

**WRITING IN THE CRITICAL SPACES:  
AUTOBIOGRAPHICAL NARRATIVE AND  
REFLECTIVE PRACTICE**

**TRACY GODFREY**

B.Ed., University of Calgary, 1988

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## Abstract

Autobiographical writing is a type of narrative which focuses on making meaning of an individual's experiences. The narrative serves as a lens through which to recognize the meaningfulness of individual experiences by noting how they function as parts of a whole. Autobiographical writing is a way to write about a whole life or particular events. Schön's concept of reflective practice has become an important part of current educational dialogue and a tool for professional development (Miller, 1994). His work has encouraged teachers to move away from mechanistic approaches of their work to the use of intuition and reflection in improving their practices. I want to reflect upon my own experiences as a teacher to extract information that may further contribute to our understanding of the qualities outside of those commonly identified that are necessary to be a successful and effective teacher. I am creating, imagining and re/writing historical data by recalling details through an autobiographical narrative of significant events in my teaching. In this project, I am attempting to find my place within the larger culture of teaching so that I can reconcile issues regarding wanting to belong and not wanting to belong and wanting to be different and wanting to be the same. I look at my life experiences, my career history in the field of education, and extract experiential themes that have contributed to my commitment to the field of education. My research and writing have led me to better understand the early influences in my life that have shaped my persona as a teacher. Can I recreate myself in the present as a teacher? I believe I can and that I will because I know my story.

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## Chapter I: Research Question and Background

The use of story in human understanding dates as far back as human interaction itself and storytelling remains an important communication tool in today's world. If we keep notes that survive, we produce a sense of how things have been going and are likely to go. Humans have story knowledge and story becomes a way of knowing.

There is a crucial connection between narrative and lived experience (Leggo, 1995). Autobiographical writing is a type of narrative, which focuses on making meaning of an individual's experiences. The narrative serves as a lens through which to recognize the meaningfulness of individual experiences by noting how they function as parts of a whole. Autobiographical writing is a way to write about a whole life or particular events. Oral and written narratives create meaning by noting the contributions those actions and events make to a particular outcome. We must examine issues of culture, pedagogy, and lived experience individually and collectively to effectively reflect upon our role as teachers (Hasebe-Ludt, 1999).

With this project, I want to reflect upon my own experiences as a teacher to extract information that may further contribute to my own and others' understanding of what it means to be a successful and effective teacher. I am recreating historical data by recalling details through an autobiographical narrative of significant events in my teaching. I want to look at my life experience, my career history in the field of education and extract experiential themes that have contributed to my commitment to the field of education. My intent is to examine school culture in relation to teaching and modes of inquiry. I am inquiring into teaching and teacher knowledge by examining my role as a teacher, a teacher educator, an educational researcher, and as a school-based

administrator. I am attempting to critically investigate and explain how as an individual, I learn and teach by seeking to connect change with learning over time. My focus is on change because I believe that change comes from learning and that learning comes from change. In my situation, this has been the case and my reason for wanting to explore the merit of self-reflective practices in self-evaluating my competency as a teacher.

In this project, I am attempting to find my place within the larger culture of teaching so that I can reconcile issues regarding wanting to belong and not wanting to belong and wanting to be different and wanting to be the same. Why do I feel different? Why do I feel like I do not belong? I am going to take a look at the culture of teaching, pedagogy, and lived experience in an attempt to make sense of my life, particularly as it pertains to my role as a teacher and a school-based administrator.

What do I hope to know, to learn in my research? I want to engage in meaningful, authentic research that begins in a place of knowing. I want to explore my past in order that I might recreate myself in the present and future. I want to remember, reflect and write about the professional experiences that have shaped who I am today. I seek to extract themes from my autobiographical writing that will help me to understand and to make peace with the uneasiness I have increasingly felt about my role as a teacher and school-based administrator. Past experience has taught me that if I reflect upon a problem, pose questions, identify common themes and extract the truth then I can possibly find my way out of uncomfortable situations and conversations. Do I really want to be a teacher? If so, what kind of teacher do I want to be? How do I feel about being an administrator? Do I want to be an administrator? Did I become an administrator for the right reasons? What were my motives in deciding to become a school-based

administrator? Why am I unhappy in my current role? Do I want to be a principal? How will the culture of teaching judge me if I decide to go back to being a classroom teacher? Would it consider me a failure? I am asking such questions so that I can uncover motives and patterns of behavior that keep me stuck in behaviors that are long past their usefulness.

This project is not about finding answers to my questions but seeking to be guided by questions that stir me into the lived meaning of experiences (Aoki, 1992). More often than not, my writing poses more questions than answers and leads me into new and different directions. But I persevere and I trust that my writing will help me to find my way in the world.

“What would it mean to dwell in the space of the *living* practice of teaching?” (Low & Palulis, 2000, p. 68) I believe that it would mean being honest with myself. It would mean that I would show the world that I am human and that I am a learner, too, that I do not have all of the answers. It would mean valuing and modeling learning and education and engaging in conversations about my practice. It would mean that I would accept who I am.

My project will address the following three questions. Firstly, how has the social order fashioned me in ways with which I no longer desire to identify? Secondly, how am I to judge the world that made me and on what basis can I unmake myself in order to remake my world? Thirdly, to what extent are my dreams and desires my own? I will explore the answers to these questions through autobiographical writing. It is my hope that writing about my life as a teacher will help me to find a place to work out the issues that have caused me to reassess and rebuild the course of my career.

When I began my career, I was confident and self-assured. Over the years, I have become less and less sure of my abilities and myself. I want to know why my experiences have led to these feelings, despite outward success and promotion. Over the course of my fifteen-year career, my colleagues, students, parents, and senior administrators have recognized me as both an exceptional teacher and as an overrated impostor. My role as a professional educator has been and continues to be dependent on changing mandates, missions, and directives handed down by those in charge of educational decision making. School principals have had the greatest impact on my development as a teacher and a school-based administrator. On the face of it, if the school principal approved of my work, I felt that I was a competent practitioner. If on the other hand, the school principal did not approve of me and/or my work, I lost confidence and felt that I was an incompetent teacher. I want to move beyond the opinions of others and begin to build a sense of my own professional competency.

Many educators come from an empirical, analytical orientation, where they are focused on the acquisition of linear facts, theories, observations, and conclusions. More often than not, schools operate as they did fifty years ago and there is tremendous pressure on teachers by teachers to maintain the status quo. I want to move beyond this state because that is where my tension exists. My tension exists in the spaces in between my desire to honor the learning process and the childhood need I have to be a “good girl.” I know that I am a competent teacher and administrator and yet, I am plagued by self-doubt, as I have become increasingly dependent on approval from the culture of teaching. I want to immerse myself in the past so that I can explore the reasons why this tension has developed.

I have always felt 'at home' with teaching but I haven't felt 'at home' within the culture of teaching. I intend to explore the reasons why I feel this way through my writing. Is it reasonable for me to feel this way? If so, why? In what ways am I different from other teachers? I must ask myself whether or not I am comfortable being different from other teachers. Have I chosen to be different from other teachers? If so, why?

This project will be a struggle to find my voice, for words I can claim as my own. Since becoming a teacher in 1988, I have become less and less inclined to share my thoughts, feelings, and beliefs with my colleagues.

I remember sharing personal stories with my colleagues. In particular, I remember telling stories in the staff room about the new man I had met. They all seemed so interested and excited for me. I told them everything and I wonder when I stopped telling them about myself, when I no longer wanted them to know who I really was. (Journal excerpt)

I have become politicized, faceless and spineless. I sugar coat my words and wrap them in ambiguity. I do not trust. I manipulate language and give the illusion that I support everyone and no one. Everyone knows this and so they in turn manipulate and corrupt the meaning of my words to serve their own purpose.

I believe that by repeating solutions of the past, we ensure outcomes of the past. This project is my attempt to free myself from the past. I want to free myself from the fear I have over being less than perfect, of making mistakes, of making people angry. To understand who I am, I must examine who I have been. We are products of our experiences. I am a daughter, a wife, a mother, a cousin, an aunt, a teacher, a learner, a leader, and a friend. I must examine these roles to fully understand my journey.

I believe that there is censorship imposed upon us in the culture of teachers. I recall going to my first staff meeting and being shocked by the aggressive tone with

which the teachers addressed each other and I noticed the self-righteous tone to their arguments and I silently wondered how I could defend myself against such acts of aggression. And as an administrator, I plan the staff meeting agenda as if I was preparing for battle, always strategizing on how to come away with fewer casualties. I remember my first experience working as a student teacher in a grade two classroom in a small town west of Calgary where I witnessed the full force of a teacher yelling at a group of students for beginning their assignment before they were instructed to do so. I remember feeling frightened for the children and wondering if they would be scarred by their teacher's verbal assault. I wondered how the students felt and I vowed never to speak to a student or colleague in the same way. But I know that I have broken this vow because I have heard myself correct children using a harsher than necessary tone and I wonder how they feel, whether they feel angry or just not good enough. I wonder how I changed? How has fifteen years operating in the culture of teaching hardened me?

I want to seek out what it means to be an educator and to be educated. I want to seek out a more fully human understanding of who a teacher is and what teaching truly is. I want to know who I am as a teacher and what my role is. At times, I feel that I have lost my focus on what is best for children. Increasingly, I have become more focused on supporting teacher centered practices or placating parents. I want to be a reflective and proactive teacher and leader who builds caring and respectful relationships with children, and who honors the learning process.

## Chapter II: Methodology

Schön's (1983) concept of reflective practice has become an important part of current educational dialogue and a tool for professional development (Miller, 1994). His work has encouraged teachers to move away from mechanistic approaches to their work to the use of intuition and reflection in improving their practices. John P. Miller believes that Schön's concept of reflective practice is valuable, yet falls short in that reflection is still rooted in a dualistic view of reality in that there is a subject that reflects on an object (Miller, 1994). There is a need for analysis and reflection, but there is also a need for synthesis and contemplation. Contemplation is a merging of subject and object. It is through contemplation that we see or envision ourselves as parts of a whole (Miller, 1994). Miller describes the "flow experience" as a place where we temporarily lose the awareness of our separate self and become totally focused on what we are doing.

Thoughts and feelings become more concrete when we not only "think" them, but also write, and respond to them by writing and reading, rereading and reflecting upon our writings. Often, writing down thoughts and feelings enhances our ability to sort out what is truly meaningful and assists us in gaining perspective on the behavior changes we are experiencing or trying to make. Writing also suggests a permanence through which commitment to change is enhanced; as well it enhances one's thought-feeling-reaction to life experiences (Babiuk, 2001).

Reflection is essential to a fully lived professional life (Boreen, Johnson, Niday, & Potts, 2000). The melding of reflective practice and teacher research results in educational improvement by developing professional autonomy (Hollingsworth & Sockett, 1994). For Dewey, true reflective practice takes place only when an individual is

faced with a real problem that he or she needs to resolve and seeks to resolve that problem in a rational manner. In an educational environment there are always plenty of problems presented to us on a daily basis. The issue is whether or not we have the courage and confidence to question our practice and to take a good look at why we do what we do. As teachers continue to seek greater understanding of their work, they may progress from concern for technique and method to deeper reflection about the many ways in which their teaching influences students' lives (Babiuk, 2001). This happened to me as a result of a crisis that occurred at a demonstration school where I taught in Calgary in 1995. I could have continued on the way I had previously and blamed the students for their inability to learn or control their behavior, but instead I took the time and the risk to look deeply into my beliefs about teaching and learning. I needed to take a close look at the factors that had shaped who I had become as a teacher. I believe that a reflective practitioner is interested in more than just mastery of content. Good teaching requires reflective rational conscious decision-making. Reflective practice stimulates teachers into thinking about what they are doing and why they are doing it.

It is reasonable to expect a teacher to justify his or her decisions and actions in the classroom and to be able to do this a teacher cannot rely on instinct alone or on pre-packaged sets of techniques (Reagan, Case, & Brubacker, 2000). To reach my full potential as a teacher, I needed to move beyond operating on instinct alone. Examining my lived experiences as a teacher has caused me to become unstuck by also forcing me to confront my dependency on pre-packaged teaching units and textbooks.

How is professional knowing like and unlike the kinds of knowledge presented in academic textbooks, scientific papers and learned journals? Reflection in action is

knowing in action. It is the entire process of reflection in action which is central to the “art” by which practitioners sometimes deal well with situations of uncertainty, instability, uniqueness and value conflict (Schön, 1983). The reflective practitioner takes the time to look carefully and to be observant, specific, precise and explicit (Booi, 1997). Purposeful conversations about practice lead to reflection on action and a willingness to experiment and improve.

What is the kind of knowing in which competent practitioners engage? An empowered teacher is a reflective decision-maker who finds joy in learning and investigating the art and science of the teaching and learning process. The reflective practitioner views learning as a construction and teaching as a facilitating process to enhance and enrich development (Reagan, Case, & Brubacker, 2000). There are many examples of the experienced teacher who does not engage in reflective practice. These are teachers that have not grown in their skills and it shows in the way that they are perceived in the learning community.

Several ways of conceptualizing reflective practice as it applies to the activities of classroom teachers have been suggested in recent years (Regan, Case, & Brubacker, 2000). Reflection on action and reflection in action are reactive by nature. Reflection on practice takes place after an event. Reflection in action takes place in the midst of practice. Reflection for action is proactive in nature and is the desired outcome of both previous types of reflection (Reagan, Case, Brubaker, 2000). We undertake reflection, not so much to revisit the past or to become aware of the metacognitive process we are experiencing, but to guide future action (Reagan, Case, Brubacker, 2000). Reflection in action is learning to adjust once you are out there knowing through feeling. For the

novice teacher, reflection for practice and reflection on practice are best. For the expert teacher, reflectivity may be best seen in reflection in practice (Reagan, Case, & Brubacker, 2000). Reflective practice improves curriculum because practitioners can use the results of their own investigations to bring about that reconstruction (Hollingsworth & Sockett, 1994).

There are different types of knowing for teachers. There is the knowledge that teachers need to make good decisions in and about the classroom situation. There is content knowledge, general pedagogical knowledge, curricular knowledge, pedagogical content knowledge, the knowledge of learners and their characteristics. There is knowledge of educational contexts, works of groups, governance, financing, community and culture. Further, there is a knowledge of educational ends, purposes, values and their philosophical grounds (Reagan, Case, & Brubacker, 2000). All of these types of knowledge impact what goes on in any given classroom at any given time yet the good teachers do something else – something more that moves them beyond basic teaching competency. Is this intuitive or is it based on experiential learning? Reflective practice involves what the teacher does before entering the classroom, while in the classroom and after leaving the classroom. Practitioners themselves often reveal a capacity to cope with the unique uncertain and conflicted situations of practice (Schön, 1983).

Is there intellectual rigor in professional practice? Reflection promotes professionalism (Boreen, Johnson, Niday, & Potts, 2000). Reflection and guided reflection are important to improving not only the confidence of teachers but also their willingness to experiment with new techniques. Reflective practice focuses on the capacity of individuals to reflect upon their own situations and change them through their

own actions. In other words, if something is working, do more of it. If it is not working, do something different.

The professional practitioner is a specialist who encounters certain types of situations again and again (Schön, 1983). As a competent practitioner, I usually know more than I say. I know when students do not understand and I sense when they are happy or when they are troubled even when they try to disguise such feelings. It is my responsibility to ensure that my students are successful in their learning and when they are not, it is my job to adjust the environment so that it is conducive to learning. To move beyond basic competency, I believe that a teacher must examine her practice and ask herself difficult questions. More often than not, these questions will rattle our core because we as teachers cannot be separated from who we are as people.

Writing is a way of understanding lived experience. Writing has prevented me from leaving my vocation. Often, writing down thoughts and feelings enhances my ability to sort out what is truly meaningful and assists me in gaining perspective on the behavior changes that I am experiencing or trying to make. My hope is that the writing process will help me to deconstruct previous patterns of behavior. Writing provides a few lines that I can use to spell out a few events, a few connections, a few patterns, a few questions (Leggo, 1997).

The more writing we do, the more we write ourselves into new horizons and new possibilities (Neilson, 1998). The pleasure has to be in the learning and in the writing, just as we have to enjoy the journey, not merely the destination (Booi, 1997). As a student in school I remember being terrified of creative writing time when we would be commanded to write descriptive paragraphs on subjects presented to us by our teacher. I

remember struggling to describe objects that held no meaning for me, always threatened by a failing grade. This project is very significant in that it is my effort to exorcise the demons of the past, my fear of writing, my fear of conflict, of failing, of not being good enough. Lorri Neilson suggests that the freer we are to use the language we know and the more facility we feel with words on our tongue that make sense of our lives, the more pure and authentic is our articulation of our experience (Neilson, 1998). This project is my attempt at making sense of the past and freeing myself from the constraints imposed upon me when I was a child so that I can begin to understand myself and my place in the culture of teaching. Both the process and the product of writing develop an “author-ity” that expands and extends voice, engenders courage and inspires a conviction to effect change in personal and professional contexts (Neilson, 1998).

In educational research, writing itself is considered a mode of inquiry and writing in transgressive and alternative ways is becoming a means of critical awareness for educators at all levels (Neilson, 1998). In much scholarly writing, learning is defined as research, explication, logic, reason, argument, and persuasion with the emphasis on conclusions, implications, and recommendations (Leggo, 1999). I have read the research and I have been saturated with other people’s answers to my questions. My questions are unique to my lived experience though and I believe that only I can change the story of my life.

Writing creates critical spaces, and forces us to remain open to learn (Neilson, 1998). I wish to use the reflective process and autobiographical writing to understand the significant factors that have contributed to my professional development, especially the historical patterns that keep me stuck in the past.

There are different types of writing: journals, poetry, prose poems, postcard stories, monologues, rants and letters, to name a few. The goal of journaling is to enhance one's sense of well being by clarifying vague thoughts and elusive feelings and to sort out what is meaningful. The journaling process assists me in gaining perspective on behavior changes that I am experiencing or trying to make. Journaling lived experiences, as I understand it, is not simply diary writing, but a tool for professional growth.

Ted Aoki suggests that journalizing is not so much concerned with the details of "we went here; we went there; etc." (Aoki, 1992, p. 30), but rather more concerned with the writing of experiences that touch our being. The journaling process has allowed me to sift through the situations that have caused me to re-examine the course of my career. More often than not, the angst I have experienced in my teaching career can be explained by unraveling the threads of the past. Until we can fully understand and appreciate the patterns in our lived experience, we are unlikely to fully realize and achieve our potential. Strackbeing and Tillman (1987) cite journals to be more likely written in a manner that can be shared with a select audience. Journals are often illustrated as written dialogues between the self and another person in order to describe, interpret and analyze experiences and ideas consisting of unique thoughts and viewpoints. The authors believe journals can provide individuals with opportunities to write about past experiences for the purposes of learning through the re-examination of actions, behaviors, thoughts and feelings. There are two types of reflective journaling. The free thought journaling process enables the writer to create/discover meaning by seeing, saying, and sensing thoughts and feelings on paper. Reflective journaling is more focused on a particular

event or incident. Frustrating and/or stressful events are dissected. Journals are powerful ways for individuals to give accounts of their experience.

I have used two specific types of writing. The free thought journal has led me to a focus. My reflective writing journal is then focused on a number of particular events that have shaped my persona as a teacher. The free thought journal has freed me from the fear of writing and has provided me with an opportunity to explore my thoughts, my feelings and my ideas on paper.

As I sat in the principal's office, I felt the old, familiar feeling of hyperarousal that I knew so well, the pounding in my chest, the dryness in my mouth, the uncontrollable shaking and I knew what was coming. I knew when the principal came in asking me to meet her in her office that I was going to be punished for not being good enough. My teaching partner was away that day and I was vulnerable. She told me that some of the parents were unhappy with my teaching and that their children were unhappy in my class. The principal suggested that maybe I should leave the school. I sobbed as I listened to her explain her concerns. All I heard was that I hadn't measured up, that I wasn't good enough, a failure. I told her that I was going through a tough time at home with my husband and that was the reason why I hadn't measured up. I could see that she felt guilty and she let me go home. The next week she said I could stay at the school, that she would work with me and that we could win the parents over, but I didn't believe her. In my mind I had failed, and I wanted to run away so I didn't have to feel the shame, the guilt, the desperation of not being good enough. (Journal excerpt)

Initially I felt that my negative feelings over this conversation with my principal were appropriate, but the process of sorting out my feelings through my writing led me to a deeper understanding of my reaction and how it was out of proportion to the situation. I discovered that the situation triggered memories of times when I felt powerless and vulnerable to attack. The situation was threatening because it brought up painful and problematic feelings such as anger, fear, and grief. The writing process helped me to make elusive thoughts become clear so that patterns emerged. I realized that I had to examine the past to gain a deeper understanding of the issues that have arisen in my life,

and when I looked deeper, patterns of behavior emerged. I began to wonder if my childhood experiences had created trigger situations for me. I wondered why I couldn't get over it and how I might free myself from the emotional and physical responses that are no longer useful.

While in school, I was taught to keep the heart out of my writing. I was told that my writing should be devoid of personal feelings, thoughts and opinions in favor of the views of other, more learned views. It is only recently that I have begun to let the heart back into my writing in an attempt to find my voice. My emerging voice seems angry and it makes me uncomfortable. Perhaps because I have spent so long trying to squelch it to better fit in with others. I worry that my anger might alienate family members, friends, or employers and this has prevented me from expressing it, but just as I am choosing to challenge my fear of writing and my fear of not being good enough, I am challenging the past by allowing my voice to emerge through my writing.

Carl Leggo states that our writing can only be true to ourselves because our stories as thought and written are based on our perceptions (Leggo, 1994). My stories are based on my perception of the truth and in acknowledging this I must accept that my recount may not be accurate in others' views. In my stories, I may show people as cruel when they weren't. I understand that my autobiographical writing will expose me, but I must take the risk if I am to truly understand how my lived experiences have contributed to my development as a teacher.

Autobiography is not only recording and reporting and repeating the lived story as known and as written by the subject; autobiography is recoding and restorying and restoring the lived story as unknown (Leggo, 1997). If we document and date

experienced thoughts and feelings, we can see over time the development of new perspectives and behavior changes. I have been able to extract meaning through the process of examining critical experiences throughout my professional teaching career and childhood.

Writing is an experience of creativity and learning. Freeing myself from the fear of writing has allowed me to closely examine my life so that I can understand myself better and further develop my strengths. I have chosen to give my voice freedom through the writing process. As every teacher knows, preparing to teach materials to others forces you to learn it in a more comprehensive way; this is even more true of writing (Booi, 1997). And yet, even though I still cannot find all the answers to the questions that have emerged from my writing, my writing gives me comfort nevertheless because it gives me hope and suggests that perhaps my past experiences as a child have contributed to my need for acceptance and approval. It is time to challenge these patterns of behavior.

Any piece of autobiographical writing is a particular reconstruction of an individual narrative and there could be other reconstructions (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000). Perhaps my colleagues really do believe that I am an impostor and maybe I am an impostor.

I am using my autobiographical writing as a field text. The word autobiography means to write one's own life. Autobiographical writing is a way to write about the context of a life. It is always a retelling because the life to which it supposedly refers is already a kind of narrative construct (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000). Oral history interviews are autobiographical and contain stories. Through the process of composing annals and chronicles, participants begin to recollect their experiences and to construct

outlines of a personal narrative (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000). Chronicles provide a sequence of events in and around a particular topic or narrative thread of interest (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000).

Autobiographical writing interrogates and examines both the joy and pain of our lives and forces us to look at the myths, reality frames, worldviews, biases that motivate us consciously and unconsciously (Kolbenschlag, 1988). I have chosen to reflect upon the pain and suffering that I have experienced so that I can better understand my role as teacher. The examination of my early life sets the context for my study by describing experiences that have led me to the place I exist in now.

Narrative focuses on making meaning of an individual's experiences. Clandinin and Connelly (1990) view narrative as the making of meaning from personal experience through a reflection process in which storytelling plays a significant part (Clandinin & Connelly, 1990). The narrative mode leads to good stories, gripping drama, believable, though not necessarily true historical accounts. Much of our self-narrating is a matter of becoming conscious of the narrative that we already live with.

Narrative creates its meaning by noting the contributions those actions and events make to a particular outcome and then configure these parts into a whole episode. It is evident to me as I examine my free thought journal that I have been in different places at different times and my writing reflects this. To fully understand and appreciate where I am in my career as an educator, I must examine significant events in an attempt to extract common themes that require greater understanding. This is imperative in thoughtful decision making because my role as a teacher is too important for me to throw it all away on a whim because I want to run away from conflict.

Narrative inquirers are often strongly autobiographical (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000). Teacher narratives in the form of teacher accounts of their experiences including descriptions of critical events in the classroom, various types of logs and journals, conference reports, and self interviews are all examples of narratives that serve to contextualize the classroom experience both for teachers and others. Such narratives provide us with a rich understanding of what takes place in the classroom (Reagan, Case, & Brubaker, 2000). What do narrative inquirers do? Who are the characters in our study? What are we trying to convey? What personal, practical and theoretical contexts give meaning to the inquiry and its outcomes? What forms could our final research texts take?

A good narrative must move beyond narrow notions of reliability, validity and generalizability. In narrative recollection, fact and fiction can become blurred; what seemed like fact is more and more memory reconstruction. The narrative writer must always be cautious to avoid simplistic plots, one-dimensional characters, and narcissistic, idiosyncratic embellishment (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000). She must be cautious to avoid narrative smoothing, which is writing in a “happily ever after” ending. She must acknowledge that her perceptions, thought and written, are never completely neutral but always interpretive in nature. How we tell our story is based on our perspective and shaped by the world around us, so that we can never be totally truthful with ourselves or our readers in an absolute sense. This project is about “getting it all out,” so that I can extract the truth in the sense of what I hold to be true based on my experiences and environment from fantasy and extract meaning and relevance. Narratively writing the past is an interpreting activity, not a simple mirroring of the past.

Ethics and anonymity are concerns with narrative inquiry (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000). I have been concerned with maintaining the dignity of those that I have included in my autobiographical writing. It is difficult to dissect an experience without identifying heroes and villains. In this project, I have focused on writing about the experiences that have shaped who I am as a teacher at this point in time. I have chosen to focus on both negative and positive experiences because I believe that juxtaposing them will lead to further insights and will allow me to reach my potential. Criticisms may not be welcome. I know that my descriptions of behavior and my interpretations of events could be argued by the characters involved. How can I obtain consent from everyone I have come into contact with? I have not solicited consent from everyone because I have done my best to disguise their identity although I am sure that they would recognize themselves if they chose to read my writing.

When I first participated in the “Writing Teachers’ Lives” course at the University of Lethbridge in the summer of 2000, I thought that examining my personal story was too much like therapy. At the time I didn’t feel that I needed therapy, rather I needed to learn how to write a research paper. Instead, I began to take a closer look at my life and the life of others in an attempt to understand myself and my role as teacher better. This caused me to feel uncomfortable and there were many times when I wanted to abandon my self-reflective journey in favor of more traditional research. However, the process of writing my life has caused me to examine painful experiences in my life and this has been difficult work, but I feel that this work has caused me to challenge past patterns of behavior that are no longer useful, and that have been on some occasions, damaging. I have often wanted to abandon this work because I have not wanted to face the fact that I

was traumatized as a child and I did not want to acknowledge that this has played a role in my decision to become a teacher. This project has led me to accept that unacknowledged and unexamined trauma-related anger has colored every aspect of my life: my work or school performance, my daily habits, and most important of all my self-esteem and relationships with others. This project is my attempt to work through these feelings so that I can gain a greater sense of control over my work as a teacher and school administrator.

### Chapter III: Leaving Home

I had always wanted to be a teacher and I clearly remember playing “school” with my two younger brothers when we were children. I was always the teacher because I was the eldest and my brothers never challenged my self-imposed authority because I was the biggest and strongest of the four children in the family. My younger brothers must have known from their own experiences as students in school that the teacher held absolute power in the classroom. I cannot remember what I taught my brothers, but I do remember how I taught them. In looking back on the times my brothers and I used to play school I now understand that our play focused more on school procedures than on content. As I reminisce about the times that we played school, I conjure up images of myself as the taskmaster shouting out orders, “Sit up straight!” “Hurry up!” “No talking!” And my brothers listened and obeyed my commands. From a very young age I learned that the teacher was in charge of the classroom and that my job as a student was to listen and learn. In school I did not have a voice. And from a very young age growing up in my parents’ home, I understood that my parents were in charge and that my job as a child was to do as I was told, quietly and obediently. At home I did not have a voice. And so, I grew up understanding that only adults had control, power and the right to a voice in stating their wants, needs and opinions. At a very young age, I understood that my personal safety was dependent upon my ability to follow the rules and keep quiet.

Madonna Kolbenschlag suggests that we must all leave home several times in a lifetime (Kolbenschlag, 1988). “Leaving home means leaving dependency, safety, and security, ethnocentrism and tribalism, status and all those things that we make extensions of ourselves” (Kolbenschlag, 1988, p.155). This project is my attempt at leaving home. I

want to look to the past so that I might recreate myself as a teacher in the present. I want to challenge the familiar patterns of behavior that kept me safe when I was a child, but are no longer useful and have in many ways kept me trapped in dysfunctional ways of dealing with the world.

Madonna Kolbenschlag points out that it may be difficult for many of us to leave home because of our attachment to the familiar, the tried and true, the devil that we know, rather than taking a closer look at ourselves in an attempt to know ourselves better. Leaving home means re-examining the past to seek out new ways of doing things, recreating ourselves, redefining ourselves, reforming ourselves. Kolbenschlag suggests that the fear of loss may make us fearful of holding on to anything and frightened of letting go and that this insecurity keeps us trapped in the past, in potentially limited ways of doing things (Kolbenschlag, 1988).

Fear has kept me trapped in the past. By looking into the past, I acknowledge that many of the decisions that I have made, currently make and will make have been influenced by patterns of behavior that were established when I was a child. As a child, being a good girl kept me safe, and in my adult life I have replayed this role daily in my work as a teacher. I want to be thought of as a good teacher, a good vice principal, a good mother, a good sister, a good daughter, a good patient, a good wife; the list is inexhaustible. I have been afraid to take a risk because I have been afraid to fail, to be disapproved of, disciplined, a failure. Maybe I don't know as much as I have led people to believe I know. Maybe I am an impostor.

This project is my attempt to find my voice. To create a new self, I must strive to understand the old self. Through the process of self-reflection, I acknowledge that over

the years I have spent teaching children in schools that I have improved my craft. Written evaluations, letters of reference, national, provincial and municipal awards should convince me that I am a good teacher and yet the feelings that I am somehow defective, deficient, an imposter persist.

To understand who I am, I must examine who I have been. Self reflective writing has helped me to locate myself in the world by leading me to an understanding that I am a compilation, a painting, a synthesis, a typography of my lived experience. To leave home, I must acknowledge, understand and interpret my lived experience so that I can become the teacher that I want to be. Much of this memory work has been uncomfortable, as I have examined events that would have been more comfortably forgotten. I am attempting to leave the security, predictability and structure of the past so that I can recreate myself into a stronger and more confident teacher and school administrator.

Madonna Kolbenschlag suggests that “ perhaps the more hollow our inner space, the more likely we are to seek to solidify and secure ourselves in outer space, in whatever can be transformed into an extension of our fragile core” (Kolbenschlag, 1988, p. 160). This project is an attempt to understand myself better so that I can recreate myself in the present and future. To understand myself in this space, I must scrutinize the past.

This means descending into that primal pool of pain that ripples beneath our consciousness, down into the subterranean roots of our behavior in our parental origins and early childhood experiences, our family and gender socialization, our experiences of intimacy and relationship, our self image and role, our addictions and compulsions, our needs for approval and love. (Kolbenschlag, 1988, p. 154)

To understand who I am, I must understand who I have been. I understand that I am a product of my experiences as a daughter, a wife, a mother, a sister, an aunt, a cousin, a niece, a teacher, a student, a vice principal, a friend, etc. I must examine each

of these roles to fully understand my journey. In this space, I intend to focus on exploring my roles as a daughter so that I can better understand who I am as a teacher.

I was born in England in 1963. At the time of my birth, my father was employed by the Royal Air Force and my mother worked as a surgical nurse. I have been told that my father traveled extensively during the first few years of my life. Our family immigrated to Canada in 1966. I have been told that we moved to Canada because my father hated being in the military; he hated being told what to do, following rules, having to be obedient, silent, invisible. My father wanted freedom, choice, and opportunities for himself and his children and he was hopeful that the move to Canada would provide this

My first memories as a child were of a brightly colored dress I wore as a child of three or four. I remember the dress because I felt so happy and free when I wore it.

While enrolled in the Writing Teachers' Lives Summer Institute in 2000, I wrote a poem about this special dress.

#### Dressed to Dance

Little girl of three or four,  
 living in Toronto,  
 in a high rise apartment.  
 A first memory in a new country  
 with mom and dad  
 my little brother too.  
 Little girl dancing in her favorite dress,  
 the picture of a chicken occupying the center  
 or was it a duck?  
 Against a background of green or blue  
 a little yellow bird  
 floating on the fabric of my dress.  
 Dance, dance, dance  
 around the tiny concrete apartment as if I were performing on a stage.  
 I jumped, twirled, and skipped across the carpet  
 telling myself that it was all right if I muddled  
 the order the straight lines on the carpet  
 that had been made by the vacuum cleaner

again!  
I bumped into the coffee table,  
brushed against the sofa  
a chair, a counter.  
I touched the wall with my hand.  
Did I leave a mark on the wall?  
If I did I didn't care.  
I was the fluffy bird on the brightly colored dress,  
with the little red cap,  
cheerful and cute,  
wholehearted and free  
Free until my father returned home.  
Quick, take a picture and keep it safe!  
Dad will be home soon  
and there won't be anymore dancing or joyful play,  
For I will have to move back into my place,  
of silent obedience.  
A snapshot of a little girl's freedom  
to be,  
but my dad came home.

When I was a child, I remember feeling fearful much of the time. My father was unpredictable. At times he was like other parents seemed to be, loving, kind, understanding, supportive, nurturing and at other times he was angry, impatient, hostile, aggressive, violent, cruel. When I was a child, I learned to tread lightly around my father and to read his moods carefully so that I wouldn't jeopardize the fragility of our household. As a young child, I learned to keep myself safe by being a good girl.

From my earliest memories as a child of three or four, until I was twelve years old, I remember being uncomfortable, fearful and sometimes terrified to be around my father. As a child, I felt helpless, powerless and desperate much of the time and this made me want to gain control of the situation in the only way I knew how, which was to please my father. And so, I learned that to be a good girl I had to listen to my father and do as I was told. Being a good girl meant that I kept my thoughts, feeling and opinions to myself.

Being a good girl kept me safe most of the time. There were times though when being a good girl wasn't enough and I wrote about one such instance in my journal.

My father brought us home a wall map of the world. It was a gift my brother and I were supposed to be excited about it, but we weren't. We were terrified because we knew what the gift meant, that we would have to spend hours studying it. My father explained to us that he wanted us to do well in school so that we could be successful, so that we could have opportunities, freedoms that he never had. I remember him telling us that we had to study the map and he gave us a time limit. He told us that at the end of the allotted time that he would ask us questions about the map and that we had to know the answer or we would be punished. The map was so big, I didn't think that I was going to be able to memorize the whole thing, but I tried desperately, quickly repeating each name and trying to commit it to memory. At first I did well and I thought that I might make it, that I might be able to answer every question he asked me, but my father made sure I didn't by asking me to identify an obscure city in Russia and I couldn't find it in time.

I thought that if I was a good girl and did what I was told that I would be safe from harm, but it didn't work that way. My father's moods were unpredictable and uncontrollable and sometimes being a good girl wasn't enough. There were times when my father wanted to punish us, show us that he was in charge, in control and he set impossible tasks for us. I wrote about the feelings I experienced as I waited for my father to punish me.

I remember waiting for my father to come into my room, feeling the threat of violence. I felt afraid, desperate, fearful, helpless, and hopeless to stop the threat to my physical safety. As I waited for my father to punish me I felt the symptoms of hyperarousal, my heart racing, my muscles tensing, my mouth becoming dry. I wanted to run, to hide, but I was locked in the room just waiting. I remember wanting it to just be over. I knew when it was all over that my father would feel guilty about what he had done to me and he would be nice to me for a while. The waiting was the worst – far worse than the punishment. And I wondered if I could have avoided making my father's moods, if only I tried harder to be a good girl. Maybe then I would be safe.

Whenever I saw my father descending into darkness, I would try even harder to please him by being a good girl. I tried to save my brothers too and I remember having private conversations with them, coaching them on how to behave so that they wouldn't

get in so much trouble, but they wouldn't listen. When I was a child, I was terrified of my father until I was about twelve or thirteen years old and then everything changed. My dad was different, kinder, softer, more trusting, and I began to feel safe around him. And from the age of about twelve or thirteen my life changed, it became predictable, safe, like everyone else's seemed to be and I was happy. It wasn't until many years later that I learned that my father had been diagnosed with schizophrenia when I was twelve.

I learned that schizophrenia was a mental disease marked by a breakdown in the relation between thoughts, feelings, and actions, frequently accompanied by delusions and retreat from social life. My mother told me that my father had been prescribed medication for his illness, which he had been taking since his diagnosis. My mother suggested that my father's illness had caused him to behave illogically, erratically, aggressively. And I forgave my father, although I did not stop trying to be a good girl.

By examining the past, I see that I continue to exhibit many of the same behaviors I exhibited as a child. I am frightened of disapproval, fearful of authority and terrified that I might make a mistake. I want to be a perfect teacher, school administrator, wife, and mother. I avoid conflict and I do what I am told. When faced with disapproval, I retreat, beg forgiveness or try even harder to win favor by being a good girl.

I was brought up in an adult centered environment where children were to be seen and not heard. As a child, I had no rights in the household and I was not encouraged or permitted to have a voice. I was not encouraged to have an opinion or to express how I felt. In acknowledging my past, I see that the relationship that I had with my father is replicated in my work with other adults. I tend to be compliant, obedient, respectful and amiable. I disregard my feelings, my thoughts, my beliefs, my opinions, and my voice.

This causes me to feel anger, anxiety and fear over my perceived inability to get over the past and those old, familiar feelings of being out of control. I recognize that my past experiences have caused me to avoid conflict even when it is necessary to maintain my rights or the rights of others. I do not feel that I have a voice or the right to say how I feel and I recognize that without a voice, I cannot become the teacher, wife, mother, and school administrator that I wish to be.

By examining the past, I acknowledge that the issues that arose as a result of my childhood have impacted the quality of relationships I have had with adults. I wonder if my past has influenced my relationships with my students. Early in my teaching career, I remember engaging in power struggles with less cooperative students. I believed that the students in my class had to listen to me even when I was wrong because I was the teacher. I was in control and I was surprised when some of my less compliant students questioned my authority.

I believe that it was and still is vital for me to investigate, interrogate and scrutinize my past so that I might develop a better understanding of my feelings, thoughts, hopes and dreams. Miller suggests that there is illumination or learning from pain and suffering (Miller, 1994). I have learned much from my writing as the process has caused me to see emerging patterns in my behavior that have kept me stuck in unhealthy, inefficient and ineffective ways of dealing with conflict. I recognize that my need for acceptance and recognition has prevented me from realizing my potential as a teacher and a leader of teachers. This project is my attempt at challenging the past and rewriting myself in the present.

## Chapter IV: The Culture of Teaching

Through in-service and pre-service education of teachers, educational leaders have attempted to improve teaching methods based on a variety of well-documented research around learning, and yet many of today's classrooms and classroom activities would be familiar to a teacher from the 1930s. Teachers who face classrooms every day have role models from their own experience as a student and, just as parents often rely on their models of parenting, teachers will rely on those models of teaching, good or bad, to determine their behavior in the classroom.

To understand who I am I must understand who I have been. I understand that I am a compilation, a hodge-podge of my prior experiences and I want to investigate my past experiences in an attempt to define myself in the present.

As I wrote in my journal, I tried to determine when I decided that I wanted to become a teacher.

My grade one teacher was younger and more attractive than the other teachers in my school were and she spoke with an Australian accent. She dressed differently too. My grade one teacher wore short dresses that were colorful and "young" looking. Her hair was long and blond like the color of honey. I remember my brother telling me that he loved our grade one teacher because she was so beautiful and young. He told me that when he grew up he wanted to marry our grade one teacher and I believed him. My brother and I both agreed that our grade one teacher didn't look at all like the other teachers in our school and we wondered if she knew she was different. I don't remember whether or not my grade one teacher was a good teacher, but she was pretty and I used to enjoy looking at her and I hoped that I might look like her one day.

My grade two teacher looked more like the other teachers in my school. She was heavy set and dressed conservatively like the other teachers. My second grade teacher spoke more harshly than my grade one teacher did and she always seemed to be angry. It was easy to upset her simply by talking out of turn or getting out of our desks without permission. I remember that my grade two teacher seemed like a good teacher. She wasn't as pretty as my grade one teacher was, and I remember more of her teaching. I remember many of her science lessons because they were always so exciting. She used to challenge our thinking

by inviting us to guess the outcome of the experiment she would demonstrate for us on any given day. And so at the end of grade two, I decided that I was going to be a teacher when I grew up.

My grade five teacher was a harsh looking middle aged woman. She was short, round, smelled of smoke and stale perfume and wore the standard issue, polyester suit. My grade five teacher was always calm and in control. She had high expectations for behavior in the classroom. My grade five teacher asked thought provoking questions and she seemed genuinely interested in what her students' had to say. She encouraged us to use our voice in stating our thoughts, opinions and feelings about our world. I remember many of the lessons she taught us. Of particular importance to me was the story of *Our Lady of Fatima* that she read to us. The story told of the miracle that occurred at Fatima where a teenaged girl witnessed a vision of the Virgin Mary. At a time when I felt helpless and out of control, the story of *Our Lady of Fatima* gave me hope and I constructed a small shrine in my bedroom with a plastic bottle of holy water, rosary beads and a copy of the bible. I prayed every night that my father would be in a good mood and that I would be safe from harm. My grade five teacher was different from my other teachers. She looked like them but she didn't teach like them. So at the end of grade five, I decided that I wanted to look like my grade one teacher and teach like my grade five teacher. (Journal excerpt)

Frequently throughout my fifteen-year career as a teacher, I have been told that I did not look like a typical teacher. In particular, comments have been made about my outward physical appearance and how it differs from the typical teacher. For example, a grade six student I was teaching in Calgary in 1991 mentioned upon meeting me for the first time that I did not look like a teacher. When I probed him regarding the reasons why he would make such a comment, he suggested that I looked more like an actress or maybe a flight attendant. He went on to suggest that I looked much too glamorous to be a teacher and he wondered why I had chosen such a career when I probably had other options.

At times, colleagues have also suggested that I did not look like a 'typical' teacher. In 1991, a female colleague suggested that my physical appearance probably contributed to my being successful in securing a teaching contract. On the surface, one

might interpret these comments to be complimentary, but I did not feel that way. I felt self-conscious about the way I looked. I wanted to be different, but I wanted to be part of the culture of teaching. Perhaps I had been successful in achieving my childhood goal of looking like my grade one teacher.

My grade one teacher did not look like a teacher and I recognized that she appealed to me at the time because she was different. She was young, pretty and perfect and I wanted to be just like her. In examining the past, I recognize now that my desire to be pretty and perfect was my way of erasing the ugliness of my past growing up surrounded by fear, anxiety and violence.

When I was young I decided that I wanted to teach like my grade-five teacher. I wanted to nurture children the way she had and keep them safe in much the same way I had tried to keep my brothers safe when I was a child. My grade five teacher gave me security when I felt frightened and powerless to control my father's moods and I wanted to do the same for children who felt as I did. I wanted to give them security, love and hope for the future. In examining the past, I recognize now that my desire to be caring and nurturing was my way of giving myself the protection and love I didn't receive as a child because of my father's illness.

Early in my career, during a teacher's convention in downtown Calgary one February, I vividly recall overhearing some businessmen joking with each other over how easy it was to identify teachers by the way they dressed. It was obvious by their comments that the businessmen felt that the typical teacher's appearance was dowdy, boring or sloppy, and I silently agreed that the typical teacher's style tended to be more conservative and understated than that of the general population. Recognizing that

teachers did tend to dress differently from the general population, I wondered how teachers might be identifiable from the general population in other ways. How was I identifiable within the culture of teachers?

Through my writing, I acknowledge that I have been defined by the culture of teaching as different from other teachers. I have been told that I do not look like a teacher and I have been told that I teach differently from other teachers. I wrote about this in my journal.

My style was more formal, dressier than necessary like I was trying to look older than my chronological age. I looked more like someone who might work in a downtown office. My mother had always encouraged me to dress for success and I had adopted elements of her own dress style – such as wearing expensive, well tailored clothes which were fashionable and accentuated my physical appearance rather than detracting from it. I spent time getting ready in the morning, showering, putting on make up, curling my hair and spraying myself with exotic scents. Perhaps this was an attempt to cover up the shame, the guilt, and the ugliness of the past. I remember that some of my colleagues made comments about my physical appearance. I remember liking being noticed and hating it at the same time. And so I fluttered between trying to look different from the other teachers and trying to look the same, not knowing who I really was or who I really wanted to be. (Journal excerpt)

I have felt fear and anxiety over my role as a teacher in much the same way I felt fear and anxiety over my role as a child. I know that in the past I have wanted to be a good girl. I want praise and recognition from my colleagues and I want to be accepted by the culture of teaching.

I understand that I must look deeply into my life experiences and examine both the positive and negative aspects of myself as I am as a person, and as a professional so that I can find a place of safety, security and acceptance in the culture of teaching.

What is it about the culture of teaching that has led me to doubt myself?

And my professional competency? Is it because I have tried to look different from the typical teacher? Is it because I dress differently? Is it because I am a female? Is it my age? Is it because I have moved myself out of the culture of teachers into the culture of school administrators? Is it because I try too hard to please? I have been devastated by some of the behaviors that have been exhibited towards me within the culture of teaching. And yet, I must acknowledge that I have consciously tried to define myself as different from the larger group. I have attempted to prove that I am worthy of my position and that I am not an impostor.

Impostor after all.  
 Pretending to know,  
 be someone I am,  
 perhaps am not.  
 I have nowhere to turn,  
 nowhere to hide.  
 I fear I've been found out.  
 Time to run and hide.

Through my writing, I have recognized that I do not trust the culture of teaching. I have not been comfortable sharing openly with my colleagues. I have been fearful of the culture of teaching, as I was fearful of my father as a child. My father had a disease that caused him to be suspicious, hostile and violent. What is it about the culture of teaching that has caused me to be fearful of it and worry that I might be punished if I misbehave, by being disagreeable, or disobedient? I have wanted to feel safe in the culture of teaching. I needed to find my voice and to use it without fear that I might be excluded from the culture of teaching. To do this, I believe that I must understand the relationship that I had with my father and how that relationship has shaped the way that I communicate with my students and my colleagues.

I want to stop and think about my work with students and teachers. I want to take the time to have conversations with my students, my colleagues, myself. And yet, I feel that the pace in school has quickened and increasingly I sense that my effectiveness as a teacher and leader is measured by how much I produce rather than by the quality of my work. Carl Leggo has suggested that we, as leaders in our society, have become a hyperactive people who seek to do multiple things at once and take little pleasure in doing any of them (Leggo, 1999). I miss the creativity of teaching, the conversations, the listening, and the learning. Since becoming a school administrator, I spend less and less time thinking and listening and talking about learning and more and more time disciplining students, pacifying parents, and comforting teachers.

My lived experience as a teacher has caused me to believe that self reflective practice will improve my teaching, and yet I feel that the culture of teaching has decided that I must work harder and faster if I am to be effective. I have become more reactive and less proactive. I no longer have the time to think, to listen and to talk about my work. I want to be a teacher and leader who builds and supports caring and mutually respectful relationships with children and adults in schools. I want to be a reflective proactive teacher and administrator, but in the school world of deadlines, meetings and business, I am struggling to honor, support and enhance student learning.

Erika Hasebe-Ludt suggests that we need to slow down the hectic pace of educational activity, and take time to observe and to talk to the children, to see, to reflect and to listen to the voices of others (Hasebe-Ludt, 1999). This project is an opportunity for me to have a written conversation with myself and with others who have knowingly or unknowingly contributed to my journey as a teacher. I want to listen to the voices of

the past to understand them better so that I can recreate myself into the person that I want to be. I need to let my guard down and trust so that I can really listen, understand and participate in written dialogue with myself. Increasingly, I feel that my role has already been defined for me in advance by the culture of teaching in much the same way my role was defined for me in advance by my father. I want to break free by finding my voice to define myself in honest and authentic ways. Through this project, I want to know who I have been, who I am in an attempt to recreate myself in the future. My need for acceptance by the culture of teaching has led me to doubt myself and my ability to teach, in much the same way as my father's punishment led me to doubt myself as a child. I must think and talk and write my way out of this by interrogating the reasons why I require acceptance and approval from the culture of teaching and by challenging past patterns of behavior that are no longer useful.

How can we speak to each other, learn to live well with each other and on the earth, and teach our children to do the same, in the face of the entrenchment of our differences? (Hasebe-Ludt, 1999) The isolation that separates teachers from other professionals is problematic. Working alone, teachers have few models of excellent practice to watch and learn from. There is not time for lingering, no time for waiting on words, not time for listening (Leggo, 1997). Increasingly, I find that I am able to write myself out of confusion, misunderstanding and fear. More often than not, my writing poses more questions than answers and leads me in all sorts of different directions, but I persevere and I trust that my writing will help me to find my place in the culture of teaching.

Learning our culture means learning which ones we do construct, how we construct them, and what good they are for our practical purposes. My relationship with my profession is being challenged by my current situation. I feel like I don't belong. I have felt like I have not belonged before. The first time I felt I did not belong in the culture of teaching was when my Head Master in England questioned me about my over reliance on teaching guides and worksheets. The second time I felt different in the culture of teaching was when I came back to Canada and taught in a school where it was suggested by some of my colleagues that I didn't look like a teacher because of the way I looked and the way I dressed. The third time I felt that I did not belong in the culture of teaching was when I taught at the demonstration in school and the principal told me that some of my students' parents were displeased with my teaching. And now, in my current situation I have felt the tension of being an administrator and no longer considered by some to be a trusted member of the culture of teaching.

There have also been times over the course of my fifteen-year teaching career where I felt that I belonged. I have fond memories of my first two years of teaching as well as the time I spent teaching gifted and talented learners. While teaching grade five and six, I challenged the belief that girls were not capable of being good in mathematics and I became a leader in the area of mathematics curriculum development. There have been many times throughout my career where I have been considered to be a leader, but it all seems to evaporate the minute I feel that I have not measured up, that I am not good enough, just like when I was a child. Feelings of inadequacy and thoughts of "I need to try harder next time" and "I can't make a mistake again" fill my mind and the old patterns of behavior emerge.

I believe that we live in a culture that says it values learning and yet we do not accept or value people who say that they don't have all of the answers. In our schools we seek to maintain the status quo and teachers will do whatever they have to do to maintain it. Kolbenschlag suggests in *Leaving Home* that there can be no community among teachers when there is scarcity, private hoarding, greed, fear, investment in self-perpetuation, sterility and stagnation (Kolbenschlag, 1988).

Teachers tend to be conservative in their appearance, habits and customs. I believe that we work in a culture that is intolerant of difference. We say we value diversity, and yet, I have witnessed teachers being excluded by the culture of teaching. Those who are different are isolated and vulnerable. To be a leader and to effect change in the field of teaching requires strength, courage, and tenacity. In examining the past, I am hopeful that I will endure and yet I must acknowledge that I am tired.

I wonder why there is such intense pressure among teachers to conform? Why does our society expect teachers to behave a certain way? Educators say they want to invite questions in collective wonder, and yet, we protect our little empires with ferocious hostility.

We have inherited a consciousness and habits of heart that generate a cultural autism, a disability that leaves us unable to relate authentically to the "other" and leaves us obsessed with things, with what is "mine" and with our notions of what constitutes right order. (Kolbenschlag, 1988, p. 167)

Lacan teaches us that it is impossible to be a teacher without also being a learner, that in order to be a teacher it is necessary to abandon the position as the one who knows, recognizing both one's own lack of knowledge and that one's own learning is never complete (Aoki, 1997). I believe that an effective teacher must model what it means to be

a learner. To grow, I must acknowledge that I don't know all of the answers. We need to further investigate the impact of socioculturally conditioned views by parents and community members about curricular and instructional approaches on teachers and schools' programs (Hasebe-Ludt, 1999). I believe that we need to take an even closer look at the sociocultural conditioned views of teachers because I feel that we are our own worst enemies and that we keep ourselves stuck in the past. I have kept myself stuck in the past by being afraid to make a mistake, to say something that might be disagreeable or confrontational. I don't want to offend anyone so I don't take a stand. I don't take a chance because I am fearful that I will be punished by the culture of teaching just like I was punished by my father when I didn't do what I was told. In the past, I have wanted to be a good teacher in much the same way I had wanted to be a good girl when I was a child. My career has been a successful one where I have been nominated for a number of prestigious provincial awards. I have received exceptional written evaluations that speak to my teaching talent, and yet, there have been many times when I have felt fearful that I might be found out. I am still struggling with the memory of the little girl that was terrified that she would be punished for not being good enough.

## Chapter V: My Story of Teaching

To understand who I am, I must understand who I have been. I am a product of my experiences as a daughter, a wife, a mother, a sister, an aunt, a cousin, a niece, a teacher, a student, a school administrator, a friend, and so on. Through my writing I have examined my role as daughter so that I can better understand my role as teacher. In this chapter, I intend to focus on exploring my role as a teacher and a school-based administrator.

I have had an interesting and varied teaching career. I began teaching in 1988 in a middle class suburban neighborhood in Northwest Calgary. I remember hearing at one time or another, that the best indicator for success in the teaching profession was the first year of experience as a teacher. If this were true then my career would have been predicted to be highly successful and for the most part it has been. My memories of the past have surfaced from time to time and led me to want to investigate whether or not the past is influencing my behavior in ways that are no longer useful for me. My first year of teaching was very successful and I was nominated for a provincial award that recognized and celebrated exceptional teaching talent in first year professionals. Although I did not receive the award, I felt honored to have been nominated and officially recognized in a large urban school district by the Assistant Superintendent. In addition to the provincial award nomination, I received a lengthy written observation and reference letter that discussed my exceptional teaching talent and my many contributions to the school during my first year there. An excerpt from my first year evaluation in 1989 read:

Tracy is a most effective teacher with a well-rounded combination of professional skills and personal qualities. She has effective classroom management, curriculum and interpersonal skills, and communicates a warm, caring,

encouraging attitude towards adults and students alike. She established a fine rapport with her year two class and played an active role in extra curricular events, staff committees and has continued her own professional growth through university and in-service classes. We value Tracy's contribution to our students and school and strongly recommend she be given a first year contract. She is an excellent team member and staff member.

As a child growing up in a strict, highly controlled environment, I tried to keep myself safe by being a good girl. Being a good girl meant that I did what I was told quickly, efficiently and silently. Additionally, I sought to please my father, to win his approval, acceptance and love. Similarly, my goal as a first year teacher was to be a good teacher so that I could keep a teaching position and win the approval, acceptance and recognition from my students, their parents and my colleagues. As a first year teacher, I considered all of my colleagues to be in positions of authority, and so I worked hard to be an amiable and cooperative staff member.

My first year teaching experience was one I look back on with fondness because I had been successful in securing the approval, acceptance and recognition of my colleagues. I received an outstanding teacher evaluation from the principal and assistant principal and I was nominated for a provincial award because I was considered to an excellent first year teacher. During my first year of teaching, I felt that the older, more experienced teachers should guide my teaching practice and I never questioned whether my colleagues' teaching strategies enhanced student learning. I was just thankful that they were there to share their teacher's guides and worksheets with me. Looking back on my first year of teaching experience, I wonder whether I was really as good as they said I was. When I look back on my first experiences teaching I see now that I engaged in adult centered classroom practices. I did not reflect on my teaching practices. At that time, it

was enough that everyone else thought I was a good teacher. I felt pleased that others considered me to be a good teacher.

The next year, I was assigned to teach grade three in another school. By winning the approval of my colleagues, I had achieved my goal at securing a permanent teaching contract. My reputation as an excellent teacher preceded me and I had no trouble settling into my new teaching position. The first teaching assignment was in a middle class neighborhood where most of the children were well cared for by their parents. The students that I taught during my second year came from poverty. Teaching such children was rewarding for me in that I could replay my role as a big sister trying to keep her siblings safe. The students at my new school loved me, and my colleagues and the administration approved of me, liked me, and accepted me.

I left my second teaching position in Calgary after only four months because I had decided to move to England to be with my fiancé. I sensed that my principal at that time did not approve of my decision and she questioned my reasons for going. Although she did not approve, she wrote me a glowing written evaluation that further outlined my strengths as a classroom teacher. She stated that she hoped that I would continue teaching in England as she felt that teaching was a mission for me. At the time, I assumed that she meant that my work as a teacher was similar to that of a missionary spreading the word of God. And over the course of my fifteen-year teaching career, I have continued to wonder what my principal meant by teaching being a 'mission' for me. While engaging in this project I consulted the *Oxford Dictionary* to learn the definition of the word, 'mission.' The *Oxford Dictionary* defines the word to mean: "A particular task or goal assigned to a

person or group, a journey with a purpose, a person's duty, vocation, or work, esp. that enthusiastically accepted or assumed (mission in life)" (Barbar, 1998, p. 927).

In reflecting and writing about my fifteen-year teaching career, I now acknowledge that teaching has been a mission for me. It has been my attempt at resolving past issues involving the relationship I had with my father. Through my work as a teacher I have attempted to correct my past by providing my students with a safe, caring, accepting, and loving environment at school. My desire to care for children in schools has arisen out of childhood feelings of powerlessness, fear and hopelessness. I believe that my childhood has contributed to teaching becoming a mission for me. I want children to experience success in school and to feel good about themselves and develop a belief in themselves as learners. My commitment to ensuring that my students feel cared for in school has helped me to overcome times in my career when my teaching has not been as child centered as it should have been.

Midway through my second year of teaching, I moved to England where I resumed my teaching career. Within a month of the move, I had secured a position teaching grade three in a large urban elementary school southwest of London. Fortunately, I was situated next to an experienced grade three teacher and she helped me to become acquainted with a different way of teaching, one that focused on students' learning needs in unique and creative ways. Reflecting on my experiences teaching in England, I see that tremendous learning occurred for me over the year and a half I spent teaching there. It was an uncomfortable time for me because it was the first time that I realized that I didn't really know what I was doing, I didn't really understand what it meant to be a teacher, let alone a good teacher. Initially, I was posted into a grade three

position and this went quite well, especially since I had a teaching partner to depend on. I remember the panic I felt when I realized that there weren't any teachers' guides, prepackaged teaching units, workbooks or worksheets for teachers to use. The temporary position I had teaching grade three came to an end in July and I was reassigned to teach a grade multi-aged primary class in the autumn. My new teaching partner wasn't nearly as helpful as the last one had been and I soon began to lose ground. I struggled then because I had not previously engaged in good teaching practices. Additionally, I was consumed with my personal life, which was in turmoil at that time. The school I taught at in England did not support the use of teachers' guides, textbooks or any of the other teachers' aids I had become dependent on during my first two years of teaching in Canada. Fifteen months after I had begun to teach in England, I was summoned by the Head Teacher to discuss my progress and intuitively I understood that my performance would be called into question. In the meeting, the Head Teacher described his disappointment with my performance. He mentioned that he had once taught with another Canadian teacher and that she had been quite good. The old feelings of not being good enough resurfaced and I responded defensively, reminding him that I had received superior written evaluations for my first two years of teaching, and that my teaching skills had been described as above average. I stated that I had been unsuccessful teaching in England because I had not been provided with adequate support. My headmaster responded by suggesting that good teachers should not need to depend on teachers' guides, prepackaged units, workbooks or worksheets. I left the meeting convinced that I needed to go home. My relationship with my partner was in shambles and it seemed as though my career might be headed in the same direction. At the time, I silently admitted

to myself that some of the Head Teacher's comments about my teaching performance had been accurate. But the suggestion that I was not good enough was more than I could deal with at that point in time and so I returned home to the safety of the known. To be safe as a child, I had to be a 'good' girl. The Head Teacher had suggested that I was not 'good' enough and that caused the old feelings to come flooding back, feelings of fear, panic, powerlessness, shame, desperation, and vulnerability. At the time, I did not have the strength to deal with the feelings that had resurfaced as a result of my conversation with the Head Teacher and I returned home.

Soon after my return, I was rehired to teach a grade six classroom. Predictably, the first year back was as successful for me as my previous experiences teaching in had been and I felt certain that I could put the negative experience teaching in England behind me. The written evaluation I received following my first year back proved that I was good enough.

Activity based learning, cooperative learning, excellent team planning and team teaching skills, good knowledge of ECS – grade 6 curriculum, poised and confident, highly involved in extra curricular and committee work at the school, believes in self-development and has completed a large number of in-service courses, indication of developing leadership skills.

I stayed at that school teaching grades five and six for four years and I worked hard during this time to reclaim the success I had experienced prior to my move to England in 1989. But in attempting to reclaim my place as an exceptional teacher, I allowed some members of the staff to mistreat me and I wrote about this in my journal. I remember sitting in team meetings with the other grade six teacher who was male, teasing me about my appearance.

At the time, I believed that challenging any of the staff members who exhibited such behaviors would cause my teaching competency to be questioned. In looking back on the comments made by my colleagues, I realize that in allowing the comments to go on unchallenged, I was repeating patterns of behavior practiced in my childhood. Rather than challenge the two male colleagues and one female colleague on the references they made to my physical appearance, I decided to work harder and show them that I was worthy of my teaching position. During those four years, I emerged as a leader in mathematics and I wrote about this accomplishment in my free thought journal.

Becoming a leader in the area of mathematics was ironic for me as math was my worst subject in school, but I challenged myself and questioned past teaching practices – I had learned a lot in England about teaching mathematics – I observed that British children seemed to possess a deeper, more intuitive understanding of numbers and I wondered why that was – maybe children didn't need to learn mathematics out of a text book. Maybe I had not understood math in school because I had not been taught properly.

Becoming a leader in the area of mathematics teaching gave me the leverage I thought I needed in the school so that my colleagues would no longer question my competency. I wanted to show them that I was good enough. Reflecting on the past has led me to understand now that the derogatory comments that were directed towards me were not focused on my teaching. Although some of my colleagues did not like me, the administration did and I received much recognition and approval while at that school. I had proven that I was good enough.

In 1995, I was accepted to teach at a school known as the “fish bowl” because it was an elementary school responsible for showcasing current best practices in teaching. Each classroom was equipped with a gallery where university and college students, as well as teachers from across the province could view best teaching practices. I felt

honored to have been chosen to teach at this school and I hoped that my placement would show those who doubted my teaching competency that they were wrong.

My experience teaching at the demonstration school was life altering and although negative at the time, the experience forced me to re-examine my teaching practice. Reflecting on the situation has led to the understanding that the situation that arose while I taught at the demonstration school was inevitable because of my past experiences as a child. I realized that I was not up on current best practice and educational research. In retrospect, I was not worthy of the placement because I did not possess knowledge of current research in teaching practice. I went to teach at the demonstration school to prove that I was good enough. I wanted to show my Head Teacher in England that he had been wrong and that I was a good teacher. I wanted to prove to my colleagues at my last school that I was worthy of the recognition that I had received.

In examining the course of my career, I recognize that I was extremely successful initially in my teaching career. Written evaluations, awards, and letters of reference and recognition had all suggested that I was a successful teacher, but I still doubted my competency, my worth as a teacher. Why did I want so much to be liked? Why did I want to be accepted by the culture of teaching? Why did I want to be accepted and recognized by the culture of teaching? Why did I feel such a need to prove my worth as a teacher? This project has led me to re-examine the comments that were made to me by the Head Teacher in England and has led me to the realization that his comments were not meant to be a personal attack and that my response at the time, was inappropriate. This was highlighted by the examination of the letter of reference my Head Teacher wrote for me

shortly before my departure in 1991. He wrote, “Miss Dowey has a lot of natural teaching qualities. With continued experience, she will, I am sure, make an excellent teacher.”

I believe that I had been extremely successful initially in my career because I had natural teaching talent. This was confirmed in December 1999, when I took the *Gallop Teacher Perceiver* to assess whether or not I would be an appropriate hire for the school board I currently work for in British Columbia. The results from the test predicted that I had plenty of natural teaching talent, but during the time I was at the demonstration school, I had not realized my potential because it had all come so easily to me. I mimicked the teaching styles that I had experienced myself as a student and as a student teacher. My discipline style was based on my father’s military approach. Predictably, I had a disastrous year at the demonstration school, and I decided to leave after just one year. My decision to leave the demonstration school was a difficult one because I feared that leaving such a prestigious teaching position might prove that I was not good enough. I wondered if I had never been good enough and I seriously contemplated leaving teaching altogether. I have written extensively about my experiences teaching at the demonstration school and the process has helped me to sort out my feelings about this difficult time in my teaching career.

Change comes from having reflected upon previous teaching experiences. I believe that I must engage in reflective practice so that I can avoid falling into negative ways of reacting to stressful situations. My life experiences have caused me to want to avoid conflict and my tendency has been to avoid conflict even when it is necessary for me to engage in it to protect myself. I recognize that this has become a problem for me in that I cannot realize my true potential as a teacher until I find my voice. In looking to the

past, I realize now that at times I have decided to be silent when I should have spoken out. When I look back on my experience at the demonstration school, I must conclude that leaving that situation was necessary based on the circumstances, and the reflective writing process helped me to sort out unresolved feelings.

Schön states that every teacher must, by regarding every imperfection in the pupils' comprehension, not as a defect of the pupil, but as a defect of her own instruction, endeavor to develop in herself the ability of discovering new methods (Schön, 1983). While teaching at the demonstration school, I blamed the students for their poor performance. Instead of accepting where the students were coming from as a result of their experiences, I tried to force them to adapt to my teaching style, which was very different from the teachers they had had previously. Prior to my arrival at the school, my students had been taught in a constructivist classroom where they had been empowered to follow their interests, to make connections, to reformulate ideas, and to reach unique conclusions (Brooks, 1993). My teaching approach was traditional and I held the belief that the teacher should be in control of the learning process. I did not believe that it was necessary for me to build a relationship with the children, nor did I honor or respect their individual histories. As a result, many of the students were unhappy in my classroom. Reflecting back on the situation at the demonstration school has led me to develop an understanding of the importance of developing relationships with children. This project has provided me with a lens with which to see myself as I was, repeating patterns of the past, patterns of dealing with children I had witnessed as a child. My childhood experiences led me to believe that adults, not children had power and control, and my experience at the demonstration school caused me to challenge this belief.

Education should prepare students to learn throughout their professional lives rather than simply to master current information and techniques. To establish this, students must be active, independent learners and problem solvers rather than passive recipients of information (Reagan, Case, & Brubacker, 2000). My experiences at the demonstration school had led me to develop new beliefs about teaching and learning and to develop an understanding that it was my responsibility as a classroom teacher to create a learning environment that honored and respected my student's background knowledge, understanding and experiences. I had not believed this prior to my experience at the demonstration school.

My experience at the demonstration school led me to the belief that the finest teachers ponder effective strategies and devise creative classroom activities, set personal professional goals and think on their feet (Boreen, Johnson, Niday, & Potts, 2000). Looking back on the course of my fifteen-year career, I recognize that my childhood experiences trained me well to think on my feet. I came from a home situation that required me to tread softly so that I did not upset the delicate balance that existed in my home. My father had been unpredictable and it was imperative for me to read his moods carefully. Thinking on my feet kept me safe. Initially I was successful in my career because I was good at thinking on my feet, but my experiences of teaching, particularly my experience at the demonstration school, had led me to the realization that thinking on my feet was not enough to be a good teacher. Self-reflective practice has led me to believe that a good teacher is one who acquires knowledge and examines and reflects upon her teaching experiences.

Soon after deciding to leave the demonstration school, I was posted into a classroom teaching gifted and talented children. I hoped that this would be my opportunity to prove that I was a good teacher. The first year I spent teaching gifted and talented learners led me to reclaim my lost confidence. The painful experience at the demonstration school had led me to question my teaching competency. I had learned that thinking on my feet was not enough and that I needed to gain knowledge in the area of pedagogy, so I decided to research constructivist teaching practices. I read and reread, *In Search of Understanding the Case for Constructivist Classroom* (Brooks & Brooks, 1993). I listened to the children, and I listened to myself. I reflected upon the past, and challenged old patterns of behavior; patterns of behavior that I felt were no longer useful to me, perhaps even damaging. I began to teach from a place of knowing, respecting and honoring my students' past experiences. I was successful teaching gifted and talented learners and within a year I was appointed to curriculum coordinator for the program. Written evaluations spoke highly of my teaching talents as reflected in this excerpt taken from a reference letter written in 1998.

Tracy is truly a reflective practitioner. She continually evaluates her program and responses of her students to it. She is committed to providing interesting and challenging experiences in all subject areas and, in her dialogue with children, poses questions related to larger issues for their consideration and reflection. Her students love working with her. She epitomizes the balance between unconditional support and academic accountability. It was not by accident that every parent from her homeroom last year requested Tracy as their child's homeroom teacher again this year. In addition, students from other classes also asked to be in her class. This was a significant compliment to Tracy's capabilities and a challenge for me in explaining to parents that she could not have a homeroom of 40 or more children!

I was recognized as a successful school administrator and invited to apply to the Leadership Development Program. Initially, I declined the invitation, as I was uncertain

whether or not I wanted the added responsibility and hours of work a promotion would entail, but my need to be recognized as good convinced me to apply to the program.

Within a month of being accepted into the Leadership Development Program, I was appointed to Assistant Principal. At the time of my appointment to Assistant Principal in 1998, I felt that I had proven that I was a good teacher.

With my promotion to Assistant Principal I felt secure in the temporary belief that there could be no further challenges to my shaky self-esteem. I had proven that I was a good teacher and I put my worries aside as I began working on my Master's Degree and looked forward to the birth of my first child in the fall. It seemed that I had overcome the insecurities of the past and that my life was back on track. In August 1998 I was hospitalized for premature labor and I spent the remainder of the summer in hospital until my son was born seven weeks early on September 3<sup>rd</sup>.

My baby spent the first six months of his life in intensive care, which meant that I was unable to return to work. It was not until my son was a year old that I was able to return to teaching and my new role as an Assistant Principal.

Our family moved to British Columbia on January 1, 2000 as my husband was transferred with his company and I began working as a teacher in an inner city school almost immediately. I was pleased to have been hired so quickly and interpreted this as further proof that I was a good teacher.

It had felt good to be back in the classroom again, working with children, and I quietly wondered whether I really wanted a position as a school administrator. While teaching a grade five and six class in British Columbia, I felt good about myself, and confident in my role as a classroom teacher. Unfortunately, the position came to an end

because of a projected budget shortfall and I was laid off. Being laid off was traumatic for me and caused the old, familiar feelings of inadequacy to resurface and so as soon as an administrative position became available, I applied for it.

Evaluations, letters of reference and various aptitude tests have consistently confirmed that I possess the characteristics necessary to be identified as a good teacher. The reflective writing process has contributed positively to my development as a teacher by providing me with a tool to explore and examine significant issues that have influenced my career. I began my career successfully and since that time I have achieved considerable recognition and acceptance by the culture of teaching, and yet, it has not been enough to erase the feelings of inadequacy that have followed me throughout my life. I have proved that I am a competent teacher and this has been reflected in the evaluations and promotions that I have received. So why do I continue to doubt my ability to be a good teacher, a good school administrator? Why do I continue to worry that I will be found out, that I am an impostor? I believe that the answers to these questions lie in the past and that I am reliving the past through my role as teacher.

## Chapter VI: The Movement of the Tides

My teaching career has been highlighted by great success and periods of tremendous frustration and perceived failure. I have oscillated between feelings of “I’ve got it!” and “I don’t know what I am doing.” At the center of this struggle has been my need for acceptance by the culture of teaching. It has been difficult negotiating my need for approval, acceptance and recognition with my sense of responsibility for protecting, nurturing and teaching children in schools. The “highs” and “lows” that characterize my teaching career can be likened to the movement of the tides – rising, falling, turning and crashing. The tides are dependent on the changing positions of the moon and the sun relative to the earth’s position.

Tides  
Relative Motion  
Gravitational Actions on  
External bodies  
Rising  
Falling  
Moving forward  
Success approval answers  
Retreating  
Failure disappointment fear

I want to become a seagull that floats on top of the tides; moving up and down, but not totally at the mercy of the tides. How can I move beyond depending on colleagues, students, parents, and principals to validate my professional competency? How can I disassemble, reconfigure and eventually reassemble my experiences so that I can build a stronger foundation that can withstand the disapproval of colleagues, students, parents and principals?

Schön suggests that the entire process of reflection in action is central to the “art” by which practitioners are able to deal well with situations of uncertainty, instability, uniqueness, and value conflict (Schön, 1983). This project is my attempt at examining, reflecting and rewriting my past so that I may gain a greater understanding of the lived experiences that have shaped who I am as teacher. Feelings of inadequacy, fear and desperation have surfaced from time to time over the course of my fifteen-year teaching career. I want to continue to search for a better understanding of these feelings through the process of retelling parts of my story. I want to understand the situations that have triggered feelings of discomfort, and vulnerability.

This project has been difficult for me to complete and there were many times I wanted to abandon it for more traditional research. But I persevered because I believe that addressing the past is the only way I can escape the self-imposed constraints I have placed upon myself since I was a child. Being a good girl served a purpose when I was a child because it kept me safe. Through my writing I recognized that being a good girl has also kept me trapped in the past.

The memories that have resurfaced over the years have often been fragmented and unconnected and they have been difficult to make sense of. This project has been my attempt to make sense of these memories so that I can understand them, and accept them. I believe that I will not be able to truly understand myself unless I pull my memories together. I have transformed my memories into meaningful learning experiences. For a long time, I have not wanted to remember my story, but significant events have triggered my memory and caused me to re-experience the past. I understand that my writing may not help me to find the missing link or the magic answer to my feelings. I also understand

that I cannot change or erase the past simply by writing about it, but I do believe that the process of writing my story will help me to understand myself better so that I might recreate myself in the present and the future.

After fifteen years of teaching, I feel that I am strong enough to face the truth and acknowledge that the past has influenced my work as a teacher. In many ways teaching and has been good for me in that it has allowed me to correct the past by providing me with an opportunity to relive my experience as a child through my work as a teacher. I can provide my students with the safe, caring and nurturing environment that I never had as a child. There have been instances over the course of my career where teaching has been a negative experience that has triggered uncomfortable feelings of the past. I have tried hard to disregard these feelings, but my body remembered the fear of not being good enough. By examining these experiences I recognized that my reaction to criticism triggered memories of powerlessness and vulnerability in me and that my reaction was often extreme and out of proportion to the situation. Through my writing I have come to understand that teaching has caused me to feel vulnerable because I cannot be a perfect teacher in much the same way that I could not be a perfect child. I understand that teaching is a creative act that is open to interpretation and subject to opinion and that I cannot escape criticism or judgement by the culture of teaching.

This project has allowed me to view the past as it has influenced my teaching in the present. My writing has led me to acknowledge that I must try to gain an understanding of the influences that have caused me to be oversensitive to comments made about my performance as a teacher.

I have felt “at home” with teaching, but have I felt “at home” within the culture of teaching? Initially, I did feel accepted by the culture of teaching, but as I began to challenge perceptions and ask questions, I became less accepted. The first time I felt isolated by the culture of teaching was when things started to deteriorate in England, shortly before the principal and I had a “conversation” about how I was not living up to expectations. The second time was when I came back to Canada and worked hard to gain acceptance and recognition from the culture of teaching. I was successful and I won over the administration, but alienated some of my colleagues who accused me of siding with the enemy. My experiences at the demonstration school triggered feelings in me that I had long since forgotten or had tried to forget. Feelings of inadequacy, fear, shame and even self-hate surfaced because I had felt that I wasn’t good enough, a failure. But then I recovered and taught gifted and talented children. And after a relative period of calm characterized by success and promotion, I have found myself in the midst of another tumultuous time that reminds me of the past. I had hoped that accomplishment, recognition and promotion would erase the fear of the past, when I did not feel that I was good enough, worthy.

I have always wanted to live the perfect life — one free from conflict, anger, disappointment, dissatisfaction and feelings of inadequacy. I believe that many people want to live the perfect life and that this has caused many of us to disregard patterns in our lived experience. For a long time, I pretended and hid from the truth because I feared that the truth would somehow diminish me in the eyes of others.

When I look deeper into my story, I recognize patterns of behavior that have led me to this space. I care whether or not people like me. I want to belong. I crave

recognition and acceptance. My writing has helped me to see that my childhood need for acceptance, approval and safety have kept me stuck in the past, in the silence of having to be a good girl. This project is my attempt at taking a closer look at the reasons I behave the way I do so that I can find a way to survive and thrive as a teacher and a leader of teachers.

My journey is one that has required me to find my way out of where I really am with regards to my competency as a teacher and a teacher leader through the use of autobiographical writing. My hope was that the themes emerging from my writing would contribute to my developing a healthier professional self-esteem and that the techniques I used to sift through my experiences would assist my colleagues to do the same. If my writing was relevant and the model I used could also be relevant to the experiences of other teachers, then my story would have had direct pedagogical use (Noddings, 1991).

There are similarities in the situations that have shaken my foundation as a teacher. Each situation was perceived by me to be a personal criticism and I was deeply wounded each time my competency came into question, regardless of whether or not the concern was relevant or not. In the past, I chose to run away from conflict and the uncomfortable feelings that reminded me of the past, but this time, I am choosing to look at the past in the hope of recreating myself in the present. I am finding my voice and I am using it to claim my place in the culture of teaching.

My writing has allowed me to piece together stories of the past in an attempt to understand myself better so that I can challenge the old ways of interacting in the culture of teaching. I know that I am over-reliant on external reinforcement and that I want to be liked and cared about and considered to be a good teacher and a good school-based

administrator. I know that I want to make a difference in the world. My writing has caused me to acknowledge that making a difference in the world might mean having to stand up for my beliefs and not to be dependent on the culture of teaching. Making a difference might also require me to make some mistakes along the way. Maybe I won't be a good girl anymore. Maybe I won't always do what I am told. Maybe I will find a voice in the culture of teaching. Can I recreate myself in the present as a teacher and a leader of teacher? I believe that I can and that I will because I know my story.

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