

**Personal Practical Knowledge:**  
**An attempt at bridging the gap**  
**between**  
**the curriculum-as-planned**  
**and the curriculum-as-lived.**

**Marie Wilfong**

B. A. , University of Saint- Etienne, (France), 1974  
B.Ed., University of Regina, 1977

A One-Credit Project  
Submitted to the Faculty of Education  
of the University of Lethbridge  
in Partial Fulfillment of the  
Requirements for the Degree

**Master of Education**

Lethbridge, Alberta

December, 1994

## **Abstract**

This study is an endeavor to describe what goes on in my classroom (curriculum-as-lived) through the process of Personal Practical Knowledge research (PPK) .

PPK consists of the phenomenological writing of classroom occurrences in the form of narratives. Phenomenological is defined here as transformation from raw fieldnotes, collected in the form of a journal, to their final transcription through several reflected editions suggested through the writing itself, and stimulated by discussions with a faculty member.

The writing process brought insight into my teaching as it highlighted some of the beliefs and values underscoring my practice. This sharpened awareness assisted me in understanding what my teaching is.

## Table of contents

I	Introduction	1
II	Research Rationale and methodology of personal practical knowledge (PPK)	4
III	Rationale of my study	9
IV	Personal history	11
V	Introduction of the narratives	14
VI	Narratives	16
	Big Mouth	16
	Crying for Mum	20
	Blank Screen	22
	Affidavit	25
	Big Fuss	29
	F.... Y....	31
	Alligator Bait	34
	Heartless?	38
	Notebooks	42
	Sam no school	45
	Learning slowly	47
	Cracking-up	49
	Heartless continued	52
	Writing in books	54
	Come and go	56
	Respect	58
	Fun day	60
	Growing a thick skin or living eight lives	63
	Call it Peer Support	66
	Dealing with parents	71
VII	Interpretations	74
	Verbalization	75
	Speaking as control	76
	Doer more than listener	77
	Caring	78
	Naive about what control means	79
	Conclusion	80
VIII	From looking back into looking ahead	82
	apprehensions about PPK research	83
	perceived benefits and possibilities of PPK	86
IX	References	89
X	Appendix: Permission letter to the parents	91

# I

## INTRODUCTION

As a teacher, I have always been interested in improving myself, in developing professionally. Consequently, I have attended various conferences, and diligently listened to "experts". I vividly remember Barbara Coloroso and Madeleine Hunter for example. Listening to them energized me, revitalized me, but after a few days I would return to my old routine as if my body was rejecting some foreign implanted organ. They were trying to cure me of a disease, but I did not feel sick. It left me puzzled, and wondering what was wrong with me. I was adding my personal weight to the criticism that " teachers classroom activities have been relatively unaffected by what the learning theorists have to say" (Jackson, p. 159).

As a teacher new to the profession, I would not dare spend a lot of my time in the cafeteria, discussing teaching with colleagues. I even judged such behavior unprofessional. Over the years though, perhaps as I matured and some of the conference sessions were repeating themselves, I payed more attention to a comment often reiterated by some of my older peers:

" Sometimes the best learning at a conference is having time to talk about teaching with other colleagues". From then on, I spent more time in the cafeteria. I still felt uneasy, even unprofessional, deciding that my colleagues who had the practical experience had as much to teach me as the

"experts". I felt guilty about selecting to listen to the vernacular language of my peers rather than the perhaps more sophisticated presentation of guest speakers.

A few years later in my career, I was given a book by a student's parent called *A child* by Torey Hayden. She writes in there, and in her next one *Just Another Kid*, about teaching in her special education class. She openly shares her activities, successes, frustrations, emotions and thoughts, throughout the whole book. For reasons I will not articulate at this time, I felt as fulfilled by reading those two books as I had when attending a University course on Special Education. Interestingly enough, Hayden attempted to do a Master's degree in Education, but decided it was more satisfying for her to write her narrative of her teaching. I did not know then, until my next University Course with Dr. Ted Aoki, that she had introduced me to Personal Practical Knowledge (PPK), an important element of teacher education research today.

What follows is a description of PPK and a consideration of how it applies to my own teaching practice. PPK has allowed me to recognize and appreciate an up-to-now denied element of my teaching which is its existence and dwelling in the phenomenological occurrence of relationships. PPK does not suggest a new theory of teaching, a new "delusion of resolution" (Smith, 1994, p. 34), but "a narrative phenomenological sensitivity which pays attention to the complexity of human experience in its lived conditions of place, story, and family etc." (Smith, 1994, p.43). PPK is the arbitration between the curriculum-as-planned (my theoretical and historical frameworks), and

the curriculum-as-lived (my stories).

## II

### RESEARCH RATIONALE AND METHODOLOGY OF PPK

PPK as a component of educational research consists of transcribing one's practice as a teacher into narrative format, and then reflecting upon those actions in order to acquire a better understanding of teaching. It allows the teacher to look at the past to reconstruct the present. The teacher's experiences can be conceptualized into images which emerge from analysis and interpretation of the teacher's practice ( Clandinin, p. 4). As the teacher derives new insights from routines , strategies, or anecdotes, she develops a new pedagogy based on a reconceptualization of experiences , thus building her "Personal Theory". It is a phenomenological process rather than a linear progression, as there is a reciprocal interaction between self-reflection and action.

This sort of research is conducted in a collaborative setting. Usually, there is a teacher, an interpreter, and an over-reader. A very important characteristic of the composition of the research team is its laterality or lack of hierarchical construct. Only in such a setting which establishes an atmosphere of trust is the teacher-practitioner comfortable enough to open herself to scrutiny. Because of its horizontality, the purpose of the research is not to judge whether the teacher has proper practice, but rather to illuminate the values, beliefs, assumptions underscoring the teacher's practice. As

Grundy puts it " ... it is judged according to whether the interpreted meaning assisted the process of making judgments about how to act rationally or morally" (p. 14).

The teacher is not simply an object of study from which the researcher derives theoretical constructs or criticisms without teacher participation in the deliberation and thinking process. Again Grundy specifies that such research "is not objective action; that is, it is not action upon an 'object' or even a person who has been 'objectified'. It is subjective action; that is, it is the action of a subject in the universe acting with another subject"(p. 14). The narrative allows the teacher to become an active agent in the understanding of teaching.

The dialectic relationship is a crucial element of this kind of research. The exchange of ideas generates new insights and further discussion. Others or experts' ideas are not " smashed down on practice" (Johnson, cited p. 171 in Clandinin, 1986). The research does not attempt to change the teacher but rather to understand the teacher's perspective. The teacher has become "someone to work with not on" (Elbaz, p. 6). The teacher and researcher work at the same level, and speak the same language. The doors of communication are open, the bridge between theory and practice is being constructed.

Teacher and researcher form a partnership from which all evolve. Such relationships do not leave anyone untouched, and all collaborators in the research will acquire new practical knowledge. Self-insertion in each

other's story will occur with reciprocal outcomes. The writing emerges from the dialogue with one's own actions, and with other members of the research team. The narrative becomes a personal exploratory process, and a phenomenological writing process. The narrative is an integration of both phenomenon and method (Connelly and Clandinin, p. 121-153).

The writing does not follow the conventions of any genre, but rather unfolds into a meditation, "a gaining of the true measure of one's situation"(Smith, 1994, p.47). However, the writing has to be understood not as a new resolution, but as a meditative suspension in which stillness allows for unheard voices to be heard within their context of ambiguity and complexity. It is a sort of "de-reflection" (Smith, 1994, p. 50) which helps the teacher to understand rather than explain teaching.

Teacher and researcher accept the possibilities of uncertainty and ambiguity with regard to the outcomes of the research. A closeness and acceptance of vulnerability on the part of all involved may help in discovering what teaching is, rather than what it should be. On that premise, research goals may be described as a broadening of our understanding of teaching. Knowing what it is may allow one to predict what it could become through understanding the beliefs and values underscoring its practice.

The narrative format also beckons the reader to transform the personal to the general in a very unthreatening manner. This may be explained partly by the fact that it maintains the social setting and the complexity of teaching (Jackson, p. 160).

Understanding permeates the language. A subtle dialogue or discourse takes place between the writer and the reader. Since the text is personal, the reader relaxes, opens-up and establishes congruency between his or her own thoughts and feelings and those experienced by the writer. The power of the narrative is attributed to its ability to adjudicate between the whole and the details (Connelly and Clandinin, p. 135).

Writing and reading teacher narratives allows, through one's story and that of others, self-discovery and the building of different pedagogical constructs. During this journey of discovery of oneself as a teacher one explores in order to highlight the images, values, beliefs that constitute one's history and texture of one's curriculum. Future teaching becomes a reflected synthesis of past and present practices.

My personal understanding of personal practical knowledge is that it balances and complements theoretical knowledge. Theoretical knowledge could be considered the framework or skeleton to which personal practical knowledge adds life-blood and identity. The skeleton needs ligaments, muscles to hold together. The skeleton also provides the new blood cells. It is not a parasitical dependence but a reciprocal relationship. Neither is dismissing the other; there is no dichotomy in their existence as "experiential knowledge is also informed by theoretical knowledge" (Elbaz, p. 5). Rather, I see them as the yang and yin\* of teaching.

Personal practical knowledge is recognized by Aoki (1991, p. 17-19) as bridging the gap between instrumental teaching and teaching....

PPK gives birth to an expanded definition of the curriculum to include the curriculum-as-lived as well as the curriculum-as-planned. The curriculum-as-planned includes the subject matters, skills and abilities that the pedagogical experts consider adequate and necessary to teach a particular age group. The curriculum-as-lived encompasses the phenomenological occurrence of the teacher experience as created by her personal history such as her beliefs, values, assumptions, and her theoretical orientation within the social context of the classroom. Teaching then becomes "a relating with students in concrete situations guided by the pedagogical good" Aoki (1990, p. 40).

\* **Yang and yin** is a Chinese emblem of conjoined male (yang) and female (yin) powers. It is known throughout the world and interpreted as a cyclic alternation of all sorts of dualities. Its shape and color also suggest that every half of the dualistic pair contains something of its opposite within its heart (spot of opposite color within lobe).

### III

#### RATIONALE OF MY STUDY

Learning about PPK made me aware that it was the kind of research I needed to be involved in to attempt to bridge the gap I felt between theoretical concepts of teaching and what actually transpired in my classroom.

I personally transcribed and interpreted my narratives. I feel this methodology better embraces the spirit of what PPK is about rather than having the researcher transcribing the narratives in conjunction with the teacher. I also believe the process of writing is a crucial element of PPK. First stories were sometimes written in the anger or frustration of the moment. As they were edited many times, I started questioning and debating the accuracy of my statements. I was becoming able to appreciate the personal bias of my narratives as they were also shared with a faculty member who was able to provide stimulation into deeper questioning of the description of the events.

As the dialogue continued with the text throughout the editing, a different account of events started to appear. The narrative did not present itself as a deadlock situation, but rather a dynamic interaction of various components. This process seemed to liberate me from the guilt feeling, and the frustrations that occur in the situations described. Instead of appreciating the event as a personal failure, it became understood as a social occurrence

sometimes out of my control, sometimes with a possibility for change. PPK allowed me to step back out of my narrow teaching perspective and to expand its scope .

In order to situate who I am as a teacher, I will present, first, a brief summary of my personal history. Then I will offer anecdotes from my teaching world following a brief introduction of how I collected them. After this will be an interpretation of the images that guide my teaching, and an elaboration of my new understanding of teaching. Finally I will present my perceptions of the shortcomings, benefits and possibilities of such a project.

## IV

### PERSONAL HISTORY

I presently teach Social Studies and French Language Arts in a Junior High School. As a teacher with fifteen years experience, I have taught various grades in the elementary, junior, and high school. I have a Bachelor of Arts degree with a major in languages, and a Bachelor in Education. This writing project is an attempt at completing my Master's degree in Education with a focus in counselling.

I came to Canada at twenty-three years of age. I was born and raised in central France. When asked if I am a French-Canadian, I answer yes with the following clarification: Since I have lived half of my life in France, and half of my life in Canada, I consider it appropriate to describe myself as a French-Canadian. However, anyone who understands that term (and many do) as a French speaking individual born in Quebec - with a strong political inclination toward separatism- has labelled me incorrectly.

My interaction with the Canadian culture is principally in English-Canadian culture. I have no understanding of the plight French-Canadians. Perhaps because I am bilingual, and many French-Canadians are not, I have never felt threatened in my identity. However, the fact that I have been dwelling in two cultures where my origins and traditions are constantly reinterpreted by others has created a continuous ambiguity about who I am

culturally.

If my cultural allegiances are ambiguous, it is apparent in my narratives that some of my philosophical foundations have been solidly anchored. I am the third child in a family firmly rooted in strong Catholic Christian ethics. Even if through experience (we all went to catholic schools) we came to lose our faith in the rituals as well as some of the more fundamental edicts of the religion, as a family we still follow most of the Christian values. Respect for authority, importance of the family, honesty, caring for humanity are at least some ethical guidelines that imbue our beliefs, even if not always clearly materialized in practice.

At school, I was a good student. However, I was also a troublemaker, and a class clown. I interpret those actions as the expression of my integrity as a child. I managed to remain a child; school had left my childness untouched. I was raised in a system rooted in the educational philosophy that children are here to learn, learning meaning regurgitating what you were taught. No one really listened to me, or was "bewildered" (Smith, 1988) about me in the sense of being interested in who I was. I was certainly raised at school according to the philosophy that I am in the classroom in order to "become" somebody other than who I am in the present. School was not my "abode" (Smith, 1983). I never considered the situation as traumatizing at the time, but my home life and school life were two separate worlds.

My life outside school certainly allowed me to be a child. I was not pushed academically, but rather left to do as I pleased within the rules

established by our Christian ethics. The natural world was my playground, and it has developed in me a close relationship with earth and the natural elements. I suspect that the milieu with which I can still connect today has allowed me some continuity, and preserved my integrity. I have been told many times: " Grow-up". I respond : "why?" as for me being a child was bewilderment at the natural world. I will never rid myself of that childlikeness. Perhaps it is why today I am still an avid lover of outdoor life; it keeps me connected with childhood.

This is only a brushstroke of my life story, although I have attempted to share some aspects of my life I consider important in helping with the comprehension of my narratives and their interpretation.

## V

### INTRODUCTION OF THE NARRATIVES

Parents of all grade sevens, eights and nines students I taught during the 1993-1994 year were mailed a letter asking permission to include their child in this study. Those who refused were respected. Parents were allowed to withdraw at any time. I have not used the name of actual students in my classroom in order to respect the confidential nature of such a study.

The narratives were written as events which occurred during the school year. When I had the time to write down what happened in the classroom, I would sit at the computer at the end of the day. For several days following the first draft I would read it and edit it. Sometimes, after months had passed I would pick up an old narrative and work at it. The distance in time in conjunction with the reflection triggered by the editing resulted in a great deal of transformation of some of the narratives.

By and large, I selected the following narratives because they were felt as salient elements of my teaching. Some incidents kept me awake at night for several days, or pondering for weeks. In some cases I was unhappy with the actions I took. In other cases I was puzzled by the situation, and uncertain about what to do next. In all situations, the events I selected claimed a lot of my energy, and I am interested in finding out why these specific events claimed so much of my attention.

Some of the narratives reflect negative aspects of my teaching. However, I consider those particular aspects most worthy of my study as they are the ones troubling me the most. I am interested in discovering why such occurrences take place in my teaching career in order to improve my practice. I have never, until now, attempted to discover why I react as I do in certain situations. So far I have not liked some of my actions, I have judged them inappropriate, and I have promised to eliminate them from my teaching, but they keep reoccurring, even if less frequently. I am hoping that the kind of reflection undertaken here will highlight some specific elements of the situation, and thus will possibly provide me with a better way of dealing with similar situations, thus resulting in more humane teaching.

Including other "perhaps less negative" narratives was also an important factor in discovering who I am as a teacher. They helped me to be precise about the strengths on which to capitalize.

I actually have a blend of two types of texts. Some narratives are presented as they were, simply and directly, reserving comments for the interpretation section. However, for some narratives I felt it necessary to present some historical context and commentary.

## VI

### NARRATIVES

#### Big Mouth

Last period in the morning: I am well aware of the teaching ethos of adapting to the level of the students. It could translate here as being attuned to their weary disposition. My cognitive self advises me to be more lenient. My physical self is experiencing fatigue. There is a breakdown in the communication system. Perhaps a no win situation.

We are reviewing what was learned the previous day. Students are instructed to put their hands up if they wish to answer questions asked. There are many of them, 35, and it is utter cacophony otherwise.

James shouts out the answer. I remind him of the rule. He stares at me in defiance. I should have registered his signal. There was going to be trouble if I was not going to be very tactful. We continued, and James shouted out the answer for the second time. I volleyed back another stare which he is well aware indicates " You are not using proper method", warning. Just as I had been insensitive to his signal, he was impervious to mine.

At that point, I probably had already lost the battle. He knew I was annoyed, he was going to go for the ride, and I sold him the ticket. Perhaps admitting kindly to his and my fatigue would have been the end of it. Perhaps complimenting him on his knowledge and participation, at the same

time as reminding him the rules, would have massaged him back into functioning properly. No, I guess fatigue had numbed my sensitivity.

At his third exclamation, I retorted: "Boy you have a big mouth!" Wrong, wrong, wrong. The red light of my intellectual program was flashing vividly. Alert, alert! I had just thrown him a weapon to use against me. I just offered him a punch bag to express his fatigue and frustrations. Up to that point, he was the bandit and I was the victim, but I carelessly just reversed that. Quick to respond, and not very loud but still audible, he slapped back: "Not as big as yours"! Surely wrong on his part. What a lack of respect! What a quick learner! I just taught him the lesson.

By then, I already had recovered and regained control. My emergency system had taken over. "You overstepped the line", I said. He also had regained control, and I could tell from his expression that he knew he also had done wrong. He had as much regret as I did. The situation was as if we had to open a safety valve, and then the pressure was a little down. We both were trying not to lose face, yet we both had.

I am aware of what the proper course of behavior should have been. Why do my emotions overcome my rationality sometimes? I have never gained any positive benefit from such behavior. Why does it still occur a few times a year? Jackson would say it's partly because of "the crowded social conditions" (1968, p. 15) and also because we are human, and we have a history.

As I recollect, in my family, discords were always overtly expressed.

We were not sent to our room, we were dealt with right there, even if there was an audience. Everyone around witnessed the scolding or reprimand. I never as a child understood such treatment as embarrassing, because it is how I was taught children are disciplined.

I do not recall as a student being embarrassed by the teacher, perhaps because mostly I was a good student. If I was publicly scolded, I did not understand it as an insult either because of my background. I also do recall now how for ten years the principal of the school where I taught mirrored my family customs. Students as well as teachers would be reproached in public.

I had also constructed a good rationale to justify such behavior. I had been taught it was an honest and straightforward manner to deal with problems. I made a virtue of what others may see as a shortcoming. In my professional and personal life, I am proud of my straightforwardness and down to earth honesty. However, it has its value only at the right time and place.

My family's openness was also inclined toward the critical. If you did wrong, it was pointed out to you. If nothing was said, it meant approval. These assumptions are permeating my personal and professional life. I notice the shortcomings with ease, I have to make an effort at giving praise.

I want to help, but in moments of extreme stress I return to the raw familiar technique of what I am used to. As I write, I only now realize the history underscoring my behavior. This new consciousness may help me understand how my personal history may be dissonant with some students'

histories, and therefore create confrontations because of misinterpretations.

What I don't assume to be an insult may be interpreted as an insult.

This narrative may have helped me sharpen my sensitivity.

## Crying for Mum

Noel was crying at school today. He was crying yesterday, and the day before. Due to a divorce between his parents, his mother has moved out, and he misses his mother.

First, I would encourage Noel to stop, to take hold of himself, to concentrate on his studies. I would also find some time to pull him aside and attempt to comfort him. I would send him with some legitimate volunteers in the hallway. I would attempt lively group activities so he would forget his worries.

I would also be torn because I was not convinced that what I was doing for the betterment of my classroom situation and out of compassion was in his personal interest. I started to also suspect that at times he used this technique to escape the routine of the class. I talked to his father whose attitude appeared to parallel mine. He would try to show empathy, but he would also encourage his son to take control of himself at school.

Now Noel acts like a normal kid. He does actually look happy. He may have overcome his sadness. He may have come to terms with his loss. He may have learned to control himself. He may.....

I am proud of my sensitivity toward students when they have problems, but shy to stray from the schedule too far. I am torn between my accountability to the group, and my responsibility to care for each individual.

I had mixed feelings about Noel's behavior. Since it was disruptive, I

wanted it to stop. At the same time, I was glad Noel had feelings and was able to express them. Personally, I have no parallel for the situation; my parents have been together for more than forty-five years. I have not experienced the trauma of divorce as many of our students do today. A new social construct has to be taken into consideration in the curriculum-as-lived.

This incident invites me to ponder. How many faces in front of me are just masks, hiding that they are unhappy for various reasons: abuse, loss, sickness, etc... because they have learned well the rules of the institution. Teaching is not simple.

## Blank Screen

I have one of these expressionless students in almost every class. I look at him or her, and I can't decipher if he or she is interested, happy, sad, annoyed or bored. I, on the contrary am an extrovert, and if I am in a certain mood, most of the time you will know. My outcry to these students is "help me make your day! How can I be of service if I have no idea what you are feeling or thinking"?

I taught Brent in grade four. His face was a blank screen. He is now in grade nine. I met his mother not so long ago. She confessed: " Brent loved you in grade four as you never took away physical education as a punishment, and he loved Phys-Ed". I was very surprised! I didn't think he had displayed much enthusiasm for physical education class, and I had guessed he more or less just tolerated me since I was his teacher: no more, no less.

Perhaps because he was the quiet type who didn't disturb, and the rowdy ones kept me busy enough, I didn't spend the time to open his door. Why does noise receive preferential treatment in my classroom? I remember sitting with him a couple of times, but I had to pull words out of his mouth. Today he is getting in trouble. He smokes and drinks, very quietly. I have also seen him play nasty jokes on others, very quietly. Has he learned to make the best or worst of his quietness, and invisibility?

I presently teach a very intelligent and motivated student who is also

very quiet. Sometimes a student will disturb the class and waste everyone's time. I know Ryan is annoyed, but he sits there without a word. He comes, the bell rings, he goes, and he has absorbed every bit of information taught. He has also totally complied to all requirements made of him. What a perfect student! However, I am concerned that his passive silence is to the detriment of his own learning. Students who act out may misinterpret his silence as an approval when in fact the opposite is true.

Then there is Stephanie, totally quiet. Often when I inquire how she is doing or make a suggestion about the work she is doing, she says: " It does not matter, or I don't care". She frightens me as I really believe she means it.

Is it possible that those students are happy as they have deciphered how to understand me in order to educate themselves, while at the same time preserving their privacy? I am in unfamiliar territory with those students, I wish they would use a language I know: be irate, exuberant or vociferous.

I am slowly learning their language. I think, however, that in a classroom situation, because of numbers, these students are going to be second rate citizens, in my class anyway, because I am a little deaf to their language. I have to keep reminding myself to acknowledge their presence and excellence, as well as problems.

By not communicating their desires, or concerns or feelings, are such students short-changing themselves in their education? In that regard, it is not an aspect of teaching that I can ignore as I understand such situation as a failure to satisfy their needs. Is there a solution? If the meaning of silence is

**ambiguous, how do I live with it?**

## Affidavit

Rhoda insisted that she had handed in her composition. I replied that I did not agree with her since I did not have it. She looked at me in a manner hinting that perhaps I lost it. I reassured her that in five years I had not lost one assignment. I was unnerved at her insinuation.

Two months earlier Paul had firmly tried to convince me that he had handed in his paper, and that I must have misplaced it. He even brought in his father to come and talk to me about it.

I explained to both of them that assignments are stacked in a precise compartment on my shelf as soon as they are collected. I also informed father and son that students are instructed that it is their responsibility to deliver work in my hand, not on the desk. I then immediately file the assignment in the appropriate section on the shelf, interrupting whatever I am involved in.

I was candid enough to explain that I had developed such a strategy as a solution to a number of past problems. Sometimes students would not hand in assignments and insist they had, or they would misplace them and blame me for it. I also had been guilty of misplacing assignments in the beginning of my career. I was proud to state that in five years, actually it is ten years, I had not lost one assignment.

A month later, Paul found the assignment at the bottom of his locker. He sort of threw it on my desk in a joking manner, perhaps his awkward way of admitting his error, using humor to cover his embarrassment. I

understood that, however I found it difficult not to want an apology from either the student or the parent.

I should be satisfied. After all, he could have thrown the essay in the garbage and never have admitted to his misplacing it. Thinking he had learned a lesson, a little annoyed I was willing to forget about it. A few weeks later, the same situation developed with the same student. This time I was very firm. The assignment was located.

Coming back to Rhoda, she remained silent after I suggested that I would check again for her assignment, but that she should do the same. I proceeded then to recount to her an abbreviated version of Paul's story as an explanation. It was a Wednesday. Thursday morning, not saying a word, she surreptitiously slipped a paper on my desk: An affidavit. Rhoda's father is a lawyer. I was stunned. Then I thought it was a joke. However, in the light of all the court suits against teachers, I reconsidered, and became inclined to believe it was serious. Being a teacher, and not familiar with lawyers' jargon, I was not completely certain of the significance of the wording of the affidavit. I revealed my predicament to the administration. My principal was also uncertain about its significance. Following his advice, I decided to phone Rhoda's father and directly verify what was happening.

Realize that the parent had not communicated with me in any other manner than this document regarding his daughter's problem!

Rhoda's father was away until the end of the week-end. He called me back on Sunday night. By then, I had asked several members of the staff their

interpretation of the document. All thought that it was meant in seriousness, and they were quite frightened by the legality and formality of the document. I was in a shattered state of mind. However, I had also checked the legal implications of such a document with one of our school board members who is a lawyer. I was reassured it had none. Because of the constellation of interpretations I was receiving, I was confused.

Sunday night the phone rang, and I picked-up the receiver. It was Rhoda's father. After polite greetings I immediately asked if he could explain the rationale behind the legal document his daughter had put on my desk. Rhoda's father replied that his daughter reported to him that she gave me her assignment, and I misplaced it. He added that he had been encouraged to produce the legal document after attending a lawyers conference where it was suggested as an effective way to teach children about the legal profession as well as to teach them about contracts.

I shared with him that I had been quite intimidated by the paper. My second comment was that he had in no manner tried to contact me about verifying the matter before sending me the document, or to even explain its existence. I recounted to him Paul's story and other reports of students misplacing assignments, just pointing out that it was a possibility. By then, he had a good conception of my interpretation of the event. Well, I had felt quite uncomfortable for several days! I did not want to be vengeful, but in no way was I going to minimize the agony he had put me through.

The next day, Rhoda handed me a letter of apology. I was almost

satisfied. Whereas the affidavit was a typed professional document, he had handwritten his apology in pen, and omitted to sign it. The content of the letter expressed how he had attempted to deal in "a humorous way" with what seemed to be "a major traumatic" event for his daughter.

The assignment was never located to my knowledge.

I still have both the affidavit and the letter of apology. What is quite remarkable in this situation is that we all had good intentions. However, we were trying to project our own perspective of the situation to the other parties, and the meaning was lost in the transfer. The student affirmed she handed in her assignment. I interpreted that she thought she had handed in her assignment. The affidavit was a teaching tool between father and daughter about the legal profession. I interpreted the document as a threat. They interpreted the absence of the assignment as my loss of it. Whether it was Rhoda, Paul, the two fathers or myself, obviously we were not connecting in our attempts at solving the problems in isolation rather than in consultation.

## Big Fuss

Andrea does not hand in her assignments at the requested time, and she is not alone. Frequently the same students fail to meet the required due dates. I am annoyed.

I write on the blackboard names of students who owe me assignments, and I bring it to their attention for several days past the due date. They are also informed of penalties to be incurred with each additional day as well as a final date for complying after which they will be given a zero. I continue reminding them, conjecturing that they are forgetting. Am I helping them? I often ask if the student has a good reason for failing to deliver the work. I am told it was left in the backseat of a parent's car in a rush to work, or the computer printer failed, or it was forgotten at home, etc... I am not certain they are always legitimate answers, but I cannot dismiss them entirely either.

As I meet Andrea the next morning, I greet her and ask her if she has her assignment for me. She replies with a big smile that she has it all done, and is going to bring it immediately. I am surprised. She comes shortly after and hands over some work which is beautiful in its presentation and quality. She gives it to me and is out of the door, just like that.

I am slow to react. I say how pleased, impressed and proud of her I am, but she is quickly gone. I am not satisfied it is enough. I want to dance, jump, hug her. For her, it does not seem to be such a big event. She just had done her work and was handing it over. What was so extraordinary? Perhaps she

did not perceive it was such a big crisis every time she did not deliver either. A matter of perspective...!

In that case, allowing a little more time had been successful. Would she take advantage of it next time? I am supposed to allow mistakes as a process of learning. How many? Will my own mistakes teach me?

Most of the time, the students have good intentions but simply forget, over and over again. The demarcation between when they need to be guided into controlling their own path, and when they have the maturity to do so is a nebulous one.

This story also illustrates the difference between the teacher's agenda, and that of the students. Sometimes I listen to the students, and I fail. Sometimes I do not listen to the students, and I fail.

"For us, there is only the trying. The rest is not our business".

(T. S. Eliot, as cited in Smith, 1983)

This event also reminds me that at home there was never much ado or ceremony displayed regarding our achievements. It was expected of us, considered natural. In France I received, like everyone else, my graduation papers in the mail. We did not participate in graduation celebrations. Similarly, birthdays were celebrated with a cake and one gift from my parents. I am convinced that this particular aspect of my past colors my attitude toward achievement and celebrations.

## F.....Y.....

At the end of the Social Studies class I noticed a folded piece of paper in the center of my desk. I opened it. It read : "Fuck You". I recognized the paper as I remembered to whom I had given this particular piece of scrap paper for a test: Roger.

The inside cover of his Social Studies Book had it also neatly printed: "F.... Y..". I had collected the books so they would not be lost over Christmas Holidays. A few days before, someone also had engraved the same words on my door, just below the little window. I had covered it with tape and written "welcome" on it. However, unnoticed by me, the tape had come off a few times. It was not foolhardy to assume that the same person was the perpetrator of all these deeds: Roger.

I was not angry. I was hurt, I took it personally. I teach the subject I am supposed to teach. I offer my help before and after class. What else am I supposed to do? Is this the appreciation I receive?

To add to the insult, that particular student is a member of my peer support group!... And we were to meet at lunch. My initial reaction was that no, I could not accept him this lunch, certainly not. I had also decided that I would have to expel him from the club, he had gone too far. I was relieved when he didn't show-up.

I went to the vice-principal that afternoon and reported the facts. The vice-principal talked to him. Roger denied writing the note, and he affirmed

that what he wrote in the book was in no way directed at me. I knew he had written the note, and none of this is directed at me.....? Roger!....

I was teaching Roger again in the afternoon, and I asked if he would stay behind after class. He obliged. He reiterated the same information he had given the vice-principal. When I tried to explain that it was hard for me to believe it was not directed at me, my voice choked, I had tears in my eyes... He was taken aback!... At that moment I realized he meant what he said. He didn't intend to hurt me. He just had vented some anger. He confessed he expected a poor mark on his test as he did not know the answers, and he had felt very frustrated.

Almost the exact same incident happened in a different class, with another teacher. When it occurred, I was across the hall from the place of the scene, and my room was empty. The teacher brought Roger in my room as he had shouted at her the same words he had written in my book a few weeks earlier. The teacher was quite upset. I just reassured her I would be glad to take care of Roger. I closed the door.

Roger burst into tears. He confided that since he had been in the hospital the previous two weeks, he didn't expect a test, and he was afraid of not performing well. He had hit the panic button again. After calming down, he realized that he could explain his situation to the teacher. The teacher was unaware of the reason of his absences, and since Roger had not volunteered any information, she assumed he was caught-up in his review. I did not make any promises to Roger. I just suggested to him to explain to the

teacher the reason for his behavior, and to give her a chance to act on it.

Roger has a very difficult family life. He misses a fair amount of school. He has attempted suicide. When attending, he also has much difficulty focussing. It is not difficult to understand why he is not interested in learning about the economic system of the Soviet Union!... When tests are written, he panics.

Since our talk, my covering tape has not been ripped off my door. This particular student still becomes quite unteachable, especially closer to report-card time. I still try to teach him, but with less assertion. I attempt to be more attuned to his disposition. He comes and talks to me, he never did before.

## Alligator Bait

In the lower grades, Charles had been teased for being overweight. In Junior High the teasing stopped. Charles seemed to have made much progress all year regarding his social development.

Charles had become the most popular comic actor when we were creating skits. He dared explore various risky subjects, even his personal weight problem, with comedy. At the beginning of the year, he surprised everyone. He quickly gained his colleagues' respect for his courage and acting abilities. Charles was profusely congratulated in public, and private. I had made a point of phoning his mother about his accomplishments. He seemed quite pleased and comfortable with the situation. I assumed he had found his way, through humor, to deal with his problems. I dared take some credit for his new found happiness. I felt I had contributed when I detected and capitalized on his enjoyment and talents in acting.

By May, however, his laughter and jokes turned into jabs, jeers, and sneers at various students and myself. Charles was also becoming more insubordinate than usual.

His crisis reached its climax the last period of the day. I felt like bait thrown to an alligator, little pieces at a time. It seemed he had decided I was not going to teach. If I recalled a student to attention, or reminded a student to be quiet, he would interject: "Why are you picking on him? He is doing nothing wrong." or similar dissonant remark. He was vocalizing

disagreement on every aspect of my running of the class, whether he could see or not the student I was recalling to order. He was playing the role of a kamikaze white knight. Had his acting been a similar sacrificial ritual, a masquerade?

I was so hurt and so sad, I was past the level of frustration. I was very calm. I was trying very hard not to say anything I was to regret later. I contained my feelings for 45 minutes, and it was the longest 45 minutes I have known in my career. I felt he was gnawing at me little by little, at the same time he was destroying himself little by little.

I am very proud that I did not lose my temper. However, I was mentally drained for two days. I could have removed him from the class, but for some reason I felt it would have been the easy solution of removing the problem rather than dealing with it. The situation was reminding me of the confrontation with James ("Big Mouth), and I was determined to act differently.

At the end of the class he was assigned to remain in his desk. I attempted to talk to him, he was not responding at all. I phoned his mother and asked her to come in immediately. She agreed to come right away.

Throughout the meeting it transpired that he was very frustrated, and felt students were treated differently, thus in his view, unfairly. I shared with his mother how he seemed to find fault with everything I said whether he could see the student I was addressing or not. I also showed his mother some nasty things he had actually written about other students to give substance to

my words. She had shared on the phone that he had been quite difficult at home lately.

His anger at me was crystalized in a comment I made, and which had upset him. Basically I had reported to the counselor the same information that I just shared with his mother, my concern about his nastiness with others. He felt I had tainted his reputation with the counselor, whereas I had reported the incidents in order for him to receive some help. It became clear that the last 45 minutes of his diatribe had been a venting of his anger. I could not deny the reason for his anger, although I felt my remarks were justified.

While he was collecting his books, his mother confided in me that after being in remission, she was seriously sick again. Was it the last straw?

This story illustrates well how the control teachers have is often a masquerade. We can tell students when to start or end classes, or what to do; but we can't force them to be cooperative. The life story they bring to class is often out of our control. I was not able to communicate with him because I was not in a position at the time to inquire about his life story. Are the classroom exchanges often a guessing game?

This narrative also draws to the forefront another piece of my personal history. My personal experience alerts me about comedians in classrooms. I was a class clown principally to cover my perceived shortcomings. Being a clown was for me like removing myself from my own identity, creating a distance and joining the mockers. It provided me with some relief, but

deeply it was painful. Perhaps that is why I could not let go of Charles. A jester, is one who jests. Originally jest meant an exploit.

Charles is in pain, and tries to extirpate that pain in various ways.

## Heartless?

Ryan sometimes, even often, acts out; so do Peter, Kristin, Shaena. However, they seem to have a heart, or a conscience. I have seen them put a cookie on my desk. They have stood up for me, ready to interfere when an irate parent out of control expressed the desire to physically attack me. We seem to understand one another's *modus vivendi*.

And then there is Ken, a B average student with what appears a solid home. He has a sister who performed at the top of her class. He participates at eighty per cent or more in the class. His peers like him or fear him, or both. When I deem I can understand him, he eludes me again, and I remain puzzled.

His eyes reflect an expressionless glare. When he is mean to others, the choice of his victims does not follow a specific pattern. He is friendly with a person one day, and very nasty to that same person the next. When sitting with his parents and the teachers, he has honestly admitted to all his deeds. He has not denied any, he has calmly agreed to the charges brought against him. He has also never expressed any sign of remorse at doing so; he just agreed he should stop, although he continues underhandedly in the same way.

He related to me the following story. I believe it happened in a MacDonald's restaurant. An older man who had much the appearance of a pauper came in. Ken and his friend noticed he dropped a five dollar bill.

They picked it up. The old man then realized he had dropped his money, and he went to the counter to check if anyone had found the money and returned it. Ken and his friend watched the incident and never made a move. Ken reported this to our class as his choice of an event to relate in the Social Studies class. He never returned the money, and he laughed while telling his story. I didn't comment on the story, I didn't express any feeling either. I was, however, quite shocked and disgusted. Ken seemed to honestly think that it was an interesting story to tell, and he did not seem to have any feeling of shame or remorse or pity; to him it was just an event not to qualify with any particular message.

I struggle with the same attitude in class. Any misbehavior is funny, and in his view harmless. He does not see the nastiness of his actions. He sometimes acknowledges when he acts inappropriately. He might admit to a deed, but then do the same thing again, even if there have been consequences the first time. Nothing really seems to matter, or to affect him. He has to be told why some simple behaviors are proper or improper. I am not convinced he knows they are one way or the other. I am also unsure he does not know.

For example, he had a chain with a bell around his neck in class, and he was ringing it. He had to be told to stop. I am not convinced he was actually capable of relating what he was doing to the whole group. At the same time, I am not totally sure that this was not done consciously, to be annoying. The crux of this situation is that I am unconvinced this student is naïve about the proper way to behave, and at the same time I am uncertain as

to whether or not his actions arise from sheer evilness.

I worry about him as well as the students around him. I have nightmares of Ken as a young adult either hurting someone very badly, perhaps in a drive-by shooting, or putting a gun to his head. Why do I see it that way?

He is the only student who feels threatened if I look at him in the eyes. I have explained to him that sometimes I look straight at him to connect personally with him, sometimes to recall him to attention. He seems unable to read my sign some days, whereas other days he does. Is he just pushing my buttons?

I asked him if he acted similarly in all classes. He replied "in some classes." I asked if he could give me a reason for acting up in my class. He said not really. I asked if I had insulted him and he said I had not. He said he would honestly have told me otherwise. He proposed I move him to the front. I had made that suggestion a while before, and he had asked to be given another chance. Now he suggested I move him. I did. The situation didn't change.

As I read over the story, one month after the end of the school year, I have not changed my impressions of Ken much. Is he in temporary turmoil, and I should not interfere? It is a difficult situation.

Perhaps he is a student who needed a little extra kindness, patience, more mistakes allowed so that he would respond. I think my basic strategies with most student may be where I fail with some troubled students. My

firmness may be construed as heartlessness. I realize as I talked to a teacher who made connection with him that it was the approach that worked for him. The counselor told me that many times when Ken would act inappropriately, he would pretend not to see (of course, only when it was to no one else's detriment). Did Ken gain confidence and comfort in being able to make mistakes in that class? In contrast, did my eagerness to teach what is right trigger panic? However, I also feel the counselor may be doing him a big disfavor by not nipping the problem in the bud. Teaching's short term results may be disappointing. How much faith should a teacher put in long term hypothetical outcomes?

Ken's story underlines my deepest uncertainties in teaching.

## **Notebooks**

A few students were not performing to expectations. In conjunction with parents, teachers decided to use a notebook to communicate with the parents about classroom occurrences, performances and homework. Parents in return were to respond by signing it after reading it, as well as by adding any comments they wished to include. The students had to put the notebooks on the desk for the teacher to write in. Students then took them home everyday and returned them. It was agreed among teachers, parents, and students that the consequence for not having the notebooks taken home every day was that the child would have to come back to school to get it.

The outcomes were varied, partly successful, partly contributing to additional problems.

The notebooks allowed parents to read facts such as assignments not in, and precise details of actions in class which should have substantiated our conception of the students not performing to expectation. It also gave parents direct information on the child's work, not the child's filtered perspective. Including all aspects of work, especially the positive, also added validation to the position of the teacher, uprooting the argument of personality conflict. The child was also consulted during the writing of reports as to whether he or she agreed to what was written. In case of behavioral remarks, if the child disagreed with the perspective of the teacher, it was included. Failing lack of time to do so, the child was encouraged to tell his story at home.

There were some additional positive outcomes to writing comments in notebooks. For some students, they fulfilled their need for a reminder of what to do, and perhaps they also created a reassurance that both parents and teachers were paying attention.

The comments written were also enlightening as to the philosophy, values, and beliefs of both parents and teachers. Teacher comments had to be written within the immediacy of the classroom situation, but were still revealing in their tone and content. Some teacher comments certainly substantiated the mistrust of parents. Parents were perhaps at an advantage in this situation as they had time to write more reflective remarks.

The notebook strategy partly resolved the problems of students who chose to relate incorrect information to their parents about homework or regarding their performance. I said partly, because new problems arose. First it took a fair amount of the teachers' time, at the end of the class, to fill in three or four of these notebooks. Also, because of a shortage of time, the comments did not have the quality of a reflective and well thought out report. In my view they may have lacked accuracy, as salient events may have been missed because of the rush. Finally, some parents and some teachers were not consistent in their writings or consequences agreed upon if the notebooks were not taken home. In those cases, the strategy proved ineffective .

The notebooks personally helped me in understanding better where the root of those students' problem was. My personal experience taught me

that with some students, the notebooks were ineffective as the parents were inconsistent at reading and signing them. In one case the notebook would be signed, and the homework not done. Since such an event was completely contrary to the very existence of the notebook, after two occurrences I advised the parent I would cease to write in the notebook.

The parent returned the notebook signed with the additional comment that the work was not done since his daughter had told her there was none. I was frustrated as we had agreed that having a notebook in the first place was because his daughter could not be trusted to tell the truth. I felt like I had wasted so much of my time and energy.

My personal experience as a child of the teacher parent relationship was always unconditional parent support for the teacher. If I was in trouble at school, I was in trouble at home. Consequently, in my practice as a teacher, I think I have difficulty accepting parents questioning my authority or practice, not giving me their full support.

I realize, however, that nothing is achieved when I let frustrations overcome me. I have to take a change of pace, and a new perspective on events. Out of six students for whom we used this method; for two it proved partially successful; for three it was unsuccessful; and for one student, it was very successful. I accept the results. Again, I have to come to terms with the complexity of teaching. Teaching is less about changing people, and more about learning to live with the constellations of life stories.

## Sam No School

He hardly came to school. He would miss most of the week, then appear on Friday. Sometimes he would come every day, but at two in the afternoon. First the students made fun of him, then it stopped. While he was absent, colleagues decided they would phone to verify the reason for his absence. They were genuinely worried. I was surprised and quite impressed at their initiative and persistence in that matter.

When they phoned, Sam would first claim to be sick. It was soon revealed that Sam was basically forced into babysitting younger brothers while mother was away with her boyfriend or shopping. Mother would promise to be back at least for the afternoon, but it would not materialize. Sometimes, when the children would phone, mother would say that Sam didn't want to go to school. When the children would talk directly to Sam, it transpired that Sam was apprehensive about leaving home, afraid mother would also depart, abandoning the young ones to themselves.

For a while Sam was invited to live with his cousins, and mother allowed it. For a month Sam never missed a day of school. Mother called Sam back home, and again Sam missed a lot of school.

A group of about five students have taken it upon themselves to call Sam as soon as the morning bell rings and he is not in school. What I find remarkable is that those students are a mixture of boys and girls of various dispositions. These students forget their books, or to do their homework, but

they never forget to ask if they can phone Sam if he is not in class.

Involvement in this matter has allowed one student in particular, Richard, to display some talents unforeseen to date. In the classroom I have been struggling with giving positive comments to Richard. Neither his work nor his attitude gave me much to go for. But Richard seems to connect with Sam, and Sam confides in him.

The last incident Sam confessed was that one day his mother insisted he stay home and babysat. He refused and left for school. Sam came to school, but appeared distraught. He confessed that he was afraid his mother would be irate when he would come home from school.

I often ask students to use logic in their thinking. If Sam gets scolded for going to school, how is his "logical thinking" going to be affected? I have taught students who were scolded and beaten at home for no other reason than the parent was drunk. Those students didn't react as expected to my scolding in case of poor performance or behavior.

I have taught a student who was thrown out of her house and had to sleep in the garage at temperatures of twenty-five degrees below freezing. She reacted very 'strangely', according to 'my' criteria, to some basic health notions. No wonder...!

Their home life had taught them a different logic from mine. Those students and Sam's stories alert me to constantly question the assumptions my teaching is based on.

## Learning slowly

I did it again. I held firm to my position, the student held firm to his, and we had a confrontation. What are my options? I did not want the student to catch up on notes during my class, as he had done previously. I did not actually see the student do it, as I did not give him the time. I knew it was going to happen. Since I foresaw the event, it stopped short of me having proof that it was happening, and the student decided to deny my accusations.

My point here is a question of control. If I allow students to do what they want, and when they want, am I doing them justice? The argument supporting such an attitude would be that if they are not going to learn that day, no matter what you do, it won't happen. My point of contention is that if I don't stand firm, I am teaching the student poor working habits which may reflect on the whole class. Is it a no win situation?

I believe it was wrong to allow the student to have his way; however it made me feel badly as the confrontation reflects on me. I would like to be having none of these situations. I know some teachers do avoid conflict, and it looks good. However, I believe they achieve that perhaps to the detriment of the child. It is hard to do what I believe is the right thing, and risk a poor reputation from it. In my case, though, this is the level of honesty at which I have to operate.

As I write more and more I realize it is something I will have to live with: do what I believe is right. Some people do what looks right.

Sometimes I feel like a witch, and I would like to play the part of the fairy.

I also have to appreciate the difference between stating what I think is right, and enforcing it on the student. By attempting to enforce my point of view, I do not execute control, rather I trigger a confrontation. If my enforcement entails a provocation, then I have not succeeded. However, if I have stated my position and the consequences, the child then has the choice to comply or not. I have to appreciate the subtleties of the meaning of control in teaching.

## Cracking-up

I taught her in the elementary grades. Brenda was an excellent student. She quietly complied to the maximum requirements with enthusiasm. I was puzzled at how busy this little girl was. After school she would attend jazz, then ballet classes, and orchestra, followed by some martial arts training. Her mother was very willing to taxi Brenda everywhere. I shared with the mother my concern about overstressing the child. My comment was brushed off with the argument that the child herself wanted to participate in all these activities. Is a child of thirteen years of age able to make such decisions?

Well, I think that now she is starting to fall apart. Her smiles are gone, she looks serious most of the time. She is reported to do strange things, such as humming, in class, which disturbs other students.

Since she has been a first class student, I didn't immediately give credance to such reports about her. In addition, I had not personally witnessed such activities. The students who were victims of her annoying acts expressed their frustrations: I was being unfair.

My rationale for not giving credit to their accusations was that the complainers were themselves acknowledged troublemakers. I was doubting what they were saying. I conceived it was a set-up rooted in jealous envy for her achievements. Their school history, perhaps wrongly so, was guiding my practice.

The complaints intensified. I received reports from reliable resources. I began to question the behavior of the up-to-now perfect student. To curb some of the complaints, I moved the accused away from its victims. One of the victims seemed to be trying to egg her on by making loud comments across the room. I could see the alleged victim being rude. I never witnessed anything inappropriate from the accused. Was I losing my touch? Is the accused so clever that she makes sure I do not see her?

I do not have direct proof of what is happening. The picture is blurry. I am looking at her with a new lens. She is aware of it. As my point of view has taken a new shift, I believe it is affecting her behavior.

This situation illustrates for me the different expectations, understandings and perspectives that we all have in relationships. Some parents want me to basically teach the subject matters. Others prefer to discharge on my shoulders the full raising of their progeny. Some students appreciate justice in certain situations, and equally appreciate injustice when it benefits them. Such attitudes could be construed as a world of contradictions. I originally did. Aoki ( 1991,p. 29-33)would apprehend it as a world of polyphonies.

It is a matter of tolerating that there are a multiplicity of perspectives in all matter of living. A bat is a predator to an insect, a pollinator to a flower, a subject of prey to a carnivore, a source of fear to some superstitious people, a source of wonder to a scientist. Being a prey is not incompatible with being a predator. A victim may also be a culprit.

Some may say our scientific western culture has limited us to an either/or perception of the world. Fission or fusion, analysis or synthesis. Conversely science help us understand the predator and prey concepts. Am I trained to believe that one thing necessarily excludes another? That being a good student excludes being nasty to other students?

Teaching may be tolerating ambiguities because we have to look from a perspective of inclusion rather than that of exclusion.

## Heartless Continued

I finally phoned the parents. Why? Ken made noises in class with the apparent purpose of disruption. When asked a question he would answer in English, even if asked again, knowing well the reason why he was asked again (he is aware that in French Immersion he is supposed to answer in French). He would rarely have any paper of his own, and thus every time it was needed, he would attempt to borrow. However, it might take two or three students before one would agree to lend him some paper. Disruptive in my estimation.

I phoned the parents and left a message on the answering machine, requesting a meeting. Mother called me back, informing me that her son had "begged" to have the chance to be perfect for two weeks, and that if it didn't happen we would meet. I didn't completely agree, and suggested I would call back within a few days to report if the situation was improving.

Well, Ken has been almost perfect. Polite, not disruptive, doing his work, studying for tests. He is behaving totally differently.

What made him change? I, alone, had no success in changing his attitude in class. Why then, would he behave in such a manner that he knew would result in me requesting a meeting with his parents. Was he just testing the system to discover how far he could push?

I am still perplexed at my lack of control or influence in directing Ken's behavior in any specific direction in class. When I feel I can grasp his

*modus operandi*, he eludes me again. He will settle down for a while, and then the pendulum will get momentum again and swing the other direction.

I think the difficulty for me resides in the acceptance that situations are not always solvable by my personal actions. I was raised in the belief that there is always something you can do, that blaming society is some sort of a cop out. Therefore, it is very difficult for me to let go of any problematic situation without making it a personal matter. I think that in some cases, such perception is inappropriate as many outside factors have overbearing influence on a situation over which I myself have little control.

In some situations I have to have a more objective position, I have to come to a better understanding of what control means. In some cases I have to admit that there is nothing I can personally do because of the circumstances, and that referring a student to an administrator, calling in parents, or putting the student outside of the classroom, is not a failure. Nevertheless this is a concept I find very difficult to accept as I have not been good at judging when events are beyond my control, and when they are not.

## Writing in books

Usually I assign books in order to teach students about responsibilities. Each student is instructed that if the book is damaged, it would have to be paid for. It is a little more complex than that. Some students take hold of another student's book and damage it.

This year I was teaching two groups of the same grade seven Social Studies class. I didn't have enough books to give each student, consequently both classes shared the texts. I decided not to assign books, but to have them distributed at random at the beginning of the class.

It gave birth to a whole new problem. Students, under the cover of anonymity, started scribbling profanities and very mean remarks about each other. I never noticed when the writing took place. Since I didn't know specifically who was doing it, I could not reprimand any students in particular.

I decided to personally keep quiet, but asked the principal to come and talk to the class about this specific problem. My intention was that inviting the principal was telling the students that this was a serious matter. He also did a beautiful job of explaining that if necessary, he would take the time to compare handwritings and find out who was responsible for what. At the beginning of his talk they felt invincible, but when he came to that point, their faces expressed worry. It was enough, it had been effective.

I decided to return to assigning books to students. Some books become

damaged, but not as many.

What I ponder today is that neither the principal or myself asked the students why they engage in such an undignified activity. We were concerned about solving our problem of vandalism, but without curiosity about why students engage in such activity.

I believe it is partly explained by our own personal experience of home and school life. As a child, I recall that there were do's and there were don'ts, although it was often not articulated why. In my teacher training, I was told of how to have control and discipline in the classroom. Why students misbehave was not explored. Thus, if students write in books in my classroom, I understand the phenomenon as my failure to control them, whereas their motives could be totally unrelated to my actions.

In teaching, do we ask enough why? So far, I have understood teaching as a profession dominated by control rather than understanding.

## Come and Go

Andy was constantly crying at home. Andy was going to be absent from school immediately, and for a full month, due to mental instability. After stating that much on the phone, father inquired if he could collect a month's homework within the hour. I could sense the parent was very upset, his son was leaving for the psychiatric ward. I suggested that teachers would need more time to prepare adequately for Andy, and requested an extension of one day to which the parent agreed.

I made a point of quickly visiting all teachers involved, asking if they would oblige the parents. Everyone seemed eager to do so. The parents were given the package the next day.

The doctors made some tests which turned out negative as Andy was back at school a few days later without any explanation from the parents. At school, Andy was viewed as a good to excellent happy student with no apparent mental ailment.

School ended, and I did not communicate to the parents my disappointment at their failure in contacting me or any other teacher about Andy's return. My choice of silence in this case was guided by my empathy toward their already difficult situation.

I do not believe parents are impolite or unappreciative. Perhaps as I do, they act according to the pattern their past has taught them. At home, teachers received unconditional support from my parents. That is what I

expect from the parents of my students. However, in my fifteen years of teaching, and nineteen years of parenting, experience has taught me that it is not always good. Similarly, some parents may have experienced very critical rapport between their teachers and parents, and they may parallel today in their actions that past relationship.

I also believe that today's parents have much less time to dedicate to their children's education when they are both working, and perhaps make contact only in crucial times which often implicates negative remarks. It is difficult for me as a teacher to be both a sensitive person in regards to kids, but at the same time to be able to grow a protective shield against the little insensitivities that occur in the teaching day.

## Respect

Danny is going to be taxing. I see it right from the beginning. I ask for binders to be open, and he looks at me. When we need to write notes on a map, he tells me he has lost it. I know the situation could get tense. I have learned. I repeat instructions for him alone and leave it at that. At the end of the period I dismiss the class, and ask a few students to remain seated, and Danny is one of them.

Some begrudge me and grumble : "Why do I have to stay?" I tell them calmly that I will explain to each student the reason for his or her delay, and it could take only a few minutes if each stays quiet and waits his or her turn.

Two students forgot their notebooks to be signed by me every day, they have to go and get it. My message is clear: do not forget if you wish to be done on time.

One student was politely asked during class to comply by not talking or annoying another student with his pen. He did not respond. I then had signalled him, gesturing as if I was phoning, and he knew I met : "Should I phone home?". He responded, loudly: "Yes, I have a phone". He is the student I deal with last. I explain to him that his rudeness and non-compliance was the reason for his detention. He listened quietly. We had no confrontation, and when he left, I bade him good night.

Finally three students who had been chronically late had to stay with me after school as I was teaching them last. They first complained for having

to stay. However they realized I was following school policies, and complying was their only choice. It was nothing personal. They set to work and used their time well.

I used to get upset at students, sometimes raise my voice at them. Although I still lose my temper, it is less frequently. I believe students interpret such reaction as a demonstration of your loss of control. Then it becomes a personal vendetta. Only recently, and I have taught 15 years, am I using the technique of consequences rather than upsets. It transfers the onus on them, and I just become the administrator of regulations. I tell them their misbehavior hurts me, I become the victim. When I am angry, I am the villain.

As a teacher I believe I preserve my dignity and the respect of the student as I do not attack him or her personally which often involves remarks which I regret later. Sometimes it is very, very difficult to keep one's calm as the student is pushing the teacher to the limit. I find it very difficult then to not become upset as I am very aware of the time wasted by other students.

However, every time I have kept my cool and dealt with the student later, I have found it most effective. I don't lose sleep over it as I do when I lose my temper.

## Fun Day

An assembly was going to be organized as the culminating event of a fund-raiser for our school. At the ceremony, students who had collected the most money would receive prizes. Our administration appealed to the staff for some ideas, and volunteers willing to provide the school with some entertainment.

In the staffroom, we bandied various possibilities to enlighten the gathering. The objective was to reward the children's efforts with some entertainment. Since prizes were to be given, the format of a game show was adopted. I volunteered to be the hostess of the show as Vanna White if someone else was prepared to support me as Vanna Black. I have twin daughters, and their two grade nine graduation dresses (one black, one white) would constitute the perfect costumes. My idea of two Vannas was certainly for mental support. I was shy to do it alone, but with someone else, I was willing to risk it.

My request for a partner was not totally random. I was set on convincing Kris, a physical education teacher, to do the job. Kris and I rarely wear dresses to school. Neither of us use make-up. We could qualify as the casual types. My idea was to surprise the students and some of the staff. Kris is also quite reserved. A few teachers doubted that she would come through. The day before the performance she warned me she had a meeting in the morning, and perhaps would not be able to fulfill her promise. She had her

doubts about such a risky enterprise, and I had mine. Were the students going to ridicule us?

Finally, lunch time, and time to dress-up. Kris arrives a little late, I smirk. Yes, we are nervous. We just get prepared and avoid talking about our apprehensions. The dresses do not quite fit. My goodness, what was I thinking! Grade nine dresses! I had tried mine and it fitted two days ago! It barely fits now, and I am afraid I will explode on stage. Kris's dress is two inches short in width. What are we going to do?

We start to laugh, and laugh, and laugh, and laugh.... We insert a piece of cardboard in her dress, and cover it with a scarf around her waist. We spread a profusion of mascara and lipstick on our faces. We even curl our hair. We barely recognize each other. We also can't believe we are doing this.

Time to go behind the curtain on the stage before the students arrive. We walk with difficulty, perched on our high heels. We are used to tennis-shoes. Some more members of the staff come behind the curtain in various costumes. We laugh. We are having fun. We are all reassured in our confidence by our togetherness in this enterprise.

The curtain opens, the Vannas prance to the front of the stage to the music of the Wheel-of-fortune. I am nervous, but I do my Vanna part. There is a silence, there are many smiles. We continue to improvise our role through the performance. We survive, we are even happy we did it.

That day was one of the most pleasant and vivid day of the school year.

There was a feeling of togetherness among all members of the staff, but also between staff and students. The event had drawn us together, a nice break in the routine which often accentuates the differences!

I suspect that by allowing ourselves to appear foolish we taught them much about taking risks, and about guarding themselves about pigeonholing people. Our teaching was doing, not telling. We demonstrated another facet of what adults can be.

I think because of the circumstances of teaching we often have to repress many of the very real characteristics of our life as adults. Unfortunately, the constraints of the classroom often impose restraints on what we teachers can do, and in turn we impose restraints on what students may do. We act differently with a group of thirty than we do with one or two persons. That day, together we experienced a much different form of interaction and control, no one was enforcing anything upon anyone else. If teaching could be that way more often...!

## Growing a thick skin or living eight lives

Every teaching year, I have experienced the death of a student. Each beginning year, although I start with enthusiasm, I also, at least once, find myself standing in front of the class, looking at the whole group, thinking: "Well, who is not going to finish school this year"? This saddening thought always hovers in the recesses of my mind and heart.

As students confide in me their exploits on dirt bikes or their stunts on skis, I am quick to remind them of safety rules. I feel that most of my warnings are ignored, but I can't help stressing caution.

Cherry and Peter were hit and killed by drunk drivers. Jeremy died when he fell and he hit his head on the pavement. His brother was driving, and Jeremy was standing on the side of the truck. Jack rolled his truck and died on Graduation night. Greg died of cancer just after finishing Grade twelve.

I observe some of my colleagues and how they deal with the situation. Some teachers seem to have grown a protective shield, they have built a distance. They don't get too close, and thus perhaps don't get hurt. I have tried, but I can't. If I don't attempt to know students to some core level, I feel I can't teach them. Perhaps I am wrong, but that's how I operate. I get to such a point of connectedness with them that death won't leave me unscarred.

This year has been no different. I taught him in grade four. He has always been full of life. In grade four his hero was Indiana Jones. One year

for Halloween, he dressed as a perfect four feet tall replica of Indiana Jones. He loves magic and mystery. I could read in his eyes that he was embracing life and its mysteries with gusto. I taught him again in grade seven, and this year in grade eight.

By Easter time, he started to miss a lot of school. Even in September, his energy seemed subdued. First, I attributed his lethargy to changing hormones or growing pains. I was saddened , we didn't seem to connect as much. I interpreted the situation partly as a statement of my failure to motivate him . I was even annoyed at having to provide homework. It was demanding of me extra time and extra energy, and most of it would not be done.

By the end of June, doctors finally deciphered the puzzle. The child has bone cancer. He is going to be bombarded with eighty sessions of chemotherapy. I am upset as I feel helpless. I am upset because if that is where his life soon stops, I am not convinced that being in school was the best use of it. I am upset because he is an innocent victim. I am upset because his face haunts me at least once a day. It's not that I want to forget him. However, other students whom I am almost certain to see in the fall, I have been able to put them out of my mind, but not Indiana Junior.

For me teaching is like having this huge family. Because of sheer numbers, I am bound to experience exponentially the joys and sorrows of a normal family. However, because I am a teacher, the victims will always remain young. I am the only one in the family who is aging. As they grow,

they move on and I sigh a sigh of relief. Sometimes I see some of my former students and they are embracing life, I also sigh a sigh of relief. But when one of the students get struck while still in my care, I don't think I will ever become accustomed to it. Many doctors or firemen experience the same distress especially at the loss of young ones.

If there is some positive outcome it is that I become a better appreciator of life, and I attempt to share my enthusiasm with the students. As I want to reprimand a student, I reflect whether it is a matter of importance. I attempt to plan my teaching with more focus on what enlightens their life, stressing in the curriculum or presenting the curriculum in such a manner to enrich their life, not bore them to death.

I also live my life in that manner. Lucky to be alive at forty-one, I savour every day. As I experience difficult times in my life with a temptation to complain, I accept the difficulties with enthusiasm. I think about these students who have passed away or are lying in a hospital bed. Similarly, when doing my favorite activities like watching a falcon hover over a river on which I am kayaking, and it is one of those perfect moments, I find myself talking to these students :

" Indiana Junior, this one is for You."

## Call it Peer Support

Every school has heard of it, or even organized a group of its own. Usually the teacher in charge selects "good" and very "responsible" students to help others in the school.

I have organized a peer support group, although I believe it is quite different in its composition and operation from the standard format. First, I invited anyone interested to come and verify what the club would be about. I also made a special effort to talk to students who didn't have many friends, who were misfits. My philosophy is that if it is going to be a peer support group, it is going to start within the group. I am repulsed by the idea of selecting "good" students to help supposedly "bad" students. After all, students in trouble naturally pair up with students in trouble. I decided to welcome anyone interested in joining.

The results are educative and surprising. Because of my lack of criteria for membership, the composition of the group is very heterogeneous. At the academic level, almost every section of the student population is represented. I have poor achievers, some students achieving well in some areas only, as well as excellent achievers in all subjects.

What I found remarkable is that some students who were poor achievers in my class became members. I had assumed they would have negatively associated me with the subject, they proved me wrong. Whereas our relationship in the academic class is tense sometimes, this club offers us a

different situation within which to interact. I am personally grateful for that other opportunity.

The nexus of the group is that all members appear to live on the edge of the school culture. None belong to the popular groups, few have many friends. Most of them are living in isolation. By putting their isolations together, I surmised they would belong to a group within which they would develop social skills. It is a vicious circle, that of being alone, because you don't acquire social skills in loneliness.

The interactions are interesting. First, I noticed that the attendance varies greatly. I believe it is due to whether these students are experiencing a good day at school or not. Perhaps they come to the group when they are most in need of social support. When they are able to function within the regular school social groups, they do not come. I also believe that the opposite is true, that they do not attend when they experience a very low social confidence level.

Secondly, and for me the most amazing aspect is how much these students want to help others, and actually how kind they can be to others. They are often quite empathic to others' problems.

Thirdly, they are also fallible; they will be helpful, but will also go back to the classroom and do something negative. However, that's to be tolerated in my opinion. I believe I am a good teacher, but I also make some mistakes. We are all trying yet making some mistakes. I do remind them sometimes that because they are peer support members, they are living by a high

standard of ethical conduct and confidentiality.

I think the club give these students the opportunity to be recognized for something positive. One of my members has much trouble in my academic class, but Charles is a regular on Mondays. It gives him and me the opportunity to meet and interact on totally different terms, in a more congenial setting perhaps. Sometimes, I feel like Charles is a different person at the club from the student in the classroom. I am not in the position of control, I am just the overseer. He has capitalized on that opportunity and is often the instigator of activities in the group.

I believe the social setting of the group is of paramount importance. The club is one place where these students talk and listen. They are not mocked, teased, or attacked. The absence of academic challenge or emotional persecution allows for relaxation and not having to masquerade. I am also more authentic as I do not have a specific curriculum to follow.

In quantitative terms, we may not be able to provide a list of accomplishments, but for me it is my greatest source of marvel and inspiration. I am bewildered at what they accomplish on their own undertaking. For example, they initiated the close watch on a particular student who was missing school 99%. They do the phoning every morning; they never forget. They even phoned the social services counselor of their own initiative. If that is not peer support, what is?

Actually, as I am writing, I realize that I initially created the club consciously thinking I would lead the club. Describing me as a catalyst is

generous, but acceptable mostly in administrative terms. I don't feel shunned; it is just strange to think that the club is a success mostly because I have allowed myself to be invisible. I thoroughly enjoy watching and participating when it seems appropriate.

I am tempted to say that this club has been the greatest source of my inspiration for reflecting on my practice; it has been my lighthouse. It provides me with a setting devoid of the academic and social constraints of the typical classroom situation.

Another interesting outcome of this story is my realization of how much I as a student and teacher felt and feel marginalized. I was accelerated in the first grade, and all my school years my thoughts, feelings, ideas didn't seem to match those of the main stream. My marginalization was protracted when I moved to Canada as an immigrant. Finally, as a French Immersion teacher, I often feel as the other. These personal experiences may account for my interest in marginalized students. I don't think that the club I attempted to create is some kind of narcissistic therapy for me, as I often experienced my marginalization as a source of enjoyment: I was treated special, I attracted some attention because I was different.

If to be bewildered is "to lose one's way" then I am truly bewildered at the unfolding of The Peer Support Group. They opened a constellation of new perspectives for my practice. I started the club as something for them, to work on them, outside of me. I was drawn into it. Not unlike those Magic Eye books in which the viewer sees images within images that are invisible to

the uninitiated. They advise:

" Open your Magic Eye and learn a whole new way to look at the world,  
welcome to a new dimension!"

## Dealing with parents

I rarely interact with the parents of good students. They have few complaints, and they do not come to school. Consequently my perspective on parents is mostly based on those whom I phone or talk to because their child has some difficulty. I am convinced it is a skewed perspective.

Sheena is very disorganized. Her parents have her involved in so many activities before and after school that this child is constantly tense and running. At times, there are explosions. The mother phoned me one night apparently with a very benign question. She ended bursting into tears. The whole family is constantly tip-toeing a tight rope.

Another child, Sheila, cannot be bothered to hand-in assignments. Sheets were sent daily to be signed by the parent which indicated assignments to be completed. They were not signed. Four times I wrote that this particular assignment was overdue, nothing happened. Of course this child does not know what is important, there is no follow-up! She has figured-out that there are no consequences to her actions. Perhaps the sheet didn't go home at all. We had agreed at a parent meeting that it was to be signed everyday. Why didn't the parent phone to check about what we agreed on?

Then, there are parents who accuse teachers of picking on their child. In my view, they are partly to blame. If students go home with complaints about teachers and the parents echo that complaint whether the child is right or wrong, there is going to be a problem. I would hope that the parent would

first check the facts by personally talking to the teacher. It is often not the case.

As mentioned before, my difficulty in recognizing the many perspectives of parents about teaching is also rooted in my personal experience. My parents always sided with the teacher. They never questioned the authority of the teacher in front of me. Thus, I have difficulty when some parents question my authority. Why is there so little trust in our professionalism? Do parents generalize from some experience with some bad teachers? I believe it is possible as I tend to generalize my reservations to all parents after I have had a poor experience with one.

Some parents are dissatisfied with the quality of some teachers and rightfully so. Teachers as a group do not have a single profile of behavior, and our division sometimes sabotages the confidence parents put in us, and therefore our authority. Some teachers are definitely not doing a good job, but we are also torn by the allegiance to the profession and the code of ethics which makes it very difficult to prove any misconduct. I certainly do not have the time and energy to devote to that matter.

There are also parents helping with various activities like; playing the piano for a choir, using a holiday to assist on a fieldtrip, taking time to show their appreciation with a note or a little gift, or a phone call. These parents give enough of their support to demonstrate their genuine interest.

Finally, the difficulties encountered by parents and teachers in education are also explained by institutional constraints. There is little time allotted in the schedule for a teacher to talk to parents. I feel we should be

working with parents for weeks before we would start teaching their child. Ten minutes parent-teacher interviews are so insufficient. After all, these students spend more time with their teachers than with their parents.

Well, what does one accomplish by following this train of thought. Does it help to try to find a scapegoat for problems? I don't find it helpful. I firmly believe that our profession is ecological. We simply can't uproot and isolate a student to educate him or her, because he or she walks into a class already imprinted by an environment and world. Therefore, as a teacher, I think all I can do is make the best of the situation which is to try to help within the framework of my beliefs and knowledge, but not to impose my help.

When both the teacher and parents are at their best, we gain good results no matter the difficulties of the child. If the teacher compensates for the parent some time, and vice-versa, all the better. If it is impossible to cooperate with parents, then I continue to do what I think is best within the parameters of the social situation, and the limits of my personal health.

Well, I, as a parent have rarely taken the time to phone in my appreciation to the teachers. It is easy to see the shortcomings until we get into the other person's shoes. If only we could trade roles once in a while! I am a parent and a teacher, and I should constantly remind myself of what I did or didn't do as a parent to clarify my perspective as a teacher. I have the advantage over the parents of wearing both pairs of shoes and that should help me understand the shortcomings, limitations and aspirations of both.

## VII

### INTERPRETATIONS

My narratives are mainly illustrations of the human, social, and emotional aspects of my teaching. I want to remind the reader that my selection was guided by the interest in increasing my understanding in those characteristics of my practice.

I want to emphasize at this point that revising my narratives in order to polish them unfolded into a deeper understanding of each story. I speculate that writing about these events was simultaneously triggering me into reflecting upon them, which then transformed my description of them. The narratives offered here are quite different from the raw fieldnotes I initially started with. In the writing, transformation occurred from the initial story that allowed me to vent some frustrations, to the more polished version wherein I elaborated on why I was interpreting the situation as frustration.

The writing, editing, discussing of the narratives allowed some major concepts of my teaching to become accepted by me. I have been told a few times by students that I don't listen. I have been aware of my poor timing regarding verbalization at times. However, I suspect that to that point, I was in denial, not ready to accept them as some of my teaching characteristics. I felt defensive about it. Progressively, as I was writing events and their explanations over and over again, I was able to allow those concepts to

surface. As the reasoning and reflecting provided some exterior explanation to the problems rather than simply pointing at me as a villain, I was able to let those constructs emerge.

### Verbalization

One of the dominant images I find in my practice is my need to express myself verbally, especially in times of frustration. I snapped "Big Mouth" at the student, I told Rhoda's father how I felt. I wrote in the communication notebooks. I described my feelings to Roger.

I verbally express my perception of a situation. As I elaborated on it in the narrative "Big Mouth", being vocal underscores my practice, but also reveals some of its limitations.

Conflicts erupted in time of stress, when being vocal translated into being critical. As portrayed and stated in the narrative "Big Mouth", my practice is grounded in the assumption that silence means approval, whereas remarks tend to be focussed on shortcomings. It is also my personal experience that this attitude is dominant in schools between administrators and teachers, among teachers, between parents and teachers, and to a lesser extent between teachers and students. While writing this section, I experimented with embracing each narrative in a positive light rather than a critical one.

I could have been congratulating Rhoda and her father for what they

were trying to do. I could have praised Ryan on being so involved in my class. I could have complimented Roger for being honest with himself, and the teachers. I never provided any of these compliments. My honesty seems to be slanted toward the critical. I have a tendency to see the shortcomings rather than the achievements.

### Speaking as Control

Attempts at being in control is also one of my important characteristics. I take action in almost all stories. I provide an answer to most situations. When I don't have an answer, I am perplexed. Ambiguity leaves me at a loss. Others providing me with alternative answers surprise me as in the case of Sam. I like to supply the answer. I like to have a clear idea of where I am going.

However, the stories also illustrate how teaching is a process of continuously dwelling in complexity and uncertainty. These two realities highlight the source of some of my problems. There is a tension between my internal desire for control, and the external forces that actually control teaching in many ways.

I have attempted to resolve the dilemma by allowing my speaking to dominate over my listening. Why did not I ask the students why they write in their books? Why did not I approach Rhoda about her note? She might have explained it simply. Do I really listen to Ryan's story? I have judged

him without giving him the chance to explain himself. Do I really listen to the parents' comments in the notebooks? It is implicitly clear that some parents have told me they don't want to hear any more about all the bad things their child does at school. I have not listened to the silence of my students either.

### Doer more than listener

I have acted rather than listened. I have striven to work on students rather than with students. I have endeavored to change the situation to match my perspective instead of making an effort to be sensitive to the constellation of perspectives in order that the classroom atmosphere be more harmonious: a polyphony (Aoki, 1991, p. 29-32) rather than a monophony or disphony.

I have reacted to situations. I have phoned parents, discussed with students. I have not let things Be so they might solve themselves. I have in most cases acted promptly. In order to deal with complexity, and because of my expediency I have only allowed *my* curriculum-as-lived to be *the* curriculum-as-lived in my classroom. Aoki (1991, p. 1-6) suggests that we are too concerned over doing, and we may want to consider not doing, but instead allow Being.

## Caring

My stories also are permeated with a genuine concern for students. The activities I do such as peer support, taking risks at assemblies, spending time with troubled students, point to my good intentions to serve them. My actions to help those in difficulty with their studies or emotional being signal that I am alert to the social and emotional aspects of teaching.

However, my concept of how to help children grounded in my personal perspective of the world may translate into ineffective help. As Smith (1988) points out "foreclosed opinion produces the unproblematized, uneffective desire to 'help' children".

My trials to connect have also been hampered by my unclear vision of the teacher-counselor role. The classroom situations depicted show that my allegiance to the individual is in conflict with my allegiance to the class. Some of my tensions emerge because I have to decide between the priorities of the group, and those of one student. I was very frustrated in Charles' case because I didn't want to waste other students time. In retrospect I think that I would have removed Charles from the class, and dealt with him later, thus allowing others to learn, and allowing Charles and myself time and space to reflect. My perceived immediacy of a decision prevented me from making a reflective choice.

It is clear in my stories that success occurs when I take time to connect

my stories with those of the children ( peer support, respect). It is also apparent that even when I attempt openness and the students do not engage in connecting with me, communication does not occur. It seems that in those cases I have to accept my temporary helplessness.

### Naive about what control means

Finally I have come to the realization that most of my problems are in fact rooted in my misunderstanding of what control is. This characteristic of my teaching was the most difficult to come to terms with. It did not make itself clear to me, a faculty member pointed it out. I wonder why it was so obscure to me? He pointed out that "much student resistance may simply arise from the fact that school is inappropriate for some students by Grade Nine". Some of my conflicts in the classroom may be simply rooted in the contradiction between the students' personal dispositions, and social expectations, and that there is nothing much I can do about it. I am caught in the middle.

I think this is correct, and that I have to be more objective about certain incidents, and put them in proper perspective. Being in control may mean putting a disruptive student out without personally feeling defeated, but because I understand his disposition is, at the moment, incompatible with teaching and learning, as in the case of the story "Alligator Bait". Being in control sometimes means to let go. Being in control is realizing that I cannot

solve all problems, that I am just one link in the chain of circumstances that occur in the lives of students. Even as I write this, I realize it will take some practice to convince myself of understanding control in such a way.

However, I believe my former perspective of control was at the root of most of my problems. I talked rather than listened, I took action, I wanted to help. If I listen I may find out the outside circumstances that explain a situation which will give me a more accurate perspective of a situation. Listening will enlighten me as to whether to take action or not, and if warranted, which action is appropriate. I may also realize that sometimes I may not be able to help.

This perspective also allows me to not be the "other" but to remain myself, as I believe most of my conflicts arose due to my reaction to outside circumstances over which I had little control. I will remain the adult in the new sense of what "control" means, which is hopefully that I will act not as the punisher, repressor, threatener in conflict with my "always a child" nature, but now, rather, as an adult in the sense of sage. That is perhaps why I resented being an adult as I understood it as my old perspective of controller, not as a wiser, more understanding, companion.

## Conclusions

Delving into my personal history has assisted me in understanding how students could misinterpret my remarks. If their life experience does not

parallel mine, they have no referent to assist them in connecting with me. Just as I find it difficult to connect with quiet students, or "blank screens" who do not vocalize their perspective, conversely they may have difficulty connecting with me. Only through the reciprocal and mutual discovery of each other's perspective will we begin to apprehend our curriculum-as-lived as a harmonious polyphony (Aoki, 1991, p. 29-33). The classroom can then become an "abode, a place where one can go on Being" (Smith, 1983).

Reflecting allows me to understand the need for my teaching to involve more listening. Only then will I be able to assist students with their problems as I will become more familiar with their stories. I also have to keep in mind a maximum balance between my allegiances to the group and to the individual. Finally I have to have a more objective perspective of my role, I have to be careful not to take all situations personally. I am understanding better what Aoki (1991, p. 7-10) means when he views "Teaching as In-dwelling Between Two Curriculum Worlds".

At the moment, these are the values, beliefs and assumptions that have made themselves salient in my understanding of my practice. More may be evident to the reader. However, I feel I have gained much insight into my own teaching, and I am anxious to observe how it will translate in the classroom.

## VIII

### FROM LOOKING BACK, INTO LOOKING AHEAD

I started my career with theoretical constructs as the perceived guides to my practice. I would attempt to follow principally the curriculum-as-planned, unaware of the curriculum-as-lived as an important component of my teaching.

My philosophy of teaching was firmly rooted in the student as the recipient of knowledge, and as an object to work on. Even if theoretically I acknowledged the social nature of teaching, and attempted to practice it (group work, brainstorming), these activities were just instrumental add-ons to my initial philosophy of teaching.

I didn't recognize the existence of the situational reciprocity or mutuality of the classroom. I was unaware of the interactions of life stories, and what they achieve in the classroom situation. As this reality of teaching was denied, I suspect it became the source of some of my problems in teaching. My problems were rooted in my blindness to the historical and social phenomenology of teaching.

In my teacher training and consequent professional development, the experts had also denied the phenomenological component of teaching. Who I am as a teacher was not accounted for.

The narratives and their interpretations have highlighted for me that

teaching is about the interaction of personal stories. It encourages me to teach differently. It invites me to create an atmosphere which allows the children to live their own narratives. As underlined in my interpretations, listening to the children's histories and stories would be a start. Such disposition would of course be of a phenomenological nature, in continuous evolution.

Such an inclination reveals a new personal concept of what a teacher is. I perceive being a teacher now as not being a model of perfection, retainer of knowledge, controller of students, but as a participant, with human fallibilities, in the process of education (Jackson, p. 153). The teacher is someone whose authenticity allows her to connect with the students because she is genuinely alert to their stories. Someone whose awareness of her personal history as well as those of the children is able to grasp the complexities of the classroom phenomenon. This also entails that the teacher is someone who learns to live with ambiguity, uncertainty, vulnerability and temporality. This is not consequently a finite conceptualization of "the teacher" but rather my temporal understanding of the role.

Following, I would like to discuss some concerns I have about this type of research, as well as some perceived benefits and possibilities for the future.

### Apprehensions about PPK research

I personally think that the open quality of the research, and the voluntary disclosure of one's teaching practice, may deter some teachers from

getting involved in this kind of written reflection on their practices. It has been a long process for me to comprehend the philosophy of such research and to accept its mandate.

One of the criticisms I have is that being a "subjective" type of research, risk is involved at the onset. Its subjectivity may forestall some teachers, and those participating in it may represent only a sample section of the teaching population, thus providing the research with a narrow view of teaching. Many teachers need to share their stories so that the general conceptualization if any does not become short and parochial.

I am not saying that some teachers are refusing to reflect on their practices. I am saying they may be reluctant to write their reflections and share them explicitly. Some personal histories may dispose some teachers to shy away from writing their narratives. I am comfortable expressing myself verbally, similarly some teachers may feel comfortable in their silence.

Another danger of such research is that the narrative process may also be manipulated by teachers themselves. Connelly and Clandinin are warning that " Falsehood maybe substituted for meaning". I concur with this concern. It is naive to assume all teachers are well intentioned, devoid of political agendas. The profession could use some positive publicity, and some practitioners may be attracted to use their narratives to do so ( Graham, 1993).

The narrative format also lends itself to manipulation by other interested parties, or when the narratives are taken out of the context of the PPK research. One faculty member suggested opening participation in the

dialogue to include some parents, and even some students. I have contemplated the possibility for an extended period of time, but I feel unable to venture taking such a risk at this time. I believe parents and students would have to be well informed of the objectives of the research before they can participate. I do not feel I have the time at this point to embark in such a project. However, I am convinced the participation of parents and students is crucial, and perhaps the final step in understanding what happens in the classroom.

Some critics also contest the validity of such research. They argue that the outcomes are not easily measurable. I have changed because I have a new perspective regarding my practice, but some critics affirm unqualified change may be insufficient. Advocates of such method defend that critics are asking the wrong question, and I agree. Connelly and Clandinin contest that reliability and validity are overrated. They suggest to replace generalization by transferability.

This research displays what teaching is with all its quirks, complexities, contradictions, limitations. Change materializes in this research not as a specific new practice, but rather a new sharpened outlook, or approach or added dimension, a new understanding of teaching. The outcome is " a state of being" (Grundy, p. 65). The results are an attitude rather than a formal product (Grundy, p. 87). The personal to the general may be a slow, diffused process. But it is perhaps a complement of the general to the personal which has been deemed inefficient.

## Perceived benefits and possibilities of PPK

Perhaps, in a school, if the persons in position of authority initiated such research, opening themselves to vulnerability, teachers would then follow. Time will be a major element in allowing teachers to build the confidence necessary to participate in such practice. In a given school, with the appropriate time to work at it, I believe teachers and administrators as researchers of their own practical knowledge would build a better understanding of each other, which in turn would certainly result in a more humane school. A relationship of trust may evolve if narratives are shared.

As University professors lend themselves to such a process, a study of their own practice, school teachers may also take the risk. I personally was inspired because of the PPK shared by professors I have worked with. I am slightly suspicious when researchers are only involved in the transcribing of other people's practice. To go one step further in the collaborative research method, and to practically make it possible, why not have the researcher replace the teacher, and thus have an experiential dialogue of what teaching is? Something similar to this proposal is already taking place when practicum teacher take over half a teacher's load in order to have the teacher investigate his own teaching.

I also believe it is necessary to inform and involve parents and students in this process. Perhaps all participants should write their personal

accounts of events instead of having it filtered through only one lens. The comparison of the same event viewed from several different perspectives -be it the teacher-parent, student-researcher perspective- may be revealing.

Several researchers (Elbaz, Jackson, Clandinin) foresee its benefits especially in the training of prospective teachers. I agree, especially if the rationale is to train a new philosophy of teaching, these teachers could be the catharsis. My personal dominant misunderstanding of teaching as primarily controlling what happens in the classroom was taught to me in Education courses. It is time to shift the emphasis in teacher education to understanding what teaching is about by having each prospective teacher explore his or her personal history in order to highlight the beliefs, assumptions, and misunderstandings that may guide his or her practice.

I do not believe however that it would be enough. I would like to personally have time to go through this process periodically and regularly during my teaching career. It could become part of institutionalized professional development or even an element of regular staff meetings where narratives are shared. I think the latter idea would be much more adequate and fitting in with the philosophy of the personal practical knowledge: that is a continuous process. We may, however, encounter the same obstacles as are blamed for teachers paying little attention to theoretical research: giving lip service in regards to time. If we agree with Aoki (1991, p. 5) in saying that: " understanding what teaching truly is, is to undertake to re-attune ourselves such that we can begin to see and hear our doings as teachers

harbored within the pedagogical presence of our beings, that is, of who we are as teachers"

then we have to take time to do so.

## IX

### REFERENCES

- Aoki, T. (1990) Inspiring the curriculum, *The ATA magazine*, January/February, 37-42.
- Aoki, T. (1991) Inspiring Curriculum and Pedagogy: Talks to Teachers. Monograph. Faculty of Education, University of Alberta.
- Clandinin, D. J. (1986) Classroom Practice: *Teachers Images in Action*. London: Falmer Press.
- Connelly, M. & Clandinin, J. (1991) Native Inquiry: Storied Experience. In Short, E. (Eds.) *Forms of Curriculum Inquiry*. New York: State University Press.
- Dewey, J. (1938) Experience and Education. London: Collier Macmillan Publishers.
- Elbaz, F. (1983) Teacher Thinking: A Study of Practical Knowledge. New York: Nichols Publishing Company.
- Freedman, S. (1990) Small Victories: The real world of a teacher, her students and their high school. New York: Harper and Row.
- Graham, R. (1993) Stories Of Teaching As Tragedy And Romance: When Experience Becomes Text. Unpublished Paper. University of Manitoba.
- Grundy, S. (1987) Curriculum: Product or Praxis? London: Falmer Press.
- Hayden, T. (1988) Just Another Kid. New York: Avon Books.
- Hargreaves, D. H. (1972) Interpersonal relations and education. London: Routledge and Kegan Paul.
- Jackson, P. W. (1968) Life in Classrooms. New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston.
- Lakoff, G. & Johnson, M. (1980) Metaphors We Live By. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
- Lortie, D. C. (1975) Schoolteacher A Sociological Study. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.

Smith, D. (1983). Learning to Live in the Home of Language: Hearing the Pedagogic Voice as Poetic, *Phenomenology + Pedagogy*, 1 (1), 29-35.

Smith, D. (1988). Children and the Gods of War, *The Journal of Educational Thought*, 22 (2A), 173-177.

Smith, D (1994). *Pedagon: Meditations on Pedagogy and Culture*. Bragg Creek: Makyo Press.

Stenhouse, L. (1975) *An Introduction to Curriculum Research and Development*. London: Heineman.

X

APPENDIX

April 19th, 1994.

Dear Parent,

I would like to do a study of my own teaching as the final project of my Graduate Studies. My purpose is to write about what happens in the classroom: incidents, interactions of students as well as my reactions to them. I anticipate this study will allow me to reflect on my teaching and perhaps maximize what is effective.

My intention is to conduct the study in the form of a journal writing of events and my own reflections. Since this is recording what happens in the classroom, your child, with your permission will be involved as a participant. All information will be handled in a confidential and professional manner. Actual names of students or locations will not be used.

If you do not wish your child to participate please indicate by filling in the attached form, and return the letter by mail directly to me. Please do not entrust your child to bring it to me as he or she could misplace it, and I would unknowingly fail to respect your wishes. You also have the right to withdraw your child at any time. A more expedient manner to inform me of your decision would be to phone me directly.

I would very much appreciate your assistance in this study. If you have any questions please feel free to call me at Gilbert Paterson Community School at 329-0125 or at home at 320-9601. Also feel free to contact the supervisor of my study Dr. David Smith 329-2186 of the Faculty of Education and/or any member of the Faculty of Education Human Subject Research Committee if you wish additional information. The Chairperson of the committee is Robert Runté who can be reached at 329-2454.

Yours sincerely,

Marie Wilfong

What happens in the classroom

I do not agree to allow my child, \_\_\_\_\_, to participate in this study.

-----  
-----

Name

Signature

\_\_\_\_\_

Date

Mail to:

**Marie Wilfong,  
Box 1660,  
Lethbridge,**

**T1J 4K3**