successfully develop relationships that are characterized by assertive mutuality, vulnerability, listening, and dialogue, then these form the kinds of relationships students can form with one another. The student - teacher relationship becomes a model for the kinds of relationships that are the backbone of the [classroom] community. (p.178).

Once this has occurred, students and teachers may feel more comfortable exploring their own creativity and journey beneath the surface. Anne Bertoff (1981) states,

Tolstoy discovered ... what Socrates first taught and what anyone who has won freedom from the conventional wisdom can find out-namely, that the form-finding and form creating powers of the human mind are the teacher's chief ally, once they are engaged, and that until they are engaged, no genuine learning can happen ... the discrimination between sterile and generative pedagogies must be made; the grounds of trust between instructor and instructed must be discovered in common undertakings; the ways and means of liberating the mind's powers must be found. (p. 85 - 86)

In order for my students to gain trust in me meant that I not only listen to my students but also share with them some of my own narratives, some of my experiences which changed the way I thought or felt about things. When my students began to share their experiences, their narratives with me, I had to look beyond the repetition, the spelling errors, the grammatical mistakes and try to hear what they were saying about their lives. The spirit of my invitation was as important as the offering of the invitation itself. As Sylvia Ashton-Warner (1963) said,

You never want to say that it's good or bad. That's got nothing to do with it. You've got no right at all to criticize the content of another's mind. A

child doesn't make his (sic) own mind. It's just there. Your job is to see what's in it. (p. 57 - 58)¹⁴

I had to learn to accept that my students came to school with their life experiences, and that was what shaped their thinking. Little did it matter whether their thoughts and opinions were clear and concise or unclear and hazy, what they arrived with was where I had to start.

I worked to develop an environment of trust in my classroom. But I also know that I have violated the trust of some children. I have told when I was not supposed to, when to tell brought some students such utter humiliation and fear of disapproval by other adults that they had kept some of their stories locked up for many years. In one such instance, a child of 11 years disclosed to me about some sexual abuse she had endured from a previous boyfriend of her mother. I went through the reassuring gestures and comments, and told her that I was legally bound to report this to the AUTHORITIES. She winced and asked if her mother would have to know. I said that the police would probably contact her mother once they had been notified. She began to cry. She begged me not to tell. She said that it was a long time ago and her mother would never believe her. She said that she would get into trouble. Even though I was not sure this student's instincts about her mother were incorrect, I assured her that her mother would want to know, that the mother would never be angry with her child about something as serious as sexual abuse. She left school very sullen.

¹⁴ I have great admiration for the work done by Sylvia Ashton-Warner; however, it is my opinion that her definition of curriculum (in terms of her students and her teaching) is too limited. I seek to expand my students' realm of experiences rather than confine myself completely to students' stories.

The next day she arrived in class with a hateful look in her eyes, directed toward me. I made an opportunity early in the morning to talk to her, and she spit her words out at me. "You had no right to tell what I told you. Now my mom's all upset. The cops showed up at the house yesterday afternoon and made her late for work. She said none of it was true and that I was just making up stories. She's mad at me too. I'm grounded. You made up a big story. He didn't really do anything wrong anyway."

I witnessed the shattering of a fragile relationship, that between student and teacher. She had no reason to ever trust me again, because to trust me was to share some of her secrets, and I had violated the gift of sharing secrets she had entrusted me with. Her survival at home had been put in jeopardy, and in spite of the home situation, there was nothing out there any better for her than that. I did not learn that lesson right away. I validated my actions by the guidelines, the legal responsibilities set out by the Ministry in such situations. In fact, that first year I taught, six of my students made disclosures of past sexual abuse. None of them was in danger at the time of disclosure. All of them were relating past experiences and the abusers were out of their lives. I suspect they just wanted to tell their story to someone, to hear that they did nothing wrong and they had every right to feel violated. However, each time I followed Ministry protocol, believing that the student had the right to be safe, not realizing that what awaited them was in many cases worse than anything they had previously endured. What those students needed me to do was to just listen. They felt guilty, embarrassed and humiliated, yet I made their stories public. I advertised their experiences with strangers, and subjected them to a public inquiry. Perhaps at a time, later in their lives, they might have chosen to make their stories more public. However in these cases I seized the power and the ownership of their experiences. They trusted me with secret life stories and I was not able to see past the proper protocol into the person behind the story. I believe that the process set into place by the Ministry in connection with the Ministry of Social Services and Housing for

instances of disclosure of sexual abuse in schools was originally intended to protect children. However, the formality of having to report any and all disclosures ultimately worked against the well being of my students. Using my situation as an example, Ministry guidelines in terms of protocol represent distortions in the system that was originally designed to protect children. Again, the best interest of all students was not ensured.

Since then, I have continued to explain to children that to tell is better than not telling, but I do not necessarily believe I have to follow protocol to the letter if the person disclosing is not in any immediate personal danger, meaning that the person who offended them is no longer in their life. As well, I have since hesitated to take the responsibility of building such intimacy with my students. Until I am sure what to do, what is best for children in situations such as I have described above, I am reluctant to encourage children to tell me. I have seen children pulled out of homes because of telling, then end up on the streets and resort to other forms of survival. Their lives become worse. Instead, my invitations to share personal stories are broader and exist in the realm of the more public world of the students.

School as an Institution: What to do with Those Who do not Fit?

Too often, and too quickly, students come to understand the meaning of institutionalization, and learn to work within the framework of "classroom". When a student learns to blend into the classroom setting, the essence of that individual is lost. In the public education system, blending takes precedence over uniqueness. Often it is only in the case of extreme behaviours that teachers take direct notice of individuals, and when this occurs these individuals are assigned labels to identify them.

In my classrooms, most of my students work within the parameters I have set. They accept the labels given to them or their peers, and they learn to work within the classroom community. However, others are not able to do that. These Mermaids struggle with the constraints put on them in the institution called public school. The Mermaids I have had in my classes have made it easier for me to critically check the parameters I set for students, both curricular and social, to see which are the ones I must impose, and which I choose to impose. They look for points of negotiation where possible, seeking flexibility in an unbending system. It is these individuals who demand special attention, the mermaids, who have helped me to closely evaluate my practice. They have tested my personal philosophy about teaching and learning by challenging me to "practise what I preach" and forcing me to include them in the classroom community when they insist on working outside the parameters I have set. The labels of giant, wizard and dwarf do not fit them, but they know there is a place for them within the human group.

Their actions have often made me re-evaluate my expectations and make adjustments where and when possible. Simply because an individual did not work within the parameters I set, it did not necessarily suggest that the student was defiant, and any form of punishment could have resulted in a power struggle between student and teacher.

Vivian Paley (1990) stated,

How could (isolating) a child ... be a substitute for reason and discourse? ... A child can no more think about social behavior in the abstract than I can teach in the abstract. Children "think" by continuing to play and develop new roles. I really do think that punishing young children for what they have not yet learned, about social behavior or anything else, is completely counter productive. It creates no useful dialogue. (pp. 86 - 87)

Instead, I try to create useful dialogue with the mermaids and help them learn to manipulate the system in order for them to be able to find a place to stand. Many of my students did not have the courage or the self assuredness to know or to say, like

Fulghum's Mermaid, either that they did not fit within the behavioral or academic framework I had set, or what type of framework they saw themselves fitting into. I know this to be true because on occasion when I left some aspects of classroom organization up to students, such as how the classroom equipment would be shared equally by all, or how they should go about solving some problem, often the students rejected the models I had used in the past in favour of their own new, different ideas which they saw as much more fair or useful to their situations. I suspect if I had not given the students the opportunity to come up with their own solutions but rather told them how to solve different problems, none would have disagreed with me. Perhaps they have simply given up trying to be heard in the adult world.

Because I have taken on an observer role in these situations where I have invited my students to solve their problem, I became aware of some students' differences through their actions. I saw actions, initiated by students, designed to manipulate the environment to suit their personal needs. For example, I noticed how some students altered an assignment if the assigned task was too simple or complex. I saw students solving social problems themselves through classroom meetings. In the anecdote about giants, wizards and dwarves, most of the children agreed to work within the established rules, but the Mermaid rejected the labels assigned by the adult. She not only disagreed with those labels, but she challenged the predetermined rules and expected a place for herself. She manipulated that environment to suit her perceptions. I see too few mermaids moving with the giants, wizards and dwarves with such apparent ease, and finding a comfortable place for themselves within the school system.

Labels assigned to students too often stay with them throughout their schooling career and students do not know how to challenge them. Those who have earned special status,

sometimes referred to as the famous people, become what they have been labeled. They become famous in the negative sense. They are known for their ability to upset the status quo, either in the social or the academic arenas. Labels such as learning disabled (L.D.), low functioning, unmanageable, and unco-operative can set students up for predetermined treatment by teachers. Replacing "Mermaid" in the story about giants, wizards and dwarves with any of the negative labels above would be unfathomable.

Some students arrived at school with a history already in place, decisions having been made for and about them, without consultation with them, in their so called "best interests", and the information was often shared between many different parties. An example I have come across frequently in my career has been students labeled or suspected to be A.D.S. (attention deficit syndrome) or dyslexic. These often over-used labels are sometimes overly exaggerated behavior patterns, indicative of public school's need to pigeon-hole children who do not "fit" the system neatly. In particular, I found that a child's behavioral disorders were often highlighted before he or she had stepped into a school, thereby pigeonholing that individual before he or she was given the opportunity to become a part of the school community. This child was denied a fresh start. What hope can a child have when he or she is received by the adult decision-makers in his or her life with negative expectations?

Some students were labeled with the reputation of their older siblings, and were therefore assigned a label before entering the system. I feel some sense of identity with some of these mermaids, which is perhaps why they capture my attention and my understanding.

On a larger scale, the public education system as a whole works against some students. This occurs when individual differences are not acknowledged, or the structure is so rigid that it does not easily allow for those students who do not readily fit into the clearly

defined compartments in the school system. Often the antics of the famous people provides the fuel for staffroom discussions. As a result of such instances, I learned that frequently the integrity of particular children was breached. Testing results were often freely discussed in staff rooms. Rampant disregard for the confidentiality of information gained through teacher-student interactions or testing results had the power to paint an unfair or biased picture of certain students, and students had no control over these external evaluations. Although student files were kept in one place, they were rarely locked up. Private information regarding some students' lives was often discussed in public places, and was overheard by people who had little or nothing to do with the individual in question. The worst scenario occurred when confidential information became staffroom gossip. I knew this occurred as I not only witnessed it, I on occasion participated in these kinds of discussions in open staff rooms. I disregarded the rights of my students.

Holdaway (1979) states,

... Since the rights of the children are considered to be vested in their parents until they attain maturity, these rights have been traditionally vested in the school authorities when children are at school. Thus, in this case, the professional agent (teacher) has all the normal rights of his (sic) child client (student) vested in him (sic). The most central relationship of the professional, that between the expert and his (sic) client, is strangely twisted by this vesting of the rights of the client in the professional himself(sic). No other profession has such power, even in the case of insane clients ... Traditionally, it seems somehow unnatural to grant client status to children in their relationship with teachers ... In a professional setting the client does in a sense put himself (sic) into the hands of the professional - he (sic) delimits his (sic) own rights in a proper act of trust and in the expectation that the special knowledge of the expert will be used always to his (sic), the client's, benefit. Central to this trust is the notion of confidentiality - the client is prepared to divulge private and potentially damaging information about him (sic), or allow himself (sic) to be subjected to tests, in the expectation that such information will be used only in the interests of his (sic) own welfare.

Children in schools find that this proper client-relationship is breached. The school may test them and accumulate potentially harmful knowledge about them with no sense of responsibility to use this information only in the interest of the child. The right to confidentiality, which we regard so jealously as adult clients, is seldom acceded to children. (Holdaway, 1979, p. 186)

It is not surprising then, when children are subjected to or witness of this kind of treatment year after year, some of them learn to disregard the education system by opting out, either passively or aggressively, until such time as they can physically opt out at the age of sixteen. Not only does treatment such as that described above render them voiceless, it also discounts their entire life experiences and circumstances. As well, it makes the building of trusting relationships very difficult.

Some students who were labeled quickly learned how to play "the school game" and worked to manipulate the system in order to survive. Others never learned, and still others chose to "not learn" (Kohl, 1994, ch. 1).

Sometimes teachers believe they must show students who is the boss, and quickly assert their power and control over students, hoping to dominate the classroom situation. Kreisberg (1990) discusses the relationship of domination in schools between teachers and students, and how the system sets each party up for this role. Schools are places in which relationships of domination are played out extensively everyday between teachers and students, and always this domination is justified as in the best interest of students ... Students are confined to spaces where they are told, and too often accept, that someone else knows what is good for them, where someone else controls their lives and daily choices, and where their voices are patronized or ignored. Their success in school is measured by their submission to their teachers and parents, and by their willingness to accept the roles and standards that have been set for them ... For many students ... they are trapped figures - lacking voices that are listened to and respected, and lacking control over their lives. (Kreisberg, 1990, p. 6)

I struggle to achieve more of an equilibrium in my class, but it is difficult when the predominant culture at home practises a philosophy of "adults as undisputed experts". When this is in place regarding adult/child relationships, I struggle to build a much softened version of the type of association the individual is accustomed to in order to

honour both of our outlooks. It is important that I am aware that some of my students will not feel comfortable with the kind of relationship I try to build with them (Delpit, 1988). It is up to me to recognize their discomfort. Like a journey of discovery, finding out about individual differences and acting on them leads me to new learning about the human spirit.

Because students' input has become so important to me, one of the methods I have used to invite feedback is to ask students to evaluate a lesson or a unit or a term they have experienced with me. Writing evaluations of the teacher has been hard for many of the students. They are not sure how I will take criticism, if I will even hear what they have to say. Some worry that if they say anything negative, they will be penalized. Others take the opportunity to be very hard and unfair. Without exception, I have to work very hard to get authentic feedback from my students, but once they see that they will not be punished for their honesty, their evaluations are extremely helpful to me.

I often have to go back to the students for clarification on something they have written, because it is so easy to read what I want to see, or hear only the comments that validate me as a teacher. When I read or I am told something by one of my students that rings true with my own beliefs, I have to search to see if they are just giving me back my opinions for the purpose of pleasing me or getting a positive response from me. My own fears, my desire to be right and true to my beliefs and my students' words might possibly interfere with my judgment, but I have to trust that they are being genuine when I can find no reason for them to be otherwise, just as I ask them to trust me.

These factors I have discussed have served as the foundation of my changing practice. As I reflect on my teaching experiences, I see times when I have made gross misjudgments,

but what I am proud of is that I have kept going and searching and asking questions about myself, my students and my practice. My journey continues.

CHAPTER 3

FROM FIELDWORK ETHNOGRAPHER TO TEACHER RESEARCHER: A TORTUOUS STRUGGLE

There were many different influences which affected my course of research methodology. Most profoundly, two factors came to impact directly on my interpretation and eventual practical course of action in research methodology. First, coursework I was engaged in during my time at Simon Fraser University introduced me to different approaches to research methodology; secondly, the type of work I was doing with my students necessarily narrowed the manner in which I gathered and interpreted the information.

During the summer of 1991, Kenneth Zeichner (University of Wisconsin) offered a course in Teacher Research at Simon Fraser University, based on an individual's personal classroom experiences. Having decided the classroom was where I felt best able to speak from an informed position, I was enthusiastic to learn what classroom-based action research entailed.¹⁵ Until that time I had assumed that my thesis work would consist of some critical discussion of "others'" ideas, those "others" being of the academic community. I had not considered that my experiences as a teacher were relevant enough to form the foundation for a thesis paper. According to Lytle and Cochran-Smith (1991),

... we need to develop a different theory of knowledge for teaching, a different epistemology that regards enquiry by teachers themselves as a distinctive and important way of knowing about teaching. From this perspective, fundamental questions about knowing, knowers and what can be known would have different answers. Teachers would be among those who have the authority to know - that is, to construct capital "K" knowledge about teaching, learning and schooling. And what is worth knowing about teaching would include what teachers, who are researchers in their own classrooms, can know through systematic subjectivity. (p. 3)

¹⁵ For a more complete summary on the evolution of classroom-based action research, see Action Research: Principles and Practice, by Jean McNiff, 1988.

This statement validated the possibility of engaging in my own research. I continued to have questions regarding the methodology of this genre of inquiry. Although I had some experience with formulating a question about classroom practice and then using the classroom community to research that question, I wanted to know how I could use this method of research for the basis of my thesis.

According to Jean McNiff (1988),

Educational action research may be seen variously as an umbrella term for what goes on in class when a teacher decides to change a taken-for-granted situation and opts to become the researcher of his (sic) own class practice ... (p. 1 - 2)

I have seen many teachers engage in this process on an on-going basis with a number of different issues in their classes; however, in order to use this methodology in a thesis, I had to have a specific intention, carefully formulate a (series of related) question(s) which could be studied in the classroom, and have some method of systematically recording and interpreting the information.

One of the challenges to action research is that it is what good teachers are supposed to be doing anyway; that is, being continually aware of their class practice and attempting to improve that practice. This, say skeptics, is not research but just good teaching. Action research goes further than this, and is itself a vehicle for enhancing the teaching/learning situation. Action research is not just teaching. It is being aware and critical of that teaching, and using this self-critical awareness to be open to a process of change and improvement of practice. It encourages teachers to become adventurous and critical in their thinking, to develop theories and rationale for their practice, and to give reasoned

justification for their public claims to professional knowledge. It is this systematic ENQUIRY MADE PUBLIC which distinguished the activity as research ... It is research WITH, rather than research ON. (McNiff, 1988, pgs. 4 and 6) Teacher research is not simply day-to-day teaching; it has purposeful intention about researching classroom phenomena, with the implication that there would be a written product as a result of the research. As well, the results are intended for public scrutiny. Yet, I was still uncomfortable thinking I must arrive at some definitive answer or conclusion regarding my teaching practices. I was not prepared to MAKE judgments based on my actions over a relatively short period of time. "Making has an end other than itself, action not; for good action itself is its end. Perfection in making is an art, perfection in acting is a virtue" (Aristotle "Nicomachean Ethics" in McNiff, 1988, p. 51).

Throughout the course in empirical teacher research, teachers shared their stories of classroom-based action research. As a course requirement, students were to develop a question they could research in their classrooms in the fall. I struggled with what would be a relevant question to ask of my own practice. What would be worthy of my time and effort? What mattered to me? What mattered to other people if in fact my work was to be shared with the public? What would help every teacher?

I wrestled with some aspects of action research as it was a new idea for me. The notion of engaging in my own professional development for my own sake, that my classroom issues were important enough to consider for research purposes was unfathomable to me. My not knowing or not believing in myself put me directly back into the role of a student with strong feelings of uncertainty and inadequacy. I had not made the connection between my personal writing and research, and the investment it would demand, with the requirements of something as formal as a thesis. Liston and Zeichner (1990) made a comparison of

action research which helped me to add another layer of understanding to my slowly growing concept of action research.

A critical aspect of action research ... is the notion of strategic action ... It is this idea of strategic action, deliberate, considered action to bring about change, that distinguishes the action in action research from other forms of action (e.g. curriculum evaluation) which may be designed to assess the past or find out about the present. It is through reflections upon these efforts to change one's own practices that new insights occur. Action, in action research, is also much more closely observed and carefully documented than action in the usual sense ... Action research thus involves documenting the effects of strategic actions over a period of time and reflecting about all of this ... (p. 246)

Liston and Zeichner also made the argument that action research was collaborative in nature, that there had to be a supportive group of teacher action researchers working together. At the time, I was working very closely with my teaching partner who provided me with much support and encouragement. We were both engaged in the same kind of reflective research. Over time, however, I had to develop independence in my understanding and working definition of action research as I am alone in my thesis work, which has as its roots some of the premises of action research. Reading the stories of teachers struggling with the concept of change and implementing new ideas and processes (Atwell, 1990; Gordon, 1984) and published case studies by teachers about teaching dilemmas they found compelling, helped me to validate my position as teacher researcher in my classroom for the purpose of thesis work. I felt much support for my work when reading other teachers' published accounts surrounding issues they found compelling enough to research. My teaching partner and I wrote a paper, "Building Classroom Culture with Student Voices" which explored the construction of a classroom learning environment untried in our collective classroom experiences.¹⁶ In this paper, we

¹⁶ My teaching partner and I had just completed our first year teaching together in an open area, multi-aged primary classroom. We each enrolled 20 to 25

confirmed our commitment to on-going, collaborative professional development, we defined our tenuous understanding of action research, and we formulated a plan for strategic action research in our classroom for the next year.

Our dialogue led us to make a commitment to change. However, change did not mean simply casting out all aspects of our previous practice. Rather, it involved seeking means by which our teacher/student interactions would incite students to share themselves with us, to tell their stories.

As teachers, learning along with those we try to provoke to learn, we may be able to inspire hitherto unheard voices. .. to break through the opaqueness, to refuse the silences (Miller, p. 5)

Among those unheard voices were our own. We became learners along with our students. And although we were learning different things than they were, our ultimate objective was the same; for each of us to find our voice in order to build a common culture together. In attempting to answer our own questions and redefine our role as teacher, we began to investigate the process of action research. According to Britton (1983), "Research is not primarily a process of proving something, but primarily a process of discovery and learning" (p. 14). In the context of our teaching situation, Britton's definition validates the trial and error process that has characterized our first year together. It is not that we lacked any goals or objectives with which to direct out practice, rather a lack of formality inhibited our sense that our process of inquiry was valid and worthy of pursuit. (Bodell, J., Seddon, C., 1991, p. 2 - 3.)

McNiff (1988, chapters 5, 6) outlined a method for formulating an action research plan and making sense of the data. My teaching partner and I followed her format quite closely in building the plan of action research, and our questions were specifically focused on the content of our students' writing: Why did the students continue to retell these "Ninja Turtle Syndrome" stories? and How could we move their writing beyond this? One problem we encountered with our questions was that not nearly as many students were writing about Teenage Mutant Ninja Turtles the next fall as there had been previously.

students ranging in age from 5 to 9 years, and our first year together had been challenging and exciting. We were both taking Ken Zeichner's course, and we were actively seeking ways to connect classroom curriculum to the lives and experiences of our students, in order to make learning more meaningful.

Much later in our second year we observed the same syndrome occurring with Dark Wing Duck. That the pattern was repeating itself with a new popular cartoon characters was an interesting lesson for me. It confirmed that the students were significantly influenced by the media, and they continued to tell, retell and modify the stories they had seen on TV. The bigger question, in retrospect, had something to do with why up-to-date media (including television, movies and computer software games) had such an influence on young students' writing, what could I learn about my students' lives from their writing trends and character choices? and how could this information influence my practice? Elliot (1988) described the learning and evolving processes teachers go through when engaged in action research:

The teacher changes his or her teaching in response to a practical problem, then self-monitors its effectiveness in resolving it. Through the evaluation, the teacher's initial understanding of the problem is modified and changed. The decision to adopt a change strategy therefore precedes the development of understanding. Action initiates reflection. (p. 28)

I would argue that the act of observing the social and academic interactions of the students provides enough "material" to raise questions intended for exploration, and that a change in practice does not necessarily have to precipitate "initial understanding of the problem". I have learned that there is great skill involved in developing the question(s) around which research will be focused.

The beginning for me, foraging into the domain of action research, was a messy process, and it took me some time to look at the scope of my inquiry in a large enough perspective so I could narrow my true interest and research topics. I came to a new understanding regarding the development of a research question. Therefore, it was with a heightened sense of awareness that I proceeded into the next level of my understanding of methodology.

Again, coursework I was engaged in had a significant impact on my course of action, and as I write this, I know that it was not just the course, but it was the instructor and his/her passion about the subject of teacher research which affected me in such a purposeful way. In January, 1992, I enrolled in a Qualitative Research methods course with Celia Haig-Brown at Simon Fraser University. It was in one of the initial classes that I became consumed in and around discussions of "classroom culture"; what it was and who defined it. Michael Apple (1990) stated,

... discussions about what does, can and should go on in classrooms are not the logical equivalent about the weather. They are fundamentally about the hopes, dreams, fears and realities - the very lives - of millions of children, parents and teachers. If this isn't worth our best efforts - intellectual and practical - then nothing is. (p. viii)

I found this statement resonated strongly with my fundamental beliefs about teaching and learning, and I believed that building a learning environment with input from all parties was one of the keys to success, that is, building a positive classroom culture. Schein (1985) defined culture as,

... a pattern of basic assumptions - invented, discovered or developed by a given group as it learns to cope with its problems of external adaptation and internal integration ... (p. 9)

More explicitly directed to classroom/school culture, Apple and Weis (1983) spoke to the diversity of individuals and the need for interaction among them, while keeping in touch with the need for a group to adhere to some kind of conformity.

Culture ... as a lived experience ... refers to culture as it is produced in on-going interactions ... Here the school is seen as an arena where tensions are worked through, rather than as a place where individuals who fit neatly within an unequal social structure are produced. (p. 27)

The notion of building culture had previously held much of my attention, and I could see this developing into a thesis statement/question. Also, I had questions about who had what kind of influence on building classroom culture. My senior supervisor was extremely supportive in my endeavor, and I began to search contemporary literature to develop an understanding of what culture was and how it "came to be" in a classroom.

I found this issue compelling because of the way in which students in my class interacted with one another and as a whole group. Often, from the way in which my students interacted with one another, it seemed that individuals could sense when one of their community felt "wounded", as the students would rally around the wounded individual and provide support. The following excerpt from my fieldnotes is an example of this.

Ethan stood in front of the crowd in the classroom. There were at least 70 people watching him, almost half of them adults, parents of other children. His classmates surrounded him. His expression said that he was at once proud and overwhelmed. His little seven year old body stood behind a low table, but did not use it for support. The room became cloaked in silence. Everyone focused on Ethan, waiting for him to begin. He looked to me. I smiled and nodded to him. He smiled back and then turned to his audience. "I did this project on whales. I did this model and I did all this writing here, and I'm going to read it to you." His voice was clear. He glanced at me again and I gave him a nod of encouragement. He began to read. I looked around the room at the audience. Every person in that room had their full attention on Ethan. The moms and dads were smiling, and the kids listened with anticipation. As I listened to his voice and heard him share his information, my heart swelled and my eyes flooded with tears. This lovely little boy, who had told me the day before that he had no-one to invite to see his presentation, had the entire audience riveted on his every word. When he had finished, everyone applauded with unabashed emotion. The look on Ethan's face was indescribable. He was very proud. (Fieldnotes, Spring, 1991)

Moments such as this fueled a need for me to understand how the social milieu of the classroom had been built, or how the culture of the classroom had been developed over time so that a student such as Ethan had the opportunity to share his work in front of a supportive public. I suspect it was his sense of comfort - being a member of a community

that cared about him - and his acknowledgment of that - that allowed Ethan to deliver his seminar to a room half full of strangers - the classroom community gave him a sense of belonging and safety, even though there was "no one from home to hear".

As it turned out, my academic discussions about classroom culture were unsatisfactory for me and did not get at the core of my inquiry. I could not find a definition which dovetailed my classroom experiences, and I could not develop my own because of a lack of global understanding of what culture is and how it is built. I knew there was substance and importance to my questions, and I knew that what was going on in my classroom had much to do with the way in which the people in that community interacted. What I needed to do was find a way in which to incorporate discussions about my experiences with building classroom culture within the larger context of my work.

Further questioning by and discussions with my senior supervisor led me in a slightly different direction, away from a close concentration on development of classroom culture. As I talked about the many instances where I saw students honouring each other and taking leadership roles regarding classroom conduct and policy, I began to look at the issue of power in the classroom, and explore this phenomenon. I, as the teacher and the adult, held much of the power because of my position, but I wondered how much control my students felt they had over their environment. My senior supervisor and I discussed at length how classroom rules were developed by my students and me, and I endeavoured to write a paper on this aspect of classroom content to more clearly define my attempts to articulate an issue or question for my thesis. Again, this did not resonate with my research intentions. I seemed to be missing the mark in terms of my passionate interests for research. Therefore, I abandoned this direction of inquiry. Throughout all of my personal exploratory writing on various issues I found compelling such as classroom culture, rule

building in the classroom, and the power or influence students had over their environment, I was still learning about qualitative research in my course-work. I had previously rejected the notion of engaging in a quantitative study of any kind, as the idea of quantifying the behavior of children ran counter to my beliefs about learning. Ethnographic research and field study seemed much more compatible with my beliefs and work ethic, and I worked to understand the role of teacher as ethnographer, and how an ethnographer went about interpreting the information gathered in field study.

Goetz and LeCompte (1984) define ethnography in four categories.

... ethnography is ... a process, a way of studying human life. Ethnographic design mandates investigatory strategies conducive to cultural reconstruction. First, the strategies used elicit phenomenological data; they represent the world view of the participants being investigated, and participant constructs are used to structure the research. Second, ethnographic research strategies are empirical and naturalistic. Participant and non participant observation are used to acquire firsthand sensory of phenomenon as they occur in real world settings ... Third, ethnographic research is holistic ... Finally, ethnography is multimodal or eclectic; ethnographic researchers use a variety of research techniques to amass their data. (p. 3).

Again, the notion of "culture" figured largely in the definition of ethnography. However, for me to begin discussing classroom culture, I had to be very clear on what I was referring to when I used the term "classroom culture". I came to know that my definition of classroom culture was related to my personal experiences, and had more to do with my interactions with students and building relationships with others than with a particular physical setting. Trying to define my living classroom culture was proving to be too difficult for me to articulate. Therefore, I steered away from that particular issue, and opted to incorporate a more generic understanding of classroom culture for the purpose of this thesis. Hammersley and Atkinson (1983) discussed the impossibility of describing everything in a given setting, no matter how small-scale the setting was defined, and the

need to proceed with the dialogue on the assumption that the reader audience has some understanding of the terms and definitions used to shape the text.

... any description we do produce is inevitably based on inferences. Thus, for example, when setting out to describe a culture, we operate on the basis of the assumption that there are such things as cultures, and have some ideas about what they are like, and we select for our analysis the aspects of what is observed that we judge cultural. (p. 13)

The acts of observation as a fieldworker immersed in the culture of another group, and the writing up the ethnography are seen as very separate acts by John Van Maanen (1988). "Ethnography is the result of fieldwork, but it is the written report of the fieldwork experience that must represent culture, not the fieldwork itself". (p. 4)

The ends of fieldwork involve the catchall idea of culture ... culture refers to the knowledge members (natives) of a given group are thought to more or less share; knowledge of the sort that is said to inform, embed, shape and account for the routine and not so routine activities of the members of the culture ... A culture is expressed (or constituted) only by the actions and words of its members and must be interpreted by, not given to, a fieldworker. (p. 3)

So I became an ethnographic fieldworker in my own classroom. I observed the students in various activities, with theirs and their parents' permission. I recorded my observations. In doing so, I wanted to be able to not only observe and record my interpretation of the events as they occurred, but be true to the integrity of the events themselves. I thought I had to be an observer without investment and not be too influenced by my membership in that community. My first foray into this domain was odd. With his permission, I interviewed one student who had been in my class for two years. I had a set of questions I wanted to ask, we went to a quiet place in the classroom, and I proceeded to ask him my questions. My reflection on this event clearly reveals my feelings about this experience.

In this interview, the student and I appeared to be stuck in the stimulus-response model (Mishler, 1986, pp. 33 - 34). We had treated the interview with such clinical correctness that the whole experience had left both of us in a state of uneasiness. Previous to this, we had not had the experience of engaging in prescribed dialogue and it was very uncomfortable. There was no conversation, no elaboration. There was no construction of meaning between the two of us. I seemed to be locked into a contrived, unrealistic "question/answer" dialogue that, in my opinion, had such a superficial meaning ... The dialogue that I so desperately wanted to get was so blatantly absent. I believed that, as an interviewer, I had failed miserably. (Notes from "The Interview", Spring, 1992)

I recounted my failure to my peers, and they suggested some modifications for the next time. Some of these included asking the entire class who would want to volunteer to be a part of my research, interviewing a whole group rather than just one individual, and asking the students where would be a good place to talk together. They were in fact suggesting I allow my students to be a part of the decision-making process regarding my research by sharing some of the power I held in the arena.

What I failed to realize at the time was that I could never take the role of outside observer, or even of a close participant observer (Goetz, LeCompte, 1984). I was a member of the community I sought to observe. Not only was I a part of it, I was one of the most visible members, being the oldest and the tallest, the one with the most power, that is, the teacher. To even try to adopt a stance of anything less than a member of the classroom community would have been a gross error on my part. I had to conduct the research I was interested in as a member of the group I was observing. We had a history, a culture defined, and the foundation of a shared language (Mishler, 1986). When this realization suddenly came to light for me, I dismissed all of my credibility as an ethnographer; as a well intentioned, impartial, observer capable of making any kind of informed, unbiased observation on particular phenomenon in my classroom (Hammersley, 1990). My first interview experience had been so awful in part because I was trying to assume a

participant observer (Goetz and LeCompte, 1984) stance with a student I had come to know very well in the past two years. He had never seen me operate in this context, and he did not know how to react. I had not engaged him in dialogue, I was like a doctor asking questions of his classroom health; clinical, not natural. What provoked my interests initially stemmed from my daily interactions, my lived experiences (Van Maanen, 1986) with and among students in my classroom, and as soon as I switched roles, the quality and force of the classroom goings-on changed. Although my membership within that community was different than that of the students because I was the teacher, I was still a part of the day to day lives of that group. My absence was felt and noticed by the student community. I was a daily fixture, not a visitor. I needed to modify my definition of teacher as ethnographer. I was more a classroom-based teacher researcher than a fieldworker/ ethnographer.

The teacher researcher is a native inhabitant of the research site - not a participant observer over a bounded period of time but a permanent and "observant participant" who knows the research context in its richest sense of shared "webs of significance" ...

Teacher research is concerned with the questions which arise from the lived experiences of teachers and the everyday life of teaching expressed in a language that emanates from practice. Teachers are concerned with the consequences of their actions, and teacher research is often prompted by teachers' desires to know more about the dynamic interplay of classroom events. (Lytle and Cochran-Smith, 1991, p. 24)

Although the research genre of teacher research continued to suggest I had to purposefully change an aspect of my practice and observe the effects on my students, I was interested in watching the daily goings-on in the classroom, without changing things (necessarily): observing, interviewing, and examining a specific issue, practice, rule or behavior already occurring in my class. I did not seek to make a statement about what

good teaching entailed, but rather to deconstruct, or break down my classroom reality and look for the ways things had come to be for my students and me.

Mishler (1986) stated that no two interviewers will conduct an interview in the same style, nor interpret the responses in exactly the same way. However, he did stress the need for shared dialogue and understanding between the interviewer and the interviewee.

Ambiguity and complexity are omnipresent in all situations and types of discourse. Shared understanding between speakers and in interview research, between them and the analyst of survey data depends on a variety of implicit assumptions and on mutual recognition of contextual factors.
(p. 45)

Because I was the interviewer, the recorder and the interpreter, I could avoid much of the inevitable misinterpretation which occurred when information from interviews had to be passed from one person to another. Interpretation (or misinterpretation) was solely my responsibility. My biggest obstacle, as I came to see it, was speaking for my students; interpreting their stories and their actions and drawing inferences which were mine rather than theirs. When I used one of the stories of my students, I knew that its meaning had to change somewhat, if only because I was the one who was interpreting the lived experience of someone else. What I had to be mindful of was not to interpret their stories and actions in such a way so that they fit into my thesis framework.

Triangulation (Goetz and LeCompte, 1984, p. 11 - 12, 175) of data gathered (a method designed to check the accuracy of not only the information I collected in the form of fieldnotes and interviews, but also my interpretations of that information) insisted I confirm and reconfirm my interpretations using more than one method.

Ethnographers use many types of data collection techniques, so that data collected in one way can be used to cross check data gathered in another way ... Triangulation prevents the investigator from accepting too readily the validity of initial impressions; it enhances the scope, density and clarity of constructs developed during the course of the investigation ... It also assists in correcting [or confirming] biases that occur when the ethnographer is the only observer of the phenomenon. (Goetz, LeCompte, 1984, p .11)

In order to start the process of selecting a "sample group" of students from my classroom, I took the good advice of my professional colleagues and asked all of my students who would like to participate in my research with me. I explained what I needed and told them that at any time they had the power to opt out for any reason. Many students in the class raised a hand to volunteer, but interestingly not all of the ones with whom I had hoped to work. I had in mind a pre-determined group of individuals, in order to try to represent my class equitably. I wanted a mix of gender, age, race, and amount of time already spent in my classroom.

Once I had spoken to all of the willing students individually, I spoke with their parents, seeking their permission as well. All were in agreement, so I went through the necessary requirements to fulfill the Simon Fraser University Ethics Board Approval and School Board approval (See ethics approval procedure, S. F. U. and School District #43). Once I obtained approval, I began to watch this group of students intensely. I interviewed them all at different times, in different combinations, reviewed their writing to gather information which supported my research. I occasionally checked my perceptions with parents to see if the assumptions I made from observations were in fact similar to conclusions they had drawn. I reviewed the audio tapes that I had made during the interviews and followed up with individuals when there was a comment I had clearly missed or perhaps not understood. As much as possible, I checked and rechecked my observations and interpretations from different angles. I tried to validate my research by

triangulating assumptions and interpretations from various viewpoints. All of this, however, did not negate the fact that I was a community member, albeit with limited membership, conducting an ethnographic study on my own community. My membership in that classroom community made the definition of "teacher as ethnographer" a reality based on my observations and interpretations as influenced by my history with that group.

Along with my growing sense of methodology, I continued, with the help of my advisor, to further define my scope of inquiry by limiting it to an area that would be both manageable and meaningful for me. With the issue of "classroom culture" keeping itself a non-definable reality for me, I began to question my role in determining classroom culture, and other aspects of classroom life especially power, control, curriculum development and establishing a climate of trust. Again, the students' narratives served to inform me, and as I became aware of the influences listed above, I watched their stories for instances where the issues of power and control were the dominant themes. Stories about rejection and dis-inclusion gave me a sense of the kind of power individuals had within their peer groups. Stories of promises made by parents and other significant adults were full of adult behaviours inconsistent with ethical teachings. For example, the student who came to school Monday morning saying that she had been told to wear her three, newly purchased dresses when her family came across the Canada/United States Border the previous Sunday had to be confused when she had been taught that lying was wrong and had in the past been punished for that offense. Stories about the power relations with their peers and adults fascinated me, partly because it was something they wrote and/or spoke of fairly easily, and partly because I wondered at the inconsistencies they shared with me in their making sense of the world. What gripped me then was the whole notion of power; the power of adults over children, the power of teachers over students, the power relations between children, and not where but how this dynamic of power played itself out in my classroom. My initial question was, "Who Owns the Power? The Role of the Teacher in

the Development of Classroom Culture". This proved to be a non question, as it was clear that as the teacher in a primary multi-aged classroom, I owned the power. In many circumstances the classroom was not a democratic union of individuals. What was more intriguing was how my students saw their role in the classroom in terms of making choices and decisions on their own.

I remember feeling panicked at taking so long to figure out what I was going to write about in my thesis. I also recall times of elation when I thought I had "arrived", that I had my problem/statement worked out, only to write the same 15 or 20 pages over and over again. One of my attempts at the beginning reads,

I remember metaphorically wringing my hands as my friends and colleagues intensely discussed the nature of their thesis work. For long periods of time I would in fact have a kindred spirit by my side, each of us struggling to narrow the field of questions we were to commit to research. But sooner or later these people I clung to would move away, and I would rejoice their arrival, and hate them intensely. Because as they moved away from me and where I was with my work I would find myself alone again, longing for direction. Frank Smith talks about belonging to the community of readers and writers, and how children do not view themselves as readers or writers until they join that community. For adults it is no different. I was not part of the writing community, I had no place among them.

Finally, with the help of my senior advisor and through my own exploration, I realized I was fascinated with the notion of power. Part of my preoccupation with this was the result of my own experiences, feeling powerless as a child both in my home and in school. With much assistance and many false starts, I finally put a proposal together. I set out to find to what degree students believed they had the power to affect change in order to make life at school a place for them to flourish. I deeply wondered if any student of mine thought they could challenge the rules or methods in the classroom and have something come of this inquiry. Questions I had formulated to try to get to the issue of power in the classroom were very round about in nature. I began with asking them if they had any opportunities to make decisions in their lives, of what aspects of their lives they had any control over, if any, and how they felt about all that. I can't believe that I ignored their answers to begin with. These children had a lot to say, but not specifically on the issue of power, although their comments are all inter-related. The biggest over-riding factor in their lives is the fear they carry with them each and everyday. And we, the adults, have taught them how to be afraid. They would entice me by telling me stories of their

parents and how they were let down at one time. Their parents lied to them. They would tell me that they were afraid when teachers yelled at them, but I was still looking for what this meant in terms of their power. I could not come right out and ask how much power they had over their environment, because that was not their language, it was mine. I felt like I was getting no-where. Other events were surfacing in my life and I needed to leave what I was doing. I thought about starting all over again but the idea destroyed me. I had excellent material, but I didn't know how to use it. After several months, I thought I better pick up again, but I truly felt that the wind had been let out of my sails. One interview had been on my mind the whole time. It was a little 6 year old girl who had spoken to me about being afraid. I remembered it because she had spoken with such passion and honesty, and hopelessness and confusion. And somehow, I remember what my senior advisor had said in the first class I took with her, "Look at what they are saying to you. Don't look for what you want to see." So with new eyes and ears, after a very long break of futile hopelessness on my part, I pulled out the tapes and my notes and I listened, not for what I wanted to hear but for what the kids were saying. And I heard, without exception, the fears that plague these kids on a daily basis, that invade their lives, their homes and their schools. And what I learned is that these kids are afraid of us adults, and according to their modus operandi, they have every right to be. (Personal writing, Fall 1993)

The notion of power relations held me captive for quite some time. I spoke to the students, I spoke to the parents (when it was not violating a student's confidence to do so) and I spoke to colleagues. Every time I made an assumption, when I spoke for a child, I was challenged on my interpretation. As is evident from the excerpt above, I made some strong postulations, which may have had to do more with my own similar experiences as a child and the sense of powerlessness I felt than my students' experiences. I was not ready to speak about children's power relations with adults from the point of view of my students.

Yet this was not altogether true. I could not ignore the reality of what the students were telling me. One day, as I settled down to interview a group of three students about their favourite thing to do in free choice time, we heard car tires screeching outside on the road. One of the boys (age 8) said,

That sounds like my old dad. I bet it is. He was bad. He used to hit my mom. He broke her nose one time. He's tryin' to find us 'cuz he wants to steal me an' my brother and take us away. I bet that was him. (Fieldnote, May, 1993)

When I asked his mother if there had been any recent contact with her ex-husband, or if he had come up in conversation recently, she was quite surprised. She assured me that no one had spoken of him (that she knew of) for months, and that she had been separated from him for several years. I could not help but wonder where this student's comment came from.

Over spring break this past year, I escaped to a cabin, not far from the metropolis, but with no phone, no TV, and too inconvenient for anyone to drop by, with good intentions of working toward building the framework for my thesis. I had all of my interview transcripts with me, all of my fieldnotes, much of my theoretical reading material, and my computer. I was prepared to work hard and get a lot of writing done. For three days I sat at my computer and wrote the same kind of story I had been writing each time I foraged into chapter one of my thesis, although this time it had changed slightly. I kept getting stalled when I made assumptions about kids based on their behavior. Something had changed within me which was affecting my entire outlook on everything. I was 34 years of age. My husband and I had just recently found out we were going to have our first baby, so my writing about the power relations between adults and children became skewed with this secret knowledge of myself. What kind of a mother was I going to make? Would my child be frightened of me? Would I dismiss his or her fears as easily as my childhood fears were dismissed by adults? Would I be able to find a balance between living my own life and living my child's life? My personal writing explains my feelings.

I sit here at my computer, again, trying to put to words the feelings and emotions I have around children and this mixed up, fucked up world we

bring them into: to try to make sense of their experiences as they have related them to me, to try not to repeat the mistakes of my parents and my teachers. I have been here before, I have sat ready, more than ready to spill onto the pages the stories of my students, intermixed with my own childhood experiences, to try to make sense of the ambiguities we train our children into. My purpose in this endeavor is to make meaning for myself, to understand from my adult perspective, from my adult life, the experiences of children, so that my behavior at least can take into account the world of the child. This is, I hope, a new beginning for me, because the circumstances surrounding my coming to write this epic have been irreversibly altered.

This time there is a difference. This time, for the first time ever in my life, I have my own baby growing inside my womb. For seven days I have known of this miracle. For seven days I have anticipated life, the life of the child growing inside of me, my own life, the life of the relationship I have with my husband. I wonder about the change that will now envelope my life. I move into a new state of not knowing. I have a living self, the living product of a union between two deeply connected people, depending, at this point in its life, on me for its very survival. What an awesome responsibility I have taken on.

My joy, my wonder and amazement are interwoven with fear and a feeling of inadequacy. I cannot know this experience, as there is no comparison. I am like a child in this life experience. I have to rely on others, perhaps not for survival, as children must rely on adults, but for help, for experience, for guidance. This is what it feels like to not know.

This work I do now will help to serve as an awakening, a coming to know and recognize the impact my behaviours, my words and my actions, my way of being with myself with others, will have on my child. It will also allow me to play out the role of the inexperienced, as this will be the "very first last time" I will ever have my first child. I pray for good health for myself and my baby, I hope for a euphoric birthing experience, but most of all I want to always remember the tenacious, preciousness of the childhood experience, and remember the awesome trust that children put in their parents. I must never underestimate the power and influence I have over my young child. I know about this power, because my students have shared some of their experiences with me. It is through their stories that I have begun to understand the diversities and dichotomies that young children must try to make sense of.

I stood at the window of the cabin, looking out, crying, knowing I could not write about this subject, not yet. I had too many unknowns in my life. I could not presume the reality of a child until I had a chance to be a mother, not in issues such as I was assuming. I felt like a fool, like a failure. All of the work I had done, all of the investment in time would have to wait until I was ready. I felt lost and lonely.

I looked at the pile of academic rubble on the table and started to tidy it up. Within the hour I was packed and in the car going home. When I arrived, my husband looked questioningly at me. "I can't do it. I'm not smart enough. I can't write about this right now." He held me silently, then helped me bring my things in. Even reprinting this story now I find myself weeping, the pain of the feelings of failure so close to me. Wisely, my husband said nothing to me until I brought it up several days later. It was after I had told my student teacher I was abandoning my thesis work, in the form I had originally intended, and I was going to have to change my topic somewhat if I planned to ever do this at all. In fact I thought I would never do anything at that point. My student teacher agreed with my change of topic. "Good," he said, "you have so much to tell teachers about what goes on in the classroom, you should write about that." Good food for thought, that which I had been preaching, praising and recommending to my students for quite some years ... Write about what you know!!! I knew about children's narrative. I had been struggling with how oral and written narrative from my students could not only shape but inform my practice. I had been asking them, throughout my research, to tell me or to write me their stories about their lives. Write about what you know!!! I had their words on paper.

I began to go through my notes to see if I was on the right track. What I found out was that I had been asking them about their lives, about their life stories, and I had tried to see how they made sense of their worlds. My question was, how could this, or in fact did this inform my practice? Finally, I had a tangible idea to work with. My senior supervisor had told me all along to save all of my writings (formal and informal) as they would provide me with wonderful fieldnotes, and as I read over my past work, I found it a wealth of information. I also found that the questions I was asking were important questions, that they were all related to the bigger question I had tackled in this work, and I had much to

work through as a teacher and a person. I always knew that I was a teacher, that it was not just my job or my profession, but that my personal and professional lives were inextricably bound together, each having tremendous impact on the other. Even today, five months after I felt at the low point of my ability, I find myself looking for excuses not to write, so I do not have to relive the pain of failing, to admit past defeat.

Once I made up my mind to alter the direction of my writing, I had to tell the many people who had supported me through my journey so far that my plans had changed. I was interested in their reactions. Some were very supportive of the change, others challenged me on my decision, insisting I could complete my original thesis as planned. If I had not believed so strongly in my reasons for abandoning my original work, I may have allowed myself to be humiliated into repeating the same patterns of work/non-work I had been engaged in for some time. I believed that many of my friends were afraid that I would give up completely, and the work I had done would have been "wasted". Instead, I stepped out on my new path with renewed intention, enthusiasm and purpose.

My husband, who had sat through the time, the tears, the false elations, the agony and the defeat, sat with me one more time to brainstorm a list of questions he had heard me asking throughout this journey. For over an hour we sat at the computer recording question after question. He asked me to clarify when a question was unclear. Finally, I felt we had exhausted all avenues of inquiry. I printed these questions, sorted and classified them and started to look for themes and commonalities. These were my "pre-writing" (see Appendix A) activities, and the questions formed the foundation for the first draft of my first chapter. I could see my way clearly through my thinking once I had everything written down.

Having the will, the determination, the drive, the ambition and the desire to write my thesis was not enough for me to do the work I wanted to do. Even having the academic methodology, the data and the support from friends, family and my senior supervisor was insufficient. I needed the vehicle, the way to get into my work as well. It turned out that I had overlooked the most powerful weapon in my arsenal, the tool I constantly asked my students to rely on; the power of personal experience, the power of writing freely at first, and the power in the work of making sense of it all. This is what I have attempted to do in this writing ... to make some sense of my journey as a teacher. Herb Kohl (1994) writes,

My own teaching is shaped by my dreams as a child and my school experience. I can connect with my students through myself as a child. It is important for teachers to connect their work with children with their own childhood aspirations and dreams as well as with their best and worst learning experiences. The negative experiences are as useful as the positive ones. And the unrequited longings of childhood are as useful in designing a program for young people as are actual achievements. Teaching, to come to the heart, must connect with the teacher's inner life and learning adventures. It is from that stance one can develop judgment ... In addition, ... continual ... contact with students allows them to reveal themselves and show their strengths and aspirations (which) enhances the ability to teach them well and reach students in ways that nurture them. This means talking to students about everything and nothing, responding in a personal way to their writing, asking them what they enjoy doing outside of the context of school. It implies listening very carefully to what they say and responding to their concerns and questions. (p. 82 - 83)

Kohl's statement outlines what I have tried to achieve not only in my day-to-day teaching, but particularly in my research with students. I come to this work with my personal and professional life intertwined, as a member of the community I have studied as a teacher and an adult being. As well, this spring another layer was added to my life experiences. Sharing my body, albeit for a short time, with my growing child has had a profound impact on my intention. Since learning about our child, my practice, my interactions and relations with children have been under close personal scrutiny. Five months later, I am trying to

put all of this together in a thesis, and I know there is a place for my story among the many other pieces of academic work. The life force within me has helped me to define a timeline, to focus, and to understand that I am not ready to write about what I do not yet know. This knowledge has shaped my inquiry and I have been able to move forward. The next section will explore the life experiences of the students I have had the pleasure of working with in my classroom.

CHAPTER 4

LISTENING TO THE VOICES, HEARING THE WORDS: LEARNER AND TEACHER INTERWOVEN

"First of all," he said, "If you can learn a simple trick, Scout, you'll get along better with all kinds of folks. You never really understand a person until you consider things from his (sic) point of view."

"Sir?"

" - until you climb into his (sic) skin and walk around in it." (Harper Lee, To Kill A Mocking Bird, p. 30, 1960)

On Objectives and Methodology

My objective in this work has been to look at my students' narratives, oral and written, and determine how my learning about their life stories has affected my practice and helped me build meaningful curriculum. I have looked at the way in which their narratives repeatedly put me in the position of learner as I tried to understand what life was like for my students, and to build meaningful connections from what I learned from them. As well, I have looked at how the individuals in the classroom developed as a community and came to accept, made it safe for, and encouraged students to share their stories with others.

I kept journals in which I have recorded behaviours and snippets of conversation, and more recently, formally and purposefully investigated various phenomena I saw occurring in my classroom. All the while I searched for the vehicle upon which the framework of my thesis could be built. For example, I spent some time watching the social interactions between students, and recording my observations. I closely observed the students during weekly scheduled activities designed to focus on their social and emotional development.

¹⁷ I read and reread their stories looking for common ground. I tried to weave the themes of their stories into my lessons, ¹⁸ making it necessary for me to pay careful attention to the topics of the narratives I heard and read. I came to know that I placed a great deal of importance on the creation and telling of stories, and I chose to adopt a story framework for the telling of my thesis. Once I made that decision, I had to choose which phenomenon I was to study. My personal journals provided me with anecdotes primarily concerned with questions and comments about phenomena such as classroom meetings, the development of classroom culture and individual differences, power relations between adults and children and how this affects the choices children can make, and how children relate their life stories to others.

As I read over my wonderings, I am caught by the passion I have for some of the issues I have raised throughout this paper, and the diversity of my interests is apparent. Two passages of writing from my personal journals reflect my thinking, and help to give direction to this chapter.

I continue to return to the "culture" of the classroom, the issue of power, teacher/student interaction which occurs as a result of the culture which has been built ... When I say, perhaps without words, trust me ... to hear you and not judge you too harshly, but celebrate your being (here) ... Do all my actions say that, or do I say one thing but do another? What kinds of things do I need to be aware of so I don't rob children (peers, lovers, friends, anyone) of their dignity? Am I a hypocrite? Can I judge myself accurately or do I see myself, my actions, my practice through rose-

¹⁷ The Primary Program (1988) recognized development in children in six different areas: physical development, academic development, aesthetic development, social responsibility, and social and emotional development. This meant that teachers had to make time and have activities designed to watch growth in all of these areas. Classroom meeting was one of the activities I used to observe social and emotional development in my students. See footnote 21 for a more detailed account of classroom meeting.

¹⁸ See pages 110 to 113, chapter 4 for an example of how I used the themes I found in the stories of students to build curriculum.

coloured glasses? What can I do to continually show children that I respect who they are and the space they choose to occupy? (February, 1992)

I have been pre-occupied with the notion of what my role is in the classroom: or not even my role, but what I can do to help promote that deep, long lasting personal learning in the students I work with. What kinds of things get learned? What kinds of things don't? What is important to me and how (does that affect) the kids ... I mostly worry that I could be doing a better job ... But how does this connect to the IMPLEMENTATION of the Primary Program? Am I talking about self-esteem or content choices, or what? I want to be sure that I am using the children's stories. I can help them to recognize their feelings, emotions, to forge ahead where they feel comfortable, to stay where it is safe when they need to ... here I am talking about risk-taking. The classroom environment, not just the physical, but even mostly, the metaphysical, the supernatural power that lies under the surface of the classroom community, where those stories are, where they are waiting. How can I reach beneath the surface, preserve the integrity, celebrate the joy of one without hurting the feelings of many? Here, I guess, I'm talking about kid-watching - action research, and to make and take the most out of every situation. (Personal journal, April, 1992)

In reviewing my personal writing, collections of students' narratives, fieldnotes and interview transcripts I found that oral and written narratives formed the bulk of my research base. Students' written narratives appealed to me initially because the errors in them provided the opportunity to teach specific writing skills. I relied on students' stories for material to build my mini-lessons. I looked at how they wrote, not what they wrote. It took some time before I recognized that it was the content I should be focusing on in terms of building curriculum. The content from their oral narratives paralleled the themes I noticed in their written narratives and I realized their stories were giving me information about their lives. Their work was the learning landscape, the ground with which to work.

My lessons were usually designed to provide some direct instruction as well as independent working time. The content of the lessons was derived from either independent student work or class-wide themes. However, because I believed so strongly

in student input, I had to be prepared for changes in planning if and when some other opportunity arose. Some of those opportunities were called teachable moments. I came to know that taking advantage of every teachable moment, the moment when all the students' interest was riveted on something other than what the teacher had planned, was often where memorable teaching and learning occurred.¹⁹

Before I could engage in meaningful curriculum development, I needed to learn about my students' strengths and experiences. To achieve this goal, I chose to use a number of different strategies: however, classroom meeting and Writer's Workshop were the two main focal points for my observations and interviews.²⁰ I looked to classroom meeting

¹⁹ An example of a teachable moment occurred when a student brought in a bird with a broken wing, found on the way to school that morning. Most if not all the students wanted to see the bird and talk about what was going to happen to it. Some students wanted to relate similar experiences such as a pet they had with a broken limb, a time when they found a different animal wounded and tried to save its life, a time when they had a broken bone themselves, stories around trips to the S.P.C.A., the hospital or the doctor's office and so on. At that moment, more was learned about a number of different issues connected with the bird with the broken wing than any lesson the teacher may have planned. Another example of a teachable moment was the first snowfall of the year. Although each student had a different connection to the event, the event itself brought a common experience to the group, and rare was the moment when most or all students' attentions were focused in the same direction. The teachable moment occurred when life outside the classroom was brought in the door. Being aware and taking advantage of teachable moments increased the number of learning experiences and common interests among the group. This awareness helped me with my struggle to incorporate students' interest into teacher designed day-to-day curriculum in the teaching and learning experiences of the classroom community.

²⁰ Classroom meeting gave students the opportunity to bring some of their social problems to the classroom community. Initially, I explained to the students the rules of classroom meeting, and I ran the meetings in order to model the process for the students. As they became more comfortable with the format, I gave control over to the students. Each week, I picked two different students to run the classroom meeting. This process allowed the students to bring their problems to classroom meeting. If a student encountered a problem he/she was unable to solve, and he/she had tried to solve it three times on his/her own or with friends, that person put his/her name up on the "classroom meeting agenda", a large paper that hung in a conspicuous place within the class. If, over the course of the week, the person's problem was "fixed" or solved, he/she

because the students ran the meeting themselves, and Writer's Workshop because students had free choice for writing topics. Although I present some of my observations from classroom meeting as independent text, my observations collected from my students' writing will be woven throughout the text.

On Classroom Meeting

Classroom meeting served many purposes. Time allotted for classroom meeting was meant to take the onus of problem solving off of me, the teacher, and the social benefits for the students working together to solve problems was multi-faceted. By inviting classroom problems to be shared in a public forum, students had the benefit of hearing that their peers had problems similar to the ones they had experienced themselves. Because of this, solutions generated for one problem could help others in a similar situation. Another benefit of providing the public forum for solving problems was that it indirectly informed some students when they had crossed an acceptable line of behavior toward or treatment of a peer, but failed to realize it.

Martelle and Karen were running the meeting. A student's problem was that someone in the class was "bugging" them and they were unable to complete their work. After asking the student body for some solutions, the

crossed his/her name off the agenda. No one was allowed to cross someone else's name off the list, and no one could put another person's name on the agenda. During classroom meeting, the leaders worked through the list of names, each student explaining the problem. In order to avoid casting blame, students with problems were not allowed to use other people's names in their explanations. After the problem was heard, the leaders asked for solutions from the rest of the class. Every problem was entitled to three solutions, and then the meeting moved on. If the person with the problem tried the solutions and was still unable to resolve the problem, they could bring it back to the classroom meeting. When a situation was clearly out of the control of the students, a teacher intervened.

leaders said, "You know, now that you've put your name on the agenda and you've brought this up, that person will probably stop bugging you 'cuz now they know." I marvel at the simplicity. (Fieldnote, spring 1992, one female, grade 3, one female, grade 2)

Student reaction to classroom meeting led me to believe they thought it was an important part of their timetable. Whenever classroom meeting had to be canceled or postponed due to a change in scheduling, some students openly moaned, while others let me know they felt robbed of the opportunity to bring their problem to the meeting. In discussions with one student, he had this to say about class meeting:

Ethan: Well, what we do in classroom meeting is, well, we just, we solve problems that people have ... and, so they can try it and then, if they don't, if they keep, if they keep on bugging people that don't want to be bugged, they just, they get their name on the agenda, but first, they [the person being bugged] they gotta, like, solve it and it has to have be happening for two days to solve it.

Interviewer: What do you think about classroom meeting?

Ethan: Oh, well, I think it's a good place to solve problems.

Interviewer: Why?

Ethan: 'Cuz if they have problems they can't just go and tattle on people, they should just solve their problems.

Interviewer: Do you use the agenda?

Ethan: Yah, sometimes.

Interviewer: What kinds of things do you write, do you bring up in class meeting?

Ethan: Well, we bring up, oh, first we can choose whenever we wanna have compliments ...

Interviewer: Have you ever been the leader?

Ethan: Yah, last year.

Interviewer: What was that like?

Ethan: Well, I had butterflies in my stomach.

Interviewer: You know, Ethan, what I noticed about you when you are the leader, is that you like to move around on the inside of the circle.

Ethan: Yah.

Interviewer: Quite a bit. Can you tell me about that?

Ethan: Oh, it's because after lunch, everybody's falling asleep, everybody's [supposed to be] concentrating on the people that's talking.

Interviewer: Why is that important?

Ethan: 'Cuz if they don't, they won't be knowing what to say, they stick up their hand and then they go, well, I forget or it slipped ...

Interviewer: O.k., so you go around and do what? What if someone isn't concentrating?

Ethan: I ask them to please concentrate on the person that's talking.

Interviewer: And what do they do? Do they usually not listen or listen?

Ethan: Some do listen, some don't ... like half and half.

Interviewer: O.k., so what about the ones who don't listen, what do you do?

Ethan: I just ask them again or I leave them alone.

Interviewer: How do you make that decision?

Ethan: 'Cuz if they won't listen or, well I'll just forget it.

Interviewer: So, is it a good idea or not a good idea to do classroom meeting?

Ethan: It's a good idea 'cuz, it's a, it's a circle, that helps people ...

Interviewer: What happens if people help each other?

Ethan: It feels good inside.

Interviewer: O.k., what about the people? Do you think they feel good inside too?

Ethan: 'Cuz they're getting answers about things, about the problem.

(Ethan = male, age 6)

Student ownership of classroom meeting meant that if I wanted to participate, I had to put my hand up like every other member of the class. For those moments, it was the student

leaders who held the power. Some students were clearly comfortable assuming the role of classroom meeting leader, while others took quite some time to volunteer for the job. I learned that students who were most comfortable leading a meeting were often the ones who assumed leadership roles within their peer groups, and had the confidence to risk making a mistake in protocol or practice in front of the group.

As a risk-taker myself, and because I wanted input from my students, I had to summon the courage to ask students for a critique of classroom meeting. Some students knew how much I valued these meetings and wrote rave reviews, and although I was aware that some comments may have been made to please me, I had to believe that at least some of the positive comments were genuine. However, not all comments were positive.

I like class meeting. I think class meeting gets the same old solutions. In other ways it is good, in some not that good. but some people go stopit, stopit, stopit* and in that meeting go please don't, and I don't like that and tell the teacher. (female, grade 2)

(* the rule is that you have to have tried to solve your problem three times, using different solutions. Apparently, some students were saying "Stop it" three times in rapid succession, and then putting their names on the agenda. When this problem was brought up in classroom meeting, the students decided that a person could not consider saying "stop it" an effective solution, and the person with the problem had to make attempts to solve their situation over the course of at least two days.)

I think that it's not fair that some people get solutions and other people just get questions and the leader go on to the next one but I like the rest of it and using the agenda is helpful to me and I hope that it will be more useful in the future but I'm not saying that it's not useful. (male, grade 3)

I do not like the components because I have to tick and tick and tick and tick. (male, grade 2)

I like having classroom meeting because it's a time you can go to the children for help instead of the teachers and not just the

tehrs but children help and it is good to have in the classroom. (female, grade 2)

When students took the opportunity to say what aspects of classroom meeting they did not like, I let them know that I appreciated their honesty and respected their courage to share their opinions. I wanted students to see that change could result from their input. Over time, new classroom meeting rules emerged, and students supported and reminded one another when new processes were implemented. This support for change was well received by all members of the classroom community and genuine learning opportunities for problem solving presented themselves regularly.

On Acceptance and Tolerance: Development of Classroom Culture

Another phenomenon I examined was the development of the classroom culture. I believed there was something special going on in my classroom among its members, an honouring of others, an understanding of co-operation I thought was essential to a classroom environment which allowed students to feel good about who they were and what they were doing. Students' stories and my conversations with them let me glimpse their understandings of community and co-operation.

In one of my first conversations with a group of students, I asked them what they liked and did not like about their life at the school. At the time I was trying to understand which activities children felt relaxed around and where their discomforts lay. I was hoping to use the information I gained in my curriculum planning by increasing the number of comfortable activities and introducing new activities more slowly in order for students to

feel more relaxed or less threatened with new ideas. I thought I would hear more content comments than about the classroom community, but interestingly students spoke primarily to the tone of the class.

Interviewer: Anything you like about the school?

Andrea: People help each other, not just saying one person's lonely, so that person's just lonely, everybody helps each other. I enjoy having friends.

[Accompanying field notes: This girl is so sensitive. She is such a people person. She has had a time in her life when she felt lonely, and now she has many, many friends and is well liked by her peers, and she is quite vocal about hers and other people's feelings not being violated. This is really reinforced at home as well. Her parents are lovely, kind gentle people, and Andrea seems to have received a double dose of human understanding. I watch her and listen to her and she teaches me so much about personal relationships. She is eight years old.]

Interviewer: O.k., and you saw all that happen, did you?

Andrea: I felt, I felt happy.

Ethan: I like this school but when people respect other people.

[Andrea's comments foster a discussion about the treatment of others. That the word "respect" came up was surprising to me. It is not a word I use a lot in class directly. It is such a powerful word, and one that forms the foundation of my beliefs about human interactions.]

Interviewer: O.k., what do you mean by that? That's a big word, respect, and an important one too.

Ethan: Well, like when someone like each other, and like they want to be friends and like the other person wants to be friends so they be friends.

[At seven years old Ethan can articulate to me what respect is. It ties in with one of our fundamental needs, to be loved.]

Interviewer: Do you get to choose who you want to be friends with?

Ethan: Ya.

Andrea: Well, sorta but not really because you sorta hafta be friends with everybody. Everybody is your friend. Sometimes you could not like this person but you still have to play with them and be kind, you sorta don't have a choice.

[I wonder if that's Andrea's decision or her interpretation of the rules. She believes so strongly in the right to be liked and have friends and leads me to believe that this is meaning she has constructed based on her own experiences. That Ethan says "yah" says to me that he has decided he can choose his own friends, but they have to respect him.]

Interviewer: So sometimes, even if someone, are you saying to me that if someone comes to you and wants to play with you, you'll play with them even if you don't, even if they aren't your favourite person?

Andrea: Yah, because, I don't like to see people hurt or upset because everybody deserves to have a friend, and to be nice to a person and then after be nice, uhm, when a person says, "Oh, can I play with you, maybe I admire you," when somebody says no just because they don't like them makes them feel bad ...

(Andrea = female, grade 3; with me during grades 2 and 3
Ethan = male, grade 2; with me during grades 1 and 2)

I knew that Andrea's comments were not only based on her own experience of feeling lonely at school; she was particularly sensitive about one boy in the class who had a very difficult time interacting with his peers in ways which permitted him entry into any steady friendly relationships. He was the boy who was not invited to birthday parties when every other boy in the class was. Andrea was very tolerant of him, empathizing with his feelings of being left out, and often she invited him into her group of friends. About inclusion and exclusion, Vivian Paley says,

Being told you can't play is a serious matter. It hurts more than anything that happens in school, and distractions no longer work very well. Everyone knows the sound of rejection: You can't play; don't sit by me; stop following us; I don't want you for a partner, go away. These would be unforgivable insults if spoken at a faculty meeting, but our responses are uncertain in the classroom ... Equal participation is, of course, the cornerstone of most classrooms. This notion usually involves every thing except free play, which is generally considered a private matter. Yet in truth, free acceptance in play,

partnerships and teams is what matters most to any child ... The way we do it, exclusion is written into the game of play. And play, as we know, will soon be the game of life. (1992, pp. 14, 20, 21). Andrea modeled acceptance of this lonely individual, and in turn, at least that year, there was a tolerance of him, by his peers, that had not been apparent before (see Appendix C). Andrea was not the "most popular" person in the class, but her acceptance of him made it okay for others to allow him into their social group, albeit with limited access. That a place had been made for this boy within the classroom community, that he was not treated as an outcast, spoke to the respect the students had for the opinion and actions of their peers. I viewed this type of interaction as indicative of the type of climate I was building with my students. Feelings borne of being left out or disconnected in a class ran counter to my philosophical objectives and I believed that it was important for students to feel included and accepted in order for us to build a history together as a community.

As I came to know each of my students better, shared some of my life experiences with them, and used the teachable moments to increase the common experiences of the community, the students became more comfortable sharing their stories with me.

Sasha, one of the students that had been with me for two years, lost most of her close peer group at the start of her third year when they moved into an intermediate class and she was still with me in the primary open area classroom. Sasha's birthday fell ten days after the yearly cut off date, an unnatural division which left her feeling stranded and alone. Although there were other girls her age in the class, they did not connect with Sasha, having developed their own peer group over the last two years. One of Sasha's stories showed the social division between them.

Sasha's Rules for the School

Sasha hated gr. 4. So did her two best friends, Melanie and Terry [Both Melanie and Terry had gone into gr. 4, while Sasha did not]. So one day they decided to make rules fir their class room, outside, (at lunch and recess). Some of the rules were: 1 Chewing gum allowed! 2 Don't come to school when you don't want to 3 Never respect others 4 never have to listen to teacher's instructions if you don't want to 5 always talk when the teachers are talking. Stuff like that. They always did their rules behind the teachers backs so they wouldn't get in trouble.

One day during lunch when their monitor Teagan was away sick, Sasha and Terry and Melanie stood up on their chairs and had everyone's attention they read their rules to their whole class! After Sasha and Terry and Melanie read their rules to the class they asked if anyone had any questions or comments and Karen, Michelle, and Naomi spoke up. [Two of those opposed were still in the combined classroom, the other two had also moved into intermediate]. "yes, we have a comment to make. "yes" said Terry "Those are stupid rules!" said Karen, Michelle, Naomi, and Candice (these people are the snobiest people in the whole school) so after lunch at 1:00 Karen, Michelle, Naomi, and Candice asked to speak to their principal. at 3:00 p.m. sharp. so at 3:00 they all went to [the principal's] office. they said, "in our class room there are three girls named Sasha and Terry and Melanie" "yes I know them" said [the principal] "well anyway they made 20 rules for the school" "So what's the problem with that?" said [the principal] "they all the rules that were not supposed to do like chewing gum in class!" "OH MY GOSH! yelled [the principal] at the top of his lungs. He asked in no particular order on his p.a. system Terry AND Sasha COME TO MY OFFICE RIGHT NOW..... (Spring, 1993, female, age 9)

I conferenced with Sasha's parents regarding her placement for that year, knowing her close social connections would be severed to some extent. Sasha had been included in several of these discussions. We came to the same conclusion: that academically she should stay with her age group, despite the fact she was very bright and capable.

I saw Sasha struggling to find a new place within an old order that had changed, and she was finding herself powerless to alter the social structure of the classroom. Through her writing, I knew who she was angry at, I could guess why she was angry, but I could not alter the social dynamics to help her feel more included. Any grouping I set up to aid in her inclusion with other peers of her gender and age worked within the academic context of the classroom for a certain time period, but the peer relations in the social context of the classroom did not alter. In this, the social arena of the students, I and my opinions had little effect on the decisions of the students.

From my interactions with my students, I learned that an individual's perspective of him or herself was not always shared by others. As noted above, Sasha's feelings of non-inclusion

were very real and very painful that next year. However, one of her classmates had a completely different perception of Sasha's social position in the classroom. In one of the interviewing sessions, I talked to a pair of students (of which she was one) about friends.

Interviewer: What about you, David, do you have some good friends in this class?

David: Sandy and Mickey and Karen and uhm, Cris and Hilda and Lee and Wallace.

Sasha: But sometimes they don't want to play with you, do they.

David: No.

Interviewer: Sasha, what do you say? Do you have any good friends in this class?

Sasha: No, not really.

Interviewer: What do you think? What happened there? How did that come to be? Because you are one of the veterans, aren't you? Do you know what a veteran is? Someone who has been doing something for a long time. You've been in this class for three years.

David: Can I please tell Sasha something?

Interviewer: Ya.

David: Sasha, many, many, many girls worship you I hope you know.

Sasha: I don't know.

David: Billions and billions and BILLIONS ... even some boys do. Really, it's true.

Interviewer: What do you think about that, David? (I whisper to Sasha and ask her if she is comfortable talking about herself in this manner. She nods)

David: Well, whenever I try to ask Sasha something, she's always with someone else. It's true, you have zillions of friends.

Sasha: Marie is a friend but she's a bit annoying sometimes because like I want to work and she wants to uhm, she'll go, how do you spell this and Natalie does too. Whenever I play with Natalie, Karen, Candice, Betty and ... they do something I don't even know and they get me really confused and I just end up going away because I have no idea what they're doing so I think I've given up on them 'cuz I guess they don't really want to be my friend.

Interviewer: Did you ever tell them about that?

Sasha: I've done that before but, they just ignore me. I hate that.

Interviewer: Sasha, you say that you don't feel like you have any friends and immediately David says, "Sasha, I'm here to tell you you have a lot of friends, right? Is that what I heard?"

Sasha: Right, but I had no idea, 'cuz not very many people come up to me and go do you wanna play

David: You're living in a dream world ...

(Sasha = female, grade 3; with me during grades 1, 2 and 3. David = male, grade 2; with me during grades 1 and 2.)

I had seen Sasha be the last to be chosen during partner time, I had talked to her about her feelings, and I had tried unsuccessfully to intervene quietly, unobtrusively, on her behalf in order that she regain a place in the classroom social order similar to the position she had held in the past, but to no avail. Yet my observations and her feelings were completely dismissed by another student as "you're living in a dream world". From this I learned how important it was to check my perceptions and assumptions, not only for this piece of work, but whenever I was dealing with others. When I made assumptions about how a person felt or reacted to a particular subject or incident, it was no longer enough to accept my interpretations without checking to see that they were accurate. On reflection, I realized there were many instances where I made general statements concerning the adaptability of an individual because of their social or academic successes, only to find out later (through parents or the students themselves) that my perceptions were wrong. I learned that different individuals perceive situations differently and stories about the same event retold by two different people could vary greatly. David's perception of Sasha's situation was true for David, Sasha's perception was true for Sasha, because each was

based on their personal experience. Only after repeated incidents where I had dismissed the experiences of my students did the message become clear for me: "Listen to the kids".

On Prejudice and Individual Differences

As I watched and listened more closely, I found that students brought up other problems they were experiencing either directly or indirectly, some of which had to do with larger, global issues such as discrimination and individual differences. I was able to better understand students' perceptions through their compositions. These stories gave me the opportunity to take information gained from students' narratives and build learning experiences based on content from mandated curriculum.

Being Handicapped Chapter 1

Jennifer was 4, turning 5. She had short blond hair and green eyes. She had 3 brothers, 2 older, 1 younger, and 2 older sisters Another thing about Jennifer is that she's "handycapped". The reason why Jennifer's handicapped is her legs don't work because she was in car accident while being taken home from being born. So she has to go by wheelchair. (Sometimes her mom carries her!) Then the phone rang. It was Jennifer's best friend.

Chapter 2 - Friends

Jennifer's best friend's name is Suzan, but everyone calls her Suzie. Jennifer doesn't have any friends because the other kids make fun of her. They also make fun of Suzie because, surprisingly, she has the same problem as Jennifer does.

The next day was the 18th. Jenn was getting more excited about her birthday. Each minute that went past. "Hey look! It's Handoo-cap! Right by the door!" yelled a kid when Suzie and Jennifer were (walking) into the school. Everyone giggled. Then, Suzie spoke up. "Just because we're handicapped doesn't mean we can't do things you can!" "What's all the commotion?" asked the science teacher when he walked by the door. "He's calling my best friend Hando-cap. I told him just because we're handicapped doesn't mean we can't do things he can!" Suzie yelled pointing to a boy named Alex. "I did not!" He yelled, trying to defend himself." Alex, I

would like to speak to you....." (joint composition, 2 females, grade 3, 1991)

More personally, the next story was written by a student who was teased relentlessly by her older brother about being chubby.

Chapter 1 The Elephant

"Mary's an Elephant! Mary's an Elephant!" Mary Louise Oliphant hated being called an elephant! "That Mark!" Mary mumbled under her breath. "Bing Bing!" Recess was over. Mary was relieved; Mark was happy Mary wasn't in his class because she would have told on him. "Art time children! Get your crayons!" Yelled Mrs. Karrell, Mary's teacher, over the screams and yells of the children. Mrs. Corelan said "Mark, I wish to see you after school! 3:00 sharp! On time!" Mark didn't know what he had done. Then he thought of Mary. OH NO! Mrs. Corelan was very strict, and when she was angry, she was angry. Mark wished he hadn't teased Mary.....

"Mary tells me you have been teasing her and calling her names. Your punishment is TWO WEEKS IN DETENTION!!! Mark's jaw dropped in awe..... Mary was sorry. She wanted him scolded but not that much! (joint composition by grade 2 female, grade 3 female, 1992)

The authors of the two compositions above all shared a common insecurity: being physically different was something that each one of them, who were all female, believed about themselves. From the stories I heard from them and their parents, and the stories they wrote, I learned that one thought she was too little to be any good at sports, one thought she was too tall and intimidating, and one thought she was too large. Yet each admired the others in some way. They were good friends, kind and caring toward each other. While they saw no fault in their friends, they could articulate incidents in their lives where they felt powerless and unable to change certain situations. As I read of their feelings of powerlessness and lack of influence over many of the circumstances of their lives, I came to know them better. Once I was aware of the inadequacies that individual students felt toward certain situations, my interactions with those individuals changed. Armed with the power of this new knowledge, I could be and was more compassionate and sensitive to an individual's particular situation. This in turn made me more aware of the kinds of issues my students were dealing with on a personal level, and I worked to see

how these issues could be developed into the curriculum, without singling individuals out. These stories gave me the opportunity to ask the students their feelings about the issues of being handicapped or fitting in and how they saw society dealing with them. As well, these stories presented an excellent opportunity to engage the class in a discussion about prejudice and individual differences, two of the recommended themes for discussion in the Learning for Living curriculum.

On occasion, after a student shared a personal story with the rest of the class, others would relate a similar experience, and a common understanding of experiences seemed to be the result. These common experiences help to build a more cohesive community, and when a student shared a personal experience, I sensed that students felt the classroom was a safe, comfortable environment for them to take risks and share frightening or special moments in their lives. It also allowed me to feel confident enough to ask students for their opinion on different classroom routines or practices, as I had done with classroom meeting, and I suspect it reduced the incidence of students being more preoccupied with doing and saying things designed to please me, the teacher, than being candid in their interactions with me.

Interests which were topical, such as pets or animals, were easily adopted into the classroom curriculum. More philosophical issues such as body image and male/female roles and gender issues were more difficult to integrate into the fabric of the classroom discussions, partly because the students' perceptions were based mostly on models they had been immersed in at home. As we got to know each other better, as I heard more of the life stories of my students, I had a better understanding of the kinds of issues and interests that occupied their thoughts and could look for ways to include those interests into the curriculum.

On Power

As mentioned in chapter two, one of the dynamics which fascinated me was the power relations between adults and children. I was particularly intrigued by a conversation I overheard between two students. They were having a serious discussion about heaven and God, and I wanted to know how God was perceived by each of them. I knew that at least one of the students did not attend church, and the other one went with his grandparents when he went to their home for weekends out of town. It was not a weekly family activity. I asked what they thought heaven was like.

Calvin: They have lots of nice stuff up there

Interviewer: Like what

Calvin: Like play and swimming pools, and if you go down to the bottom of the pool, you'll never drown, 'cuz you're an angel.

Ethan: There's gold streets up there ... that's what everyone says.

Interviewer: Who gets to go there?

Ethan: You'll go there 'cuz you're a teacher

Calvin: (referring to another student) She'll probably go to heaven 'cuz she's always been good - doing good at school and not swearing and stuff.

...

Interviewer: How did God get all this power?

Ethan: From his mom and dad.

Interviewer: And where did they get all their power?

Ethan: From their mom and dad ... it's like a life cycle, goin' round and round (two males, grade 3; Fieldnote, Feb. 1993). The reason this conversation struck me as interesting was

the notion that God, a powerful being in their perception, got power from the parent figures (mom and dad), and that this power was just handed down, parents to child. To them, power was inherited, not won or earned, and the individuals with the power had the ability to make decisions regarding the life of others. In their minds they had already sorted out who was "good enough" to go to a place where "you'll never drown". Their place had already been determined by another. I sensed their feelings arose as a result of an inability to alter what they saw as pre-determined. This information confirmed my belief that children saw adults as the keepers of all power, and that adults could pass down their power to their children. In retrospect, I wish I had pursued my questioning to find out if those students thought that God's parents could take the power away once it had been relinquished to God.

One of my students related a story to me about having to obey an adult and do the exact opposite of what he wanted to do in order to feel safe. By doing as he was told, he was rendered powerless by someone he cared about.

David: Once I was lost. My Gramma, she took me with her to the showmart and my daddy was at Eatons on the other side so uhm we couldn't get daddy out because he was somewhere in the thing and we didn't know where he was so uhm so we found out that his lights were on and uhm, so we told the ladies about the description of the car and the license plate and so she announced it on it and so daddy was just comin' down but (gramma) was waiting too long so she took me and took me on a bus back too my house. It was very scary. I thought I would never see my daddy again 'cuz we were so worried he'd try to find us.

Interviewer: So your dad was in another store and your gramma thought that he had gone somewhere else, so you got scared that maybe he had gone away? That's very frightening. I bet you were scared. But it turned out he was busy with something else?

David: Ya, he was very worried. We came home and it was like about 4 o'clock and he came home and it was like 6 o'clock and he was waiting for a very long time for us.

Interviewer: Was he looking for you there?

David: Ya, I think he was looking at books I think.

Interviewer: Was he angry when he got home?

David: Yes.

Interviewer: At you?

David: He was sort of upset but he wasn't having a temper tantrum. He was saying, I was waiting for you for so long, where were you? And (gramma) said no way I'm gonna wait so long here for him and just took off.

Interviewer: How did you feel when that happened? What did you want to do?

David: Stay and wait for my dad.

Interviewer: But why did you go?

David: 'Cuz she told me I had to do it.

Interviewer: Why?

David: Because my mom said you shouldn't mess with your gramma 'cuz gramma's real tough...

(David = male, age 8; with me during grades 1 and 2)

This anecdote demonstrates the struggle which goes on for some children when adults make decisions without recognizing the consequences for children affected by those decisions. This boy would have felt like he had some control over his sense of feeling safe by waiting for his father, but on instructions from his mother, he was not to question the actions of his gramma. After hearing these stories, another layer was added to my awareness of the power dynamic between adults and children, and the lack of choices children often had in making decisions for themselves. It also served as a reminder to me to be mindful of the power I had in relationship with my students.

On Choice

In order to learn when students felt they could make choices about different aspects of their lives, particularly in and around classroom practices, and times when they had no choice, I designed an interview framework intended to hear their stories around this issue. I wanted to hear their thoughts on when they did or did not have any control or power over the decisions in their lives. This related again to the issue of power, and I wanted see where they believed they had some power or control in their lives. This information was important to me because it gave me insights into their world and helped me know the areas in their lives they felt confident about. Ultimately, I wanted to begin my learning/teaching relationship with the students by drawing upon those skills students had the confidence to use, then building on their strengths in those areas before moving into unfamiliar material. What they told me was that their choices were limited: often they were able to make a choice within a given framework, but they usually had to follow the instructions of the teacher or parent.

Interviewer: What kinds of things do we do at school that you don't have any choice?

Terry: Directed journal

Interviewer: O.k., yah...

Ethan: Doin' what we ... doin' what we wanna do instead of doin' what the teacher says ... like what we should really do, like what the teacher says.

Stephen: In gym, we have to do what the [teacher says].

Interviewer: What's some other times you don't have any choice?

Marie: In Writing Workshop you don't have any choice to do Writing Workshop ... there wouldn't be anything else for you to do.

Interviewer: O.k., so are you saying you don't have a choice about what you can write about in Writing Workshop?

Marie: No, you don't have a choice if you want ... it doesn't matter if you want to do Writing Workshop or if you don't because you have to.

Interviewer: Do you have to ... does someone tell you what you have to do in Writing Workshop?

Marie: No, you can do your own stories or anything, but you have to do Writing Workshop.

Interviewer: So, what kind of things do you guys do?

Ethan: Like, write stories about uhm characters we know instead of like killer characters or sumpin' like that, not like a dangerous story like with bad guys in it that cut off people's heads ... that's inappropriate?

[My teaching partner and I had made a rule the year before that the kids could not write about 'blood and guts' kinds of things. Later, we reversed this rule as it was interfering with what some kids really wanted to write about. This student seemed to have held on to that rule, even though it was no longer in effect. What he has managed to do, in telling me what he is not to write about, is to tell me he still feels controlled over the content of his writing, for some reason he does not believe that he can choose his story content.]

Interviewer: What's inappropriate about that?

Ethan: That, that you can't do that.

Interviewer: Why?

Ethan: 'Cuz, it's not allowed in the school.

Stephen: It's not suitable.

Interviewer: It's not suitable? Why don't you think it's suitable?

Stephen: It's,

Ethan: Because it's not right to tell people about it. 'Cuz if, if uhm you're doin' it, doin' this an' makin' papers of it, like uhm, a kid can read, read this, then he might do that kind of story and ...

Stephen: Make it gross.

Ethan: Yah, like a nightmare that a kid's doin'.

Terry: In Writing Workshop, the teachers, you don't have a choice not to do writing. You can't just keep doing pictures, you have to do some writing.

Interviewer: What do you think about that, Terry?

Terry: I think it's neat because you get to practise writing and get to practise doing stories. It's better than just doing pictures.

(Terry = female, grade 3; with me during grade 1 and grade 3
Ethan = male, grade 2; with me during grade 1 and grade 2
Stephen = male, grade 3; with me during grade 2 and grade 3
Marie = female, grade 2; with me during grade 1 and grade 2)

The students spoke at length about the powerlessness they felt with adults. This took several different venues, and their stories brought back some of my own childhood memories about unfairness and unjust decisions being made on my behalf that I had no power to change. What surprised me was the ability many of the students had to articulate their stories of injustices being done to them.

Hana: ... and also what I don't think is fair about my parents what they do to me like if I'm bad they, I don't think it's really fair that they take away my nintendo 'cuz I bought it with my own money. I don't think it's fair.

Interviewer: That's very interesting. Did you tell them about that?

Hana: Uh-huh.

Interviewer: What'd they say?

Hana: They wouldn't kinda listen 'cuz it's 'cuz they, like it was my birthday gift and, so they kinda don't listen which I don't think is very fair or they say, oh do you want to be grounded for a day?

Ethel: That's a bad thing.

Hana: So I'm not really comfortable about that, 'cuz they'll change things into a badder thing which I don't think they should do 'cuz they made up a rule. They are MY things so I don't see how I should, I don't think I should be grounded for anything 'cuz they uhm, took my things away and if they're asking what they bought for me, I bought it. My mom bought it so then I had to pay her for that.

Interviewer: So you feel that you own that (ya), it's yours. You made the money to pay for it and you bought it for your birthday, and now when they take it away from you.

Hana: Ya. I don't think that's fair.

Interviewer: So what should they do instead? Like, what would be fair?

Hana: Well, what would be fair, well, I don't care how much money they take away from me so that would be fair. Like I have \$8 sitting

here from my bonus points so I don't care if they take away 50c from me.

Interviewer: Tell me about the bonus points.

Hana: Well, we get bonus points like getting money back, like if you're good.

Interviewer: And so, you say you don't care about money.

Hana: No, I don't really care about money. Interviewer: So that's o.k. if they take that (ya) but you don't like it when they take things that you care about?

Hana: Ya, 'cuz I paid for that thing.

(Interview, spring 1993, Hana = female; with me during grade 1 Ethel = female; with me during grade 1)

Younger students recognized that as they got older, they would be able to make more decisions for themselves and have more independence.

Interviewer: Tell me about a time you got to make a decision about something.

Ethel: When I got my stitches put in.

Interviewer: Tell me about that.

Ethel: I got to make a decision if I wanted one of my family members to be in the room when I got them done, or if I didn't, 'cuz sometimes it's really painful and I squeeze my mom's hand, but I didn't want anyone in, it's worth a try, and when I got them done it didn't hurt a thing. Sometimes when you are older you don't have to have your parents there all the time, you can do it yourself.

...

Ethel: I love going to school.

Interviewer: Do you? Why?

Ethel: Going to school means making more friends, meeting new teachers seeing you and (the other open-area teacher), sometimes when you're sick seeing (the substitute teachers) and just being around the school makes me happy.

Interviewer: Just being around the school?

Ethel: Yah, it gives me a warm feeling inside, when I get inside the school the thing I usually rush to do is give my teachers a hug.

Interviewer: I've noticed that about you.

(Ethel = female, with me during grade 1)

Although students often saw their choices limited by their parents and other significant adults in their lives, they accepted, for the most part, the decisions made on their behalf.

I am not suggesting adults are not to make decisions for children, but as a teacher, I need to be aware of the consequences of my behavior when I take the power of decision-making away from a young student, when I take away their right to make choices.

On Family

In students' narratives, family was very important to them. Once I gave them a choice in terms of story topic, I noticed that they rarely deviated from familiar settings and/or characters, and family members often took main character roles. This gave me insight into their lives, and their life stories about families let me know what kinds of issues they were struggling with at home. In terms of informing my practice, I learned to relate teaching anecdotes by sharing similar personal experiences in order to ground my examples in the familiar. Some examples of this came about when I told stories of my childhood, for example, when my brother used to try to beat me up, or when my family went camping together in the summer. I asked students if they could relate a similar experience, and most students were able to. Some of the experiences students shared with me are as follows: Today my mom told me, "No friends. You have to clean the television room. Mark my word, NO FRIENDS!!! So now I have to clean the television room, all by myself. And, I can't have any friends over until its clean! (journal entry, female, grade 3, 1992)

The last few nights, I've slept on rollers. IT HURT!! My mom thinks it doesn't hurt. (journal entry, female grade 3, 1992)

[A card with a two little gifts in it for her parents who were going away for a short holiday. The text reads:]

To mom dad and to enewon [anyone] you tock adout [about]

The filin [feeling] with out you is scary and wat evr wor [you're] thinking I do under sand [understand] it I wont to giv you this to you take good car [care] of them pinks for mom and dloos [blue's] for dad wer [where] evr you are dont losit [lose it] It helps me mow [know] you are ner [near] and that ull [you'll] remember me.

from Andrea. ps see you in my drems (female, grade 2, 1991)

One sunny morning, Melanie and Sasha were going on a picnic in the woods together. As they packed their lunches they sang a song (Teddy Bear's Picnic) to make it quicker. as they skipped off, Melanie heard a scream. It was Sasha! Melanie went over to where she heard the scream come from! To her surprize, there was a giant black hole right in front of her toes! At the bottom of it was Sasha, laying on her back, screaming.

Chapter 2 - The cave

Melanie took a branch that was lying on the ground and pulled Sasha up. As soon as she got out, they ran home and told their father. Their father said, "Girls, how about we all go together for a picnic tomorrow and we'll investigate this black hole of yours..... (Story by two girls, one grade 2 the other grade 3, 1991)

Other life experiences with brothers, babies, sisters and cousins all figured largely into the stories of the younger students with whom I worked. Their stories were full of people and settings they were familiar with. Often familiarities from different parts of their lives were intermixed in written narratives and took on a life of their own. For example, in their stories, cartoon characters lived with them, spoke to them and were a part of the human interactions, but events of the stories often had a cartoon genre. The classroom helped the unfamiliar become familiar. Just as I learned from my students, I was able to see when they learned from me. I watched to see if and how they incorporated information from the external curriculum into their knowledge framework. New learning was included in stories which demonstrated how the students fit these ideas into their foundational knowledge. In the next excerpt, the writer incorporated her newly learned knowledge of

the provinces of Canada into a story about an activity her family frequently engaged in during the summer holidays - camping.

Mrs. Xray was make lunch when jimmy Xray came in. Jimmy sat down at the table and said, "I have thought about three things about why I HATE the summer" Jimmys mother gave him his lunch and asked, "What might those be honey" "Well, he said for starters, you know how much mosquitos like me? Jimmy said. "Yes!" said his mom. "Well This yer theres THOUSAND of Them!" Jimmy gets mosquito bites alot. to the mosquitos his blood tast good. Jimmy has lots of scrufley brown hair, he's 7, has hazel eyes, live on mexican ave on prince Edward Island, and is quite tall. "Secondly, its SO HOT this summer!!! Thiredley, we are going to B.C. and summers a time to be with your firends and I don't know enyone in British columbia!" "Your right, she sad. Jimmy Thought he was right for all of them but his mom said "but only right for 2 of them The next day the Xray family went from their home on Prince Edward Island to Nova scotia. Then Thay camped at the K.o.a. After about 5 days at the K.o.a.they packed all their belongings, straped them to the car tight, aand headed for Quebec (female, age 7)

From this story, I knew that this student was looking for ways to accommodate new information that she was acquiring. Her ability to blend parts of her real life into a fictional story, based on past, real life events, with new information assimilated into a familiar framework led me to believe that she was ready to go on and learn more about these different provinces in Canada.

I wondered how my interactions with the students impacted on their behavior and attitudes. While I was ready to admit that in the classroom I was the person with the most power, I did try to be mindful of that power and the effect I had on students. However, sometimes all my good intentions were lost in the movement of the day, and occasionally I was humbled by my students.

In outside line-up after lunch, I stopped Carmen from playing with a leaf she found outside, because I was giving instructions/directions. She snuck it by me on the way in, and when the kids were asked to do nature pictures, she did leaf rubbings, beautiful leaf rubbings in all different colours. Shame on me. (Classroom journal, Fall, 1992).

How many times, I have asked myself, have I interfered with the learning, the experiences of one of my students, as in the example above? Carmen knew we were drawing nature pictures after lunch. She had a notion, an idea for her picture. Even though I had tried to put a flaw in her plans, she refused to let me. I applaud her tenacity; I am embarrassed by my behavior. This should have informed my practice more directly than it did. However, what I have also come to understand was that despite being chastised by me, either the admonishment was not serious enough for her to abandon her idea, or she had enough faith in spirit of the classroom to be true to herself. She seemed to know that even though I had told her to throw her leaf away, and she had not, she was not going to get into trouble for using it for her picture. In fact, she received many positive comments from her peers and from me about her picture. This mermaid was able to see beyond my scolding and did not allow me to interfere with her plan. I think that speaks to climate of the classroom, and how some of my students refuse to accept the judgment of the teacher. I have relieved students of many different trinkets which were occupying their thoughts and time when my expectations were that they attend to something else. Sometimes it may have been the right decision, sometimes not.

On Fear

One of the most powerful messages I received from the students' narratives was their fear. This did not come through so much in their writing as it did in our conversations and again it took me some time to recognize "fear" as a theme of children. As I looked over transcripts and fieldnotes, I saw many opportunities where I could have pursued a line of inquiry which would have led me to this understanding sooner. However, I came to it rather later.

Still, as I look to see how this information informed my practice, I can find little evidence which indicates that I built curriculum around this topic. What this information did do, however, was heighten my sense of awareness about the children's world.

[The conversation had been about the length of the school day, whether it should be shorter or longer, and who made the decision to make it end at 3:00. The focus of the conversation quickly changed.]

Interviewer: Do you think we should go longer in the day then?

Ethan: Ya 'cuz it's sort of not fun staying late, I mean, staying early, like, uhm, say it's 3:00, and like school's over and uhm your mom isn't there for about an hour.

Hana: I think I know what we could do is uhm well, you could make up a little well, uhm which I think might be a little weird but the people who are in our class if their mom's not here early well you could quickly make up a notice and say please hurry and pick your child up and if the moms and dads get here late well you could just let the children the people who don't have their parents here early, you could just let them play for a while but then clean up their mess when their parents come.

Ethan: That's what I did once.

Interviewer: So, kids should be allowed to stay in school if their parents aren't here? What do you normally do if your parents aren't here?

Ethan: Wait outside and see them from there.

Hana: It's much more dangerous outside.

Ethan: And if somebody takes you.

Hana: Ya, then you're bye-bye's.

Interviewer: How can somebody take you? Tell me about that.

Hana: Well, 'cuz it's easy, 'cuz lots of the parents don't, like, wait in the car just for their kids so lots of people who like to take children away come to the school 'cuz you know how lots of people come to school.

Ethan: Ya.

Hana: So they, people come to the school and they can take children, but I don't think it's really safe to go outside to wait for your parents.

Interviewer: Who makes you go outside and wait for your parents?

Hana: Well, it's kinda like the rule here and I don't like it.

Interviewer: Who made up those rules do you think?

Ethan: (the principal).

Hana: Ya.

Interviewer: Well, that sounds kind of frightening. Is it frightening?

Hana: It's frightening for me and my mom because I don't want to be kidnapped and my mom doesn't want me to be kidnapped. 'Cuz I heard on the news this kid got kidnapped on the street when it was time to go home, and so I don't think it's really safe for kids now to do that. Ethan: On the news I saw a kid got kidnapped from about a 20 or 30 year old and it was a man.

Interviewer: What happened to that child?

Ethan: He was never seen again.

Hana: It's like Michael Dunahee. He's never seen again

Ethan: He ran away.

Hana: No, he got kidnapped.

Ethan: Oh ya.

Hana: And got killed, so it's also,

Ethan: No, people think that he got killed, we don't really know if he did.

Hana: Well I don't think it's really safe when kids go out.

...

Interviewer: Can you tell me about some other rules that make kids feel unsafe?

Hana: Some adults make them walk to school.

Interviewer: Tell me about that.

Hana: Well it's easiest if they walk to school 'cuz then like some people like parents haven't explained to them very much, just like Michael Dunahee. He just didn't know so the person came up and kidnapped him but I think it's easiest when kids get kidnapped on the street when they are walking home or to school 'cuz if like Brenda [7 year old girl] and all these other kids walk to school so it's easy enough, the people can kidnap all of the kids and not leave anyone behind so it's easiest.

Interviewer: So, who makes you walk to school?

Hana: Well, my mom likes us to walk to school but she walks with us 'cuz she's not very ... like in the olden days they could walk to school 'cuz there wasn't very many crooks so but now my mom walks with us 'cuz uhm, there's lots and lots of kidnappers in our world so she walks with us but lots of adults don't. Some people, and some adults, don't really think, like, explain it enough so they let their kids walk by themselves ...

(Hana = female, 6 years old; with me during grade 1
Ethan = male, 8 years old; with me during grades 1, 2, and 3)

Another similar story was told to me by another student. The interviews were not related, nor were they on the same day.

Marie: ... And something that's totally unfair that's going on right now.

Interviewer: What's that?

Marie: It's that people are allowed to walk on the street and roll and go straight up to people and say, hey, you wanna come and find my car for some candy, or come help me find my lost puppy, and kids get snatched for that and that's not fair.

Interviewer: Can you tell me about that?

Marie: Everyday I walked home from school I was really [supposed to] get a ride home, we don't like walking home from school because it, my heart beats and my heart goes ba boom ba boom really fast²¹ and it makes me really scared like someone's out to get me? They're just going to pop out of the corner and snatch me? and it's because when we were walking home from school one day we heard someone yell help and we started running and we heard someone yell help again and there was a car, a car, a van coming out of, of, and it came really fast at us, so now I'm afraid to walk home by myself, I walk home from school, it was really scary.

Ethel: I bet.

Interviewer: Tell me about this kidnapping stuff.

Marie: [My friend] was wanting to come down to our house and her mom said no they're probably eating dinner and it's too late to go out so

²¹ There was a nasty custody battle in this family last year and Marie and her sister had to be picked up from school every day by their much older sister for a while. The father had apparently threatened to take them from the school, and Marie was clearly frightened about it.

she asked if she could go roller blading so her mom said o.k, so when she was roller blading there's a guy that came up to her and said, hey, hi little girl, what's your name, and she goes, you tell me yours first, and then he goes nah, never mind, and he goes hey little girl, wanna come help me find my little lost 5 day old puppy? And she goes, no, she yells no, and she screams and she starts roller blading? But the man chased her, he chased and he chased and it's luckily that my friend got away? She ran to her friend's house? Her friend's and my friend's house? She called home, her mom rushed down there but I bet for (my friend) it was pretty scary because the cops came down there and she was crying, her mom says, so, it scared me, and as soon as I got told this, I started to cry and I phoned (my friend) and I went, Are you o.k.? 'Cuz I was panting like a dog, and it scared me, scared the mind out of me.

Marie: ... I know that there's someone out there trying to get children and soon I'm gonna be one of them and it's not going to make me happy.

Interviewer: What else are you frightened of?

Marie: I'm frightened that my friend is gonna be tried to be hurt again. I'm not gonna live to the age of 10 and I'm never gonna see my family again.

(Marie = female, age 7; with me during grades 1 and 2
Ethel = female age 6; with me during grade 1)

I wonder what is an effective way to deal with this child's fears in such a way as not to dismiss them, but also not to dwell on them.

Almost without exception each student or group of students I interviewed brought up their fears, and Michael Dunahee's name or circumstances was mentioned in each incident. These children feared for their lives, and many of them did not believe their parents could ultimately protect them. I wondered what we, the adults, could do to help these children feel safe. I looked to their outside lives, to their life experiences, and I saw where the fears came from. Parents, school and media spoke to the need for children to be careful. "Stranger Danger", discussions about the need to be wary of strangers, and safety, became

kitchen table talk for these children, and while I know there was a need to focus on the very real possibility of children being accosted by a stranger, I worried about frightening the children to the point where they became immobilized by their fear. I believed in the need to teach children how to manage themselves in a safe manner at all times in all sorts of different environments. I was required to teach Ministry mandated programs designed to emphasize safety precautions, but my impression was that instead of safety, fear was taught. The school I worked at received a letter from a local radio station advertising yet another way to teach our children to be fearful of their environment. The letter read:

Beginning on _____, 1993, Television ____ will be joining forces with _____ Restaurant and local radio stations throughout the lower mainland and Vancouver Island to support and promote a very important safety message to children.

The message is "SHOUT NO!", a timely and necessary one, in which we'll urge children to shout "NO" when confronted by strangers...

To create awareness of this important message, Television _____ will produce and air a series of sixty-second "street proofing tips" posing six different situations where children may be confronted by strangers and when they should shout "NO!". We'll invite parents and children to stop by their nearest _____ Restaurant to pick up a free copy of the "SHOUT NO!" colouring book. As an added incentive, a colouring contest page will be included, whereby children can enter to win a Lunch Party for their entire class. (December, 1993)

I failed to see the connection between winning a colouring contest and "street proofing" children.

On talking to my senior supervisor about my frustration with being confronted with my students' fear, she related a story from her own life regarding her children.

At our annual New Year's Eve dinner with friends, we all stand up and say something about the last year that we will remember. Last year I remember I stood up and I said, "This was the year I had to teach my kids to be afraid, to be careful on the street when they were out. I wanted them

to know about the dangers that were possibly there for them, and I didn't know how to do it without scaring them. (Celia Haig-Brown, personal communication, Spring, 1993).

What my senior supervisor endeavored to do was inform her children about the need to be aware of possible dangers on the street without frightening them too much. We both agreed it was a delicate balance to achieve. In school, my experience with my students was that they didn't need to hear about the fears anymore, but they did need some practise with the strategies so if or when confronted with a situation, they would feel some confidence with their own abilities to protect themselves. They needed some "in the bones experiences" (Shifrin, 1993) to build their confidence in themselves, if in fact they felt vulnerable. In the classroom this meant more than just talking about "Shouting No!", it meant actively practising it; developing and role playing scenarios and speaking realistically about the dangers that are out on our streets, listening to children's fears, and discussing these fears with them.

Students also heard the stories that frightened them from adults, and this may have added to their fears of what may lie lurking just outside the door for them.

Sasha: Mrs. T.? She told me this, she said that she woke up 'cuz she couldn't go to sleep so she went into the living room to read a book, right, and then she heard this noise and it was a car without the lights on. This is 2 in the morning and the lights aren't on so she quickly turns on the lights and he goes away and he never saw her again.

Interviewer: You know they are up to something wrong if they don't have their lights on.

Sasha: Suspicious. And then they got some tapes and all sorts of things stolen out of their trailer, and there's these people called the _____? They live up the street and well he's been, one of the kids has been in jail and I live right by them and I don't feel that safe. I know that nothing could happen but I still don't feel that safe.

Interviewer: Because of what your neighbours do

Sasha: Ya and up the road, you remember Nadia telling you about her house getting robbed? (yes)

(Sasha = female, age 8; with me during grades 1, 2, and 3)

From another student: "My Gramma and Grampa wanted to take us to Disney World but there's too many drive-by shootings and kids getting killed so we're not going." (female, age 6)

I got the impression that children had enough personal experiences which they shared with each other to gain a healthy fear of their communities without influence of adult input.

David: ... and a couple of, last March, some people were killed across the street, and I think I remember a car being parked there and then uhm, on the weekend? there was a car parked right in front of my house

Sasha: Is this murder or something?

David: Yes, there was lots of people there. There was even the U. TV thing there.

Sasha: Oh ya?

David: It was very scary.

(Sasha = female, age 8; with me during grades 1, 2, and 3

David = male, age 7; with me grades 1 and 2)

It seems that no one knew really how frightening that experience was for David. A note from one of my stories explains his prolonged reaction, to the ignorance of all the adults around him, of his fear of that event.

Murder, a crime of violence, takes place nearly everyday. One day, it occurred across the street from the home of one child. He brought the story to school, talked about it in hushed whispers for the first day, and finally got up the courage to tell the rest of the class the next day. He was clearly frightened, but the magnitude of his fear was not known by the teacher, me for over a year. Then I heard how two, large, scary police officers showed up on his family's doorstep that night. This little boy thought that the police thought that someone in his house murdered his neighbours. He thought that someone in his family was going to be taken away. He was scared to death of the people who were supposed to protect him.

He is still afraid to sleep with his window open. In his story writing, people are often getting murdered, and it is a mystery who did it. Suspects for the murder in his fantasies often include well liked members of his class, and another stranger. In his stories where his family are the characters, people are saved. He is trying to make sense of this ... when the adults in his life have gone on with theirs. ("Every Child's Story", personal writing, Spring, 1994)

Fear invaded many areas of children's lives. The fears they spoke to me about had nothing to do with bad dreams or other fantasy worlds. They focused on the daily occurrences in their lives, when the familiar was threatened by the unfamiliar. Therefore, my 'call to action' (Bodell, 1994) was to try to find a way to build into the curriculum acknowledgments of their fears and a way to combat them. Short of bringing in martial arts experts, I could think of no practical way to address this issue.

What I have done in terms of adapting the curriculum to reflect the issues brought up here is to find pieces of literature which presents similar scenarios. For example, Charlotte's Web (E.B. White, 1952) deals with the ideas of friendship, loyalty and individual differences. Through White's characters, discussions about individual differences, loyalty and different life styles can occur safely, where students may identify with the struggles of one of the characters, but can do so anonymously. Again, The Girl Who Loved Caterpillars (Merrill, 1992) tells the story of a young girl who dares to defy her parents wishes and be true to herself. This story can lead to discussions about power relationships between adults and children, and it gives me the opportunity to see how students respond to the way the character handles herself in this situation. Although these stories do not offer practical solutions for students experiencing similar problems, they do allow for discussions where students have the opportunity to share their experiences with their peers if they choose. The Tenth Good Thing About Barney (Viorst, 1971) deals sensitively with the issue of death, and invites discussion about similar experiences children have had. Alexander and the Terrible, Horrible, No Good, Very Bad Day (Viorst, 1972) tells the

story of a young boy who has a terrible, horrible, no good, very bad day. Students identify with this character and share their "bad day" experiences. Although I can find stories similar in content to the stories students share with me about their real life fears, they always have a happy ending. My students' situations do not always have happy endings, so to them, these stories stay within their fantasy worlds. I have found no literature which tells stories about the kinds of fears my students were raising such as the scary neighbour or the murders across the street.

On My Learning

It took me a long time to hear what my students were telling me. When I finally did recognize their fears as a common theme, I had to accept that I lacked the knowledge to find a way to incorporate this issue into the my classroom curriculum in an authentic way. I did not know what to do about it as a teacher, except to let my students know that I believed that their feelings about and behaviours around fearful events in their lives were legitimate.

My actions and behaviours impact on those around me. In each of my roles as teacher, adult, and beginning mother, my reaction to any given situation will vary depending on my audience. I am a person with deep and passionate emotions. I have the right to express my passions, but I must recognize that the way in which I express myself will impact in different ways on different people. In a classroom, my raised voice sends a clear message of my frustration to my students, but is also very frightening for some. I suspect my child will have the same reaction as my students. I must be sure to take the time to explain my behavior, even if it is to say I overreacted. I have to acknowledge which of my behaviours are appropriate and inappropriate and why. Also, in the class, I must acknowledge the

fears of my students so that my words and my actions do not frighten them. Sylvia Ashton-Warner maintained that the emotion of fear was one of the two most powerful emotions in a child's life (Teacher, 1963). Children's fears are different than mine, if only because I have had the gift of time to recognize, live and deal with some of my fears.

I have tried to listen to what the children said; I have observed their actions and words, and recorded my interpretations which are woven throughout the text. I do not believe it is enough for me, as a teacher, to base curriculum solely on the interests or the experiences of my students. Part of my responsibility as a teacher is to present new ideas and concepts to my students so they may explore and add to their experiences. As Herbert Kohl (1994) stated:

... There are teachers within the public school across the country ... who provide their students compassion and work from their pupils' strengths. They also love learning and they have a passion to share what they know and are learning from their students ... For me, writing on a chalkboard and going on about something I am dying to share with my students is one of the greatest pleasures of teaching. I don't feel a need to force them to love what I love, or learn what I have learned. I just want to have an occasion to inspire them. After all, I didn't invent Mozart, Carnegie Hall, or know what my Uncle Julius taught me before he took the initiative to teach me. Taking the initiative to teach well and with love has always been important to me as providing my students with an opportunity to learn on their own.
(p. 63)

The ability to build curriculum which reflects the interests of the students, connects with Ministry mandates and provokes deep, memorable learning for students is my greatest challenge, and for the time that I spend with my students, I am the only one who can weave those three components together. I firmly believe that when the teacher recognizes that the students come with passions of interest, skills unknown and interesting, and complicated and challenging daily life experiences, then curricular content grows out of an awareness and understanding of building on prior knowledge and lived experiences. It is

my feeling that when curriculum is delivered by the teacher with a focus on the content rather than the students, disinterest and apathy are often the result.

The narratives I have related in this chapter are only a sampling of the work I have read and collected from different students over the years. To ignore these stories and to try to keep them separate from the daily goings-on in the classroom is to negate the life experiences of the students in my charge. Also, it does me a personal disservice in terms of getting to know my students better. It is important that I have the opportunity to read and hear about the happenings in the lives of my students from their written stories. It is one of the places as a teacher that I am constantly transformed into a learner.

CHAPTER 5

SEARCHING FOR NEW GROUND ON THE ROAD LESS TRAVELLED: THE JOURNEY CONTINUES

Out of the strain of the doing
Into the peace of the done.
(Julia Louise Woodruff, "Harvest Home", 1910,
in S. Powter, 1993, p. 337)

These stories of the students have helped to shape my practice over the last seven years, and I continue to try to access their stories in order to make connections with them between their lives and the mandated curriculum. My intention is to promote in my students deep, memorable learning, to make classroom learning more meaningful, to make a difference to their life chances.

When I shifted my teaching strategy from "covering the curriculum" to "UNcovering the curriculum", a change took place in all of my interactions which had to do with classroom. The focus of my teaching intentions shifted from teaching the curriculum to teaching the students. Talk in my class was encouraged rather than discouraged. Curriculum guides became reference materials rather than "how to" and "what to" books; curriculum content was tailored for each different group I worked with. Establishing trusting relationships with my students became extremely important to me. I worked to build a community in my classroom, with my students, and I invited them to be active participants in that community. School was not just a way of spending our days, it was our way into the world.

I believed time at school should be spent building on the individual's foundational knowledge and making sense of new information. As well, I needed to be aware of my

own limitations in terms of such matters as knowledge and my skills as a teacher, and my advantage in terms of power. Katherine Paterson (1988) stated,

... [teachers] must try, always conscious of our own fragmentary knowledge and nature, to give our children ...words that will shape their minds so they can make those miraculous leaps of imagination that no sinless computer will ever be able to rival - those connections in science, in art, in the living of this life that will reveal little truths. For it is these little truths that point to the awesome, unknowable unity ... which holds us together and makes us members of one another. (in Barton, Booth, 1990, p. 15 - 16)

Every year my teaching methods change. I get better at some things, completely discard others, trying new ways in their place, always working towards refining my talents, always working towards the same end: to promote deep, memorable learning in my students. As an elementary school teacher, one of the factors which always contributed to my efforts in this endeavor was the large blocks of time I had with my students. Most parts of most days were left up to my discretion as to how they would be organized (see Appendix D).

I am now a teacher at a junior high school. Although I came to this position with several years of teaching experience, the context of the junior high school is very different than that of the elementary school. When I entered the elementary system, I was inexperienced and my ideas were untried. I moved along the path of professional development haphazardly, with little intentional direction, unsure of my developing teaching pedagogy. I slowly built my philosophical framework based on practical teaching experiences. When I left that setting, I felt some confidence in my teaching practices, philosophy and methodology. The history I had build within the context of the elementary school system made me feel secure in my belief about teaching and learning. Moving into the context of the junior high school, I felt a similar sense of unease as that which I experienced as a beginning teacher although I have a much clearer understanding of the craft and the

pedagogy of teaching. My disease has mostly to do with my unfamiliarity with prescribed curriculum and the way the school days are organized. The organization of the junior high school is different; the students are older and bigger, and I have yet to find teachers in the junior high school system who embrace the same philosophy as I do about teaching and learning. I feel lonely at times and I continue to connect with my elementary school colleagues.

At the school in which I work, we have a five by eight timetable, which means that students are enrolled in eight different subjects which they rotate through over the course of a five day week. Each teacher has seven different classes in their timetable, and can therefore see up to two hundred and twenty different students in one week. Most teachers "teach" in one or perhaps two different subject areas. Those teachers who have mastered this unfriendly system seem reluctant to consider the need for a fundamental change which might transform the current system into something that is more user friendly. Other teachers, such as myself, are trying to cope with covering massive amounts of content within a relatively short period of time. This system, by design, is exhausting. I see the mermaids behaving like fish out of water, laying along the sides, gasping for air, in danger of dying. Teachers and students alike are only surviving the system instead of thriving in it.

Whether it is because of the sheer numbers of students I see over the course of a week, or because of the organization of the junior high school, I see many more mermaids in this system than I did in the elementary system, and there is very little room for them to stand. Within my classroom I try to help them find a place for themselves by negotiating assignments and behaviors with them, yet I wonder whether I am doing them any favours when I am told by king "wanna be's" that no concessions will be made for them in the

next year, and there seems to be little if any recognition and celebration of individual differences.

I see students coming into my classroom talking to their friends, happy, excited, full of energy, then falling into listlessness and disinterest for the most part, once class has started, looking for spaces during class time when they can reconnect with their friends and retell some of their recent life experiences, or plan some new ones. There are many students who have learned how to work within the system, but I see more and more mermaids who are not invited to find a place for themselves inside regular classrooms. I see new Canadian students struggling to understand text books which can put the most interested party to sleep, simply because of the way the information is presented. When I have asked my new colleagues why we are doing things the way we are doing them, their explanations seem directed at fitting the kids into the system rather than making the system fit the kids. Surprisingly, I have found that the students tend to support and maintain this status quo.

During my first term teaching in junior high school, I tried to manipulate the curriculum in order to better reflect my vision of teaching and learning. I shaped projects for my classes which I believed would allow students to make personal connections with the mandated curriculum. For example, one group researched contemporary political occurrences which would directly impact their lives as Canadian citizens. Another group researched their family histories and origins. My purpose was to begin our year of study with something familiar to them, and then continue to connect their new learning with the foundation we had built. I was surprised at all of the negative feedback I received. The students were angry at me, I suspected because I had changed a system they had become familiar with, and I asked them to work independently, in a different direction than the traditional question and answer program. My program was not text book based, which was what

they were used to. Parents who were used to their children consistently scoring high marks on tests and winning academic achievement awards vocalized their discomfort with my program because it was "too subjective" and, according to one parent, "irrelevant". These attitudes from home were reflected in the attitudes of some of the students, and it made the effort of building community even more difficult. I found myself working very hard toward establishing a climate of mutual respect between myself and my students.

I have to wonder whether the reaction I experienced from my students was because any change in the system they were familiar with was too threatening for them and therefore frightening. At least the system as it stood was a known entity, and students knew their position within that system. As peer relations and social acceptance became increasingly more important to adolescents, I noticed that many of my students seemed to be more content to fail a test or assignment rather than feel the sting of ostracization. Their fears about performance seemed to lie more in the social arena than in the academic arena. Perhaps then, the hostility I experienced from the students as I tried to find new ways into old material was because I unknowingly threatened what they knew (the school system) which offered them some stability. Armed with this hypothesis, I can now be more aware how to approach my students and extend an invitation to creatively delve into subjects such as history. Although I have yet to find any advantage to this system for either teachers or students, I have found many disadvantages. It is my opinion that, fundamental to its lack of success in accommodating all students, is the notion that the junior high school system, by its design, is meant to keep students and teachers from making connections with each other. I have found that at junior high school there is no time built into the teaching/learning schedule for relationship building. I believe that three hours a week is not enough time for teachers to get to know students or students to get to know teachers. As well, the organization prevents the building of learning communities where

all of the members are able to form a human group and learn to work with each other. Therefore, the mermaids in the junior high school system are often only tolerated by teachers, rather than accommodated. As well, because so many different teachers are responsible for covering the curriculum, I have heard my students complain of unbalanced homework schedules. No connections are being made between any of the different teaching disciplines, and curriculum content has often been "laid on" students like a blanket, in a very dispassionate way.

For me as a teacher, it is important that I get to know my students very well in order to build the type of learning community in which students feel comfortable sharing some of their experiences. This helps me to know them and in turn tailor curriculum to their interests. However, everything is geared to delivering curriculum through a specific body of content, testing, passing or failing students, and moving on to the next group. I suspect that little, if any, deep, memorable learning is occurring. No connection is being made between mandated curriculum and the lives of my students.

This year, I was fortunate enough to have two classes with the same students in them, and as a result I only enrolled 166 students, less than many teachers. However, with enrollment numbers like that, authentic²² assessment and reporting became a sad joke. Assigning marks was a numbers game, testing became the order of the day, and Friere's model of banking education was a reality that most teachers seemed to adopt at the level I was teaching. Teachers had the power to pass or fail students based primarily on a single

²² The term "authentic" refers to a method of assessment that measures students' progress both against criterion references, and compared to their own personal progress. In order to practise authentic assessment and reporting techniques, teachers must know their students well, gather a number of different work samples over time, observe and make note of students' growth when they are using a variety of different learning techniques, and measure learning in a variety of different ways.

form of assessment. Communities of learners were not constructed, inclusion was not considered to be important, and I watched the mermaids gravitate towards one another, seeking to build their own community designed to challenge the system that had no place for them, but which they were forced to be a part of.

Many students were threatened with expulsion, some regularly, as a means of controlling their behavior. Counsellors and administrators were run ragged trying to provide students with the support they seemed to need. As I see it, the system in which I now work was not designed with the human group in mind. It is "crazy making" (Shifrin, 1993). There are many alternatives to the eight by five timetable in terms of school organization, each with its own drawbacks, and many of these alternatives seem to me to be much more in line with giving students the opportunity to build communities in classrooms where they meet with the same group of people on a more regular basis. The simple act of giving students more time with fewer teachers is a way to cut down on the craziness of the current situation.

My mandate is not to change the entire system but rather to carve out a place for me and my beliefs (and other teaching mermaids) to grow and flourish within the existing system, to find a place for the mermaids to stand. The temptation for me to abandon my efforts within the forum I now work is very real. I could return to the elementary system which already is more in line with my beliefs, at least in terms of time allotments and organization, but I see wonderful possibilities and opportunities for students and teachers at the junior high level, and that excites me. I will continue to make places and spaces for mermaids to stand in my classroom. That will mean that I will have to challenge the status quo with my colleagues and peers, and perhaps with administrators, parents community groups, and students. Finding a place for mermaids could take many different forms. My

invitation to the mermaids could be rejected. However, I believe that I must sincerely make an effort to manipulate my courses, the physical space in my classroom, and /or my teaching approaches to find some standing room. I want to give the mermaids the opportunity to learn how to accommodate themselves within the rigid school system if they do not already know.

In chapter one I asked the questions, What life experiences does each child bring to the classroom, how can I access the students' narratives, and how can I use this information to develop meaningful curriculum? and Why does any of this matter to me, as a teacher and a human being? As I write my conclusions for this piece of work I am reluctant to even venture to give a definitive answer to these questions. As Vivian Paley (1990) states,

[Some] problems are not meant to be solved. They are ours to practise on, to explore the possibilities with, to help us study cause and effect. Important issues can't be solved with one grand plan - or in one school year. Some are worked at for a lifetime, returning in different disguises, requiring fresh insights. (p. 80)

I see the issues I have been exploring as perhaps my lifetime work. After all, what could possibly be more important in my profession than the quest to make learning meaningful for the students in my classrooms?

What I have come to know as a result of my inquiry is that learning takes place in many different ways for all individuals. "Deep and memorable" does not necessarily mean positive, and it is important to me that the learning experiences of my students be mostly positive.

While I see the value of curriculum mandates in terms of exposing all students to a specific body of content over the course of several years, I see even more clearly the need to help

students make connections and build foundations on which new learning may be constructed. It has been my experience that when this is not the case, too many students resist learning the content that is being presented. Students who have difficulty adapting to the formal institution of school struggle even more than the others, and seek acceptance in other communities that often run counter to tenets of the public education system.

I have learned that when a teacher extends an invitation to students to share some of their life stories with members of the classroom community, and when that invitation is accepted, that group of individuals can begin to build a community by sharing their histories with one another. My job then is to find the commonalities within the group and build on those common experiences in order to expand students' knowledge base. As well, if I truly believe that it is important to invite students to bring some of their life experiences into the classroom, I must be open to what they might spontaneously bring into the classroom. I must watch for and take advantage of the teachable moments when they present themselves. Perhaps most important of all, I must stop and listen to my students, hear what they are saying and know when and when not to take action from their stories. I need to be mindful of the content of their stories and respect their feelings around their different experiences.

I was struck by the candor of my young students when they shared some of their private stories with me, and I felt very honoured by the faith and trust they seemed to have in me. From their stories, I came to know that children often felt unheard by the adults in their lives, and that the fears they legitimately felt were often dismissed by their elders. Because of this, they learned to keep their fears to themselves, and unless asked, they would not readily speak of them. I wondered how I could make the consideration of this dynamic of fear a part of the curriculum of the classroom. Students seemed to feel

powerless to control their own safety in many situations, and I have yet to come across an effective way to address those fears. Programs offered currently, dealing with personal safety, seem more directed at increasing children's fears than giving them tools designed to give them a sense of power and control over their bodies.

With primary students, we celebrate Hallowe'en, where scary ghosts and goblins are discussed extensively, but the students seem to know that we are talking about the world of make-believe, and they separate that from their fears which exist in the real world. Fear seems to be a universal theme among young children, and as a teacher I do not yet know how to deal with it in the classroom, except to recognize that the fears my students tell me about are legitimate.

I have modified my practice significantly since my early years of teaching. That modification has been intentional and with direction. I have not changed my practice simply because a new curriculum guide was issued by the Ministry, but rather because I was feeling frustrated with my efforts in a particular area and I learned of another approach which seemed more sensible, or because I heard of a different approach which was more in line with my evolving philosophy. It took me some time to let go of the "teacher as actor" approach which provided me with security and gratification as a teacher, and have the courage to be true to my convictions. This meant that my intentions as a teacher had to be motivated by a desire to improve the life chances for my students, and that the students, not me, had to be the center of the classroom universe. Writing about it now, it seems such a simple concept, but coming to understand that concept proved to be a tremendous milestone for me, and I would be remiss if I let myself think I made that transition by myself.

There have been many friends and colleagues who had a significant impact on my practice. However, there was a period during my teaching career that I had the opportunity to work side by side with a dear friend and a brilliant woman, Joyce Bodell. We worked together in an open-area classroom, each enrolling a multi-graded class ages 5 to 9 years old. It was over the three years we worked together that I honestly learned to practise what I preached. Joyce and I engaged in the most wonderful, challenging, inspirational, compelling dialogue about teaching and learning, about adults and kids, about our lives and how our personal experiences in life had come to impact on our teaching. We always had and continue to have more questions than answers, but those questions, or rather, our search for the answers, seemed to be the fuel which drove our practice. Being able to have an on-going conversation with a trusted colleague allowed me to explore new areas and grow, professionally, in ways that may not have been possible had I been isolated in my class, on my own. I believe that teaching colleagues need to connect with each other in order to find support for the work they do. I found the courage to act on some of my beliefs partly because I had someone working alongside me who held the same beliefs. This was genuine professional development for me, and I think that this could be so for many other teachers as well, given the opportunity.

A friend of mine, a psychologist, once told me that her most successful clients in therapy were those who had some curiosities around their behavior and wanted to know why they were the way they were. I think that same premise was true for Joyce and me. We had curiosity around our teaching practices, and we had the good fortune of working closely together over a long period of time. As well, because we were such good friends, our conversations were mutually respectful. Having curiosity around teaching and learning has great potential for all teachers. If teachers were given license to ask questions about different phenomena occurring in their classrooms they were curious about, I think that

self-directed teacher professional development would be the result. We learn best what we are interested in. This leads to deep, memorable learning. Our students saw us modelling the process of constructing knowledge, and I believe the model we intuitively provided helped our students feel comfortable to openly construct their understandings, often by conferring with their colleagues. That time stands out as one of the brightest highlights of my teaching career, and I will always cherish the years Joyce and I spent together in our big beautiful classroom with our fifty students.

For me, the most crucial factor in my professional development was to find at least one person who had the same kinds of questions and wondered about the same kinds of issues as I did. When I had a teaching partner working beside me, I had the opportunity to test my ideas and my hypotheses about teaching and learning. My partner provided me with the support I need to test new ideas and alternate teaching approaches. Throughout all of this we had an ongoing conversation about the practice of teaching. As well, the entire staff at that school was regularly engaged in dialogues about refining their craft of teaching. Although that was not the only time in my career I felt highly stimulated and motivated in terms of professional development, the supportive atmosphere certainly gave me the sense of trust and safety I needed to feel in order to take some risks in my practice.

When I made the decision to deviate from the black and white prescriptions of the mandated curriculum, I had to be very sure of what I was changing or rejecting. Therefore, I had to read and try much of the material made available to me. By doing that, I became extremely familiar with grade specific curriculum guides and as a result, my decisions to use or not to use the material were made from an informed position. I thought that this was very important because I wanted to be sure I was not rejecting anything that was in fact in line with or could be adapted to my personal philosophical beliefs about

teaching and learning. In truth, I found that many of the provincial mandates contained big ideas which were adaptable to some kind of restructuring.

I hope that over the next several years I will be able to continue to build foundations where my students and I can participate in common learning experiences. In order for that to occur in the system where I now work, there will have to be a significant shift in thinking by the policy - makers. Perhaps it will have to start more as a grass roots movement, where I and other like - thinking mermaids will join together to work within and resist the confines of the structures imposed upon us, and invite our colleagues into conversations where the learning needs of students are at the forefront of our teaching practices. Until that time, I will continue to reflect on my practice and, as Vivian Paley wrote in her letter to me (circa Spring, 1993), "We must keep watching the children. They always provide us with the answers we seek."

As I bring this work to a close, I feel a tremendous sense of relief and accomplishment. This afternoon, the sun is shining. Spring will be here soon. I hear my beautiful baby girl gooing in the background, and I know that by completing this document, this chapter of my life is coming to a close, while another is just opening up. My journey will take a different direction now, but I will always identify with the mermaid, and I will be sure there is always a place next to me for other mermaids to stand.

Return from the page
from the full horror of the journey
into the page
Beneath the page is a story:
everything that ever happened.
The page is a skin.
Touch the page,
draw a knife through it.
Touch the page at your peril.
(Atwood)

Appendix A

The five stages of the Writing Process are as follows:

1. **Print experience which the child has been involved**
2. **Pre-writing or rehearsing**
3. **Writing or drafting**
4. **Post writing**
5. **Diagnostic and evaluative phase**

For me, these five steps evolved into my working model of the Writing Process. The steps, with subsequent explanations of content within each step are as follows:

1. **Getting started**

Pre-writing

- **playing with ideas**
- **preparing through simulation / leading to the development of voice**
- **networking thoughts**
- **Shared student talking**
- **strengthening connections**
- **posing questions**
- **formulating hypotheses**

2. **Drafting / shaping thoughts**

Composing

- **expressing personal voice in writing**
- **using language to match thought**
- **reflecting on learning experiences**
- **making new connections**
- **internalizing learning**
- **new thinking leads to deeper understanding**

- re-writing text as purposes change or become defined
- re-reading aloud to hear meaning
- sharing drafts

3. **Editing: crafting thoughts**

Writing

- choosing a form that matches purpose and audience
- establishing criteria for the form
- hearing models (that reflect different forms)
- adding criteria based on new knowledge
- analyzing student writing based on new criteria developed
- sculpting text, reaching again for language that matches thinking
- polishing ideas with others
- re-reading to hear message
- sharing what you did and why you did it

4. **Proofreading: using conventions of print**

Writing

- establishing criteria for correct usage
- seeing models of convention
- adding criteria based on new knowledge
- learning techniques to guide proofreading
- personal audit(ing)

- analyzing student writing based on criteria developed
- applying new knowledge to complete draft
- sharing what you know and how you use it

5. Publishing/Presenting: sharing your polished thinking

Writing

- designing format
- celebrating the final product

(Brownlie, Close, Wingren, 1988)

Appendix B

Recently, one of my grade six students, a boy, said to me, " Ms. Seddon, you make learning this stuff so fun. I really...(pause), learned a lot by doing this, a lot more than using the text book. This was great. " He was referring to a unit we were just completing in math on measurement, capacity, time, energy, money and volume. Instead of doing the usual weighing and measuring of indiscriminate objects, as I have done every year with various modifications, I asked the kids if they would be interested in organizing a field trip to learn about different ways and applications of measurement and measuring. I chose the "field trip" venue because of my personal memories of school field trips, and because the students were familiar with this type of activity. For me as a student, field trips held the most positive memories of my times at school. I have hazy recollections of day to day in-class activities, text book assignments and teacher lectures, but I have singularly vivid memories of going to Fort Langley in the snow, of skiing, going to Penticton on exchange, going camping, and the countless other outside of school activities. These experiences formed part of the foundation of my deep memorable learning.

My intent in teaching the measurement unit was to present various methods and strategies to adapt, calculate and apply measurement techniques within a meaningful context. Although many of the field trips in my experience as student had little to do with the daily goings-on of school, in my situation as a teacher, I saw an opportunity to connect mandatory curriculum with the daily life experiences of the students, within a setting outside of school walls. As well, this afforded the students the opportunity to assume leadership roles and live the experience of organizing their own field trip. The students were eager to try, so, I suggested a hike in a local provincial park. We would decide on and purchase a communal lunch to prepare on site, and hire llamas to carry our supplies on the hike with us. We would have to raise the money to pay for this trip ourselves. The

students' reaction was very positive; perhaps because they viewed this activity as an escape from the school and classroom for the day, or because they were given the opportunity to organize an outing themselves. Overall organization fell into different categories and sub-categories. The primary concerns for the students included money, transportation, food, time, and distance. Students worked in small groups to brainstorm what questions they would need to answer in order to cover all considerations. As the teacher having a teaching/learning plan in mind, I put large coloured tags up on the tack board, each identifying a different measurement concept. As different groups developed questions, they decided which of those concepts (time, energy, capacity, volume, length, or weight) their questions applied to. Because each of the measurement concepts was colour coded and questions were printed by the students on coloured strips, they began to see that questions from any one of the colour groups could and did fit into several different measurement categories.

Once all of the questions were in place, the students wrote about and decided upon the best way to divide the tasks up so that each person in each group had some responsibility for organization. Some of the considerations became very complex, and the degree of problem-solving that went on was quite remarkable. For instance, the transportation committee had to find out the least expensive mode of transportation. This meant surveying all students to see what type of vehicles might be available for driving, which meant that a date had to be set for the trip, which meant that the money raising committee had to have all plans in place and completed for that date. Each student was responsible for recording the passenger capacity for his or her family vehicle (even if the parents were not able to assist with transportation), measuring the storage capacity for that vehicle, and determining the type of fuel necessary and the cost per litre of the fuel, and the mileage/kilometerage the vehicle was capable of. With this information, the transportation committee had to add up all of the factors for computing and paying for fuel consumption,

round trip, for all vehicles, and compare those costs against the cost of public transit and private (hired) transport. Once the mode of transportation was decided (family vehicles), the transportation committee had to confirm, first in writing and then by telephone, with all of the parents who had offered to drive. They then had to report to the llama committee to be sure rental dates were in fact, the same as the date we were to be transported to the site.

The students soon learned that they had to work co-operatively with one another, even though they were responsible for different aspects of the trip. The money-raising committee, for instance, had to know how much money would be needed overall. This meant information from the committees for llama renting, food, and transportation had to give some initial input before they could present the class with money raising alternatives. While working through the initial organizational aspects of this trip, I truly had no idea of the intricacies involved in organizing a group to organize a field trip. As they delved deeper and deeper into the details, the students began to realize two things. First, they had no idea that so much was involved in this type of school event, everything costs something, whether in time, money, energy or a combination of various components.

In order to provide the class with some information, I conducted mini-lessons (Graves 1984) on the different mathematical components and gave examples of where and how these measurement concepts might apply. In the area of energy consumption and food, I knew the students did not have a clear understanding of how many calories must be burned to lose a pound (or kilo) of weight, or the statistical data concerning replacement of body fluids, but they did know they had to eat and drink on the hike to replace the calories they had burned, and that calories were the energy providers, and that we had to pay some attention to nutrition in our lunch choices. For their first encounter with applying new knowledge to a practical application, I was happy with the limited understanding they showed. Presenting the measurement unit in this way was a learning experience for me, as well. For my own assessment and evaluation purposes, I had the students, prior to beginning the unit, write out their definitions of each of the mathematical concepts I hoped to cover. When, at the end of the unit I had them revisit their definitions, I hoped they would have much more to say about the various terms, but I was sadly disappointed. Upon reflection, I recognize that it was their ability to write clear definitions that had not grown significantly. However, when I had them write in context, when I asked them to write about what they learned about measurement from organizing the field trip, their comments were much more focused and precise. They used the

terminology and gave examples of their understanding. When at last we went on the trip, the kids paid the parents for the gas, we had chicken dogs for lunch, fell in love with llamas, and had a terrific time. Small omissions such as where exactly in the park we were to meet up with the llamas served as learning examples for us to ponder later. The organization of this event took a considerable amount of class time, and one of my question was, "Is this really worth it?" The feedback from the students assured me that this was an effort worth making.

Appendix C

Two years after writing recording the entry about Andrea and this boy, when this boy was no longer in my class, I heard some disturbing stories about his behavior, and wrote the following journal entry:

The boy who has no friends ... At grade 1 he was repeatedly exposing himself on the playground. There was some concern about abuse, but no follow-up done. In grade three he wrote in his journal, "I get scared when, at night, my dad open my bedroom door and I see his shadow." [I phoned] M.S.S.H. - nothing but reprimands, to me for upsetting the family. Two years pass. During that time he stalks a little girl, following her home and hiding in the bushes across from her house, scaring her. Her father speaks to him once, he continues to do it. The school is alerted, administration speaks to the boy and the behavior stops. He tries to befriend the one girl in the school who is kind to everyone. He is at her house constantly until her father has to tell him to stay away. Then ... he still comes around.

The boy who has no friends.

His younger cousin comes to the school. He's pretty messed up ... mom in absentia, he's angry, self-hating, lying, not telling the real or the whole story ... starts to fondle himself, tells a girl he is going to follow her home and have sex with her, ... it is suspected that he is being sexually harassed, by his older cousin. The boy with no friends ... (Spring, 1993)

The boy moved away shortly after that entry. I worry about what happened to him and the people he became friendly with. When Andrea accepted him his elation was apparent. He had no idea how to foster and nurture a friendship. His response was to become overbearing and smothering. That his behaviours became suspicious later was frightening and disturbing, but not surprising. I wonder how much impact Andrea had on his life when she invited him into her circle of friends, even though it was only for a short while.

Interestingly, the boy with no friends showed up in a different school four years later, in the late intermediate class of my former teaching partner. He seemed to be quite happy, appeared to have many social contacts, and said he really liked his new school. Perhaps Andrea's kindnesses had a significant impact on him.

Appendix D

As students move into higher grades it is often the practice of elementary schools to employ specialist teachers in the areas of F.S.L. instruction (French as a second language), music, and/or physical education. These times become fixed into individual teachers' schedules, and it is very difficult to alter. With the intermediate students I worked with the next year, we spoke about the kinds of subjects we were to address within the year time-frame. I explained my dilemma with timetabling all of the activities we wanted to engage in within a five hour day, five days a week. I also outlined the recommendations, by the Ministry, regarding expectations in terms of classroom time spent on each of the different subject areas.

I gave them each a timetable with the fixed times and platooning subjects written in, as well as a list of the different subject areas we were to cover in our class time, within time blocks to make it feasible, and let them work at figuring it out. It proved to be a very valuable exercise, and the students came up with many more creative ideas than I had developed. I collected all of the timetables and put together a timetable which was the result of everyone's input. I never heard another timetabling complaint from the students, unless our timetable was usurped by a school-wide function. Although the scope of their options was limited, the students developed a better understanding of all of the factors which must be considered and addressed within the course of a school week. Also, they were given some ownership of deciding how we could spend our class time, and why it was set up in a particular manner. As well, it forced me to share some of the power a teacher has over making decisions regarding class activities, and let me access the creativity of thought of my classroom community. Another facet was added to my understanding of classroom community dynamics.

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