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# Pedagogical interchanges on identity : an email correspondence

Colburn, Heather

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**PEDAGOGICAL INTERCHANGES ON IDENTITY:  
AN EMAIL CORRESPONDENCE**

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B.Ed., University of Lethbridge, 1992

A Project  
Submitted to the School of Graduate Studies  
Of the University of Lethbridge  
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Requirements of the Degree

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## Dedication

I dedicate this work to  
my family, my colleagues,  
and to all of the kids who have laid down their own tracks.

## Abstract

A series of fifteen email interchanges provided a qualitative research environment in which to engage in authentic communication about the people and events that have shaped my correspondent and me as both teachers and learners, and provided us with the opportunity to share, and to reflect on, the same roles as school administrators. In telling the stories of our personal and working lives, we examined, and better understood, the experiences that have shaped our identities. The purpose of the project was to explore what our lifewriting reveals to us about our identity. It brought to light the learning that takes place as we reconsidered our views of our educational experiences, parent-child relationships, and our own professional working realities. In doing this project, I wanted to find out what it was about the history of my life that made me choose the path of teacher, and then the one of administrator, and shaped my identity in these roles. I wanted to recognize and understand the effects of the people, events, and themes that shaped my identity, and continue to shape my identity in those roles and in others. I was most interested in the journey, the dynamics of the letter writing relationship, the themes that surfaced in our writing, and the insights the interchanges would provide.

## Acknowledgements

To Shannon Geer, thank you for always being honest with me about the work and about life. Twenty years from now I can write a whole new chapter about how you shaped me. For now perspective is fairly clouded. Too fresh, too raw.

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## Chapter 1: Introduction

To be a teacher, then, requires that I face my Teacher, which is the world as it comes to meet me in all of its variegation, complexity and simplicity. When I do this I face myself, and see myself reflected in the faces of my brothers and sisters everywhere.

–David G. Smith

In discovering whom Aretha Van Herk's (1991, p. 173) "I" might be in relation to others in this place in which I find myself in the world, part of the journey, for me, must always come from the writing. As one of the most important means of communication and creativity that humans have, writing is at once an outlet for emotion and creativity, and a means of self-discovery. Graves (1998) supports this observation by stating:

Children want to write. They want to write on the first day they go to school. This is no accident. Before they go to school they mark up the walls, pavements, and newspapers with crayons, chalk, pens, or pencils... anything that makes a mark. The child's marks say 'I am.' (p. 3)

Writing to understand oneself is a valuable growth experience that can play an important role in one's endeavor to become complete as a human being. For me, it is also part of becoming a better person, teacher, mother, administrator, etcetera. In order to be effective, the autobiographical writer must be ready to own his or her narrative and to feel safe in the telling of the stories.

The writing comes easily to me, but the sharing of the emotions and the revelations about myself are another matter. I have chosen to face myself, and some of the significant adversities and celebrations of the experiences that have shaped my education, my

teaching and my learning, in a series of emails to a friend and colleague. Fifteen consecutive email interchanges form the foundation for this project, which is autobiographical, epistolary, and dialogical in nature.

My friend, Shannon, finds a large part of his identity in the passion of his work and writing. Narrative lifewriting is essential to the evolution of my understanding of where it is that I fit in the world in relation to others. In this way, Shannon and I are both teachers and learners. He has recently resigned his principalship and I have recently assumed the assistant principalship in the same school. Because we come from different backgrounds, and are of different genders, we offer one another different perspectives on the roles that we live in the world.

The purpose of this project was to explore what our lifewriting reveals to us about our identity. It brings to light the learning that takes place as we reconsider our view of our educational experiences, parent-child relationships, and our own professional working realities. We embarked on this project with the full realization of our class, social location, race, and our privileged status as White, middle-class professionals. In doing this project, I wanted to know, what was it about the history of my life that made me choose the path of teacher and then the one of administrator? Further, what was it about my life history that shaped my identity in these roles? I wanted to recognize and understand the effects of the people, events, and themes that shaped my identity, and continue to shape my identity in those roles and others. I was most interested in the journey, the dynamics of the letter writing relationship, the themes that surfaced in our writing, and the insights the interchanges would provide. Because Shannon and I are



Outreach teachers and administrators, the interchanges and their themes must be framed in an Outreach context. Understanding Outreach is a good place to start.

## Chapter 2: Inside Outreach: A Working Reality

Shannon hired me in 1994. He was the Principal of the Outreach programs for more than ten years. He started it all; he was my mentor, my friend, and my guide. Part of the fallout from his departure was my evolution from English teacher at Lethbridge Outreach High School to Assistant Principal of the Outreach Programs.

Currently, there are eighteen teachers and eight support staff working in the nine Outreach programs operated by Lethbridge School District #51. The programs are under the supervision of an Outreach principal. Five of the programs are institutional, meaning that they are housed in institutions such as Sifton Family and Children Services, the Lethbridge Young Offenders' Centre, the Safe at Home secure facility, the adolescent psychiatric wing of the Lethbridge Regional Hospital, and Harbour House Women's Shelter. The students in these programs receive treatment and services to help them deal with behaviors resulting from sexual abuse, crime, mental illness, and family abuse and breakup. Students live in those institutions and attend school there. The nature of these settings requires that the Outreach programs and teachers partner closely with the staffs of Alberta Justice, Alberta Mental Health and the Chinook Health Region, Sun Country Family and Social Services, and others who also work there. The other four Outreach programs are storefront, located together in an office building in downtown Lethbridge. Lethbridge Outreach High School is a year round high school program. The Alternate Junior High, Downtown LA, and A'sitapiksi program each have a 12 student maximum and serve the needs of specific target populations (middle school aged children, children with a mental health diagnosis, and high school aged Aboriginal students). If all nine Outreach programs were housed together under one roof, they would comprise the

second largest school in Lethbridge School District #51. Over 1,200 students accessed programming in our Outreach programs in 2001-2002.

My duties as Assistant Principal are primarily to the four non-institutional programs, although I spend a good deal of time attending to the needs of students and staff in the institutional programs as well. My office is at Lethbridge Outreach High School, where I teach grade 12 English Language Arts and have a caseload of students whose Individual Program Plans I oversee. In terms of work expectations and timelines, the courses that I teach are individualized for students, who register on a continual intake basis. Not all of the students are living through crisis. Some are university students who need to upgrade in order to transfer to a preferred post-secondary program. Some are honors students who would like to supplement their timetable at their home school with an extra course. Some have simply relocated to our city at a time in the semester that is not conducive to starting new courses. Regardless of their reasons, over 600 students a year join Lethbridge Outreach High School. The teachers serve the social and emotional needs of most of these students just as much, if not more, than their academic needs.

Outreach programs exist because mainstream schools do not work for every student. There are good teachers, and good schools, everywhere, but they do not always provide what every student needs. It is not even realistic to expect that they should. Outreach programs are not better than mainstream ones, nor do they work for every student. The simple truth, however, is that some students are faced with more life circumstances than they can effectively manage and than mainstream schools can effectively deal with.

In this era of site-based management, overcrowded classrooms, and credit enrollment units at the high school level, some students become viewed as liabilities. They cost

schools money and are a lot of work. They consume a great deal of teacher time and energy and generally do not earn enough credits to pay the bills. In my experience, a much higher percentage of students are pushouts than dropouts. Webster (1997) states, “the pushout phenomenon indicates that all consumers cannot buy the schools’ goods or consume it productively” (p. 174). With the commodification of students comes marginalization. These students are not “producing” because they cannot cope with school while dealing with pregnancy, mental illness, family breakdown, disease, relocation, abuse, addiction, homelessness, and a host of other traumas. Lots of these young people fall through the cracks simply because they are dropped through.

Mainstream schools are often not particularly child centred. This is supported by Gintis and Bowles (1988), who say that the basic agenda underlying education is “the preparation of students to be future workers on the various levels in the hierarchy of capitalist production” (p. 17). Since not all students are yet in a place where they have the tools or other supports in place to focus on the “good citizen” agenda, mainstream schools do not meet their needs. These students’ life circumstances already set them apart from their peers. Sporadic attendance and academic lags set them apart further. They become frustrated and disenfranchised. Schools quickly run out of resources (usually teacher time and energy) in the attempt to reengage students and often “suggest” that these students “explore other options.” The damage to the relationship between students and school is often irreparable. In order for students to be successful in schools they must feel safe, supported, and cared for. In the case of pushouts and dropouts, this trust relationship is lost. Problems preventing mainstream schools from being truly child centered include pupil-teacher ratios, staffing dilemmas stemming from site-based budget

decisions, pressure from Alberta Learning to teach to the test, increased teacher burnout, and concerns with classroom management.

Teachers in Outreach have bad days, too, but for the most part we believe that children are good and that it is often the problematic circumstances of their lives that provide them with so many barriers to success. In the best interests of children, the unofficial motto of Outreach staff has become “it’s easier to beg for forgiveness than to ask for permission.” Outreach staff have been known for our loud, and often colorful, moral indignation on behalf of our students. We are constantly bending the rules in favor of the students rather than in support of bureaucracy. We believe, as Elaine Chang does, that “individuals exist prior to place, and are invested with the ability either to conquer or to succumb to the predicaments they wander into” (p. 98). Our goal is to provide young people with the tools necessary to conquer their predicaments.

I can describe the working reality in Outreach in a lot of ways, but it is difficult to explain. It is a lived experience. It is made more clear by David Smith (1996), who says that “by facing too those whose faces have been seared by the fires of life, seeing myself in them, I become more fully human, more open and generous, more representative of the real thing we call Life” (p. 11). Our difference makes us able to accomplish what mainstream schools cannot with some students. We have a much smaller pupil-teacher ratio. We operate year-round and with extended hours. We phone home weekly. We offer one-on-one, individualized programming and attention. We operate out of non-traditional buildings. We do everything differently. We are different. The students are also very different from the mainstream and our difference from those mainstream schools that they have experienced is something they relate to and appreciate. It is hard work, and we

are passionate about and protective of the students. In these ways we feel we serve this particular population of students better than do mainstream schools. There is something of a “club mentality” in Outreach. This is, perhaps, because we are set apart from the mainstream system and we are sometimes able to help students to succeed, where mainstream schools have not. Even though we use our difference from mainstream schools to our advantage with our students, we regard “Outreach mentality” not as a strategy, but as an ethic. By this I mean that providing students with universal opportunities for success, for example, is not just a plan we strive to carry out. It is a deeply held value.

Outreach theory and practice contain elements of constructivism in that teachers help students to come to understand their world and to make sense of the predicaments they have wandered into by accident or by choice. Staff are postmodernists in their steadfast questioning of policies, their rejection of the grand narratives of the mainstream system, their opposition to the status quo, their respect for students’ identity, and their unwillingness to separate students from their frames of reference. Just like us, students operate based on what they have experienced and who those experiences have shaped them into being. We cannot expect them to function outside of who they are. Idealism is inherent in that if Outreach staff did not believe that people are innately good, it would be impossible for us to work with many of these students. Value judgements about students’ circumstances and life experiences have no place in Outreach.

What Outreach programs claim to do, and follow through in daily practice, is to provide students with a universal opportunity for success and then back it up with the support each child needs to be successful. After dealing with all of their issues, then we

sometimes deal in basic education. At the end of the day, Outreach is thoroughly grounded in realism. Some of the experiences we have that shape our lives just happen. The challenge is in teaching students to identify the problem, to name it, to get past it, to overcome the obstacles, to learn to avoid the pitfalls, and to get on with life and learning. The only incredible leap of idealistic faith made is not to God, but to the steadfast belief in the resilience and strength of children themselves.

### Chapter 3: Method

I once thought that autobiographical research seemed self-serving and lacked credibility. I have since come to understand that the circumstances of our life histories affect every aspect of the personal and professional lives of the people we are today as well as the ways in which we relate to others. Interestingly, Chambers (1998) cites a letter that Shannon once wrote to her, in a graduate seminar on life writing, in which he comes to the same realization:

Maybe it's not necessarily self-indulgent to learn about oneself. Maybe my thoughts of being self-indulgent have been a cop-out. Perhaps I haven't had the courage to take a long hard look at myself. (p. 16)

Cameron (1998) supports the position that Shannon and I have come to:

Valuing our experience is not narcissism. It is not endless self-involvement. It is, rather, the act of paying active witness to our selves and to our world. Such witness is an act of dignity, an act that recognizes that life is essentially a sacred transaction of which we know only the shadow, not the shape. (p. 50)

Autobiographical research presents valid opportunities for self-reflection and understanding, and growth. Connelly and Clandinin (1990) believe "in the value of narrative enquiry and autobiographical data as sources of self-knowledge and critical self-reflection" (p. 5). Graham (1989) claims that autobiographical writing has gained much credibility among researchers who have come to see it as a valid research tool over the last three decades. "Self-narrative," he says, "has come to be seen as another form of thought, a 'mode of cognitive thinking'" (p. 97). Diamond's (1994) belief "that narrative



is the key to studying the self and reconstructing one's experiences" (p. 38), and Bruner's (1986) "notion that narrative is a primary way humans make meaning of events in their lives" (p. 11) lend themselves to these ideas.

In order to go forward with the journey of my life, I must have knowledge of where I am standing. Essential to this knowledge is my own sense of identity. This becomes doubly important for me as a parent and as a teacher. In order to facilitate my own personal and professional growth and development, I must be aware of the people and the events that have shaped me as a teacher and as a learner. Smith (1996) writes:

Persons must be seen in terms of 'their relations rather than substance' so that 'personal identity appears as emergent and contingent, defining and defined by interactions with the surrounding medium.' A person does not so much have experiences...as exist inseparably from those experiences. (p. 7)

The interconnectedness between my own history and my current teaching practice and context is supported by Butt, Raymond, and Townsend's (1992) belief that life history affects teachers' personal and professional development to a great extent (p. 155). Not only does understanding the links between one's past and one's present assist one in becoming a more effective teacher, but it assists one in becoming a more effective human being as well. For these reasons, narrative inquiry seems well justified.

Calkins (1994) writes that she used to think that we wrote about our lives when "our lives are done and we want to give one last, loving look back, but now I know that it is by looking back that we create our lives, ourselves" (p. 399). Westfall (1988) cites Kroetsch, who explains that "in a sense, we haven't got an identity until someone tells our story. The fiction makes us real" (p. 236). bell hooks points out that writing narrative serves to

“illuminate and transform the present” (as quoted in Mitchell & Weber, 1989, p. 17). Accepting these ideas as being true, Shannon and I will enhance our own identities through the telling of our own stories. The project takes the shape of a conversation where the participants do not feel the need to comment on every phrase, or to respond with answers or advice. The idea was to listen quietly in reading the other’s letters and to respond with whatever memories, images, or ideas the other’s correspondence invokes. Kadar (1992a) believes that “epistolary literature is a legitimate and necessary function of – or even a step in our progressive consideration of – life writing” (p. 7). The validity of its voice is found in the idea that letter writing is one of the genres in which “the author does not want to pretend that he/she is absent from the text” (p. 12). Kadar (1992b) makes reference to Foucault’s belief that letter writing discloses the self and provides an opportunity for reawakening and “a remembering of the secret self” (p. 158). In response to receiving a letter from a teacher colleague, Mitchell and Weber (1999) explain that, for the letter writer, “writing the letter was a way of working back through the past in order to understand herself in the present” (p. 6).

Pinkola Estes (1992) believes that any time we tell our stories, “we feed the soul” (p. 15). Further, she writes, “stories are medicine...they have such power; they do not require that we do, be, act anything – we need only listen. The remedies for repair or reclamation of any lost psychic drive are contained in stories” (p. 15). Pinkola Estes points out that the stories of our lives are like maps that guide us through the past, explain the present, and point the way to our future. In looking at the people and events that shape us, we develop our understanding of our identities and celebrate the self. Pinkola Estes recognizes the importance of exploring identity through stories when she writes,

“stories enable us to understand the need for and the ways to raise a submerged archetype” (p. 16). In fact, “when we ‘tell it like it is’ we are also ‘telling it like we are’” (Barnes & Duncan, 1992, p. 3) and ultimately, when we engage in the telling and creating of our own histories we “acknowledge and honor all of our relations” (Houtekamer, Chambers, Yamagishi, & Good Striker, 1997, p. 142).

Part of developing our understanding of who we are in our current contexts is figuring out where we fit in the world in relation to others. Gunn (1982) sees the real question for the autobiographical writer as asking, “Where do I belong, not, who am I? The question of the self’s identity becomes the question of the self’s location in the world” (p. 23). Life writing clarifies this location by not only connecting the self to the self, but it also connects the self to the other. Hollingsworth (1998) writes about an important change in her teaching methods to include “more conversation that created space for biographical examinations of how and why we interpret the world as we do” (p. 73). She refers to her exploration of her own interpretation of the world, and writes, “Maxine’s [Greene] stories of her life through her letters were helpful in that process” (Hollingsworth, p. 73).

People have been writing the events of their lives on cave walls, on animal hides, in diaries, and in letters for thousands of years. Letter writing promotes the connection between the self and the other in ways that celebrate the richness of lives lived by the correspondents. Mukherjee (1993) indicates that letter writers send “us portions of their lives” (p. 5).

“Corresponding” is the act of communicating by letter or in this case email (Hanks, 1987, p. 352). The root of the word “correspondence” is the smaller word “respond.”

According to Hanks (1987), “respond” is the verb meaning “to state or utter (something) in reply” (p. 1301). The prefix “co” means “1. together; joint or jointly; mutual or mutually. 2. Indicating partnership or equality” (p. 302). In corresponding, then, Shannon and I are responding together to our experiences with our worlds. “Corresponding” also means “being in agreement, or being similar in character or function” (p. 352). This speaks to the life path we all follow, and to the similarities in education, career, and working reality that Shannon and I share. It speaks also to what Connelly and Clandinin (1991) refer to as the effect that letter writing has of contributing to a “shared perspective” (p. 130).

When we correspond the details of our lives, we “send a strong and clear message that what we are writing about and whom we are writing to matters” (Cameron, 1998, p. 97). In the introduction to her second anthology of Robertson Davies’ letters, Skelton Grant (1999) writes that Davies “found value in the letters” from his friends and acquaintances, because “they gave depth to his understanding of [his friends’] characters and illuminated corners of [his friends’] minds and careers” (p. xii). The correspondence relationship would not exist without mutual respect and trust. It must be accepting and non-judgmental. Only then can the correspondents safely explore identity in such a way that each can say, “it is good that I am able to be a work in progress with you” (Cameron, p. 97). Chambers, Oberg, Dodd, and Moore (1994) support these ideas in their reference to Berry’s notion that “in a conversation, you must not expect always to receive a reply that you foresee or a reply that you will like. A conversation is two-sided and always to some degree mysterious; it requires faith” (p. 104).

Hasebe-Ludt and Norman (1998) refer to “writers and their correspondents whose connections with each other resonated with the caring lifelong commitment to friendship” (p. 13). Shannon and I have a relationship that was built on a foundation of collegiality and collaboration, but it has evolved over time to mean a great deal to me in terms of trust, respect, mentoring, friendship, and indeed familial care. Shannon became ill last year and relocated on an extended medical leave. Neither Shannon nor I could be described as being even remotely ‘gushy’ by nature; nonetheless, given our history together we share a very close tie. In the introduction to Carroll’s (2001) book, Brinkley indicates that letters between family and friends offer the correspondents a “simple exchange of assurances of caring and support” (p. 29). It is indeed an environment in which authentic conversation can occur. The similarities in the level of honesty and emotion illustrated in the letters between Silko and Wright (1999) and in the letters that Shannon and I write are striking. As Maclear (1993) comments to her friend, “we’ve lost touch. This letter is my attempt to re-connect” (p. 6). In this case, this project not only provides the opportunity for my reconnection with Shannon, but also for the opportunity for important reconnection with myself.

Realizing that Shannon’s experiences may have been much more difficult than mine, I did not want to offend him with my petty tales of woe. It was difficult not to revise what it was that I really wanted to say. It was important for me to recognize that, even though my life has not been filled with the same conflicts as Shannon’s, my history is just as valid in how it and the people in my life have shaped me. It was, nevertheless, important to both of us that we not write self-deprecatingly or that we not paint ourselves as martyrs to the circumstances of our lives. It seemed essential to the process that we try, as best we

could, to really tell it like it was/is and interpret it along the way. This process was facilitated entirely by the level of trust that Shannon and I have gained in one another over the years of our friendship. The trust made the honesty in the telling of the stories possible. In this project, Shannon and I have told our own stories, recorded our own fictions, and made our selves real.

The qualitative research for this project, the correspondence, occurred by email over the course of a two-month period. Fifteen consecutive email interchanges were the foundation for the project which, in its entirety, is autobiographical, epistolary (relating to letters), and dialogical in nature. In preparation for the interchanges, Shannon and I had several telephone conversations during which I explained my research question, and the format and timeline for the interchanges. For clarification, I emailed him the same information. After agreeing to participate, Shannon never asked me any questions about my research question or about the research itself. Never once did he ask me why I chose this particular research question. He assumed, I suppose, that I knew what I was doing.

In deference to the conversational nature of the project, once the interchanges began I did not ask Shannon specific questions, nor did I seek specific answers. Like Chambers and Oberg (1992), we adhered to the idea that “we do not proceed by formula” (p. 1). I did, however, expect certain themes to surface throughout our epistolary exchange. For instance, I anticipated that we would write about our families and about Outreach because I know that those are important to Shannon and to myself. This simply comes from knowing someone for a long time. Some of these themes include parent-child relationships, fear and insecurity, the idea of being different, collegial relationships, trust, and personal and professional growth. I did not intend to edit any grammar or sentence

structure in the letters. My hope was that they would be written in the same voices in which we speak to one another. In order for the conversation to be authentic, the voices must also be authentic. The nature of letters and conversations among friends allows for characteristics as flawed as the friends themselves. I edited spelling and punctuation only where it interfered with the readers' understanding of the writer's meaning or intent. I have chosen to highlight only the relevant excerpts of the interchanges that support and illustrate the identified themes. As I read the interchanges, three main themes continually surfaced: fear, relationships, and difference. The supporting excerpts that I have chosen to illustrate these themes will not be chronologically ordered.

Even though our letters are of a personal nature, addressed directly to one another, the product of my interchange with Shannon will be public. Like Maclear (1993) did to the recipient of her letter, I invited Shannon to look past the public aspect of the project to the gift of the interchange:

I realize that a public letter may seem contrived, but when have our lives been free from the public scrutiny and self-consciousness we internalize? Rather than ignore the very real impact these influences have on our lives, I hope to write through and beyond them. I want you to accompany me on this journey through thoughts and memories—fissured and fragmented, fragile and firm. (p. 6)

As Hasebe-Ludt and Norman (1998) suggest, Shannon and I “intend to enter into yet another layer of meaning-making through writing and re-writing the experiences of living, learning and teaching in this particular landscape of correspondence between friends” (p. 8).

## Chapter 4: Interchanges

I choose the word “interchange” over others like “entry” or “exchange” for very particular reasons. Hanks (1987) defines the prefix “inter” as “between or among, together mutually or reciprocally” (p. 793); it implies an atmosphere or relationship of trust. “Change” not only means, “to make or become different, alter, replace with another, transform or convert” as a verb, but as a noun it also means “what is given and received in return” (p. 264). The email interchanges were written, received, and replied to in a relationship with the resultant opportunity to be transformed.

An interchange is distinguishable from an exchange by its atmosphere or relationship of trust. In this case, it is the relationship of trust that Shannon and I share that ensured that our interchanges were replies to what we gave to and received from one another in the exploration of what makes us different, and similar, personally and professionally. The interchanges provided us the opportunity to discover the degree of truth behind Brightman’s (1995) quote, from Hannah Arendt to Mary McCarthy, which speaks to the telling of our stories through letters. “This curious neurotic concern with the self,” Arendt wrote, “which in analysis was shown to have nothing to tell but variations of identical experiences” (p. 295).

The interchanges provided an environment in which to engage in authentic communication about the people and experiences that have shaped us. They were written in the same voices and language in which Shannon and I speak to one another. The voices then are as authentic as the conversation itself. The interchanges happened naturally and in such a manner that we were able to write freely about many of the experiences that shaped us as teachers and administrators. The interchanges offered a



medium to explore the people and events of our lives that have shaped Shannon and me as both teachers and learners, and provided us the opportunity to share a similar role as school administrators. We examined, and better understood, the experiences that have shaped our identities in telling the stories of our personal and working lives.

The experience of sharing intimate details of one's history, growing up experiences, and daily working reality can be unnerving. Explaining how I felt inadequate about "this" or how I reacted badly to "that"—particularly to someone I have worked with so closely for years and who has seen me at my worst and at my best, was somewhat disconcerting. Even though Shannon and I had always shared an open, honest, frank relationship, there is a lot more vulnerability involved with putting all of our fears and insecurities down in print. For instance, you cannot take email back. There were times when I wondered if what I was writing would change Shannon's perception of me. Shannon reflects on the ambivalent feelings that stem from such sharing, in his letter to Chambers (1998). On the one hand, he writes, "If I become unfettered by all the bullshit I have choked and cloaked myself in, I'm fearful of who I will leave. I would like to say that I hold you responsible but that would be unfair and it would allow me to reshape my life with more bullshit" (p. 16). On the other hand, Chambers continues to cite Shannon, who goes on to say that he "really liked being naked, not nude, not unclothed, but really naked" (p. 16).

And so, Shannon and I engaged in authentic communication about the people and experiences that have shaped us as teachers, administrators and learners. Freire's (1996) niece's request: "[W]rite me letters about your life, your childhood and, little by little, about the trajectory that led you to become the educator you are now" (p. 11) indicates that one's past provides the tools for understanding one's current personal and

professional reality. Life, really, is all about evolution. Patai (1988) writes, “Having the opportunity to talk about one’s life, to give an account of it, to interpret it, is integral to leading that life rather than being led through it” (p. 163). I remind myself that there are no definitive answers to the personal or global questions I was exploring. As Calkins (1994) says, “The important thing is the inquiry, not the answers” (p. 407). And now, in retrospect, perhaps the answers are to be found after all.

The three themes that emerged from the interchanges centered primarily on relationships. Relationships with parents is the theme that we identified as having the most influence in shaping our identities. Other relationships that helped to shape who we became as teachers and administrators included those with siblings, extended family, children, peers, colleagues, and, of course, our students. Another important theme was that of difference, and how being different from others affected those relationships and influenced our career path and working realities. Lastly, I identified the theme of fear that stems from the insecurity we feel when faced with new experiences that cause us to doubt our ability to cope or conquer.

## Chapter 5: Small Talk in a Crowded Room: The Pedagogy of Fear

Of sharing life writing, Chambers (1998) writes:

When I ask teachers to start digging up their dandelions I know I am messing with some very powerful stuff. When they begin to dig deeply, to examine what's at work in their lives, how they are living them, how they are teaching, and what the meaning of all this might be; teachers can be exhilarated, devastated, or some complex combination of the two. (p. 15)

While doing the interchanges, Shannon and I began to dig up our fair share of dandelions. A significant number of interchanges dealt with issues surrounding the fear and insecurity we often faced in our roles as teachers and administrators. Shannon had been gone from Outreach for almost a year, and for the first time I was trying to put a name to some of the fears I had been facing as a new administrator. I was taking a look at my insecurity surrounding my new role, and my ability to do my work. I was able to relate my current worries to some emotionally painful experiences from my own public school education and recognize that many of the events that shape us also stay with us to a certain extent.

Early on, I wrote to Shannon some of the feelings I had never before shared:

Part of my fear in being an administrator is that others might think I'm not cut out for it. Maybe my real fear is that I'm really not cut out for it and someone might find out. I don't care if I make mistakes for the right reasons, but I do "wander into those predicaments" and feel like I'm twenty-four years old again, and just starting out, and in way over my head. My fear is of making the wrong

decision or asking the wrong question, and everyone thinking, "How did that fool get this job?" I suspect these fears go back to moving from school to school so often when I was growing up and always feeling tormented by what others thought or, more to the point, by what I perceived they were thinking. It drilled into me a good deal of self-preservation. Keep a low profile and your mouth shut and no one gets hurt. I've struggled with that as an adult. "Duck and cover" to stay under the radar does not serve me well in my current reality. So I carry that around, and remind myself every so often to exorcize those particular demons. They are not worthy of me. In my heart I know that if I always do what I think is in the best interests of kids I really can't go wrong.

Interestingly, there were more references to fear and insecurity throughout the interchanges than to any other theme that emerged. I can only attribute the ease with which we shared these stories to the level of trust in our relationship. Some of the stories dealt with childhood trauma and family tragedy that shaped our family relationships and our ability to know our own limitations. Shannon wrote:

Perhaps my future life of "fear" was nurtured by my selfish fear that Bud's ill health was going to preclude any future long-term plans for a father-son relationship. I was 7 years old when Bud suffered his first heart attack. At that age, my knowledge of "hearts" consisted of cupid, candies and Valentines Day. So, just what the hell was a "heart attack"? Even at the tender age of 7, I knew it wasn't good. Fear can lead to resentment, guilt and regrets. I regret that my dad died

when he was young. I regret that he died before I was old enough to understand how he was able to give and accept unconditional love. I still get the occasional closet pang of guilt that I harbored some resentment towards his inability to get well. Now, Heather, here's a huge irony for me—I've followed in his venerable footsteps and gone and had myself a heart attack. And like my dad, I refuse to accept and sometimes even acknowledge that I'm not the man I used to be.

In addressing my fears and insecurities, and some of his own, Shannon and I told stories about some of the challenging events in our careers that shaped us as teachers/administrators. The events we chose to write about were joyful and painful, fraught with fear and insecurity, but tempered with the knowledge that—with students as our focus—we could ultimately cope quite well with the people and the events that come our way. In the early interchanges, we both wrote a great deal about a student we had known who affected us both profoundly. My relationship with her was an incredible opportunity for a child to teach me how to be a teacher. My philosophy of education is built upon the things she taught me while I was her teacher and she was mine. After I had written about this student, Shannon addressed my fear and insecurity:

Whenever you feel the urge to duck behind your own fears, you know it won't wash. When you first met Lynne, you may have thought you were afraid of or intimidated by her. In actual fact, you weren't. If you had been, don't you think Lynne would have smelled your fear? You may have been simply afraid of the unknown. You had likely never met anyone like Lynne before. More importantly, Lynne had never met anyone like Heather before.

I was in my first year of teaching when I met this girl, and she was my student for the next two years. She challenged all of my preconceived notions about what the teacher/student relationship was about and about who was teaching whom. She scared me daily, because I did not know how to respond to her life that she shared so openly.

Make no mistake, when I met Lynne I was terrified. You're right though, I wasn't terrified of *her*, but I haven't realized that until lately. The unknown did terrify me. What terrified me the most was not being able to relate to her life and not being able to understand why she was so comfortable with chaos. I didn't understand or speak much of her "language," but I respected her. She lived in a system that did not want her or much care about her. She was a child with no perceived power and no perceived future. However, Lynne had traveled through hell and come out the other side. She is part of the gift.

Shannon and I also compared our fears to those of our students. The things that worried and scared us as people and professionals seemed so small in light of what we knew about the issues our students faced. Shannon addressed it best:

Sometimes courage is a load but not nearly as heavy a one as fear. Besides, no matter how shitty you may have thought your day was you almost always knew to who and what you were going home. Lots of our kids also know what they're going home to and that's pretty shitty—and fearsome. Now that's courage.

We dealt with fears that stem from our insecurity as professionals. Shannon had left his position as principal several months before we began the interchanges. His move was the one that brought about my move to the assistant principalship. This event, and the

death of my uncle at the same time, changed the way I thought about myself as a professional. It changed my teaching responsibilities and my relationship with my colleagues. I explained:

One of my deepest fears was that I had not been paying close enough attention to all that you have taught me. John [a mutual friend and colleague] told me that other people needed to panic and feel anxiety without you, and that they would have to dig inside of themselves to find their own way out of chaos. Yes, he assumed there would be chaos...More importantly, he let me know that I would find my way.

I realized that the sort of education and mentorship that Shannon had ensured for me over the years was not to be had at any university. Suddenly, he was gone from my daily working reality. The process of doing the interchanges has pointed out to me that I really had been listening and had learned the lessons Shannon taught. I also discovered that he had me pegged for administration long before I realized that was what I wanted for myself and, sometimes, I wonder what he saw. As always, however, Shannon validated my fears and provided support with another gentle lesson:

*Now that I've distanced myself from this world of administration, I feel compelled to tell you that my professional, and in some cases, my personal life history has been built on a foundation of fear. Fear is often a trigger for bullshit. I don't necessarily believe that I was ever afraid of doing the wrong thing. I was however, always concerned about doing the wrong thing in the wrong way. Interestingly enough, I found that if you did the wrong thing in the right way,*

things often ended up right. We've talked about fate and fear and all the vicarious stuff that attaches itself to us as a result of fate and fear. I sometimes wonder if most teacher types have taken a similar path. It may be a bit pretentious but I tend to think that most teachers have some of the same fears. Most of us probably don't realize that our colleagues are kinda like us. Maybe what we're able to do better than most is mask our fears and get pretty good at small talk and overcome our self doubts. I mean let's face it, teaching isn't much more than "small talk in a crowded room."

The interchanges dealing with fear shaped my sense of our humanity by reminding me how precariously positioned we are in all of our life roles, and how we must face the fear that realization might cause. We must challenge the obstacles, refuse to disengage, and maintain a blinding faith in the people around us. "Living fully, claiming body and shadow, is difficult and deep work. It is the work that says, 'I am the one who is culpable; I am the one who is at stake in this question'" (Clifford & Friesen, 1999, pp. 63-64).

Although our fears make us feel uncomfortable, insecure, and doubt our abilities, the knowledge that we can cope with them and even overcome them provides us with a sense of who we are as competent, caring professionals. Shannon put the issue to rest for me when he wrote:

You speak of your fears. I smile when I read this. Your experiences past and future will shake your indomitable spirit but you will never be shattered. When you're faced with situations that you feel are beyond your abilities and your capabilities, you can rest assured that everyone else, including professionals, academics, senior



administrators and even most colleagues know less than you—and like me, what you know may lie right next door to nothing. The life history that continues to direct your path will allow you to come out the way you decide.

## Chapter 6: What They Came to Teach Me: The Pedagogy of Relationships

In the first interchange, relationships emerged as a theme with significant influence on shaping identity. There, I wrote:

Elaine Chang (1994) writes that individuals exist prior to place, and are invested with the ability either to conquer or to succumb to the predicaments they wander into (p. 98). Your leaving last year triggered a personal and professional evolution within me. I have known for some time that administration in Outreach was one of my goals. When it happened the way that it did I was filled with guilt and self-doubt. My uncle died that same week and I felt as though I was losing two of my most important mentors and models. In the past year, my learning curve has skyrocketed, my comfort level has risen, and still I look for you. It is ironic that in your leaving, and in your absence, you are still one of my greatest teachers.

Throughout the interchanges, it became very clear how important the relationships in our lives are to Shannon and me in determining our roles and where we fit in the world in relation to others. Relationships with colleagues, students and each other are very important to how we see ourselves as teachers/administrators. Early on in the interchanges, I expressed to Shannon how his support and encouragement ultimately shaped my career path as well as my identity:

When Meghan [my daughter] was 18 months old, I had been back to work for a year, working a 0.6 FTE [Full Time Equivalent]. I was feeling out of the loop at work and with myself as a new, working parent. The Master's program was something that could be just for me. And so, I registered for that first class. The

only problem was that it was still only Spring Semester and it ran from 9:00 am to 10:00 am every Monday, Wednesday, and Friday for twelve weeks. Do you remember how you made that happen for me? It was the environment of complete trust and support that you fostered for all of us. The other day, you emailed me and agreed to undertake this project with me without even knowing very much about it. You wrote, "When have I ever denied you anything?" The answer to that is, "Never." Your comment reminded me of that first class four years ago and of the many other gifts you have given me along the way.

In reply, Shannon makes reference to my support of him as my administrator and identifies himself, in that often lonely, isolated position, as a phantom—an abstract idea rather than a real person.

As I have said to you before, whenever you thought I had finally lost it, you never seemed to waver in your support. That must have taken a fair degree of courage. Sticking one's neck out for a phantom can be a bit hair raising.

That particular interchange made me think about how becoming a mother shaped my identity as a team member, and changed my relationship with my colleagues, for a time. I thought about how it felt to be back to work part time after my maternity leave and not feeling a part of things there. No one ever actually said or did anything to make me feel as though motherhood was interfering with my work or performance. Nevertheless, when I left staff meetings to pick up my daughter, stay home because she was sick, or did not participate in staff social functions, I felt as though my colleagues thought I had become a lesser teacher. Maxine Greene, as cited by Neumann and Peterson (1997), writes, "I am

amazed, looking back, at the intense guilt feelings I experienced for having a child who made altogether natural demands” (p. 22).

These experiences shaped me as a teacher by making me more sensitive to the demands on my students who are young parents. I modify their timetables and workloads to accommodate sick babies and day care schedules. Likewise I am sensitive to the feelings and needs of my staff who are parents and maintain a timetable that accommodates various start and end work times. Our school is year-round and on a time-for-time holiday system. This enables the parents on staff to attend their children’s schools on special events days and to stay home with their children on mainstream schools’ professional development days. Our staff social functions have become family oriented and children are welcome to attend staff meetings. What I have learned is that my teaching is not isolated from my mothering, and that I “take with me to my professional practice a stronger voice, and a more careful ear to what I practice and know as a parent” (Chambers, et al., 1994, p. 103). As a teacher/parent, I wrote:

Some days, when I am at work, I will take a few moments to silently watch my students. They are busy chatting with others, coming and going, or trying to make sense of their course work. It is then, when they are not concentrating quite so hard on keeping out the adults that the light shines through. Now and then students will catch me catching them, and they will smile. It is in those moments, when they are at their most vulnerable, that I learn what it is that they have come to teach me.

What my students taught me, and continue to teach me, is that positive relationships with teachers shape the outcome of the school experience. Relationships where students feel

supported, cared for, and trusted by adults shape their identities and change their futures by increasing high school completion rates, thereby lowering the rates of poverty, homelessness, substance abuse, etcetera. I never know what student will walk in next to register at my school, but I do know that my every interaction with that child will affect his or her identity either positively or negatively. My students have taught me just how much influence I have as a teacher. Consequently, I have learned that, as an administrator, it is my duty to ensure that all teachers at my school treat every child with the dignity and respect that he or she deserves. In these ways, my relationships with my students have greatly shaped my identity as a teacher and administrator. Chance encounters become tempered by trust, dignity, respect, and caring and become the genuine relationships that have a hand in shaping all of us.

The ways in which my identity as a teacher and administrator has been shaped by my family relationships are probably most obvious. Most of us live with our families a long time before we leave home. Parents and extended families provide us with the foundations for the values and beliefs we hold and the role modeling which influences the choice of paths we choose to travel. Early experiences with school and peers also affect the development of our identities. Each of us has both good and bad stories to tell of childhood incidences at home or school. How we internalize our life stories affects their long-term influences on who we are as people. I believe that how we feel about our own texts becomes the truth about them. Margaret Meek, as cited by Calkins (1994), says, "Stories... create our first memories. From the stories we hear as children we inherit the ways we talk about how we feel, the values which we hold to be important, and what we regard as the truth" (p. 399). The facts of our lives shift almost daily and the things we

were told as children, and what we understand about them, evolve and become something else. Some of it is real, some is wished for, some is family mythology, and some of it is mixed up in other stories. We remember the stories of our childhoods, and the stories from before we were born, differently than our elders simply because we were so young and lacking in life experience.

Jackie Torrence (2000) writes, “Family tales are about the place where I became me” (p. 22). I believe that this is true not just of our family stories, but of all of our life history—every minute of it. I think we make a mistake if we ever think of ourselves as being a finished product shaped completely as soon as we leave the family home as young adults. We are always growing and changing in a myriad of ways.

It was easy for Shannon and me to write about our relationships with our parents and identify their influences on our educational and career paths. We both had caring, supportive relationships with our parents and were comfortable sharing these, and their, stories. The interchanges show that Shannon and I are keenly aware of the many ways our parents helped to shape our identities.

Like most of my generation’s parents, Bud grew up during the depression. His formal education lasted until he reached grade 8. After that, his education was delivered by the often cruel and unforgiving world of work. His life was dedicated to making a better life for himself and, by extension, those he loved. Of course the irony of attempting to make a better life was the main reason for Bud’s early death. My dad would never have understood or accepted the ironies of his life. As far as my educational future was concerned, my dad, who/whom had only

managed to reach grade 8 knew that education was important. He didn't necessarily push too hard and only referred to my grades if he knew that I hadn't given my best effort. He didn't seem to care too much whether or not I got A's or C's as long as I had tried. My mother's response to poor grades (Math was always a pain for me) was completely different and she was always a little cranky (especially with my dad and, in my mom's view, his seemingly indifferent approach to my poor grades) when my grades were somewhat ragged. My mom, who had gone to university and received her degree from the University of Alberta, always believed that I should go to university. She was a teacher. Probably one of the most difficult years for both of us was the year she became my grade 8 teacher. For the one and only time in my life, I never spoke a word—at least not in her class. I had a tendency to take out my grade 8 angst on all the other teachers. What a tough year that must have been for my mom. To be perfectly blunt, I have no recollection if my mother was a good teacher or not but I do remember that I was a little bit scared of my mom, "the teacher." From grade 8 on, I knew that any future employment plans would definitely not include teaching. In fact, my mom discouraged any notions I might have had about being a teacher. She thought architecture would be a good pursuit. As I found out, and as you know, I've never had the "sit down" ability to focus on anything that required attention to detail.

There were many similarities here for Shannon and me. Shannon and I both identify our parents as being the people we credit with the most positive power in our lives. We refer to them as the people who instilled in us our standards of personal integrity, responsibility and work ethic. There are similarities: our mothers have post-secondary educations and our fathers are early school leavers. Our mothers are strong, openly supportive figures, who strongly influenced their children's education. Our fathers influenced us in other ways; mine by supporting the path my mother had laid out for me, Shannon's by modeling many of his currently held values and beliefs regarding family and work, and in the empty spaces created by the fact of his father's early death.

This is my perception of the way I was shaped by my parents:

I do not need to ask myself who has been most influential in my education and career. Since I was a small child my mother has been giving voice to her belief in all that I could ever want to strive to do and my father has been beside her, quietly nodding his agreement, loving and supporting me unconditionally. My father was just as supportive of our endeavours [mine and my sister's] as my mother, but he took his lead from her and offered a quiet strength in comparison to the powerful way she had of instilling self confidence and coming up with the perfect pep talk at just the right times. It's hard to be honest without clouding my stories with too much nostalgia or emotional baggage, but if I had a magic wand for "our kids" I would give each of them my parents-what a gift. It's easy for me to get through even the bad days, isn't it? Even my dark places are filled with so much light.



Our mothers are the people Shannon and I identify with our educational success, and we relate to each other family stories that our mothers told us. Le Guin (1989) points out that “we think back through our mothers” (p. 234). This is reinforced by the idea that the ideals people hold are given to them out of their own “personal histories as well as the backdrop of traditions, customs, and habits, the social and institutional practices in which their personal histories are lived out” (Chambers et al., 1994, p. 98). I am sad to hear my students, who are usually girls, say that they neither like nor need their mothers in their lives. Mine is my best friend. I will always want and need her. Mothers and mothering influences is a topic that interests me greatly and I have written about my mother, and hers, quite often. My mother’s belief in me, her support of whatever I thought I might want to do, is what has carried me through all the hard work of living and ensured that I ever bothered to try at all. Every time I was tired of the grind or hated going to school, or wondered why I ever started down this road, my mother said, “You can do it. If anyone can do it, you can.” One of the research subjects for Robinson and Robinson (1998) indicates a similarly close tie with her mother:

My mother has been my teacher and my guide; I cannot think of a single instance in which I recall a ‘rivalry’ as it is commonly defined. Rather, I recall tremendous support for my errors, and sympathy with my failures, just as I remember elation at my successes. (p. 66)

When I couldn’t decide what to pursue at university, my mother said, “Anyone who writes as well as you do should become a teacher.” So I did become a teacher and I do continue to write. My mother’s mother, who I saw rarely and who died when I was very young, was also a teacher. Her life is a strong influence on mine and my identity as a

parent. What I want for my daughter, and for our relationship, is primarily shaped by my relationship with my own mother. Likewise, my basic philosophy of parenting was shaped by both of my parents. I reveal some of what has become my identity as a parent in this way:

Meghan is definitely one of my biggest opportunities. Having her in my life is like winning a prize every day. She renews my zest for life, makes me notice things, helps me to realize new and old stuff about myself and the values I hold. She inadvertently makes clear the hypocrisies in my life, and makes me appreciate bugs and things. She is six years old and is a whole world unto herself. She is her very own unexplored territory and she is the mapmaker. I am just the guide.

My identity as a mother is very similar to my identity as a teacher in this respect. My students, like Meghan, make their own way and explore their worlds on different levels. I am my students' guide. My identity as a teacher is wrapped up in this metaphor. Part of my work is to safely guide them on a journey of exploring ideas and opportunities.

Shannon and his mother have a close, loving relationship. The quality of their relationship was influenced by the death of his father at a young age. Shannon wrote:

I am so glad she's still alive and well to share the smatterings of our past. Being an egocentric child, teenager, and young man, I missed our shared history. As far as my dad's unheard stories are concerned, it's kind of a gnawing ache. He died too soon for me to listen.

Obviously not restricted to mother-daughter relationships, Grumet (1988) explains that the "process of thinking back through our mothers 'is not' of them but of our relation to

them. It is the question of how to be separate and still recognize them in us, us in them, and us in each other” (pp. 190-191).

Of identity, Stuart Hall (1990) writes that, “We all write and speak from a particular place and time, from a history and culture which is specific. What we say is always ‘in context,’ positioned” and that “it is worth remembering that all discourse is ‘placed’” (p. 51). It occurs to me that our very being is positioned or placed and I am grateful for my parents, the circumstances and the gifts I have been given.

## Chapter 7: “Hit the Road”: The Pedagogy of Difference

Barnes and Duncan (1992) cite Gregory and Walford, who write, “Our texts are not mirrors which we hold up to the world, reflecting its shapes and structures immediately and without distortion. They are, instead, creatures of our own making, though their making is not entirely of our own choosing” (p. 2). Likewise, I wonder about Shannon and me and about what we chose and what we did not for our selves and our own lives. What is reflection and what is distortion? Our perception of our experiences with the people and events of our lives plays a large role in determining how we feel about our place in the world. I wrote a great deal about how my own school experiences helped me develop a sense of being very different than my peers:

Part of the reason I wasn't comfortable teaching in traditional schools really was my own school experiences. I did well in elementary and junior high school and I got along with teachers. My problem was with my peers. I never felt that I fit in and rarely felt a part of any group. I didn't make friends easily and I didn't flirt well. I could not cope with the damage teenage girls do to each other on a daily basis. I always felt like the new kid even when I really wasn't anymore. I had a very hard time feeling comfortable sitting in a classroom and it followed me straight through to university.

Many times I have asked myself how it is possible for me to feel such an affinity to my students when I cannot relate to their experiences. The interchanges illuminated for me the simple fact that, even though I cannot relate to most of their lived experiences, my

empathy for my students, based on my own experiences, forms the philosophical underpinning of my beliefs and attitudes towards teaching.

I was never very comfortable in my own skin. Part of that came from moving around, I think. I've spent my whole life trying to prove—to myself, let's face it—that I fit in, that I'm just as good as the next guy (or girl...), that I'm wanted on a team, whatever. Honestly, that's been a lot of time perfectly well wasted. I'm thirty-two years old and I need to get past it, but there you have it, that's part of what shaped me. I guess what the last part of the diatribe means is that I have felt some of what a lot of "our kids" have felt in traditional settings—alienated, disenfranchised, overwhelmed. The transient, the truant, the traumatized, the parenting, the socially inept—I've got room for them. The expelled, the drug addicted, the drug dealers, the suicidal—bring 'em on. They all come from essentially the same tormented places from out of the mainstream and inside of themselves. I have a place for all of them in my heart and in my schools. Maybe that's why you didn't care so much that I couldn't teach Math.

As the interchanges progressed, Shannon and I found that we had more in common than even we had realized. Our shared perspective on the subject of relating to our students was another example. Shannon wrote:

It's kind of interesting how alike we seem to be. Putting aside the female-male thing and the age difference and the fact that I don't have children and that you're there and I'm here and...hold on...okay, so maybe there are a lot of

differences but there are some things that are the same. You spoke of not feeling very comfortable in your own skin. Well, me either. You spoke of not feeling very comfortable in a room crowded with small talkers. Well, me either. And there have been occasions where adult-type folks have suggested that the reason that I seem(ed) to get along reasonably well with our kids is because I could "relate" to them. Sometimes I would nod sagely. There were times when I sometimes even believed them. What bullshit! What arrogant bullshit!

In that interchange, Shannon also makes reference to being compared to our students. This idea of being set apart from our mainstream peer group runs throughout the interchanges, but manifests itself here in a professional sense. Not only were our students different from their mainstream peer group, but the very fact of our being Outreach teachers set us apart from teachers in more mainstream settings. As I wrote to Shannon, a good deal of our identity as Outreach teachers stems from these very differences:

*As Outreach teachers, we always considered ourselves to be on the fringe, outside of the traditional loop, different, and happily so. However, this also afforded us a sort of elite status and we had a lot of attention from and interaction with our board and central office administration. Perhaps our position as the "teacher's pets" of the school district had only been in our own minds. Regardless of where it came from, that position gave us our sense of identity and we had a great deal of ourselves invested in it and in our belief that, in Outreach, we could do whatever we set our minds to.*

Shannon goes on to write about the way he felt mainstream teachers perceived us, and pointed out some of the ways we actually use our differences with our mainstream peers to isolate ourselves and protect our students from the mainstream.

We often live and breathe our jobs. And, as often as not, we (that would be the collective "we") tend to revel in it. We tend to try and outwork each other and get ourselves into a bit of a pissing match. We delight in assuming a martyr's stance when we discuss our preoccupation with our lot in life. I know that I certainly had a habit of doing this and I was never quick to dispel the myth that our kids were "tough." Most of the teachers external to Outreach thought that we were misfits and even in some cases, ne'er-do-wells ourselves. But it wasn't for these reasons few had a burning desire to join us. Teachers that have had their professional psyche(s) ingrained by the traditional system just thought/think that teaching "those" kids would be too taxing. It may be okay to keep the myth alive but the trick is to not believe it ourselves. If we come to believe that our kids have become a burden, then it's probably time to "hit the road." You and I both know that the kids were/are never a burden.

Throughout the interchanges, Shannon and I identified quite clearly that being in Outreach made us different than other teachers. However, the differences did not just come from simply being placed physically apart. Shannon identified these differences on an experiential level:

During my life with the school district, I lost over 30 kids to suicide. It sounds selfish and even self-indulgent, because it wasn't me that lost these lives. Even

keeping count is kind of disrespectful. Families and friends have lost much more. I still remember all their names and their faces. Which means jack-shit to the families and friends. Self-preservation is my main motive for not looking too deeply into this dark past. Although your academic types may love the “touchy feely” stuff most will never know the pain that you and I have experienced through our kids. You will continue to experience this pain. For me, the pain is slowly sliding into relegated memories. Perhaps I’m a little resentful of that. Perhaps I feel a little guilty of the occasional fits of smugness I get from knowing that I have experienced a pain that few others will ever know. My smugness rides on the backs of those that have experienced the true and withering pain of their children’s deaths.

**I took a more philosophical stand in writing about being different from mainstream teachers, but the message was still the same. It was obvious that our identity as teachers hinged on the notion that we were not simply teachers—we were Outreach teachers.**

I felt a lot of different emotions while reading what you wrote about the kids you, and we, lost. We work with amazing children. It is often not as astounding to me that many of them took their lives as it is astounding to me that they were able to live their lives at all. That is courage. Many of them committed suicide simply because they were so tired. The emotion I settled on in the end was great pride. Like kids, we Outreach staffers come to view our “reputation” with an elitist attitude that we wear boldly and proudly. I can describe Outreach in a lot of ways,



but it is difficult to explain. It is a lived thing, and the kids make it happen. Smith (1996) says, "by facing too those whose faces have been seared by the fires of life, seeing myself in them, I become more fully human, more open and generous, more representative of the real thing we call Life" (p. 11). Isn't that great? I love that! When I first read that my heart stopped. I thought, "That's it! That's Outreach! That's us!" And I was so thankful for the best job in the world. It is imperative, particularly in Outreach settings, that we always remember that students "exist prior to place," because our treatment of them is tempered by the notion that we need not ever contribute to the fire that sears their faces.

## Chapter 8: Conclusion: Laying Down Our Own Tracks

With each interchange, the things I thought I had figured out about the way I am and who I am, the issues of my life that I had already wrapped up in nice, neat little packages, got unwrapped and thrown back at me. I was at once uplifted by Shannon's limitless faith in me and deflated by the realization of how little I know about most things. The irony of the paradoxical situation I found myself in was confounding, to say the least.

When Beltrame (2002) asks how her upbringing shaped who she became, Chief Justice Beverly McLachlin answered, "Who knows why one is what one is?" Looking back at my interchanges with Shannon, McLachlin's statement seems to me to be very true. There are no definitive answers. Shannon and I decided that fate grants us the opportunities to grow into the people we ultimately become. These are the opportunities that wander past us, that we either grab on to and make our futures with or that we do not recognize and let slide by. They are also the opportunities that we are granted by being born into them or being lucky enough to be in the right place at the right time. This idea, I felt clearly, played a large role in shaping my life and career path, as well as my identity as a teacher and an administrator:

My grandmother was a teacher. She was my mother's mother. My Uncle David (my mother's brother) and his wife were both teacher-administrators. I wanted to be a vet, but I couldn't do the math. As a kid, with my stuffed animals, I either played vet or teacher. I knew about teachers. Teachers were good and smart and family. They cared about you and helped you. They wanted you to learn. They made you want to learn. My family is comfortable with teachers. I guess I always knew that I would become a teacher, although I remember being irritated that

there was no mystery, no sense of discovery in choosing a career path. I almost wanted to rebel against it. It was like it was preordained only not in any religious sense. Fate? I don't know, maybe there's too much "grand plan" wrapped up in fate for me. Accident? One of the "predicaments I wandered into?" I didn't know what I wanted to be when I grew up and, honestly, became a teacher by default and got my job by accident.

The interchanges were a rewarding opportunity for my personal and professional growth. I have been truly blessed by having journeyed through these interchanges with Shannon. He is in many ways wise and spiritual, yet he is very funny and real—flawed like the rest of us. Because he is of a different gender and generation than I, he quite often has a different perspective on issues and the interrelatedness of people and experiences. I gain insight into my own place among others when we talk; he is able to open different windows of understanding on my world. Of our journey, Shannon wrote:

How either one of us got to these points in our professional lives still, in my estimation rest largely on the whims of fate. If we look too closely at the reasons why we do what we do, the reasons often seem like motives. And motives almost imply that a crime has been committed. So, maybe we didn't actually get off track. Maybe, like most good Outreach folks, we just laid down our own tracks. If you keep doing that, then being an administrator will always be a frustrating way to spend your day, but at the end of that day, you will be satisfied.

The influence of fate on identity ends, however, with the moment of chance that decides the family circumstances into which we are born. After that it is the people we

encounter and share our lives with, and the experiences we celebrate and suffer that shape our identities. Our life stories, and the way we remember them, shape the way we feel about ourselves, our world, and our place in it.

I am amazed at the amount that Shannon and I had to say to each other on so many different topics, and am even more amazed that so much has been left unsaid. I expected more stumbling blocks along the way. I thought that Shannon would find the number of entries tiresome in conjunction with his own life's challenges. I expected that some of the entries would need to be conjured up and worried that they would seem as if they were forced. I worried also that each entry might become a simple reply to the one that came before. None of these things happened.

The process and evolution of the interchanges turned out to be more valuable than I imagined. The interchanges are very fluid and so memories or issues were triggered by what the other had written and the ideas came immediately. Every interchange was exciting and filled with new knowledge and understanding of the other, who we thought we knew so well. I have a better understanding of the events and people that have shaped me as a teacher, and administrator, and a learner. I recognize that even minor incidents and brief encounters have also had a hand in shaping me, and that these have not always been based in formal education. Even more than all of this, I have a stronger sense of my interconnectedness with the people and events of my life and this has been important to me. I have gained a new appreciation of myself, Shannon, and others in my life and work. I have truly learned that, ultimately, when we engage in the telling and creating of our own histories we "acknowledge and honor all of our relations" (Houtekamer, et al., 1997, p. 142). My last letter to Shannon speaks clearly to these experiences:

We've been communicating our educational lives and identities through sharing the stories and people that have shaped us for a little over three months now. I feel "opened up" by the process of engaging in these interchanges with you. By "opened up" I mean that I feel freer to own my own experiences. I'm not sure I have a better handle on the experiences and people that shaped who I am as a teacher and a learner. I do have a better handle on my own issues that I bring with me to work everyday as a teacher/administrator (fear, fate, relationships, etc).

Identity is tied closely with being ready to own one's own stories. If we are not ready to examine and reflect the experiences that have shaped us, we will not really understand who we have become. King (1998) cites Margaret Laurence, who writes about becoming ready to own her own narrative in a letter to a friend:

It's just that I feel I might at last be able to look at people here [Canada] without blinking. Having hated my own country most of my life, I am now beginning to see why. It's the mirror in which one's own face appears, and like Queen Elizabeth the First, you smash the mirrors but that doesn't change yourself after all. Very strange. I am glad I did not write anything out of this country, before, because it would have been done untruthfully, with bitterness, but perhaps not anymore. (p. 147)

One of the great teachers and identity shapers in my life has been the process itself of engaging in my Master's program. I have discovered so much about the person I am, and how I fit in the world and relate to others. I have thought critically about my life history and how and why I have come to hold certain fundamental values and beliefs. I understand how I have come to find myself in the particular spaces I now occupy at home and at work as a friend, colleague, mother, daughter, wife, student, leader, teacher, and

consumer. I better understand my strengths and weaknesses and the potential for my personal and professional growth.

This project, however, has provided much more than that. Indeed, as Hasebe-Ludt and Norman (1998) indicate, “Personal letters, ‘intimate’ correspondence, constitute a way into the soul, the otherness of the persona, the mask we so often show to the outside world of academia” (p. 7). The project points out that significant intimate relationships provide us with the foundation to be able to reflect on our lives. Had I not been able to be completely honest with Shannon and myself throughout the interchanges, the experience of the interchanges and the project would not have been nearly as rewarding. In an intimate relationship, people feel safe and are able to take risks where they might ordinarily be closed to others and, therefore, closed to themselves. Part of the work for me, as a teacher, is to try to form significant intimate relationships with my students to provide them with an environment where they, too, can reflect and grow. Sharing my own stories with my students, and encouraging students to explore their own stories, are examples of steps that I can take along the journey with them.

In reflecting on the people and experiences that have shaped me in the roles of my life, I have learned the importance of passing the skill on to my students. Lifewriting is a window to students’ understanding themselves and their own past experiences. The research for this project demonstrated very clearly to me that we celebrate life in our letters. As an English Language Arts teacher, I can extend this medium to include essays, poetry, short stories, journals, etcetera. Engaging in these activities will help students to cope with what has passed and with the experiences they still face. My hope is that they

will develop the ability to make better choices based on a clearer understanding of themselves and their relationships.

The guides throughout my lifelong journey of identity shaping have been my classmates, family, friends, teachers, colleagues, and the “aha” moments that come from understanding that I am because of where I have been, and because of the people who came before me and those who are now with me. Being ready to own my stories and face myself has been crucial to the process. Much of what I have learned would have come naturally over the course of my lifetime, but the journey itself has been intrinsically rewarding. What I have gained is without price. In of the later interchanges, I wrote:

Every experience and encounter is a life lesson, a teaching and learning opportunity. Everything has a purpose and all events—both good, bad, and in between—are opportunities. Every person we encounter and every experience we have is meant to teach us something. In fact, I can apply the “what have you come to teach me” question to all of my experiences and encounters in life. I can apply it to my successes and to my conflicts, to my family and friendships and to my more difficult relationships. I can apply it to every student who walks through the door of my school and receive a different answer. I can apply it to every staff meeting, every class I attend, and every second of my life. I can apply it to your presence in my life. The question allows me to be both the teacher and the student, and that is why I am here.

The truth of the matter is that in exploring the experiences that shape us, we learn that it is never just one thing that shapes the rest.

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