Pausing at the River’s Edge:
A Narrative Inquiry Into the Practice of a Reading Teacher

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Abstract

In this narrative self-study I retell and connect the stories of my personal journey with literacy from childhood to the present. I use narrative as both methodology and method as I story my life experiences and my personal encounters with literacy. The heart of my reflections comes from the pages of personal journals written and storied over many years of trying to make meaning of powerful literacy experiences in my life. Now, in going back through the stories and reconstructing meaning, I make connections between the memories along the journey and the place from which I now tell my story. The interpretations I construct give voice to beliefs I have lived by and illuminations to moments in time that I have come to see with new eyes as I have engaged in this inquiry.

The journey and self-reflection within the pages of this inquiry provide understanding of the driving force behind my personal passion for literacy. I am better able to understand my motivations and share the stories that validate my personal and professional path through time.
This narrative self-study is dedicated to the special persons in my life:

To my children, Taryn and Nicholas, who supported my every whim and learned the joy of books at very early ages. Thank you for staying strong with a teacher for a mother.

To my husband and biggest supporter, Brian, for always helping me to see myself. Thank you for being my mirror and for reminding me that I had this paper in me to share.

To my best friend, Karen, Without whose friendship, I might not have had the strength to do this. Thank you for always telling me that you would trust me to teach your only child.

To Pat Kelly Though you don’t know it, you gave me my metaphor.

To my mother’s loving memory You gave me books.
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CHAPTER ONE: MY METAPHOR: A LASTING GIFT

And the river flowed right to my door,
Making me just a little too free.
But now the river doesn’t seem to stop here anymore. (Simon, 1975)

I have known for a very long time that my metaphor is a river. I have traveled in
spirit and in reality a very long, meandering path to get to where I am... and I have a
long journey ahead to get to the sea. My metaphor was a gift: a gift given to me by a
dear friend, teacher, and mentor who told me that I would never be satisfied to stay in
one place. I would never “settle” for what was good enough, but would always seek out
ways and means that were better, different, and more challenging than the ordinary. He
shared the river metaphor with me and explained that, like a river, I would constantly
change to get to my destination, whatever that might be. Sometimes I would rage with
fury at an injustice that I encountered, and other times I would flow softly and evenly
with friends and loved ones at my side. I had told him that I didn’t know what I wanted
to do with my life, but I knew I wanted to somehow “change the world.” He told me
that I had to begin with changing myself. As I look upon his words, now in the present,
I did not know that I had begun on a course that would take a lifetime. Each decision I
made in life, each time I reflected in my journals, each moment I spent with children, I
constantly asked inwardly, “How can I improve myself?” “How can I make this
better?” As the questions continued and I became more and more reflective in my
writing, I knew I did not have all the answers that I was seeking. I constantly turned to
mentors, friends, and theorists who might open a gateway and allow my thoughts to flow towards uncharted, new ideas that might answer my questions and meet my needs for a short time. Then questions would inevitably bubble up again.

This inward questioning, seeking to improve myself, and reaching outward for answers became a pattern that continued and continues now, ever present. And the images of the river would appear often in my personal writing. My metaphor could "encapsulate crucial aspects of life" and "move us towards insight" (Fulford, 1999). Thinking of myself in terms of a river gave me, as a writer, the ability to paint the landscape that I traveled and allowed me to see more clearly where I had been and the place I was moving towards. When I stop to write and reflect on my life experiences, I feel as though I am pausing near the river's edge and gazing deeply into a still, reflective pool. I see not only my own reflection near the surface, but also the clear river bottom lined with the rocks, stones, and debris that may have slowed the flow of the water. I see, too, the life and movement that thrive in the cool water, the ever-changing growth and creation that lives deeply hidden and generally unseen. But the pause I take and the inward reflection I gaze upon is always short lived. For soon I am enveloped within the waters and become, once again, a part of the river, moving on in my journey towards the sea.

When I began my journey as a teacher and as a self-reflecting person, I knew that I was only a trickle, a stream in the torrent of life, teaching and simply living each day. But I gained momentum and found that I had rivulets and estuaries among my dear friends and colleagues. Each student whose life I touched gave me strength and helped me to branch out ever further through the dry, barren dustbowl of what I knew about
education. I gained volume when I flowed with others, not alone. I wove and wound my way through the perils of teaching, always pausing to nurture each and every child who needed me. I continuously sought out others like me and wound far from those who tried to stop my path. There were jealousies and false pretenses that turned my path in different directions.

Not always were the waters smooth sailing. Many times throughout my life I have met with people who did not understand my passion. They were either too comfortable in their chiseled ways or too shallow to notice. Many times these people simply cluttered the landscape along my path, but many other times they tried to block my way or even change me. But the passion that drives me is buried deep within and somehow has always managed to gain strength from resistance. Much like rapids on a river that gain force against the rocks, I would try that much harder to overcome the doubters and the envious people who tried to “tame” me.

Many times, I was disillusioned and thought that I might give up my quest. Many times I became bogged down with politics within a staff or within my school board and thought that I might never reach my goals. Often, the pressure was placed on me to conform to “a program” or one method that educators of the moment believed was the answer to all children’s needs. But I could not lock into that way of thinking. I could not believe in my heart that there was any one program or method that could reach all children. I knew, from drawing on my own childhood experiences, that it might take a new or unconventional method to break through to a child and open doors that no teachers’ manual could predict. It became my belief that an educator could
teach children and a teacher could reach children. My strength, my passion, and my drive became the desire to be "a teacher."

Fortunately, there were dear friends and colleagues for whom I paused, pooled, and shared my cooling, soothing waters. From them I learned a great deal and became stronger in my convictions. The greatest of my friends fed my passion for literacy and pushed me ever farther and faster, encouraging me to build upon my strengths and sweep others along with me. There were children who challenged me and tried to dam me up, who troubled my waters and steered my path. But each time they appeared, I gathered them into the flow of the streaming water, and when I finally had a good grasp on them, I flowed again with renewed energy and commitment to carry them along. I paused many times along the shores to get to know them, to spend time with them, and I hope that they remember me as I remember them. Sometimes, I pooled too long and needed to gather my strength to continue on, but moving was my journey and my destiny: never too long in one place, never complacent, and never unchallenged.

I am the river of learning, of seeking, and of knowing. At times, I know that I am a part of something much bigger, and at times, something of no significance at all. I am at once large and small. I am simultaneously learning and knowing. I have gifts to bear and resources to tap for anyone who cares to know me. I have reservoirs of memories to share and oceans of people whose expertise and opinions I have adopted. But since I still journey, I feel that I will never stop; learning, seeking, pausing, and testing new paths. I am the river. I don't stop here anymore. I continue in my freedom to learn.
As I reflect back now, my river metaphor continued to grow and develop over time. As a very young girl, I recollect my parents telling friends that I was like a babbling brook flitting in and out of the room to talk, to play, to experiment, and to learn. Later on, my mother commented that when I was focused on a problem for which I could not find a solution, I was like a deep, steaming pool, quiet and reflective. When the solution was found, I burst forth like a torrent and sometimes washed others away in my enthusiasm. Early in my teaching career, in conversation with a beloved leader in my school, he told me that I had to seek out a steady course and not overwhelm colleagues with my boundless enthusiasm. He once said to me that “a raging river can be a frightening thing, and it is better to invite others along than to sweep them up in your tide.”

Whether a quiet stream or a raging waterfall, my journey took me on many paths in education, both personal and professional. And my metaphor continues to flow, even now, to help bring momentary inspiration to my writing. But as I look backwards on the journey I have made, no trail was so compelling, so all encompassing as my developing passion for literacy. I examined it from every aspect and perspective and, no matter how my life was altered, the love of literacy took the lead in everything I did on my personal journey. Like a river flows continuously to the sea, I flowed toward the thing that drew me toward it. I climbed over mountains and swept down through valleys, always seeking the thing that drew me into its arms, my sea, my resting place, my ultimate happiness: teaching children to read.
The Journey Begins

The focus of this self-study is to tell the story of my journey through literacy as a lifelong learner both personally and professionally. Who I am as a teacher and who I am as a person could rarely be separated, as I strongly believe we are what we teach. "Life's narratives are the context for making meaning of school situations" (Connelly & Clandinin, 1988, p. 27). Our lives are a collection of stories and experiences that reflect the kind of person we are and the kind of teacher we become. My story consists of my discoveries, growth, change, and ongoing experiences with reading and writing. In this inquiry into lifelong experiences, I view literacy through many lenses: the wonder of childhood, the unsettled nature of adolescence, the mission-seeking vision of teacher training, the perils of the classroom, and the leadership role of Literacy Consultant for a major metropolitan school board. I have looked deeply into some experiences that I have had at each of these stages in my life and examined the impact that they have had on who I am as a person today. All of these experiences add to and illustrate the metaphor of the twisting and turning river which brought me to the place in the journey where I now pause and reflect. "The kind of teacher we are reflects the kind of life that we lead" (Connelly & Clandinin, p. 27).

From childhood and on through adolescence, there were experiences and memories that began to shape what I now understand to be my beliefs about the importance of reading. As a child learning to read, I was subjected to a structured series of instructional approaches that were based more on the colouring and completion of record cards than on the decoding of meaningful text. Reading seemed to be something that was "done" rather than something that was understood and enjoyed. As I reach
back into my recollections to share and reconstruct childhood memories that speak about those encounters with literacy, I am constantly amazed that I ever learned to read at all. By themselves, the memories and stories may seem trivial, but retold in the context of making meaning, I know they add to the bends and twists in the river that make up who I have become as a teacher. I believe that “almost no one lives their life at random... instead, people are going somewhere” (Connelly & Clandinin, 1988. p. 9). As I use this reflective process to examine my life, I clearly see a pattern emerging towards greater and deeper passion for reading.

I want to relate what I have come to know and understand about literacy and what I have discovered about the teaching of reading and writing. I need to pull the memories and stories together and blend them into an understanding of who I have become as a person, as an educator, and as a leader. I have a story to tell, and I hope to add to the body of work that might empower others to see their own journey through literacy in a new and powerful light.

Looking back, I have memories from my childhood of reading being special and meaningful times spent in close quarters with family members. Reading was a natural occurrence prior to slumber, and it was a pastime meant for leisure and relaxation. Reading had a formidable presence in my home. It often began with the delivery of the daily newspaper to the front door, the reading of which consumed a good portion of the breakfast table. During the day, it was not soap operas or even radio that consumed my mother’s free time, but it was precious moments pouring over crossword puzzles and *Readers Digest*. Dinner could not reach the table until my father returned home from work, and even then, not until he devoured the evening newspaper. Later, at bedtime, it
was snuggling and being read to by my older brother or my parents. When the lights went off, it was Caroline, and Curious George, and the Pokey Little Puppy who filled my sleepy thoughts.

_A Journal of Childhood_

Growing up in rural Montreal, I have visions and memories of being read to at an early age by my mother and my older brother. I remember that I wanted certain stories read to me over and over again and that I cherished bedtime storybooks. I conjure up visions of fireplaces and being snuggled up in covers and blankets and being held on a lap or a bedside to read. Although our book collection was small, I remember reading time as being very important and valued in our home. It was like a cherished mantle that was passed on from the oldest to the youngest in the family. My brother read to me, and I, in turn, years later, read to my little sister. However, strange as it may seem, I do not remember being able to read by myself, until I had completed my first novel, a book my mother gave me to read, _Up the Down Staircase_ by Bel Kaufman. I don't remember the feeling that I have spent years instilling in young children through praise of their accomplishment in reading. I have seen their shoulders lift like the swelling of a tide, and I have witnessed their smile broaden like a bending river. I don't remember ever feeling that way myself. I will never know, to this day, why, at the age of 10 years old, I did not recognize that I could read. I was
doing well in school, I was reading to my little sister; but, somehow, I just did not have a feeling, a sense of “readerness.”

Up The down Staircase is a collection of letters, notes and memos written to, with and by a new teacher assigned to her first classroom. It takes the reader through the journey of this young teacher and depicts her difficult struggle with glimpses of notes scribbled back and forth to colleagues on the staff. Her students are challenging and rebellious, but she is a caring and successful teacher. As the year progresses and her students experience successes they have never known, the writings of her students, as shared by the writer, become polished narratives with deep sentiment and esteem for their wonderful teacher. It is a touching and wonderful book. I recall the moment I completed its worn pages and thought to myself, “I did it! I can read!” (Journal Entry: September 1965)

I have often wondered, after the death of my mother, why she chose that book and encouraged me to read it. Did she know, 12 years before, of my destiny to become a teacher? Did she wish to steer me in that direction? Or did she simply want me to take joy in reading? Well, joy I did take, and a teacher I became. I adore reading. I have made the teaching of reading my passion. Will I ever know my mother’s intention? Not really, but I think I already did, even then.

I believe, now, that I did not choose reading to be my passion, but reading chose me! It seems clear to me now that my passion to help kids to read was a manifestation
of my desire to share with them that elated and exhilarated feeling that I had when I realized that I was a reader. That moment that I remember flying down the stairs to announce my membership into the mysterious “club” of readership seems so vivid and powerful to me now that I believe I strove, in every moment of my teaching career, to recreate that feeling of accomplishment in others. Like the river is drawn to the sea, I was pulled to recreate that achievement in young children, adolescents and, now, even adults. Until I revisited that journal entry many times and relived the moment over in my mind, I did not fully understand the impact that that particular event had on my life. Instilling that kind of joy in reading in the hearts of others became my raison d’être. And constantly seeking ways to improve and reach that one child in the room who was struggling seemed to become the fuel that drove me on through resistance and doubt, to keep going and continue on my journey. “To grow, to move forward rather than backward,” seemed to become the “nourishment of my spirit” that helped me become the person and teacher I cherished (hooks, 1989, p. 7).

The Early Years

As I began school, it was clear that I was able to read; this I know because of the comments and grades on numerous report cards that I have kept over these many years. But it was not a conscious pastime on my part as a school-aged child. Reading, as I knew it, was a series of “visitations” with meaningless text, unmotivating short stories, and endless colouring of graph-like charts to indicate completion of reading tasks. I have recollections of the competitive nature of reading and completion of levels as well as the oral round-robin competition of reading without embarrassment or error.
But it was not meaningful. It was not joyful, and it was definitely not satisfying. A story written in my journal reflects the memory best.

Memories of Reading

The teacher had a bell, a tiny, tinkling gold bell, which signaled the beginning of reading time. We always waited, anticipating the sound of that bell to leap from stiff chairs. Waiting, with our hands folded neatly on our desks, knees together, starched, white shirts tucked neatly into scratchy tunics. Waiting. It was the sound of reading. It was the sound of permission to read. That bell was the sound that signaled the class to race to the box, a large, worn, heavy box that housed the reading. The reading itself consisted of story cards with corners that were beginning to peel and shred, all neatly ordered by number and colour in a stepped big box.

She lifts the bell from its resting place, stiffly, like some form of Miss Havisham, stuck and frozen in time; she jiggles the bell, and instantly the room explodes. I leap from my chair with the others to get to the box first! It's reading time! The cards lay before me in their orderly fashion, and fingers and arms and elbows are flailing at the cards. I must have the number 12 card in the red category. It is the last one in the Red Series and then, completion will be mine.

I carry the precious prize to my desk, tripping over others to get to my place to read my red card, number 12. I read it quickly
to finish and answer the 10, simple questions. I find the answers in the story. Literal answers. Done! I have mastered the Red Series.

My next task is to retrieve the Scoring Card and colour in the red column on the card to indicate that I am a better reader and can move on to the next level. It is the reward for the reading and answering all the questions correctly. The reading reward is made more special by the pleasure of taking out the treasured red, velvet snap-case of Prisma Colours, finding the best red, and colouring with precision and finality the Red column, signaling completion, like the ribbon pinned on the chest of the first-place runner.

The Red column is done, and now I must move on to Bronze, Silver, and finally Gold. The questions increase in number. The stories get longer. But the reading and the rewards seem the same. Day in and day out, the incessant repetition and security of progress. Steady, repetitive, monitored success in reading and comprehension. Reading is easy in grade 3.

May comes, and the Reading is completed. The colouring is completed in the Bronze column, the Silver, and even the Gold. The Scoring Card is full, and I am a Reading Success. I am done. I am a reader. Report cards handed out on the last day. It says, Reading “A”, Writing “A.” I am a reader. I am a writer. But am
I? How come I don't know it? (Journal Entry: Written in Reflection, June 1972)

Why does this story leap out? Why does this experience ring so loudly—much louder than the tinkling bell on the oak desk of the woman who used it to signal reading? Why does this thread of the story need to be woven into the fabric of the river landscape? It is my own experience. It is a secret story of a young child told here, recreated in time and space, to be reconstructed into meaning here and now. The bitterness I felt in that room, the empty and hollow reward of “reading” mindless short stories only to fill in endless multiple-choice bubbles on cards, was the only memory I had to share of literacy in my early education. This was a story with special, personal meaning upon which I could draw for understanding when I ventured into teaching young children to read. Why does it ring so loudly? Why does it pull the fabric of the weave of the landscape? Because it is real. It happened. It is the memory I have of success in reading. But the reading itself was empty and meaningless. I believe that over time I came to draw on the feelings I had as a child in this story. I knew that I felt cheated, and yet I was told that I was successful at reading. There was no joy in it, and I’m sure that I did not feel the elation and excitement that I did later on when I was 10 years old and discovered that I was a true reader. I drew upon this experience, often, for strength and guidance in my early years of teaching. Every time I saw the eyes of a child who did not understand, a child who was disinterested or disengaged, I tapped into my “SRA feelings” of disenchantment and made it my mission to change that feeling for that child. Each time a struggling child crossed my path or said, “I don’t get it,” I knew that I had to help that child to recreate the joy of being a reader.
In my reconstruction of this story, I begin to understand my own philosophy and beliefs about teaching reading and where they might have started. I have come to believe that literacy should never be prescribed by “programs” or a routine, mundane “habit.” I believe that reading should evoke the excitement and thrill of a new discovery, a road not traveled before, even a path not chosen. I have always tried to make it fill the hearts and minds of children with the wonder and excitement that I found the day I knew that I was a reader. Never would I allow myself as a teacher to become the worn-out ruin of a lost art or the crumbled and broken pieces of a once-magnificent structure like I remember my own grade 3 teacher to be. As a teacher of reading, I needed to be the bright, shining pebble on the river’s edge. I remember always wanting to become the kind of teacher who makes you want to slip on your rubber boots and step through the slippery rocks just to experience the excitement of reading. I wanted to become the guide, the light, the shining star who makes children want to sail the river, to take the journey, to yearn to open the book. And books? I think I always strove to make them real. Not short story cards, but picture books with pages and illustrations and shiny covers. I believe that a child’s fingers should feel the spine of a new book crack when opened. They should experience the smell of fresh pages opening, or the mustiness of old ones turning in leather-bound volumes. I think these things should be the memories of reading for children. I have tried to achieve this in my classroom and draw every child to the water’s edge.

**Reflections of 1971**

*I first laid eyes on him as he waltzed into guidance class in my high school. He had a “swagger” of confidence and wasted no time in*
launching into rhetorical thought and challenging premises. He looked each one of us in the eyes, and I found that very strange given the experiences I had encountered so far in this hugely overcrowded highschool in suburban Montreal. The other teachers wore the black robes of professors trying to prove that they belonged. This teacher wore only cords and jeans and spoke the words of someone who "knew" something more than the others.

I can't say that at that moment I knew that I was going to be a teacher. In fact, I didn't know—I didn't know anything—but I did know that he was a teacher. No, the teacher! He embodied every element necessary, in my mind, to be called The Teacher. He hated stupidity, hypocrisy, and falseness of any kind. He loved honesty, integrity, and truth. He loved his students, and he loved looking into a person's heart and soul.

I came to know him by way of one of his classes on "being yourself." He challenged us to change the world. I made an appointment at his office and told him that I wanted to do just that but I didn't know how. He told me that I had to start with myself. Instinctively, I was both hurt and surprised. "What is wrong with me that I need to change?" I wondered. And at the same time, I was shocked that he knew I was so unsure of myself and so seemingly worthless at this stage in my perception of "self,"
As I came to know him, I realized that by some strange twist of fate, he did know me. Know me in a way that no one else ever would. He could see through my eyes, and I into his. We became friends, the deepest and most caring friends. I changed so much over those years. We met often. We talked for hours on end, and every time he challenged me to stretch further.

I was number one, he would tell me. I was a "person" who could see into others' eyes and know where I belonged. I would always be a person, and the river would always flow past my door. He was my mentor. I believed him, I gained strength and confidence and I became a teacher because of his inspiration. I would never stand for the "bull," and I would challenge based on my feelings, and I would always put kids first, for they are the future.

He taught me to be me, and that is the greatest gift a teacher can give to a student, a friend, and a person. I will cherish my memories of him, and I will always love enough to keep him alive forever. He believed that once you saw into a person's eyes, you kept each other in memory forever, and he wrote me a poem which I cherish. I have lived my entire life by his teaching and influence,; honesty, integrity, and above all else, being a "person."

I still do... (Journal Entry: 2000)
As an adolescent, I discovered both the love of literacy and the ability to question, challenge, and rebel against the current norms of reading and writing instruction. Reading to learn, as it was taught at the time, was flat in context and meaningless in content. Writing was prescriptive and provided no choice and offered no variety. My journals and my poetry provided a world in which I could challenge any concept and voice any opinion. My mentor and friend continued to encourage me to write my poetry and journals and pushed me ever further to continuing my journey in my love of literacy.

When I share with others, now, that I had no intentions to teach at that time of my life as an adolescent, I am sometimes amazed at how clear the remembering is. I was busy raging at the “machine” of life and injustices, as young adolescents often do, but I was also further developing this love and passion for literacy that needed to be shared. John Lennon said, “Life is what happens to you when you’re busy making other plans” (Lennon & Ono, 1980). I was busy working with children in a hospital as a volunteer, babysitting, and writing poetry, not even noticing at the time that the river was steering me, preparing me to, indeed, become a teacher! The “teacher within, the voice that invites me to honour the nature of my true self” (Palmer. 1998, p. 29) finally emerged and, much to my mother’s delight, I steered my path towards teaching children to read. Looking back now, it would have been, truly, a life unlived had I not chosen this path. But, again, I believe, knowing the inner passion that was being nurtured inside me, teaching chose me! “I do not make the story, the story makes me” (Stafford, 1991, p. 28).
Choosing to Teach

Throughout my teacher education and hands-on teacher training, the significance of my passion for literacy became more clearly established, and I continued to document my learning experiences in my journals. My colleagues in my classes and associate teachers in my practicum placements began to notice the history that was shaping my teaching, the biography that was shaping me as a person.

“Through knowledge and through our stories about our knowledge, we bring a sense of our own identity into focus” (Pagano, 1991, p. 199). I shared the stories of my reading life with students, and they could sometimes identify with my experiences. One of my professors in teacher’s college, after an observation of a reading lesson, told me that I “bring reading to life for these kids and you have a way of making it real and exciting. You are the Bobby Orr of reading teachers!” What an evaluation! I was thrilled at the acknowledgement, but I knew in my heart that I was not “playing by the book.” I was not using the “programs” for reading and writing that were in the classrooms in which I taught. I was finding materials that I “thought” the students might enjoy, and I was not always taking the easy and most popular route to creating my lessons for children.

Years later, in the midst of a workshop on reading, a teacher my own age walked up to me and introduced herself:

You probably don’t remember me, because our classes were so large, but I was in your panel in teacher’s college. I remember you so vividly. You always asked so many questions and were never satisfied with doing things the way that was recommended. You always challenged things! I
really admired you at the time, and I thought how I wanted to be like you as a teacher. And now, here you are presenting in a reading workshop! I really am not surprised.

Once again, throughout my teacher training, I was being steered by a passion and an inner strength that I really did not identify until much later in life. But my journals continued, and my poetry became richer with the questions about where I was going and why I wanted to get there. Still, teaching the love of reading was choosing me as:

some uncomprehended law holds us at a point of contradiction where we have no choice, where we do not like that which we love, where good and bad are inseparable partners impossible to tell apart, and where we – heart-broken and ecstatic – can only resolve the conflict by taking it into our hearts. This used to be called being in the hands of God. Has anyone any better words to describe it? (Florida Scott-Maxwell, as cited by Palmer, 1998, p. 87)

**Standing on Mentors’ Shoulders**

The history of what was being researched about literacy at the time was a part of my history in reading and discovering how it answered my needs in the classroom. And the pages of my journals were becoming the biography of my road along that historical path. The work of Marie Clay (1979), Donald Graves (1983), and Nancy Atwell (1987) on the acquisition of language and the instructional approaches to the teaching of reading and writing were giving voice to thoughts that I had been unable to put to words and theory. These passionate writers and other dedicated researchers were
giving life to thoughts that I had harbored and kindled for many years. Marie Clay stated that reading is “a message-gaining, problem-solving activity which increased in power and flexibility the more it is practiced” (p. 6). Graves and Atwell seemed to empower children with a wealth of freedom and independence through the voice and choice of literacy in the classroom. These were the words that I needed! Their words often appeared quoted in my journals, and they became fodder for my reflections and my teaching practice.

The historical development of the teaching of reading over time had evolved into the research and theory upon which I would stand to give voice to my own beliefs about reading. I would learn, over time, to stand on the shoulders of the work done by these masters to continuously improve upon and refine my own classroom practice. Every time I questioned my practice or looked to reach a single child, I sought the work done by these mentors and made it a part of my story.

As I began my teaching career, my passion for reading and growing as a teacher remained a driving force to teach children to read, write, and enjoy the active and conscious process of communicating their thoughts and feelings. I never lost the desire to improve, learn new strategies, and continue on professional development paths to find new and meaningful interpretations of literacy instruction. Even though I met with many obstacles, including individuals who wanted to mold me into someone else, my goal always remained the same: improve, grow, and better my practice. I attended conferences, purchased books, and continued on my journey of fitting all the pieces together, always with the clear intention of making reading a more meaningful experience for my students than it had been for me. I wanted to set them on their
journey on the river of literacy equipped with all the tools that lifelong learners would need.

In my first teaching position, which was a grade 1 class consisting mostly of students for whom English was not their first language, my desire to teach reading in a meaningful manner developed slowly, gradually, out of necessity, desire, and the love of children. It was not through conventional methods or traditional resources that these children were going to learn to read. Once again, Graves (1983) came to the rescue with his research on the need for children to be immersed in good literature.

As a student of the Hall Dennis Report (1968), and the Formative Years (1975), which were the current curriculum documents of note at the time in Ontario, I found the voice for such instructional strategies as language experience, team teaching, and open-ended learning experiences. It was upon these historically significant building blocks that I managed to begin constructing a personal philosophy for teaching children to read.

As I continued my journey along this river of “becoming” a passionate instructor of literacy skills, I began, gradually, to develop a personal voice, rooted in both my own experience and the historical development of research. This combination of experiences and the desire to learn began to give volume to my voice and to my philosophy and beliefs about reading. It became clear to me that reading was not taught by a “program,” but rather it was taught by caring and compassionate teachers who could tailor instruction to the specific needs of the students. I remember that I was uncomfortable with attaching specific timelines and restraints to skill acquisition in children. I remember beginning to believe that children who were immersed in
language learning would develop at individual rates. And finally, I came to the realization that the experiences that I had had in learning to read were detached and impersonal. Most of the time my teachers had relied on methods based on the presumption that reading was a rote activity, with little meaning other than passing tests of achievement. I then knew that the literacy experiences that I wanted to provide for children had to be meaningful, motivational, and individualized to include all learners.

It is through these personal experiences and historical milestones in reading that I found justification in collecting notes, reflections, and journals that now form the cornerstone that helps me link theory to my own personal practice. They became what is now my autobiographical story. They gave me my voice from within.

Each time I walk into a classroom, I can choose the place within myself from which my teaching will come, just as I can choose the place within my students toward which my teaching will be aimed… I can teach from curiosity or hope or empathy or honesty, places that are real within me as are my fears. I can have fear, but I need not be fear – if I am willing to stand someplace else in my inner landscape.” (Palmer, 1998, p. 57)

As a young teacher, I was starting to script the story of who I was becoming as a person. I was taking a life lived and sharing it through story with the students I encountered. In turn, the students were adding depth of experience to my life and adding meaning and fuel to my story. The story, it seemed, was beginning to be told in small increments while growing in length, depth, and breadth simultaneously. It was the beginning of the paradox that I was living in becoming a teacher. I felt I had a mission to teach children to read and to experience the joy of reading as I had, but as I
encountered each child, they too had stories to be honoured and their stories became an integral piece of my own life as a person.

Just as the river travels its path and swells with the rains of the spring, I was growing and changing with each new teaching experience I had. I gained in momentum as the children’s stories became my own. Like tributaries that meet the main branch of the river, we linked and joined in everlasting and permanent ways to flow together through time. As the river gains strength and momentum toward the sea, I was being fueled by the students, my experiences, and the wonderful research that was being done in the field of reading. I was finding my voice, and it was fueled by the voices of others.
CHAPTER TWO: FINDING A METHOD TO SHARE MY STORY

You again? I am reminded of the moments in time when we see ourselves so clearly and deeply. It reminds me of moments when the soul, heart, and mind are so gently intersecting, and you stop in that blissful second of comfort and recognition, and familiarity

— ah, yes, you again? (Journal Entry, May 2002)

Thoughts like this one, from the pages of my own journals, have been my survival through troubled times. They have been my thinking tool when I had to work through difficult moments. The pages became a discussion with my deepest “self” as I pondered ideas and solutions on those blank pages. The pen became my method for coming to understanding, and it was always through the pen that I came to know my own mind, my convictions, and the purpose for my journey in life. When any path I have taken seemed too rough, my journal pages would grace the bedside table and long into the night I would scratch my questions, confusion, and my thoughts. By morning, things always seemed calmer. Somehow, the very fact that the thoughts were written by dawn made the sun rise a bit brighter and the new day lay out ahead of me more clearly. It was in my early years of journaling that my metaphor of the river developed in a more meaningful way. I have come to know that the way of my teaching is evidenced in the stories of my life. I understand that “knowledge is narratively composed, embodied in a person and expressed in practice” (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000, p. 28)
It was in high school that I had been told by my dear, lifelong friend and teacher, that my approach to life was much like a river. But I discovered more and more that I could rage against barriers like the rapids of a torrent or I could calmly drift past the trivial without a care or concern. I could rest and settle calmly like a still pool with people I trust and admire, and then move on like a babbling brook to seek out new avenues and experiences. I began to use the river metaphor throughout my journals to steer and guide my thoughts, choices, and decisions. The choices I have made are represented by the bends and turns in the river. The waterfalls and rapids have been the challenges that tried to keep me from my path. The rocks symbolize the obstacles, sometimes people, who tried to steer my course of action in a direction I knew to be against my convictions. And, finally, the calming pools of water were the people from whom I learned, my peers and mentors, from whom I gained strength to move forward once again. Rarely have I ever stayed for long. The river continued to flow and continued to reveal itself in my journal entries, but the fodder for the narrative was waiting to be written.

The Story, Experience, and Narrative

It was in reading Connelly and Clandinin’s work on narrative inquiry that I came to realize how my written journey would unfold on paper. Their work describes the study of narrative as the study of how humans experience the world (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000). As a teacher trying to place experiences into a recognizable form, I found that my journals, collected over time, could be shaped and pieced together to form part of my method for this self-study.
Narrative names the structured quality of experience to be studied, and it names the pattern of inquiry for its study. To preserve the distinction we use the reasonably well-established device of calling the phenomenon “story” and the inquiry “narrative.” Thus, we say that people by nature lead storied lives and tell stories of those lives, whereas narrative researchers describe such lives and collect and tell stories of them, and write narratives of experience. (p. 2)

I believe that narrative and storytelling play important roles in the lives of teachers. It is through our experiences and the way in which we relate those experiences to one another that we share common ground. In my experience, teachers tend to share their stories orally, in the staffroom, or at parties. As natural storytellers, we share experiences we have had with children who left an impression on us. I think we enjoy sharing moments in time, moments that have left an indelible mark on our memories, and I think we share the inventive processes that we have found to be successful with our students. I believe that it is in this storying that experienced teachers find a way of “passing the torch” to their younger colleagues. Much like the elder native people pass on the history of the tribe to the young tribe members, teachers share their knowledge and experience socially with other teachers. Teachers’ stories and well-remembered events take on an organized narrative structure or story line that is easily recognized in the profession (Carter, 1993).

Wherever teachers gather socially, stories will be told, experiences will be shared, and lessons will be learned. For it is within this unique “club” of storytellers, I
believe, that new storytellers are formed, new histories are written, and new teachers are transformed into reflective practitioners.

I remember hearing my own teachers storytelling with one another. At the time, I imagined that they had a special bond or attachment and that I would not be a part of that exclusive unit. But, over time, I found myself seeking out those who would share stories with me. I began to learn from the stories that were told, and I began, slowly, to adopt the "voice" that I heard in their words. For me, that was the voice of experience, and it was the voice of caring about children and about how they learn. As I look back upon it now, in the present, I realize that it was, and is, this "voice" that takes the commonplace events and experiences of teaching and transforms them into narrative accounts: stories rich with meaning. The voice I hear in my narrative now is reflective of the combination of voices I have encountered through my life experiences. I combine the voices of children who have crossed my path with the voices of mentors and researchers who have influenced me. I gather together the voices of great teachers and combine their histories with my own. The voice that is created is a voice that has grown and changed over time. My own multiplicity of voice is an artful river landscape which travels through new teacher, inner self, leader, and mentor. It is the personal signature that makes the story and the writing my own and gives it meaning when passed on to others.

Bullough and Pinnegar (2001) state that self-study researchers "stand at the intersection of biography and history" (p. 15). They talk about "nodal moments" of life learning and how they are enlightening and crucial to self-study work. Stories that are told by teachers have the unique quality of forming the history of that teacher's life.
Then, they often become a part of the stories and histories of other teachers. It is in this way that I want to build my story, my history, and pass it on to others. In looking back at the past, interpreting inwardly, applying thoughts and ideas to the future, and sharing outwardly, I can develop my history through narrative and offer my story to others.

Clandinin and Connelly (1992) write, "methods for the study of personal experience are simultaneously focused in four directions: inward and outward, backward and forward" (p. 417). They explain that the storyteller in a self-study asks questions in all four directions to bring form and substance to experiential research. This inquiry process takes on the form of an autobiography through time. I use this as a framework to share my stories in this study. I choose to rely on the "reflexive inquiry situated within the context of personal histories to make connections" (Cole & Knowles, 2000, p. 2). The connections that continue to drive my story are the ones from early experiences that seem to have shaped the person and teacher that I have grown into.

It seems natural, then, from the pages of my journals and reflections that I should choose to tell my story and relate my experiences using narrative as my methodology and method. Narrative inquiry offers me a vehicle to give voice to my personal story and share how I re-vision it over time. Glesne (1992) uses the term "autoethnography" to explain this narrative process of inquiring into the self. Using journal entries collected over many years, I can share my experiences with reading and the consciousness-raising experiences that I have logged about the reading process. My interpretation of these journals and the sharing of these experiences enable me to construct meaning from stories remembered and shed light on the decisions that I have made and the paths that I have chosen over time. As I reconstruct in the present some of
the essential learning moments in my life in the past, I am able to interpret some of the
curves and turns that have brought me to know who I am as a person. It is in the
description of these experiences and in the retelling of many learning twists and turns
along the way that I can continue to employ the metaphor of the river journey in this
study. Clandinin and Connelly remind me that, "difficult as it may be to tell a story, the
more difficult but important task is the retelling of stories that allow for growth and
change" (2000, p.71). The stories in my journals, as they lend themselves to my
narrative, were reflections on paths taken and decisions made. The inquiring nature of
the writing was always intended to make connections from experience to growth and
change in my practice in the classroom.

By choosing narrative, I am empowered to reflect on my personal stories and
connect their meaning through interpretation to my personal and professional life.
Denzin writes, "Following Dewey, I believe that the methods for making sense of
experience are always personal and ... one learns about method by thinking about how
one makes sense of one's own life" (1994, p. 501). I can then invite others to travel
along with me on the journey by sharing the stories to see how I have come to know
myself as a teacher. "Stories lived and told educate the self and others" (Clandinin &
Connelly, 2000, p. xxvi). In writing narrative, I choose to study my self, my choices,
and the momentum that keeps me going forward by looking at the events of my past.
Through interpretation, I begin to illuminate connections to the person and teacher that
I have become.

Glesne speaks about the language of the researcher (1992). She notes that
meaning is often more complex than the mere definition of the words on the page.
Careful word choice helps give voice to the interpretations I have made and adds perspective to the lens of reflective journaling. Thick description is an essential addition to my methods as I recreate moments in time where my senses were heightened and I was made aware of crucial discoveries. Embellishing and adding sensory details to my text helps me to “set the scene” as I story specific moments that are vivid in memory, as well as events and experiences as I remember them now. Excerpts from my journals serve to illustrate situations more clearly by illuminating the details, the thoughts, and senses of past moments and experiences.

Observation generates the kind of cultural knowledge and understanding of any everyday situation, but it is the interpretation of actions and reactions of others that give the researcher his/her data (Adler, 1972). In my case, observations of my students led to my writing of many journal entries over the years, made after intense reflection on a specific experience or literacy lesson. Many more journal entries were made directly following observation of my students practicing with and using language in both reading and writing. I know that the act of writing these observations in my journal provided me with a link between literacy acquisition and my developing reconstruction of my own theories and beliefs about reading. By themselves, my observations would not be as useful to me as a method for recording in my self-study. But my recorded observations have played a critical part in leading me to reflect and inquire into what I have come to know about reading. I write as a way of knowing myself and where I stand in the river landscape. Laurel Richardson (1994) explains how the act of writing becomes a method in self-inquiry.

Although we usually think about writing as a mode of “telling” about the
social world, writing is not just a mopping-up activity at the end of a research project. Writing is also a way of "knowing" – a method of discovery and analysis. (p. 516)

My journal writing has always been a method in my life to help me interpret moments in time and their impact on my life. I write to enlighten my thoughts and reflections in order to grow as a person and as a teacher. Without inquiry into the events I experience, the experiences have no connection to my life. I cannot interpret the meaning of those experiences without making those connections. As a writer, teacher and person, I choose narrative as a method out of need, habit, and constant connection to a life lived. I have always written, and I have always looked back upon the writing as a way of making sense of the events in my life.

As a writer, my narrative focuses on the emergence of my own understandings that have come to be my driving force in the teaching of reading. I choose to use a lens, not of the world anew, but rather, of the world as it exists, as I have experienced it (Kincheloe, 2000). I choose to open the doors and allow myself into a world which was built over time and experiences, reflections and musings, as well as questions and doubt. But above all, it is my world of experience and the way that I have crafted the pieces of my learning puzzle together that shape the direction and path of my journey. And as the doors open wide and the fresh air drifts in, I once again write and ponder in order to "see" myself in a new way with clearer understanding.

Once it became clear how I was going to share my story, I had to consider the reasons behind my desire to write this narrative. Why do I want to tell this story of experience and developing understanding? Furthermore, why do I need to share this
story with others? The answers, it seems, were still within the pages of my journals and in my poetry. It was in a recent move that I discovered journals of my poems, written since adolescence and stored for many dusty years without being disturbed. This journal entry recounts the experience:

The Discovery

As I slid the knife edge under the crusted and yellowed tape on the box, I opened a familiar smell along with the dust and must. The box flaps lifted, and the scent of old paper, and typewriter ribbon somehow combined to form memories. The scent conjured up my grandmother's old Corona and the round, lettered buttons that had to be pushed with great force to make an imprint on the pages. And the pages were stored in a musty-smelling cupboard in her dining room hutch, a small confined space that combined linens, envelopes, and fresh, clean, heavy bond.

I knew instantly, just from the smell, what the box contained. It was full of my journals, pages penned since I was 12. And, here, some 30 years later, I discovered them again, like some ancient Mayan ruin. And just like the archeologist who claims the discovery, I began to carefully, gingerly, pick through the rubble and gently brush away the dust. The dust particles were caught rising in the stream of morning sunlight coming through the basement window, and as if a message were being sent, I lifted a volume of stories to uncover the real treasure beneath-my poetry collections!
There, at the very bottom of the forgotten box, glistening with mildew from the dampness of concrete floors and 30 years of storage in dark basements, were my poems. There were four books, begun in high school in Montreal and continued up until my early teaching career, just waiting to be opened and read and rediscovered. My fingers slipped through the pages of heavy bond from that old Corona and then through the onion-skin stage. (I remember thinking that it was very cool to type on onion-skin paper because you didn’t have to press the keys as hard and you could sketch backgrounds to the poetry after it was typed. I think that it coincided with using Peacock Blue pens in school—very "cool"!)

Each book of poems had a cover designed with favourite pictures clipped with care from a magazine. One was a Norman Rockwell of people talking/gossiping in the manner of "broken telephone," one was a scene from Chesapeake Bay at dawn, another was a tall ship on a calm sea, and the last was that of a gnarled, grisly, dark-skinned hand clutching the white, porcelain face of a doll. I sat down on the cold cement and read for hours... (Journal Entry, June 2000)

In the moments that passed and the reading and remembering that followed, I was reminded that I had a story to tell. Those pages spoke to me as if from the past, that I must write it all down and weave the story that I needed to tell. I was reminded, once again, of the value of a teacher’s story as I have come to know it. Was it the story of a journey—a journey that has more meaning if it is shared? Is it my journey, the journey of
just one teacher, and yet there may be many who might connect their teaching stories to my own? I needed to rethink the story as it was unfolding in the pages in my hands and decide if there was evidence of the inner landscape of which Parker Palmer speaks in *The Courage to Teach* (1998). Palmer describes the deep inquiry that “honors and challenges the teacher’s heart,” from the superficial to the “inner landscape of the teaching self” and examines the questions that we must ask ourselves:

- What subjects shall we teach?
- How? – what methods and techniques are required to teach well?
- Why? – for what purpose and to what ends do we teach?
- Who? – who is the self that teaches? How does the quality of my selfhood form – or deform – the way I relate to my students, my subject, my colleagues, my world? (p. 4)

I knew that I was reading the questions, the struggles, the solutions, and the motivations which I had wrestled with over many years. The images were strong, like maps of the river journey, laying out the course and the reasons that had led up to many actions I taken. Had I not asked myself these very questions often over time? What answers had I found? Or had I found any at all? I began to believe that the one answer or purpose that continued to drive me onward was that desire to recreate “life” in reading for children. Could I ignite the love of reading and the delight that I had felt when I was 10 years old? Could I give them that same feeling every time they read a book?

One poem that I rediscovered in my collection was written at the end of my first year of teaching. It seemed to me that many of my colleagues cared very little about their students’ literacy and learning but cared very much about ordering new
“programs” that promised to do the teaching for them. It frustrated me and, though in my heart I felt it was misguided, I was not in a position to convince them otherwise. But I insisted and would not order the “programs” for my students. Once more, as I often did when I could not solve a problem, I wrote:

Teacher

I said today that if I knew then, what I know now,

I would not have chosen this course, this wretched path along the river.

I would not have endured the restraint and the remodeling

That is being pushed on me.

I would not have suffered the lashing tongues

And the bitter insincere smiles of peers, not trying their best.

I would have rebelled against the language, the lack of emotion,

And, most of all, the ambiguity.

I said today this if I knew then, what I know now,

I would not have passed this way.

I would not have accepted the confinement

On my very being.

I would not have seen those children’s unfeeling eyes.

I said today that if I knew then, what I know now,

I would have run far from this place.

But I would not have been honest with myself.
For I WOULD do it all again,

If not only for what it has taught me about dealing with falseness and insensitivity,

But if it only stopped me and made me think – once –

Then I would choose this path again.

For being a teacher is the only true drive that steers my vessel

Through a life of false ideals.

And by transcending the false with the words of this poem

And the eyes of those children

I can truly walk away with a feeling of accomplishment

I did it ... and I would do it again! (J. Onody, 1978)

There, within those words, lay the “why” for constructing my story. It contained an epiphany of sorts that helped me to understand why I needed to begin this narrative study. It was a story lying dormant, bursting to get out of the musty pages and into the classrooms, the children, the teachers, and, most of all, into who I have become. This poem reminded me that I was here, in this profession, for one reason that steered my passion. I wanted to find ways to reach every student and give them the joy in reading that I had discovered as a 10-year-old. I could not reconcile taking the easy path. In fact, it was often the road less traveled and involved much more work with individual children.

As I continued my journey and my written accounts of that journey, I felt the growing desire to share those stories as I remembered teachers sharing their stories with me in the past. I began to believe that in some small way others might benefit from the stories that I could tell. The stories of strategies that worked and failures that didn’t. The stories of
children and the moments of discovery and joy in reading. My stories made of experiences and inquiry.

I am in a position now in my school board where I work with new teachers every day. I recognize that they must experience some of the frustrations that I felt at the time I wrote that piece of poetry and, maybe, in the sharing, I could help them to get through to the next day, their next teaching assignment, or even the next turn on their journey. Many times, new teachers are faced with the choice of proceeding as they believe in their hearts or going along with the pressures that can occur on a staff. Often, they need support to resist the ways and means that are being forced upon them. As I reflect on this poem once again, I wonder if I have shared this story often enough with new teachers. Do I tell them that it is alright to follow your heart with students? Do I share this feeling with them when they need the support?

These questions remind me to write down and share the experiences I have had. I need to tell others about the many children who passed through my doors and opened my books, children who, I believe, benefited in some small way from strategies I had tried. I want to recount my memories of those children and those methods I had used to reach them. I do so in the hope that I might possibly lighten the load of just one teacher who would reflect through the story I told. I could share those children, those ideas. I could share what had come to be my very existence. Narrative inquiry could take me there.

Norman Denzin (1994) states that interpretation is an art form and that it is not mechanical or formulaic. It was clear to me in the past that the pages of those journals and my poems were guiding me through both my story and the need to interpret the meaning of the experiences that were shaping my journey. Now, in writing this text, I
see that I was learning lessons that shaped the person and the teacher that I have become. As I was writing and reflecting on the experiences I was having, I was learning and growing as a teacher and as a person. My commitment and passion were growing ever stronger. I tell my story and reconstruct lessons learned to share with others who may find personal and professional connections in my story.
CHAPTER THREE: MY STORY BEGINS: TEACHING AND LEARNING WITH YOUNG CHILDREN

In my first classroom, the very first days of my career, I used my journals to help me through each day and guide my thoughts. The reflections I made provided the light for me to "see" precious moments and events that were unfolding. Each story that I entered asked over and over again if I was doing the right thing. Was I reaching the children? Was I teaching reading the best way I knew in order to reach them? What was driving me? Was it still the desire to create that burst of joy I had felt to learn that I was a reader? Did I want each child to share in that feeling? The story that leaps out of my memory now is one written after my very first day as a teacher. I was assigned to a grade 1 class and had been hired, on the telephone, the evening before classes began in September of 1977.

A Teacher is Created

The classroom was a two-pod, open-concept area with what seemed like endless walls and windows. The light streamed in to reveal nubby carpet and newly tiled areas for play spaces. New rubberized curtains dispensed a medicinal smell into the air that one could taste over time on the tongue like a bitter lemon. My colleague on the other side of this abyss was also hired the night before, and our glances at each other across the room expressed our thoughts of panic and flight. A brief survey of the room revealed no chairs, tables, desks, books, pencils, nor any object that would convince a bystander that this was a primary classroom. Suddenly, a small, elderly, female figure broke the
...
shadow of the doorway. Curtly and efficiently, we were welcomed by the principal, who informed us that this teaching area had been cleared out to give up space to a summer, recreational program. The furniture had not been returned because they did not know if and when they were getting teachers for these two classes. My colleague and I exchanged glances, realizing we were the nonexistent teachers for these last-minute grade 1 classrooms. In our hands, we felt the crisp push of class lists filled on both sides with first and last names totaling 88!

The rest of the morning was a blur. I scrambled into action, believing with all my heart that there was something I could accomplish in the few short seconds prior to the bell. There was no time to retrieve furniture—that could wait. I quickly found chart paper, markers, and retrieved several storybooks that I had brought in my car. My colleague collected some crayons and paper, and the caretakers moved in two “teacher” desks just as the bell rang. We greeted our students, met anxious parents and grandparents, and embarked on our day with every bit of grace and panache as if we knew what we were doing. We spent the entire day reading books and poetry and singing songs! (Journal Entry, September 1977)

As I reflect on this journal entry now, in the present, I wonder how I ever stayed in teaching at all, let alone began to develop meaningful beliefs about the art of educating children. Though I had attended seemingly endless classes in teacher’s
college and practiced the craft of teaching on countless groups in other teacher’s classes, I was not sure that I really “knew” anything at all! Until that phone call on Labour Day night, I had all but given up hope of ever teaching. I had even accepted another job in advertising, and my brother had told me not to get locked in “my ivory tower” and get out into “the real world.” How was I ever going to really become a teacher? Was I going to help these children? All these doubts, I recall, simply fueled me forward in my growth. And sitting down in the evenings with my journal and pen in hand gave me the ability to light a candle and illuminate my experiences. Over time, I began to see meaning in events, and I could reconstruct the moments that began to give shape and structure to my beliefs about teaching and learning.

**Reading in Grade 1: The Passion is Formed**

*The floor and that nubby carpet became our new learning space. The children and I spent days learning new names, singing, chanting rhymes, clapping, and moving in rhythm. They shared stories and songs from their Italian heritage and I began teaching them nursery rhymes from my childhood. But it was not long into our time together that an imaginary warning light began flashing in the “teacher space” of my mind: that place where instinct and training somehow come together and send messages to the rest of the brain. As I looked deeply into those many sets of deep, dark, brown eyes gazing and smiling at me, I suddenly realized that I was teaching them songs and rhymes easily accessible to children of the Sesame Street generation, but they did not know them! They were mouthing and imitating the words and*
gestures with me, but they did not recognize any of the patterns or rhythms. They were the children of first-generation Italian immigrants, and they had not experienced these traditionally English-Canadian songs, chants, and rhymes. Many had not attended Kindergarten. In fact, for them, the language patterns were foreign, backwards, and challenging. As for meaning, I suspected that I might as well be teaching them a new language. It was not long before I realized that I was.

Shiny, new furniture arrived one day along with boxes and boxes of beautiful, crisp new books for the children. I eagerly ripped open box after box, unleashing the smell of newly printed texts, only to be bitterly disappointed. Primers, they were called, and pre-primers, filled with magnificently coloured illustrations and stilted, unnatural text. They brimmed with brilliant and catchy titles, but the stories were as far removed from the experiences of these children as their Italian songs were from me. The second story in the pre-primer that I was to share with little ones contained the word “SCAMP, ”, a word that I had barely ever used and might as well be some alien language for these children. But the word was there because the letters S-C-A-M-P had been introduced by then, and so, that was the word they should be able to read. Read, indeed! These children needed to speak, play, and experience the English language. They needed immersion in the rhyme and rhythmic patterns of language. They needed predictable stories
that would spark their interest in reading. They needed experiences
that would develop a store of familiar vocabulary from which to draw.
They needed to hear language. They needed to touch and taste the
words on their tongues. They needed to hear the sounds in their hearts
before any of them would leave their mouths. But most of all, they
needed me—not those books! For I had become their teacher, and I
would make every effort within my power to give them the gift of
reading that had been so precious to me as a child. I would create a
classroom in which language was rich and generous. Words would
always be new, exciting, and accessible. Books and stories would be
plentiful and touchable and inviting.

The classroom changed that day. It wasn't a room anymore. It
was a place of sparking excitement. It was a learning environment
filled with cooking with words, painting with words, building with
words, dancing with words, moving, touching, molding, and crafting
with words. Charts and print brimmed forth from every available
space in the room, and piece by precious piece, my words on the
charts were replaced by the children's words with paint and
plastiscene and coloured sand. The scent of crayon and tempera paint
was mingled with sounds of story and song. Words became phrases,
and phrases became sentences. Sentences became rhyme, and little
eyes twinkled with delight at the sounds that were coming from their
own mouths. It was not a quiet space, this new classroom; it was filled
with tape recordings, children’s voices chiming in with rhyme, and the voices of learners developing and experiencing the joy of language. It was the beginning of reading. (My Story of The First Months, 1977)

Journal entries like this one helped me stay grounded in the beliefs that I was beginning to form about literacy acquisition and the needs of young readers and writers. Like Annie Dillard (1974) in Pilgrim at Tinker Creek, these moments became for me the “literature of illumination” that could capture and preserve precious memories frozen in time, to revisit when inspiration was needed. I was still striving to create a passion for reading in children the way I had accidentally fallen upon it when I was 10 years old. I did not want them to wait that long! I wanted them to feel the passion as early as possible.

But there were countless entries in my journals that were of another type. I realized very early in my career that my own experiences, though telling, were not enough to completely formulate my direction in instructing young children to read and write. Was I teaching these children to the best of my ability? Were there ways and means “out there” that could help me reach these children? In a reflective way, I would always question if my methods were reaching the students, and I would reflect on both successes and failures to examine how I could improve. I began seeking out the books of the research “gurus” of reading instruction. I attended numerous conferences on literacy learning, took notes, and reflected later on the research presented and how it fit into my emerging beliefs.
Mentors Along the Journey

It seemed to me that the teaching of reading and writing to students of all ages presented very different challenges and issues but still contained very similar themes. Several of these themes were beginning to emerge from the research that I was reading at this time in my career. Early literacy, according to Brian Cambourne (1988), is acquired through complete immersion in language: oral, visual and written. It was with this in mind that I filled my own classroom with books, listening stations and all forms of writing tools with which my students could express themselves. Looking back, I see that my classroom had taken on an almost artistic portrait of children involved in and excited about learning to read and write.

Observed One Morning

The room is a buzz of activity. Every centre is filled with happy, excited faces. Every hand contains a pencil, pen, crayon, book, or paintbrush, and every aspect of the room speaks of language learning.

I had been away the day before, and I uncovered a note on my desk amid the clutter of the previous day which stated simply, "Your class is amazing! Every child knows what to do and where to go for their reading! They share reading with those who cannot yet read on their own and they write or draw their experiences with stories! How do you do it? Can I come back—just to visit and watch?" (Journal Entry: December, 1978)
In looking back over this entry in my journals now, I can see that I was learning lessons from my distant mentors: the researchers in literacy. I see that I was constructing my instruction of these young learners using bits of what I already knew about them and cementing it together with the expertise of others.

I learned very early that literacy seemed to be acquired by children at differing rates based upon factors like motivation, prior knowledge, and emotional connection with literature. I could see, through observation and record-keeping, that the “penny” would drop for these children at very different times. It was through reading the work of Piaget, written in the 1920s, that I began my own exploration of children’s thinking and learning. Piaget examined not so much what children know, but how they come to know, and he expanded on his theories to develop his six levels of cognitive development (1977). His theories provided the insight at that time for all early childhood education and were my bible as a teacher of young children. Through reflecting on my experiences with children learning to read, and combining those reflections with his developmental theories, I came to accept the varying rates of learning among young children. I remember what a relief it was to finally have some understanding as to why children acquired language skills in different ways and acquired reading skills at different times! I think now that Piaget helped to shape the way that I taught reading to my students. I learned to allow time for my students to develop the necessary skills they needed to become readers, and I used a wide variety of teaching strategies to try to reach each and every child through their diverse learning styles.
Donald Graves (1983) also opened my eyes and built my awareness of the needs of young literacy learners to develop as efficient readers and writers.

All children need literature. Children who are authors need it even more. Because children write daily and across the curriculum, their need for information is raised significantly. They need to be surrounded with poetry, stories, information books, biography, science and history, imaginative and factual books.... Children’s literature covers the entire span of human experience and knowledge. (p. 67)

In his earliest writings and conference lectures, Graves touted the need for children of all ages to be surrounded with good literature. Many educators at that time picked up on Graves’ theories and incorporated the notion of immersing students in quality literature frequently during the school day. The building of the classroom library with an assortment of genre, and both fiction and nonfiction selections became the focus of many educators (Schwartz 1987). Both Graves and Schwartz believed that the opportunity to build literacy skills at any age depends on the students’ ability to readily access a wide variety of literature. Because of the work of Graves and the supportive, teacher-friendly text of Susan Schwartz, I too strove to provide rich literary experiences to match the needs and interests of the students in my classroom. I read to my students on every occasion that I could, and I made it my personal goal to send children home with books every day. I was making connections and fundamental discoveries from these “mentors” in reading research that had begun to shape and mold my beliefs and my passion for teaching reading.
Reading For The Love Of It!

The Reading Conference was enlightening! I feel as though I have been lifted out of myself and transported into a moment where everything makes sense; I want to know if Graves has been in my classroom. He seems to know and understand my students! His words and ideas seemed to be directed right to my ears and, as I listened, it was as if a glow of light had come streaming into the room. My efforts to surround my kids in good literature were not wasted. My ideas about chanting and marching to rhythm and rhyme day in and day out are useful endeavors! It is so uplifting to think that I am on the right path with the directions I take in the classroom! (Journal Entry, November 1980)

In reflecting on this journal entry, I can remember my visit to hear Graves speak as if it was in the present. I connected with his words in a very meaningful way. I believed that the children in my classroom needed to have authentic reasons to read and write, and this seemed to be a fundamental message that Donald Graves was sending. I felt as if he might be speaking to me personally, and I feel now, in looking back, that this was a monumental experience that shaped the way I taught reading and writing from then on. I began to notice a very clear pattern in the lessons that I was learning from the leading experts in literacy theory at the time. I can see, in the present that I still teach with many of those early lessons learned as the very foundation of my beliefs. Even today, in my role as Literacy Consultant, I can hear the echoes of Schwartz and Graves within my own words. As I speak with new teachers, I find myself passing on the lessons I have learned and the experiences that made those
lessons so meaningful to me. In hearing my own words to those new teachers, I have often wondered what other lessons I learned in the past that shaped my present instruction. Were there other “mentors” who guided me on my journey without ever knowing me?

Upon reflection, I think another mentor and reading researcher who shaped the way that I taught young children to read was Brian Cambourne (1988). He wrote that the teaching of literacy could not be fragmented and isolated from the other systems of language learning. He believed that if children are presented with “real” reading and writing experiences, then the acquisition of the conventions of language should be taught within those experiences. When my own students read out of genuine interest and wrote with real intention, they were more likely to retain and utilize the proper conventions of communication. When reading and writing had little purpose other than meeting curriculum and content demands, my students seemed to lose interest in reading and could not be motivated to write. Cambourne proposed that the “whole” child must be engaged in literacy acquisition and that teaching skills in isolation creates an unnatural learning environment.

My own teaching experiences in the classroom seemed to lead me, in a very natural way, to the discovery of Whole Language, and I fully embraced its philosophy. I believed in the simultaneous development of the whole child, and I began developing literacy experiences in my classroom that would provide the children with reasons to read and write that were genuine and unique. I quickly discovered that children were the best indicators of their own learning styles. Watching and observing them closely helped me to plan reading and listening activities that excited them to continue to read
and write. Whole Language instruction seemed to be, in theory, a very close connection to the way that I was delivering literacy instruction to my students. Reading aloud to the students, surrounding them with good literature, and teaching skills within the context of the stories and language experiences were many of the strategies that I was already using. In looking back over the lessons I was learning in the past, I can see clearly now that the move toward Whole Language was a strong influence for me. This style of teaching played a leading role in who I am today and in the beliefs that I share with others.

As I continued to read my journals and began reconstructing the meaning they held for me, I came across an entry that reminded me of a local mentor and teacher who impacted my beliefs and ignited my passions in the past. In listening to the passion and commitment of David Booth one evening, I found meaning and direction to take forward into my own practice:

*David Booth came to our Reading Association meeting tonight and he read to us! He read with passion and insight and spoke with an openness about reading to children that I had never experienced before!*  
*His tenor, the rhythmic dance of his words, enveloped me and took me on a journey back to times when my family read to me as a child. This must be the way children feel when I read to them in the classroom! I must make it the way my children feel in my classroom. (Journal Entry, January 1981)*

In rereading and remembering this journal entry, I can still feel the excitement I felt after listening to Booth address us. He was inspiring! He had the ability to take the
simplest of stories and retell them in a way that drove me, as a young teacher, to new heights. I knew that I had much to learn from him, and I continued to meet him in other venues along my journey.

**Resource Teachers’ Conference-2001**

At one event, recently, I was asked to thank David Booth as the keynote speaker at our literacy conference. With delight and pride, I accepted, and I finally put into words the impact that he has had on my teaching. I shared with him, and the audience, how I strove to take in and learn everything that would help me become a better teacher and meet the needs of my students. I recounted for him the many times that he had inspired me and sometimes even gave me reason to move on in my career. I shared how I had struggled with the students who seemed to take so long for learning to take place, and how he had taught me patience. I told him how I often worried about and reexamined every lesson I taught and how he had shared with us the fact that he had done the same in his class each and every day.

Finally, I shared with him that he had inspired me, in the present, to work with other teachers and help them to motivate children to read and write. When the thank-you speech ended, I realized that I had made a connection to events in the past that had shaped me forever. He also realized the impact that his words had had on my journey, and he softly spoke in my ear, “Thank you for connecting, and make sure you write it down!” (Journal Entry, 2001)
I think that as I reflect over this story and remember other mentors who helped guide me on the path to this text, I realize that I have continued to learn right along with my students. When a new challenge arises, I research, read, and attend conferences. With each new mentor that I have encountered, I have incorporated the beliefs that were meaningful for me, in my own experience, into my teaching of reading and writing.

It was many years later that I discovered the works of Cunningham & Allington (1994) and Nancy Atwell (1987). But I can see in the present that I had found needed answers to many of the questions that I had begun to experience. How do I motivate reluctant readers? How can I build success for all students in my classroom? Both of these researchers believe that children need to feel competent in their reading and writing abilities in order to retain motivation in the classroom. I think Patricia Cunningham states it plainly and clearly when she writes, “Success precedes motivation” (p. 233). Once students feel that they are doing something where they can achieve success, they will participate more fully. The focus, then, I believed, should be not on the acquisition of grades, but rather on the improvement of the individual student. As with Atwell, Cunningham agrees that teachers and students must work together to track the progress of the students and that the process of literacy learning is more important than the individual products that they may produce. Indeed, in my own classroom in years gone by and throughout my teaching experiences, I saw that children would progress through stages of literacy at very differing rates. It seemed to me that my duty as their teacher was to track that progress and provide instruction based on their needs. I still believe that classroom instruction that arbitrarily divides
students into groups or consistently treats them as a whole class cannot meet learners’
diverse needs. Cunningham advocates larger blocks of time to provide these students
with more opportunity to read and write and also with a wider variety of choice and
exposure to a large and varied selection of genres. She clarifies that all readers and writers often need topic selection modeled for them in order to make responsible choices, but that, in time, students can expand their interests and embark on new ideas that sustain their own motivation.

My experiences in the classroom supported this research, that as long as students felt that they were progressing successfully towards becoming more literate, they continued to make good choices for their own learning. The following journal entry helped me to reflect on the whole idea of motivation and success in the classroom.

**Why is it so hard?**

*Self-esteem seems to be the key that unlocks children in both their learning and their risk-taking. Today, I set out to intentionally make my kids feel great about their progress in reading. It does not have to be a secret that they are progressing well. Why not share it with them? The kids seemed to be somehow “lifted” in spirit with just the slightest notion that they were improving! And is it really so difficult to give them a boost? Why do some teachers find it so hard to be positive? Look in the mirror, if you like what you see, accept it; if you are not satisfied-do something positive to change it. (Excerpt from three-way Journal: Reading Specialist Course, July 1990)*
Looking back on this journal entry, I realize now that it became my “mantra” for positive change. I knew that children responded to positive feedback, and that encouraged me to always keep student progress reports an open process in which the students themselves had a stake. I began trying student conferences—yes, with 6-year-olds!—with tremendous success, and the students began making plans for their own change and improvement. In revisiting this journal entry, I now know why I continue to “mark” students in this fashion to this day, in an open conference in which we discuss goals, improvement, and successes large and small. It is to honor their self-esteem and give them further motivation to continue on their own literacy journey. In providing positive feedback and making the children feel competent in their choices I believe my students showed clear signs of continued success and increased motivation.

I realize, now, in reconstructing the impact of these mentors and their lessons on my journey, that each one provided a turning point in my life and my direction. It was with these mentors in my early teaching journey that I was able to examine my experiences in the classroom with a new lens. I could hold my experience up to the light of the researcher’s wisdom and refocus my own classroom instruction with renewed insight. Once again, I found myself looking inward and reflecting upon my special moments with the children, looking outward for guidance and insight with which to improve my methods, moving back through time to gain understanding of my own commitment, and then applying new knowledge to experiences as they came along.
Second Year in Grade 1

Living here, I am always in the presence of the stuff of which I write.

(Timothy Findley, *Inside Memory*, 1990)

A retrospective lens helps me see the connections of my story along the journey, always seeking the best way to teach children to learn, read, and write. As my story continued to take shape, I remained a teacher in grade 1 for several years. By learning along with the children and continuing to develop the philosophy of, and the passion for, the teaching of reading, I maintained loyalty to my journal writing to reflect on my teaching practices.

**Resource Encounter**

*It was late October when the scowling faces of the Curriculum Resource Support Staff broke the natural rhythm of the classroom and informed me that “the room was too noisy and the children should be printing between the pink and blues lines by this time in grade 1, and why was I not using the beautiful new books that I had been sent....” I simply invited them to please stay and visit with the children. To my great surprise, they did. They seemed to be caught up in the energy in the room, and they crouched down with the children, asked questions, and looked at their writings. (The one with the pink and blue line fetish abruptly left the room. I don’t recall ever seeing her again in my 24-year career with the board.) The others brought colleagues; little did I know that they were Superintendents with the board, and they stayed for quite some time, chatting with the students, looking through their little*
scrapbooks, and listening to them talk about school and chant poems and rhymes. The scowls had changed to smiles, the broken, unnatural silence had transformed to the buzz of excited learning again, and the voices of these “experts” were telling me that I was a remarkable teacher to have so many of these language-deprived children reading and writing so well and so soon. Reading? Writing? Was it really true? It had snuck up on me, that what I truly believed about reading and writing was actually taking place before my eyes. These little ones were immersed in language and were speaking clearly in sentences. They were printing out stories with chunky pencils and illustrating them with crayons and paint. They were creating building-block houses and writing up diagrams of how they constructed them. They were composing little notes placed lovingly in the mail slots of the classroom mailbox. They were sitting in corners clutching favourite storybooks. They were kneeling with chart paper rhymes and chanting them with their friends. They were cutting and pasting word and picture matches and reciting them back to their friends. Everywhere, they were learning language, everywhere they were making connections, everywhere there was reading! The transformation was complete. The empty, barren classroom with the sunlight streaming through the windows was now alive and brightened by the sights, the sounds, the tastes, and the very feel of children developing language skills.
It was at this very moment that my philosophy of teaching reading was cemented into a deep-seated belief that empowered me through every step of my career with children. It was the fuel in the engine of my journey. It was that room and the eyes of those beautiful children that convinced me that the theory was unshakable. (Journal Entry, October 1978)

I have reflected upon and recounted this story so often with others in the present that it has become the very root of my philosophy of teaching. I feel I have built my teaching career on giving young learners what they need to move on and then standing back and watching them enjoy their learning. As I reflect upon this story in the present, I see how it has shaped me in my current role as a Literacy Consultant with my school board. I try to help facilitate new teachers as much as I can and help them to determine their own goals for their students. I strive not to be the “sage on the stage” but rather “a guide at their side.” Mentorship, in all its forms, has taken on a special meaning to me due to the experiences that I had with mentorship in my early teaching years. I believe that my role as a mentor means that “wisdom is not passed from an authoritarian teacher to a supplicant student, but is discovered in a learning relationship in which both stand to gain greater understanding of the workplace and the world” (Aubery & Cohen, 1995, p. 161).

I knew then that the river did not stop here. My personal and historical journey took me along a new path to experience new challenges in teaching reading to preadolescent and adolescent learners. I sensed that I had to “prove” that hands-on learning and the active participation of students needed to be tested in the waters of
older children. With this in mind, and very much at the forefront of my decision, I moved to the junior and intermediate grades to brave the rapids of doubt and misconceptions that existed about whole language strategies with this age group. Many teachers of preadolescent and adolescent students believed that the principles of whole language strategies would not help these learners to scaffold their reading and writing skills. I wanted to prove them wrong and try, for myself, working with older children.
CHAPTER FOUR: EXPANDING THE CONTEXT: MOVING TO MIDDLE SCHOOL

Children need to be marinating in books!

(Harvey Daniels, Literature Circles Presentation, San Francisco, 2002)

It did not take me long to discover that reading and writing had to be a priority in the junior and intermediate grades as well as in the earlier grades. I quickly learned that I could not assume that my students already knew how to master reading, and I discovered that many were not motivated to read and write. Many teachers I met felt that teaching these students to read was not their priority. They felt that the teachers in the primary grades were the “reading teachers,” and their job as middle school teachers was to “cover the content.” I knew that the students needed voice in the classroom, and it was evident from their writing that they had not been given much choice in topics prior to coming to my classroom.

This was a new experience for us all, and it was evident that my students needed to develop better reading and writing skills. But I quickly discovered that their literacy acquisition could not be teacher driven. I could not teach these students in the same manner that I would have taught primary students, but they needed to learn to read! I spent time building their self-esteem and creating some motivation for them to read and write. I knew in my heart that I could motivate these students, and I embarked on my own reading and writing research to find out more about these adolescent literacy learners.
I realize now that once again, I found myself making connections with the teacher-stories of others, and my own beliefs had to be tested in these new waters. I knew that I needed to adapt to new learning environments and that my instructional approaches needed to adjust to the new values and priorities of these students. My journal reflections changed as well, as they began to mirror my own growth in understanding. I began an inquiry on the pages of my journals as to the "portability" of primary practices to junior and intermediate classroom situations. I wondered whether some of the lessons that I had learned early in teaching were transferable to these students. It seemed to me that some were easily adapted to older students and others definitely were not. For me, as a constructivist making meaning along this journey, I know that my own understanding was changing and evolving in different forms, both through my personal experiences and through the research of new mentors such as Lucy McCormick Calkins (1986), Harvey Daniels (1994), and Janet Allen (2000), who were blazing new educational trails. But, in reflecting back upon my journals, I see it was the students, themselves, who convinced me that being immersed in literature and being given time to read and write were experiences that would build the love of literacy in their hearts. They wrote to me in a card one day, which I kept in my journal:

You are the teacher who gave us the time to read. You let us choose the books we like and you make reading fun by reading to us. No other teacher ever gave us so much time to read and write about our feelings and what matters to us. But most of all, you let us talk! We love the sign on our door that says, "Learning is happening here,
it's not silent!" We will never be silent. We will always be learning.

And you made us love it. Your Grade Six Class (1986)

As the years and the journey continued to flow, I turned my attention to the instruction of literacy with adolescent learners. It provided a new set of challenges and a change for me as a primary teacher, but it also provided me with a venue to test what I had come to believe about teaching literacy to all ages. My foundation and beliefs built with young readers and writers were now being applied to older students, and I found that many of the core elements of literacy learning remained constant. The themes that were once so evident with younger learners were still prominent: My students needed to be surrounded by language and immersed in books, they still acquired and developed their skills at varying rates, they needed to be surrounded by good quality literature and language experiences, and they needed to feel success with their reading in order to maintain motivation. Once again, I turned to my journal, reflected on what I already knew, and read more on the subject of adolescent learners.

Seeking Mentors: Looking Outward

The Message

It seemed like a completely ordinary morning. I strode into class from the bustling hallway and asked the students their opinion of the Morning Message on the board. I had written a morning message every day since the start of the year and I found it to be a successful method of getting the students settled and focused in the morning as well as sparking,
hopefully, some opinions and discussion about the content of the message. Today I had simply written, "Carpe Diem!"

Hands flailed in the air to start the discussion amid a flurry of grunts, groans and other expressions of "pick me" sounds. I chose a young man in the back of the room who was soft spoken, popular, and thoughtful. He simply stated, "Miss, we can begin to discuss the quote in a minute, but first can I ask you something?" "Of course," I replied. With a look of deep contemplation on his face and later, I realized, a bit of trepidation at hurting my feelings, he asked, "Do you think that by this time in October you could put your Morning Messages on the blackboard in handwriting, not printing?"

Lessons learned in grade 8 about how adolescents can be offended by treating them like "children." I know that they are children in many ways, but they are also something else.... What is it about these students that makes them unique?

Unlike all others.... (Journal Entry, November 1993)

Entries like these began to appear in my journals, and I once again turned outward to the research-mentors to help me fill in the blanks and make the connections that I knew were there to be made. Although many researchers seemed to agree that all children have certain basic needs in common, my adolescent learners provided some unique challenges. One such challenge that I had discovered through my own experiences was that my students were under the influence of many social pressures that affected their reading and writing skills. It seemed my adolescent learners were
undergoing many personal and emotional transitions that often interfered with their ability to read, write, and respond. Hart-Hewins, Goldman, and Parkin (1993) were making similar discoveries in their own research and it seemed to support my own observations.

Young adolescents continuously negotiate who and what they are, vacillating between independence and dependence, between confidence and insecurity, between being outgoing and withdrawn...Relationships between home and peers occupy much of their time and their influence is paramount. Relationships with family members may be strained, as adolescents are often self-centered, quick to question and may only engage in activities that interest them. (p. 13)

Indeed, my students were fully dependent upon the trends and values of their peers, and I felt at the time that they needed to find a connection between their own life experiences and the curriculum that I was required to teach. Without real life connections, learning seemed to hold little meaning for them. It was important to me to try to create social situations where my adolescent learners could discuss ideas and share thoughts in order to establish relevance and motivate learning. As I had chosen to make this move into instruction with older students, I wanted to understand how teaching reading and writing could be deeply rooted in meaning and relevance for these young people. I remember wondering how I could create these situations in my classroom. How could I have my students see themselves as social beings while developing their own literacy skills at their own rate? As Judith L. Irvin (1998) so aptly phrased it, "how can I bring the language of the hallway into the classroom?"
Although no one would dispute that dialogue in the classroom doorway is a social event, reading a play, discussing a chapter in a social studies book, and writing a story can also be social events. Reading can serve as a barrier to social activity when a student hides behind a book to avoid social interaction.

I wanted to learn to view new social learning situations not as interruptions to instruction, but rather, as personal connections to literature and responses in a social context. I remember trying a variety of desk formations in the classroom and unique groupings to try to encourage the students to talk in groups about books.

I was discovering that my students needed to feel that they were active and essential members of the school community, and in order to feel this, their thoughts, feelings, and attitudes had to be valued. I remember continuing to involve them in any classroom decisions that were often simply “decided” by teachers. I recall trying to include them in school and community events by reading to them every day from newsletters and local newspapers. It seemed to me at the time that I could invite them into the community by immersing them in opportunities to “get involved.” As each student found something that they felt strongly about, I could gradually ease them into reading and writing about the subject. I knew back then, as I know now, that the motivation of my students had to come from within themselves and not be prescribed by the teacher.

In reflecting back on the lessons that I was learning at that stage of my journey, I realize that their meaning is still important for me in the present. I learned then that students need voice and choice in their reading and writing, and I was adjusting my
instructional strategies to respect that basic need. Today, in working with both students and teachers of all ages, I find myself always mindful of giving learners the ability to express their opinions and the choice of reflection in a wide variety of ways. As I work with teachers in my current position, I realize how influential those lessons have been. When I sit down to plan workshops or develop lessons with new teachers, I encourage them to build upon the subjects they know and care about and not have their reading and writing instruction buried under “boxes, kits and manuals full of synthetic writing-stimulants” (Calkins, 1986, p. 4).

It seems to me, as I look back, that as a teacher I had learned very early lessons about the pitfalls of providing writing topics and assigning reading. That seemed to produce only superficial and short-lived sputters of enthusiasm for writing and, as the enthusiasm faded, so too did any learning. When my student learners were provided with choices of what to read and write, they seemed to see the process as more meaningful and authentic. I remember noticing more enthusiasm in the classroom and hearing a flurry of “meaningful talk” on the articles they were reading or the stories they were composing. Calkins (1986) says that

It is natural for adolescents to look for the significance in events, to view a subject from a variety of perspectives and to shuttle between one point of view and another. (p. 111)

It would have seemed unreasonable for me to expect my adolescent learners to read or write on a topic devoid of personal significance, expect them to view a topic from only one perspective, and express only one point of view regarding a subject. I wanted them to try to expand their reading and writing response, not stunt it. I began to share my
stories and poetry with them to help them see my own life as a writer. It was my hope at the time that they might make connections from my stories to their own lives and begin to see themselves as writers as well. Once again, the nature of the river is to pick up speed and join itself with other rivulets. I wanted to scoop these students up and carry them along with me toward new discoveries. My intention was not to have them write like me, not to use me as the only model for their discoveries, but to invite them on the road of a reader and writer to make discoveries of their own and then move on. “But she told me that I would not be one of the others. I would learn as much as he could teach me, then I would go away to learn more from someone else” (E. J. Gaines. 1993, p. 63).

In my current role as a literacy consultant, I believe that this is exactly what many teachers expect their adolescent learners to do, and they question why students are disinterested in reading and writing. I have discovered through my own experiences, and through asking the very same questions that new teachers are asking me, that providing choice and voice in literacy instruction seems to be the key to maintaining motivation.

As I look back on the classrooms I taught in middle school, I try to use those stories to support new teachers in their struggles with teaching reading to adolescents. I often recommend to new teachers that they try to provide genuine choice and self-direction, and therefore motivation, through the daily guarantee that each student will choose their own reading, writing, and response, as well as the opportunity to work independently and in groups. I often share my own teaching experiences with these teachers, and I reflect on how my own students seemed to experience greater success
and motivation. Some of my experiences, such as this story in my journal, serve to remind me of how this success and motivation can change students’ lives forever:

**An Interview**

*Mr. And Mrs. B_____ came in after school today. I had been calling them with regular updates on their daughter’s progress. They had expressed concerns about her choice of reading material. Very suddenly, after not wanting to read at all, she was constantly reading “Goosebumps” mysteries and wanted to read little else. I assured them that I was encouraging her to read several volumes of these books as she was enjoying them so much and liked to write mysteries of her own. They asked me if it was limiting to read so many books of the same type and genre. I replied that I thought that it was very limiting for their daughter to be reading nothing at all as she had been accustomed to doing ever since September. The mother laughed, reflected a moment, and turned to her husband and said, “You know, I read every volume of Nancy Drew! How could we be so foolish to worry about her reading? She is reading! All the time! And that was how I got turned on to reading too, as a child.”*  

*After a bit more small talk, the husband rose and extended his hand and said, “We are sorry for taking up your time.” I remember thinking to myself; “If only other parents would take time to notice their child is reading!” (Journal Entry, November, 1986)*
Reflecting on this story in the present, I realize that the experience I had with those parents in that interview began to shape the way I spoke to all parents about their child’s reading. I developed a practice of always discussing a student’s preferences in reading material and asking parents if they were aware of what their child liked to read. In some cases, I asked if their child was reading at all! Sadly, when I retell this story in the present to teachers struggling with parent interviews, I still find that many teachers are not asking these questions. They know what the students are reading (or supposed to be reading) because they still assign it. A few teachers along the way made connections to my story and began offering variety and choice to their students. They discovered, as I had, that they had increased the students’ motivation to read more frequently.

I recall one recent reading workshop in which a new teacher offered to share both my story and hers. She spoke to the group about how she had made connections to my experiences as I shared them with her and immediately made some changes in her classroom. The changes she introduced were relatively minor, but she found that her students had benefited from her giving them choice in reading, writing, and responses. While listening to her speak, I felt like the circle of the story had been completed! She had asked for my help and reached out to me. I had shared a story from my memory with her. The story touched a chord with the experiences she was having with her students. And then she, in turn, offered to stand up in a workshop and share her memory with other teachers. It highlighted the idea of the shared story and the way teachers seem to pass on their wisdom from one generation to the next through memory, experience, and storying. Dewey (1938) reminds us that we know what we
know from the events, situations and experiences that shape our lives. I am reminded also of the many good reasons to follow David Booth’s advice and “remember to write it down.” It is worth sharing. And writing is an excellent method for sharing. It is from experiences like the one in that workshop that have me continually encouraging new teachers to seek out mentors who want to share their stories and to begin to journal their experiences to one day share with others.

I have come to value every moment of literacy learning that takes place for young children, for adolescents, and for adults. It is the tiny stream that has grown into a river of solid belief in myself as a person and as an educator in the present day. I can clearly see how it developed out of my experiences in the past.

Portfolios

As I look around the room, I am struck by the buzz and excitement all around me. I am like an outsider in my own classroom. I told the students that they could conduct three-way conferences with their parents tonight, and that they needed to prepare by selecting pieces from their portfolios that most clearly demonstrate their learning this past term. I half-expected groans and the frustrated looks of students pushed too far. Instead I received cheers of approval and the fastidious, orderly search for samples from their folders. Students pulled “best work” samples out first and wrote reflections of why it was selected and what details they might discuss with their parents. But, to my delight and amazement, they pulled out samples reflecting failure, disappointment, and poor planning. I had to know why! I
stopped the class from their scurrying and asked them why they were selecting such samples to show their parents. Here was the answer they all put to me:

Well Miss, you taught us to live in the moment. Each moment we live, we learn something. Sometimes it is successful, sometimes it is a disaster but it is still learning. You said to select samples of learning from our work. I picked this lousy test because I learned that I if I had spent only a few minutes going over my notes, I would have done much better. But I didn’t and I learned to plan ahead!

Sandy said she would choose this piece of writing with 20 million spelling mistakes in it because she learned that it was not that she couldn’t spell, it was that she didn’t know when it was important and when it wasn’t. Now she knows, because of that story that she made into her picture, pop-up book for the kindergarten kids, that spelling counts when you need it!

Chris picked the poem he wrote. He thinks it isn’t very good, but it was the first poem he wrote, and now he reads and writes poetry all the time!

See, you told us to show learning, and we all learned something by our “failures” (well, not really failures) because how could we fail if we’re learning? (Remembered and Observed; Journal Entry, March 1986)
As I reflect on this entry in my journal, I try to piece together the journey and where it led me on my river of experiences. I know that working with these students and having these experiences helped steer me toward defining specific strategies that seemed to work for my adolescent learners. The meaning-making in this journal story is that, for me, adolescent learners seemed to value every piece of literacy learning that helped build their confidence and provided success. Given the freedom to view “mistakes” as positive growth rather than punishment and failure, my students learned to monitor and celebrate their achievements with honesty and self-worth. Initially, one might not look on some of the samples chosen by these students in their portfolios as “success,” but I believe providing them with the time and the tools to examine the learning taking place enabled the students to take control of their own learning plans. They could examine the reasons they chose a sample piece of writing and identify the importance that it had for them in their literacy acquisition. That, in itself, I identified as success. It is not everyone who can learn from mistakes or even identify learning goals.

In my current role in educating other teachers, I often rely on the portfolio story to help teachers recognize the importance of their students’ self-worth. I encourage them to provide time for their learners to make connections to their own stage on the learning cycle. And I translate that story into helping teachers to develop their own learning plan. New teachers tend to be very hard on themselves when things do not go as they expect them to. I try to use the lessons I learned from the students in my classroom, and I invite teachers to reflect on what is working well in their classroom in reading and what needs improvement. Once time has been provided for them to reflect,
I encourage them to share their experiences with one another. It is usually at this time that the stories begin to flow and the teachers can identify the value of each and every story-good or bad. Then, the inevitable next step is, “Let’s make a plan for improvement and write it down.”

The lessons that I have learned from middle school have a direct impact on the way I choose to work with new teachers or with teachers who ask for help. In the same manner that I encouraged students to examine their successes and strengths, I try to invite teachers to identify moments where everything went well and moments where nothing was working. Palmer says that “remembering such moments is the first step in exploring one of the true paradoxes of teaching: the same person who teaches brilliantly one day can be an utter flop the next!” (1998, p. 67). I believe that inviting teachers to take part in this exercise helps them to become reflective in their practice and recognize learning goals for themselves. It is a form of self-knowledge very similar to the enlightened moments that my past students experienced with their portfolios. As I helped students to inquire into their learning, I want to help teachers to examine their teaching.
CHAPTER FIVE: PERSONAL AND PROFESSIONAL

Kathy Carter says that to story is a way of knowing. In my quest to know myself, I have “storied” my life in journals for many years. Many of the entries within these tattered pages are poetry. My poetry has become my “Memory Box” in that it holds all of the different buttons of my learning. Some of life’s lessons come in sets: lessons not learned the first time. Some lessons are single, shiny, and large; they are times well spent, the big lessons learned, timeless, treasured, and cherished. Some are tiny and of significant colour; these are the small lessons in life that get lost because they are so small, but recalling their unique colour allows them to stand out in memory. Yet other lessons are plain white. The button-down oxford variety that are just there, of little significance.

But when they are jumbled together in a collection, they form the Button Box of the story that sews them together. My button box—my poems of life’s lessons. (A tribute to Denise Surprenant’s “The Memory Box”, Journal Entry, 1994)

As I reflect on the many life lessons in my poems and journals, I must trust my own interpretations and accept responsibility for reconstructing their meaning: not simply what they meant at the time of writing, but what they have come to mean now in the directions the river has taken me and the decisions that I have made. The bends in the river were still to twist and turn and direct me in another challenging and rewarding direction. Looking back over life lessons, I can see the path forward as my interest in literacy continued to grow into a passion. As time passed, my need to share my ideas
and thoughts with others grew and developed. Many of my colleagues often came to me wanting my advice and suggestions for their own literacy programming, and they seemed to be asking themselves the same questions that I had been asking myself over the years. I wanted to spend more time with them, and the desire to share my stories with more and more people began to pull me more and more away from the students. I was torn and confused by what I perceived at the time as my duty and loyalty to my students and the need to share my story with a broader audience. Soon after, I was approached to apply for the position of Literacy Resource Consultant with my school board and was given the opportunity to chart a new and forward path in my professional life.

At first, my reluctance to leave the classroom pulled its inevitable strings on my heart, but my passion to deliver my message and share my ideas with others won me over. Once again, I was charting new waters in my professional life and navigating unknown territory in my quest to extend and enhance literacy instruction as best I could. I set sail for the school board offices with high hopes and the zeal to “make a difference.” I believed that I could reach teachers by sharing my genuine interest in literacy, and my own experiences in the classroom.

Life Within the Boardroom Walls

Life in the school board offices and boardroom meetings were very new to me. I had to learn the internal structure of the “system” while still trying to maintain my personal and professional commitments to my beliefs about teaching reading. There were many times when that was a very difficult task. My journals reflected my internal
struggle and the paradox that I seemed to be living. What I had come to know about reading and teaching children was not always in line with the jobs that I was requested to do. Co-ordinators pressured me to inservice teachers on some new “miracle program” that was reputed to help children read. Superintendents were more concerned with increasing test scores than with helping children to become lifelong readers and stay in school. Why was I here? Where did I belong in this system? Could I continue to express my opinions, refuse these jobs, and still keep the ability to talk with and share with new teachers?

Over time, there have been many days that I questioned whether I was doing anyone any good by being cloistered in small meeting rooms and buried under mountains of curriculum documents that needed revision. But one day, my vision emerged from the depths, and I shared my ideas with my new colleagues. I wanted to make reading special for kids. I wanted to find a way to help teachers learn some ways in which children might feel successful and excited to read. As I spoke and made my presentation, I suddenly heard my own voice. It wasn’t the voice I had for so many months held back in meeting rooms. It wasn’t the voice of my co-ordinator or superintendent. To my surprise, it wasn’t even the voice of my mentors. It was my voice sharing my story and my beliefs to this new audience of my own peers. As I remember it now, it was a pivotal moment of clarity. I knew what I had to say from years of believing it. The “sacred landscape” (Palmer, 1998) of my journey was being bared for all to see. This is me! This is who I am and what I believe!

To my amazement, my idea was met with enthusiasm and open discussion. I was to head up a team of my fellow consultants to write and deliver a framework for
literacy instruction that would help teachers of grade 7 and 8 struggling readers to more effectively motivate their students. It was to be offered initially in the summertime and, it was hoped, grow into the classrooms over time. This was not simply a teaching document, but a hands-on approach to sharing some of the beliefs that I held so strongly. I would finally share my voice and give shape to something in which I believed completely. I would write, design, and co-ordinate this approach for struggling students, and I could do it the way that I believed would work best with kids. I was given the responsibility of gathering the teachers in an invitational way and working with them to share my beliefs about teaching reading and writing. It was met with such enthusiasm that I was able to journal my experiences with Dr. Milree Latimer and use those journals as an independent study towards this text. Indeed, there were learning moments in those many journals that helped make connections between my past experiences in the classroom and what I was helping teachers to learn in the present.

Take the Lead on This, Judy

Three weeks in June have been spent going over the fine details of the grade 7 and 8 remedial program and finalizing revision after revision. The books we have chosen to read with these struggling readers still excite me. The titles are so rich and the content so thought provoking that I know they will touch the hearts of these adolescent students who will share them. More important, the teachers will enjoy reading them to the students, and their voices will betray their enjoyment of the reading.

We have chosen a great deal of read-aloud picture books because I believe that is a big part of why these students have lost interest in reading
null
over time. Research shows that their schooling is preparing them for 80% of their reading to be nonfiction, and we as teachers know that we must prepare them to read and understand non-fiction. But many of these students have reported to me that the last time anyone read a book to them was in grade 4 or even grade 3! How can we expect them to sit up and take notice of reading as a form of enjoyment if we don’t read to them? In the program, each day revolves around at least one read-aloud. This way, the techniques of good reading are modeled, the joy and excitement of good text are shared, and the student is not put under pressure by fearing to “make mistakes” in the reading. Risk-free enjoyment! While the planning and writing continue, we polish and finalize the teacher binders with ideas and suggestions to spark excitement in the classroom....

I visited a classroom today where the teacher had just finished several lessons with the students using read aloud and sharing with them ideas for making personal connections to their own lives. She grabbed me in the hallway as I was making my way to the next classroom, and she said, “I feel like I have given these students the keys to the castle! They never knew that reading, writing, and sharing their own story could be so exciting. It is the last day of July, it must be 100 degrees outside, and I can’t get these kids to go home! This is the best instruction I have ever had; thank you for letting me be a part of it.” (Journal Entry: After Observation, July 2001)
It still brings tears to my eyes to read over these journal entries and reflect on my many visits to these classrooms to dialogue with those kids. Every time I turned around, another child was making a new discovery about their own capabilities in literacy. One student asked her teacher if it would be O.K. to keep her Writer's Notebook under her pillow for the rest of the summer, so that she would be reminded of all the great reading she shared in her dreams, and that it might give her courage to enter high school in September, knowing that she was a "reader." How could I ask for a more rewarding experience? And how could I not share it with others? I continue to share these stories with new teachers; both teachers new to intermediate grades and summer school teachers who want to become involved with the program. The stories have voice now, and I story them for these new teachers. I am a member of that unique club: the teacher-storytellers.

I seemed to sense as an educator that it was not the "program" that changed kids and helped them to succeed, it was the teacher. And I often wondered if the teacher-as-storyteller could make a profound difference in the lives of other teachers, who, in turn, can change children's lives through literacy. I began to use this thought as my motivation to continue to seek out new teachers who wanted to learn and who, like me many years before, needed to walk the journey along with someone. I wanted to be that "someone," and I wanted to share my stories with them. Once again, I was developing new ideas for my own professional life and helping to lead others in sharing my journey of literacy.
In the Classroom Again: From a Different Perspective

When I imagine teaching, I always picture children first. When I think of curriculum, I am reminded of Connelly and Clandinin’s interpretation of curriculum as being all of life’s experiences (1988). When I think about the teaching of reading and writing, I can’t help but see, in my mind’s eye, a teacher, smiling and reading with children, telling stories of real-life experiences with books and with writing. It was, and is, always with this vision that I enter other teachers’ classrooms to assist them as a consultant. I find myself sweeping the room with my eyes and taking in every drop of information, every smile, every word, that will help me to understand this teacher and the relationship he or she has with books and with children.

A Classroom Visit

The moment I stepped through the door, I knew learning was happening here! The kids were sitting in a huge circle, they were engaged in discussion, openly, meaningfully. They clutched books in their hands as if they were treasures. They leafed through them to be a part of the discussion and talked freely about how they felt.

As my eyes surveyed the room, I drank in the piles of books everywhere, the writing-in-progress on desks and tables, abandoned for the moment to allow for meaningful talk. I noticed the smiles on every face and a sparkle in every eye that could only be described as excitement.

They instantly welcomed me into the discussion by telling me that they were comparing picture books by Patricia Polacco and, “What do
you think?". "Do you know her books?" How could I not join in?

"Here's what I think." I told them when I had read the books and how I felt at the time. I told them how her books could be very funny and others very sad. I shared how some of her stories made me cry because they reminded me of my own grandparents and how one of her books enraged me because it was about Nazi oppression. They beamed. They drank it in. And they continued their talk, engaged and enlightened, and in agreement to expound on my ideas....

I spoke with Jackie later on. She begged me to come in again.

"Why?" I asked, "you don't need me here. You don't need help with these kids!" She replied, "No. I need you to share the excitement with me!" I'll be back often! (Journal 5: Independent Study, July 2001)

Moments like these keep me visiting classrooms and meeting new teachers, for they are the fuel that keeps me going. The children continue to greet me and invite me into whatever they are doing, and the teachers continue to feed my need to tell my story.

One teacher said to me, "You know, when I listen to you speak, I know you believe in what you are doing. I hear it in your voice and I can see it in your eyes. You really believe in children and that they all can succeed, and I want to feel that way too." It is these snapshots in time that remind me of why I chose this path and why I need to continue to share it. I continue to reflect, inwardly, to see myself in the role that I now hold in these people's lives, and I see it clearly in the journey I have traveled myself.
In my childhood, when I was reading-by-rote in school, using S.R.A. cards, I know now that I was playing the game and making my teachers happy. I remember that I had learned very well how to play the reading game and appear to be achieving great success. I have now met children who are like I was myself. I have met students who have learned to play within the system that they find themselves, and they are succeeding. But what they don’t know when they meet me is that I will ask them the questions that are not in the book. I will expect answers that are not found in the story, and I will want them to have an opinion about things in the story that have meaning for them. At first, they are shocked, stunned, and have few answers to offer. But as time goes on, it has been my experience that they will look deeper and think harder and answer longer. And they sometimes even seem to enjoy the process.

In my experiences teaching adolescents who were struggling with reading books and forming opinions, I tried to rely on the successes I had with younger students in exciting them to read and write. I understand now that many of those glimpses of success were born from the reflective practice of my journaling. Ralph Fletcher (2000) advocates the use of a Writer’s Notebook in which to record one’s thoughts and ideas at any time of the day. Much like a journal, the use of this kind of notebook seemed to help my struggling readers to become aware of the many topics and ideas they possess inside themselves. My experiences seemed to support the positive response to reading and writing that these students developed over very little time. The students themselves seemed to develop new attitudes towards reading and writing once they realized that they had interests, ideas, and thoughts that they could share with others openly. And privately, they could reflect on things that they did not wish to share.
In the present, when I address teachers who are unwilling to change old habits and tired strategies, I often reflect on my own “bad days”—the struggling readers and the difficult classes over the years that I never thought could be changed. I frequently share how they changed for me and how I believe just a few lives can be altered forever through the power of strategies such as read-aloud, sharing great books, and encouraging the use of journal reflection.

When I meet with new, eager, and energetic teachers, I can identify with the sparkle in their eyes because I can still remember the enthusiasm in mine. I believe I can help them to keep that spark alive by supporting them on their journey and encouraging them. I can share my stories with them in the hopes that some aspect of my story might help them to deal with their new-found journey. Often, the process results in teachers discovering the value of reflective practice and using a journal of their own.

It is in taking my inward story and translating it outward and into actions that I can give meaning to my journey, my story and my daily life. I try to share my stories with teachers who may be able to connect with them and link my experiences with theirs. I do not feel that I am unique in any particular way, but I do feel that I have experiences to share with others that provide me with insights into what they are experiencing that just might provide some support and some guidance for the path they may choose to follow. I share with them my practice of writing in a journal and I inquire into their struggles in the same manner that I often inquire into my own. What is working for you? What is not working? Can you think of a time that something worked really well for you and your students? Tell me about it.
Annie Dillard (1974) writes that “seeing is very much a matter of verbalization. Unless I call attention to what passes before my eyes, I simply won’t see it” (p. 275). My ability to speak about my experiences with other teachers and write my thoughts in my journals enables me to “see” the events and experiences more clearly, and it is with increased clarity that I feel I can make decisions on my journey.

I believe that it is just as important for me to help teachers to inquire into their practice and “see” for the first time what works for them and how they can build on what is working for them. In inquiring into their own practice, they can examine the strategies and instructional methods that seem to work for their students in their classrooms. I could not or would not presume to prescribe a “system” that would work for all teachers or all students. I find myself continually honouring their individuality and their rate of learning. My beliefs seem to be rooted in my past experiences in childhood and in my professional life, and they are reconstructed in the present to give learners voice and choice.

**Journal Six**

*This final week of the summer school program is somewhat predictable-the teachers have had lessons modeled for them and their questions answered-and so the caring ones “dive in” to focus on the students while the ones who are still struggling focus on the report card. Both last year and this, teachers have taken the opportunity to either share wonderful stories about their kids’ progress or make panic phone calls to me regarding wording on the reports.*
This is the time when I always have a great debate with myself over any future decisions to enter into the administration end of things. My concern is not over the reporting of progress but over **noticing and celebrating** the progress of the students. I suppose that would not make for a terribly effective principal! It is not that I devalue the reporting; in fact my reports were always written with care and precision. It is just that sometimes teachers get so bogged down in the physical writing of them that they miss the “aha” moments happening right in the classroom under their very noses. I wish that assessment and evaluation were ongoing so that teachers would learn to report constantly on student progress rather than get “freaked out” each reporting period.

To make a long story short, I still have to address the needs of these teachers regarding reporting, and I spend some time with them on designing comments to reflect what the student has accomplished and what the student still needs to develop and practice. The final lessons in each program (7 and 8) are designed to invite the students to self-reflect and set goals for themselves. This, to me, is far more valuable than any comment the teacher could put on the report card! I wonder how many will spend quality time on that last lesson? (Journal 6: Independent Study, July 2001)

While completing my Independent Study for my master’s degree, I found that the sharing of my journals from this time and the discussion of their meaning made yet another path on my journey very clear and lucid. The standards that I would use with
students to set goals for themselves were the same standards that I had always set for myself. My goals for the future seemed somewhat unclear. Where was the river journey leading? I knew that this role that I currently held would last only 6 years—a long time in the life of a river, but a short term in the span of a lifetime. The inquiry began inwardly as to where I would travel from here. I always knew that I would happily return to the classroom at any moment, but I wondered if there was another place to tell my story, another forum to pass my gift, given to me many years ago, to others.

I then was approached by several colleagues and superintendents to sign up for courses to become a principal. “You would make such a good one,” they told me. But I knew, as I reflected upon this journal entry and many others like it, that I would never seek an administrative role in a school as vice-principal or principal. That very summer, my application for the Principal’s Course had been submitted—and withdrawn! Worrying about report cards, attendance sheets, registers and yard duty, though important to the functioning of a school, would never fuel my journey and allow me to move forward. I could not reconcile the difference between my heart and my head in relation to the “job.” And it was through the “seeing” of my life in my journal entries that I could interpret the power my words had on my decision to withdraw. I could not be who I am and carry out what I perceive to be the mundane and often conflicting duties of an administrator and still maintain my strong beliefs about teaching and learning.

My beliefs are continually fulfilled through the process of sharing and interacting with other teachers. The restrictions that “telling” rather than “shared
dialogue” might have on me would surely lead to the end of my journey-I could visualize the river stopping. And I could not bear it.
CHAPTER SIX: THE RIVER FLOWS ON

When time pauses at death's hall
When age bows to its ordained fate
I shall not fear to heed my call
For from time to time, I shall walk with you
And enjoy once more a world for whom I no longer am
I shall laugh and play with your children's children
And yet speak with old friends
For through you, I still am
For within your memory, I can still be
If you love enough to remember me.

(A poem from my mentor, Pat Kelly, given to me in 1972)

Writing this final chapter, I am very aware of the power of looking back over the stories of my life, my teaching with children, and my work with teachers, and to examine the impact of my discoveries, growth, change, and ongoing experiences with reading and writing. Now, at this point in time, interpreting these many stories has led me to believe that they have impacted upon each and every decision that I have made and have contributed to the person and educator I now have become. I have spent every teaching moment that I can remember trying to bring students and teachers to a place of joy and excitement to read. Each story I have written speaks of the inquiry I continue to make into myself, my actions, and my growth as a person and as an educator. Each story strikes a chord in memory, and the time and place of each journal entry seems frozen in
time and vivid in memory. I can clearly remember how I felt with each story penned and how I struggled to learn, change, and improve as a young teacher.

Looking back and reading my stories with the knowledge and experience of where I am in the present, I can see that each story played a role in deepening my convictions about teaching reading to children of all ages. It seems now, as I reflect on each story here in this text, that these events were a powerful presence in my life and that each one represents a thread in the seamless landscape of my decision-making. As I retell each story and interact with teachers and students in the present, it is clear that my stories, my experiences and the sharing of both led me to a kind of awareness of who I was then and who I have become.

I believe the passion that I held in my heart as a young teacher was the impetus which led me to seek out my friends and mentors and implore them to guide me and to nurture me. For without that early passion, teaching can sometimes slump into the everyday doldrums of covering curriculum and grading papers. I know now that I have always had a love of and a desire to learn, to improve, and to change. But the passion I possessed early on seems to overflow. It seems when I reflect back on my stories that I could not have contained my passion for reading and writing in just one classroom and one set of experiences. I wonder if my experiences in my early years of teaching already were paving the path to the literacy consulting that I am doing now.

In writing this text and mapping out the river terrain, I see now that my desire to share my story must have been born long before I ever recognized it developing. The committed and devoted person I had become seemed to be forming long before I had even dreamed of becoming a teacher. I know now that my passion was formed in the delight of a 10-year-old girl who discovered reading for the first time. I know my commitment was
cemented in remembering the grade 3 reading class where reading was treated like a contest. I believe now that my passion grew in the poetry that I shared with my dear mentor and friend who encouraged me to “change the world by starting with myself.” I grew as an educator, and my beliefs seemed to develop in that first classroom when the pleading eyes of those children begged to read and write. My dedication to lifelong learning seemed to flourish with each inquiry and each challenge that stood in my path. Every obstacle that entered my path seemed to give me propulsion to carry on in the journey of discovery. When questions arose and I sought growth in my practice, I stood on the shoulders of mentors and researchers who guided me and steered me toward my goals. I shared my path often with good friends, often wonderful teachers themselves, who shared my beliefs and bolstered my efforts with theirs. Like the river that swells with a flood, I found strength with those who shared my professional beliefs. And in ways that so often tie our professional and personal lives together, I chose to become close friends with teachers with whom I shared my convictions. When I needed to find the answers, grow, and change, I always turned to my writing to illuminate the path for me.

I had wanted to become a teacher who could supply my students with the very best that I was capable of in order to help them become the learners who could achieve the most that they could at the time. I know that deep desire was born of my own experiences in early childhood, and I believe that those experiences in my life fueled decisions I made in my classroom. “In general terms, the past conveys significance, the present conveys value, and the future conveys intention” (Connelly & Clandinin, 1990, p. 2).

I can see now that the decisions I made to teach older students and learn and grow with them was a choice that seemed to have been growing for many years. Each
story I reread seems to have been a single drop in the water along my river journey. And the river could not have been formed without each and every drop, each and every story.

Looking back, I can observe the full spectrum of why I chose to become a consultant for literacy. The decision to choose to share my stories with others seemed to be brewing from that first day, in that first classroom. I had learned so much and had so much to share that I could not be contained by the banks of the river that I had been set upon. I needed to expand my own boundaries and, having done so, I needed to share the journey with others.

To this day, I choose to journey with the special people in my life who have made an indelible mark on decisions I made and paths I traveled. My mentor and friend has given me a gift that cannot be replaced: the canoe and the paddle with which to continue my journey. He provided the words upon which I can reflect and “see” my own reflection in the mirror with new eyes. The poem that begins this chapter, and many others like it in my poetry books, was given to me at a time when I could not see them for what they were. I was not ready to accept the inner beauty of the words and the impact that they could have on my life in the future. Now, it is by looking back and reflecting that I move forward and outward on my river journey, and that river brings me to seek out others with whom I can share my course, steady and true.

My children, my husband, and my best friend are all companions on the journey to the person I am and the teacher I have become. Without their love and support, I could not have made this journey or written it down. Some special people on this journey are in memory only now, some are here with me in dynamic research books,
and some are living with me every day. My mother helped me to place the vessel in the water by making me see myself as a reader and writer. And for that, I will be eternally grateful, for it became the engine that steered my craft and the fuel for the passion within me.

I have come to value “quiet” in reflective ways that I never had time for, nor patience for, in the past. My only reflective time was writing, but now I find refuge from the storms of demands on my time in other ways as well. Of course, I read for relaxation, but I garden and I run every day. It is in these quiet pastimes that I reflect on the past and the future and my belief in what I do and the decisions I make.

Sometimes a person needs a quiet place. A place to rest your ears from bells ringing and whistles shrieking and grown-ups talking and engines roaring and horns blaring and grown-ups talking and radios playing and grown-ups...

Well, even grown-ups need a quiet place sometimes.

But it can be hard to find one.

You have to know where to look.

(A Quiet Place, a children’s book by Douglas Wood, 2002)

It is ironic, however, that the quiet place I have found to think and reflect each day on my journey begins with the sound of my own feet pounding on the pavement while my thoughts trickle along rivers and riverbeds. But it is the time and space of my best thinking. As I run, I form my stories and revisit my memories. My morning run is where I commune with nature while mulling over the world’s problems. It is where I write my lessons for children and where my journals are drafted. It is where I make
decisions for my day, and it is where I talk with every one of my other friends, present, past, and future. It is where I have the voice and choice that I so honour in others.

I know that each day will lead me onward along the river, but I know that I will never be alone on the journey because I will always walk with friends and mentors, new and old, who make company on the path.

Looking Back
Looking back, I realize that I was blessed with mentors at every crucial stage of my young life, at every point where my identity needed to grow...
I was no longer an apprentice, so I no longer needed mentors. It was my turn to become a mentor to someone else. I needed to turn around and look for the new life emerging behind me, to offer to younger people the gift that had been given to me when I was young. (Palmer, 1998, p. 25)
I can see that my story does not end here; it only pauses, to be continued on some other paper, with some other purpose, but it will always be shared with others. It is the nature of the story to be told, and it is the nature of the teacher-storyteller to continue to tell it. To explore the story and tell it in context is truly a “mode of knowing” (Carter, 1993, p. 5). Through remembering, retelling, writing, and sharing, one teacher can contribute to the connections and growth of many. Each contribution adds to the story of others through the sharing. And each teacher added to the chain continues the journey with others.

The process of this part of my journey is to reconstruct a vision of myself, the memories, and their meaning, but also to look forward to the future and decide how this
process has helped me, and it is hoped, may help others in the sharing of the story. As I reflect on the beginnings of my teaching and learning, I can only wonder at the energy and enthusiasm that I had and stand in awe of the accomplishments and progress I made with my students. For it is through the lens of the experience and the knowledge that I now hold within me that I truly see how little I knew then and how far I have traveled.

In looking back and examining my experiences in total, I have to ask, "What have all these experiences taught me? What have I learned? And how have they educated me?" The individual moments, memories, and even faces come back with great clarity and remind me of how much they have impacted my decisions. Could I have made the decisions that I made if those moments in time had not taken place? If those snapshots in time had been slightly altered, could I have become the educator that I now am? If I had not had the benefit of my mentors and the research of the leaders in literacy theory, could I have developed the deep-seated passion for learning to read and write?

I believe that little learning would have taken place if I had not taken the time to write the lessons down. While many of my journal entries were intended only to help me through my immediate decision-making and reflection in the moment, looking back over them has brought enlightened understanding of how and why I made the choices that I did. It is through the reexamination of the words on the pages that I can find justification and support for the values and beliefs that I now hold and that I choose to share with others. In revisiting the stories of the reflections that I had, I can shed light on the paths and turns that my career has taken. If I had only memory, without the
written words, I might not have recognized the intimate connections between my narrative and my teaching self.

It is in the writing of this narrative and these many reflections that I have validated the “multiple I’s” of who I have become (Clandinin & Connelly, 1990). I have seen in my story the “I” of the learner, the young teacher who continually strives to know more and improve practice for the students. I have seen the “I” of the teacher, who with mentors in tow, has made it a life’s work to build a variety of beliefs and strategies that I believe to work with all ages of learners. I have seen the “I” of the inquirer, always questioning and improving upon what is working. I have seen the “I” of the writer who records in journals and reflects on meaning, past and present. I have seen the “I” of the critic, who constantly questions and analyzes what I am doing, searching for ways to improve. And, finally, I have seen the “I” of the consultant, here, in the present. I am the consultant who strives to share my “knowing” with others who are on their journey to “know.” And it is only through looking back that I see where I have been and where I am headed. It is better by far to make that journey with others, not alone, and so I understand how I chose to take this journey with all the teachers, family, and friends whose lives I hope I have touched and have touched mine.

Looking back with a view of the full journey, I see all of the markers along the road to the present. Like reading a roadmap of the journey, I see clearly all the signs along the way that, with reflection, make the path vivid and inevitable. I have no doubt that it is what I was fully prepared to do. It has been a journey “past ego to true self” (Palmer, 1998, p. 73), and for me the journey on this river is painted like an explorer’s charter in hues of multicolours and lengthy, detailed logs scribed in ink.
As I look back and retell this story, I realize that I began with my own story and end with many. As I share my story with many other teachers, it takes on the cyclical quality of then being shared as part of their experience with many others. Teachers' stories become a part of their life history (Carter, 1993), and each story added to their repertoire builds upon their journey. Like the pieces of a puzzle, I can see now how the stories fit together and how they can be retold from the perspective of a colleague with whom I have shared them or a new teacher whom I have mentored. Each time the stories are shared, they become a part of someone else's experience and are woven into the fabric of their memory.

I recently found myself in a workshop setting, listening to a colleague retelling a story that I had told to her as a part of my experience. At first, I felt almost offended at hearing the words of the story from a "foreign tongue." But I was immediately transfixed by the phrases and intonation of her voice giving careful and considerate attention to the exact detail of the original story as I had told it. I was amazed at the clarity with which she understood the impact of my story, and I was delighted at the interpretation, her interpretation, and how it was applied to the situation at hand. In fact, it was in hearing the narrative told through different eyes that I could see the true value of the story in the first place. It was the sharing that gave the story its meaning, and it was in the shared response from the listeners that the story came alive in their memories. It was a manifestation of the endless cycle of the teacher as a storyteller, passing on the stories of experience to the younger tribal members. Once again, the stories remain alive in the retelling, and the possibilities of interpretation are endless based on the many listeners.
Like standing atop a mountain and looking back along the river bed, I can see and retrace the steps on the path to now. I have learned that I will not pass this way again, except in my memory, and I will keep the story alive by taking others by the hand and showing them the journey. At each turn and bend in the river, I can recount the choices that had to be made and the decisions that resulted from endless reflection. I can see the timeline carved into the edges on the water, and I can point to each challenge and where it took place. I can vividly recall each obstacle in the easy flow of the journey, and I can rejoice in the rapids and waterfalls of the excited learning and sharing along the way. Each mentor, each friend, stands like a totem in honor of their place in my journey.

But most of all, I have learned that the paths I have taken and the beliefs I have held were the right ones, for me, and helped to form me into a teacher and writer who has something to share with others.

**Looking Forward**

As I change the direction of my gaze to the future, I see that gathering my stories together and writing them in this self-study has given me the courage to tell, the passion to reflect, and the confidence to know that it will be meaningful to some. It is difficult to believe, at times, that I have had any experience to share that might be worthwhile for others, but in testing the waters of these many pages and sharing them with others, I believe I have a story to share that might make meaning for a teacher’s approach to reading with children. I might build a connection for a teacher who is struggling with his or her own story.
I know now what Dr. Susan Drake, a professor in my early Master of Education classes, meant when she asked us, “What is worth knowing? And who decides?” The things that are worth knowing are the things that are learned through experience and through sharing of teachers’ stories. It is the rebuilding of meaning from all of the pieces of memory and experience that make up the essence of the teacher. And, in the final analysis, the teacher must decide what to teach. If I, as teacher, have learned anything at all through this self-reflective study, it is that I teach who I am. I have grown, changed, and made decisions that have shaped who I am today. It is in teaching who I am and what I have come to know that I am true to myself. It is the only truth that I can really know and the only story that I can honestly share.

“Mentors are an amalgamation of their life experiences and need to be aware of the major events that have influenced them. By becoming a student of their own journey, mentors are better able to understand its flow and pattern” (Zachary, 2000, p. 8). Whatever happens to me is my teacher, and I have learned to sit at the feet of my own life and drink in the lessons it has taught me.

I learned to read in a way that I would never wish upon another child, but it was through remembering that experience that I came to understand what drove me to teach others to read. I know now where the passion was born: the desire to help children feel success and joy in literacy. I came to experience the teaching profession through the joy of teaching young children to read, and it is through sharing those many stories, in the present and in the future, that I can help others who are beginning their literacy journeys. I learned to rely on the mentors and researchers who made their life’s work the study of literacy and I can now share their works with others who want guidance
along the way. I feel that I am placing them hand-in-hand, on the path to knowing, as they were clutching my hand on my route.

I continue to read and learn and build on the challenges of this leadership role in the hopes that the river journey does not end here, but continues on for many years in the memories of the many children whose lives I believe I have touched and in the retellings of the stories I have shared with others. In an effort to continue my journey, I choose to take a new tributary on the river and work as a mentor for new teachers. I have been invited to work on a new initiative within my school board that will allow me to be a learning resource for new teachers and to continue in dialogue with mentees. In so doing, I hope to continue to bridge the gap between the stories I have to share and the people who I believe will most benefit from hearing them. “Using one’s lived experience is the text for self-discovery” (Lindeman, 1989) and I hope that I can model the critical reflection to new teachers that I have used for this narrative. I see myself as a resource for learning for new teachers and I hope that someday, I may be able to further extend my gifts to teacher-candidates in training.

I know that I have a story to tell, and in telling it my journey continues. With eyes focused on the future, I seek out new directions and open new avenues for others to navigate. I hope to chart new seas and plot new co-ordinates for turns in the river not yet imagined, but like a good book that you want to read over and over, the journey of literacy repeats upon itself, stretching farther off into imagination with each visit. Where will my journey take me in the future? I know that it will not end here.... “New awareness comes out not only in dreams, but in mundane or momentous events” (Carol Shields in Shields & Anderson, 2001). I will continue to seek out the light and the
illumination on the moments and events that continue in my life and, as always, I will take the time to write them down on the journey.
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