

**RE-IMAGINING TEACHER LEADERSHIP:
AN AUTOETHNOGRAPHIC INQUIRY**

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By

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ABSTRACT

Leadership has been given deliberate prominence in education in the quest to activate educational capacity and improve educational performance within schools (Hargreaves & Ainscow, 2015). Expectations for the teaching profession as a whole, and in particular teacher leadership, are central to the hopes of “improving school outcomes, improving the educational attainment of students, and replacing conceptualizations of leadership” (Torrance & Humes, 2015, p. 792). In spite of the positive rhetoric regarding teacher leadership, it has not been successful in achieving these aims, especially on a wider scale (Barth, 2013; Coggins & McGovern, 2014).

Re-imagining teacher leadership raises the question of what teacher leadership is, why it has not been deemed successful, and what spaces exist for teachers to lead within. The author’s experiences are situated through self-narrative writing and compared to existing literature on teacher leadership, raising questions as to why existing educational landscapes might remain inhospitable to the legitimacy of teacher leadership. While micro-events are the focus of this research, their relationship to macro-structures indicates the need for re-imagining the spaces where teachers can lead within school systems. This autoethnographic inquiry illustrates how reflection on career events and teacher leadership experiences can enrich the description of educational leadership and the role educators can take in fostering leadership.

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As to the clutter of artifacts in the garage, they remind me of experiences I cherish with those I love: faded, dusty, whimsical homework projects lovingly created with our daughters Susanna and Eve; every mode of transportation that has carried Mark and I together on adventures far and near; the filing cabinet and boxes of books- all reminders of the wisdom and love for learning from my father, Harry Keller; the tickle trunk holding costumes like the pencil skirt- a reminder of the strong women in my life who have always led quietly while caring for and encouraging others; and even the lumbering lost discarded mirror where I saw myself revealed ...who knew artifacts relegated to hidden corners of our garage would assist me in exploring my experiences and release my imagination into the landscape of teacher leadership.

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PROLOGUE

Disturbing the Dust

While cleaning the garage
and *disturbing the dust*,
I find remnants of myself.

Stored in a strata of layers,
filed away in a cabinet
between taxations and vacations,
teaching experiences
materialize.

Rifling through artifacts,
I catch glimpses of myself
in letters of reference,
reconstructed resumes,
performance evaluations,
and covering letters,
evidence of many new jobs and moves across the country.
[I can] *not cease from exploration...*

small individual photos
long ago removed from the pack,
slip out and tumble forward
interrupting this (re)search.

Memories of children and youth
hidden amidst lost teacher gifts:

A brass, apple-shaped bell
cautiously presented by small tentative hands of Jessica
who found writing and reading a release from her tormentors.

The noon hour “homework club”
a souvenir engraved and presented by Sean grinning widely
before we ate exotic foods prepared by family at the farewell due.

A metal hand-held hole-punch
slyly pierced a rubber tree plant repeatedly at the back corner of the classroom,
coveted by Jerry during that strange year, his third in grade seven.

Tiny portraits
cut out from a package of mass prints
shyly shared and awkwardly offered
after that day.

Photo day—
dressed in our best attire,
lined up, row on row, side by side,
staring straight ahead
for some visiting stranger.

I was closer to you, in age, in those days.
Smoothing a pencil skirt with sweaty palms,
standing at the sideline,
perched on tiptoes,
holding my breath behind my smile,
witnessing our beginning.

Unpacking and discovering the remnants:
words we spoke,
words they wrote,
experiences from another time,
_raised

me,
the teacher,
chock-full with curiosity and a fierce desire to learn,
rushing and stumbling onto an unexpected landscape.

Retreating into reflection and (re) searching,
I recognize myself,
*At the end of all [my] exploring [I] arrive
where we started,
and know the place for the first time¹.*

¹ Italicized lines from *Little Gidding*, T.S. Eliot's *Four Quartets* (1942).

I routinely disturb the dust and reorganize spaces. Well, in truth, I tend to explore and re-imagine more than reorganize spaces in the office, basement and garage. Stepping off the treadmill of teaching for the summer season, I carefully review and file items I have stored away because I lacked either the energy or time to properly give them the attention needed. At this time of year, I also contemplate the growing collection of artifacts I am too nostalgic to part with. I was not a hoarder before I taught or had children. It seems numerous moves and changing teaching assignments over the years have left me nostalgic and hanging onto artifacts from those experiences. Staring at long forgotten boxes of resumes, teaching materials, and faded art projects done by our children, I realize I struggle to throw things away.

Today, while cleaning my file cabinet of teaching materials now relegated to the garage, I am surrounded by a circus of artifacts and a variety of vehicles I have used to travel a varied landscape. On one wall there is the diorama of the Zeppelin passing the Eiffel tower framed against Vincent Van Gogh's Starry Night. Dusty and fading, this whimsical homework project, done by one of our daughters, reminds me of countless hours spent discussing ideas during the days before the assignment was due. I loved imagining us travelling back in time and floating over Van Gogh's starry sky. Much of my life as a mother and teacher has been spent beside a child peering into some assignment or topic and wondering how learning might be re-imagined.

Crammed into every corner and crevice of the garage are other types of transport: the ten speed bicycle (during the 1980s) carried me along prairie highways and side

roads when I was a beginning teacher and needed an escape from the monotony of small-town life. The child's wagon (during the 1990s) pulled children, toys, and research articles from playground to playground in the lower mainland of B.C. while I was working as a consultant and teaching education classes. For the new Millennium the homemade utility trailer (packed with belongings) hauled crying children and our heavy hearts over the Great Divide to make a new life in our prairie hometown. I am transported back as I look around this collection and I tumble into a memory hole with each item. Gradually time evaporates, and I awaken from my retreat into nostalgia; this is not getting the dissertation done!

Ah, the dissertation. Tiring of the work in schools and school district offices, I set off on this journey to understand my teaching experiences and the educational landscape I had traveled. Provoked by my experiences as a teacher-learning leader and consultant during an initiative to renew the work in high schools, I returned to graduate school. During that initiative, teachers and administrators tackled transforming the educational practices within high schools. We grappled with how to carry out the very messy work of changing the traditions we could barely perceive. Gradually, I realized we struggled in recognizing leadership among and for teachers and the educational landscape in schools and district offices. In spite of the concerns I had about the task of pursuing a PhD, I wanted to learn more about organizational theory. I had been skirting around the ideal of leadership for some time, as the word 'leader' always made me feel circumspect. I was

persuaded by my experiences that teacher leadership was misunderstood and overlooked, but I was not sure why.

Reflecting, I ask myself, when did I start questioning and re-imagining teacher leadership? My preoccupation with this ideal began decades ago when I stepped onto the schoolhouse landscape, first as a student and then as a fledgling teacher, until it grew gradually over time, in multiple classrooms and schools as a teacher leading. The question, “What is teacher leadership?” is as crucial now in the latter days of my career as it was early on as a beginning teacher, stepping forward to lead learning. Looking backward and looking forward, I wonder if I might have recognized teacher leadership and been better prepared for leading in that role had I understood the landscape I would encounter as a teacher and a learner.

The educational landscape that teachers navigate over their careers requires a special lens for seeing. Greene (1995) illustrated the competing visions used on educational landscapes as ‘seeing big and seeing small’.

To see things or people small, one chooses to see from a detached point of view, to watch behaviors from the perspective of a system, to be concerned with trends and tendencies rather than the intentionality and concreteness of everyday life. To see things or people big, one must resist viewing other human beings as mere objects or chess pieces and view them in their integrity and particularity instead. One must see from the point of view of the participant in the midst of what is

happening if one is to be privy to the plans people make, the initiatives they take, the uncertainties they face. (p. 10)

Greene concluded that the challenge within schooling reforms required teachers to learn to move back and forth between the two ways of viewing so that they would not have to choose between “seeing big and seeing small,” but instead “reflect upon their practice within a complex context and ... make their choices out of their own situations” so that they would “comprehend the domains of policy and long-term planning while also attending to the particular children, situation-specific undertakings, the unmeasurable, and the unique” (p.11). When immersed in classroom realities and student needs, I find that I need an empathetic way of ‘seeing big.’ When I became a resource teacher, and later a teacher learning leader, I realized the limitations offered to students when individual teacher efforts remained isolated in each classroom. I found the desire to be autonomous often affected collaborative efforts and diminished both personal and collective efficacy. The system-initiated way of ‘seeing small’ that I experienced offered a superficial scan of the efforts going on in a school and district, but it did not encourage and value the collective efficacy and empathetic way of seeing that I think is needed. I wonder if teachers’ leadership and experiences in ‘seeing big’ is the essential way of bridging and supporting the on-going tension of these ways of seeing and ensuring collective efficacy.

Peering into the mirror, I wonder at my own vision for understanding teacher leadership. Staring at my reflection, it is apparent the last three decades have changed

me. Examining myself, I find my vision is altered, and I am no longer able to see small in the way I once did. Now I must step back and scan in order to see clearly. Surveying and scanning I explore while making connections to what might be within. There are numerous jokes from family and friends about the visionary support that longer arms might offer. Has this way of seeing and believing come with aging eyesight or from exposure to a wide canvas of experiences? With my desire to see and explore the landscape, I find that when peering at particular details, I need another eye, a mind's eye that has a layered imaginative lens. Yes, these days, I require a lens which is empathetic and social in nature.

Reflecting further, there is my problematic neck. Changing vision requires leaning forward and sticking your neck out. Sticking my neck out repeatedly has caused me no end of trouble. Sticking your neck out, combined with far-sightedness, can gradually cause light-headedness while your hands and arms go numb, thus reducing the ability to juggle many things, as I like to do. I wonder why I am trying to juggle so many things. Is this yet another sign of the times or just a reality of my situation and who I am?

Like the garage, my life is a jam-packed eclectic pursuit of many interests and influences. It too is organized by the seasons. In the summer months of down time, I attend to my own affairs and find needed space from routines and job demands. I read, write, garden, and travel, all the while, visiting family and friends. By mid-August I turn my thoughts fully back to teaching and consulting, and I begin to ramp up again: sorting, planning, and preparing for the year ahead. Then with school start-up in September, I

jump onto a treadmill that changes from a walking pace to that of an exhilarating gallop. There are occasional moments on release days, statutory holidays, and seasonal breaks where I try to catch up with email, preparation, and oh yes, my own life commitments.

Many roles quite literally push and pull on me as I weave through my personal and professional life. I am spouse, mother, daughter, sister, sister-in-law, auntie, niece, cousin, friend, colleague, and neighbor. When you pile on member of the sandwich generation, and in any free hours, PhD candidate pursuing my current hobby, the dissertation, there is a messy collision of roles and responsibilities. I have tried at times to separate some of the roles from this bricolage, but their interconnections influence who I am.

As I stand in this garage cleaning with an old dust rag made from a skirt I once wore, I am very much like this piece of cloth now. I am comprised of numerous threads woven into the stretchy fabric of who I have become. Each thread woven together enriches and strengthens me, while confining me with demands for time and attention. I now have numerous experiences from classroom contexts, school settings, and roles that wind inside and outside the classroom. Meandering from western province to western province, from rural to urban settings, teaching grade levels from preschool through to university, I have moved repeatedly back and forth, in and out of the classroom to grasp at the art and craft of teaching, and explore the landscape of teacher leadership. As I explore my experiences and look at my ideals of leadership through an autoethnographic

lens, I wonder about the intangible quality of teacher leadership, which depends on and influences the context of the classroom, school, and school system.

Returning to the present, I catch my image in a large sliding wardrobe mirror in the garage. Who has a sliding mirror in their garage, let alone one of this proportion and on wheels? After the house renovation, the contractor was supposed to remove that wall-sized, weighty thing, but instead it was pushed away to one side, unseen, and then forgotten. School started, then another new job, and family commitments cornered me, and I also overlooked the mirror. Perhaps it is now time to remove the dust and attend to it.

CHAPTER 1

THE LENS OF LEADERSHIP

It is pictures rather than propositions, metaphors rather than statements, which determine most of our philosophical convictions. The picture which holds traditional philosophy captive is that of the mind as a great mirror, containing various representations—some accurate, some not—and capable of being studied by pure, nonempirical methods.

(Rorty, 1979, p. 12)

To See and be Seen

Sitting in a routine morning meeting, I stare at my skirt's delicate fibers, woven carefully into a form that means business. This pencil skirt is one of the subtle changes in the way I chose to dress as I returned (again) to work within office spaces of a school system as an educational consultant. I returned to this role in the hopes of renewing the educational work in our high schools and supporting teachers. I am craving a new leadership position that is larger in scope than one classroom and one school, but still rooted firmly in the work of teachers and students in school efforts at reform and redesign.

My craving for leadership is not unique. I see the concern for leadership all around me these days. I wake to headlines lamenting disillusionment in leadership during elections and inquiries into the issues of the day. Within my own province I watch as we consider how to influence educational policy and teachers consider how they might pick a provincial leader who will care about the role of teachers and education. Nationally and internationally, people continue hoping to have their concerns attended to as they elect leaders amid controversy on an increasingly complex global stage. Amid these agendas for change, controversies arise, inquiries are started, frequently stalled, and then enfolded into the complexity of the issue that they set out to explore and highlight. To an outsider, little seems to be accomplished at the outset and the interests of those the inquiry is meant to serve become contentious. Leadership appears paralyzed by a fierce tug-of-war between competing beliefs, inadequate funding priorities, and excuses for cynicism and apathy. I see a perpetual yearning for the intangible ideal called 'leadership' amid questions as to what leadership might entail when it is not yet successful or evident.

So if leadership is so pertinent these days, why do I struggle to attend to today's current conversation about educational leadership while seated in a school district office? Why do I find myself mesmerized by a small loose thread in the fabric of this pencil skirt? This skirt with its delicate warp and weft of threads and fibers mesmerizes me, as it illustrates the confines and complexity of the educational landscape I find myself on. Before, when I would routinely circle and sit beside students in the classroom, I

would have ignored a small snag or loose thread. But then, when I worked in schools, I frequently wore a fabric far more flexible in nature and laughed when I invited colleagues to join me in the sisterhood of the stretchy pants.

Perhaps this current inability to concentrate is due to the previous restless night. I was talking through much of it, my husband informed me. Jaw pain confirms I was either grinding my teeth or chewing on something hefty. That restless sleep must be linked to yesterday's events, which played over in my mind all night long.

Yesterday, the professional learning session, scheduled in the calendar, surprised all of us, even those in charge of planning for the event. We all seemed to have missed anticipating its arrival and the conundrum we would witness among our colleagues. That day, department heads were sent by their supervising principal as part of an initiative to improve student engagement in learning. These teacher-leaders were called from their daily work in high schools to activate their newly named roles as 'learning coordinators.' The title "department head" had only recently been changed while the actual work duties remained much the same in many respects: chair a monthly meeting, keep track of a budget, organize resources, relay any administrative announcements, and mentor new staff within the department. Expectations for how to actively lead learning in the department was the topic for the day, and unknown to most in the room was that this role of learning coordinator was the next effort to widen the presence of teacher leaders.

This was one more step in an initiative to transform the learning agendas in classrooms and teacher collaborative structures in schools. During the development of

this initiative to reform schools, the typical duties and expectations for department heads were reviewed and reconsidered and then tweaked in name only and without the participation of those in that role. Department heads continued to be shoulder-tapped and to find themselves the recipients of a title, in which their duties seemed to far outweigh the meager pay stipend they received. Regrettably their participation in the impending evolution and determined need for a learning agenda at department meetings had been missing.

That day I was wearing two hats, as I had taken on a new part-time position. While I continued with my previous role of learning coordinator for student services and resource teacher in one high school in the mornings, I now also worked as an educational consultant supporting literacy at the district level in the afternoons. I was minimally involved in the planning of the learning session and instead I was there primarily as a support person and participant.

From the sidelines, I watched the varied reactions to the presentation, “Consider an inspiring educational leader and list their characteristics.” I had intended on participating in my learning coordinator role with my school group, until a raised hand and direct stare signaled me over. I recognized the knowing look from this colleague working at a neighbouring school. He had often lamented that his colleagues did not agree on practices and policies that would address student-learning needs.

Joining the group was tricky. I negotiated a circuitous path through the throng of densely packed teachers and tables until I reached the raised hand. The chatter I

expected when I arrived was replaced with silence. Group members, avoiding my eye contact, continued looking down at the table. The colleague who signaled me over leaned back, rolled his eyes, and finally invited me into their dilemma.

“We can’t seem to recall any inspiring educational leaders,” the veteran teacher smirked. This colleague who had signaled me over, had previously shared frustrations of working with colleagues in his role as a teacher leader in this school. Looking around I witnessed anger and frustration in the down-turned eyes and crossed arms, until a voice lamented, “This isn’t what we expected. We didn’t come here for this!” The complaint came from someone I once knew very well. We had taught alongside one another in a far-off rural school, at a much earlier time in our careers. It was a time before our own children came on the scene, before school divisions amalgamated, and before the steady ripple of career moves for new opportunities. Although decades had passed, I recognized her as if it were yesterday. Surprised by her response, I wondered at how she seemed to have forgotten the days when we were new teachers and we worked with an inspirational educational leader.

What was it these teachers were expecting and looking for?

Why did these teachers come to this space?

Puzzled by the gaps in this conversation and the expressions, I am perplexed by the lack of recognition when the word ‘leadership’ enters the room. Staring at my hands folded on my pencil skirt, I realized no one said anything. In a room full of talkative teachers, something has happened I did not understand.

What is Teacher Leadership?

Bennis (1959) captured the challenge in conceptualizing leadership when he wrote:

Of all the hazy and confounding areas in social psychology, leadership theory undoubtedly contends for top nomination. And ironically, probably more has been written and less is known about leadership than about any other topic in the behavioral sciences. Always, it seems, the concept of leadership eludes us or turns up in another form to taunt us again with its slipperiness and complexity. (pp. 259-260)

Much has been written about the quest to activate educational leadership capacity and improve educational performance within schools (Elmore, 2016; Hargreaves & Ainscow, 2015; Leithwood, Harris, & Hopkins, 2008). On the educational landscape, leadership has been given deliberate prominence by governments and school system personnel, with increased expectations placed on teachers (Hargreaves, 2015; Torrance & Humes, 2015). Harris (2005) concurred, “No modern concept has been more powerfully received in the consciousness of those concerned with school reform and improvement than leadership” (p. 201). The ideal of teacher leadership “is often caught in a collision between the two strategies of achieving reform: one resting on heightened involvement and commitment of participants and one relying on intensified control of participants’ work” (Murphy, 2005, p. 10).

Torrance and Humes (2015) indicated, in their review of international educational trends, that significant policies were driving expectations for the teaching profession and for teacher leadership. They identified the drivers as the “pressure to continuously improve school outcomes, increased attention and competitiveness of comparisons of educational achievement, replacement of conceptualizations of leadership within a distributed perspective, and a devolution of governance to the school level accompanied by higher expectations on staff to address local needs within diminishing budgets” (p. 792). School districts and governments, with an increased appetite for improving student performance, have gravitated to acknowledging teacher leadership as it appears a natural and cost-effective response, but educational leadership among and by teachers is not that clear cut or simple to conceptualize. I wonder, do we understand the complexity of teacher leadership and the spaces where it is found? Do we realize its importance and underpinnings in educational leadership? I wonder about teacher leadership challenges when Barth (2013) wryly commented, “... it’s *always* been a promising time for teacher leadership. It’s just never been a *successful* time” (p. 10). If *the time is ripe again* for teacher leadership, as Barth indicated, why has it been viewed as unsuccessful? Are the conceptualization and experiences of teacher leadership worthy of exploration? It took me some time to commit to this determination.

Point-no-Point

I wrestled with what I was seeing, and I was tired of waiting. I questioned the reality and illusion of leadership. After a tug-of-war of beliefs and points made on this topic, I found I needed to rest and reflect.

Perhaps spring's late arrival caused me to be weary and discouraged. We had long, cold winter storms, which surprised us with their revenge on power grids, housing, and century-old trees. Amid the reports on Mother Nature, our leadership fiascoes hit the papers with the same tenacity. Local, provincial, national, and international events were publicized frequently. To escape from the noise of those events and the demands in my life, I returned to Point No Point on Vancouver Island where there is an island of hopefulness.

I set out some time ago to examine my experiences of leading as a teacher, but nagging doubts haunt me. These doubts are attached to my desire to write an autoethnographic account of an inquiry into the experiences of a teacher leading. I have been approaching and avoiding the task for some time. I fear my story might be trivial, and yet, haunted by it, I carried the baggage of a slow-growing dissertation from my prairie landscape to continue to contemplate it at Point No Point, B.C. Greenfield (1993) described this place:

...as the road weaves between the ocean and trackless forest and mountain, you will pass Point No Point. There a no-point has become a geographical fact, as may be *seen* both on the ground and on the topographical maps. Does its name

describe reality or does it represent illusion, oversight, technical error or the wrong thinking of idiosyncratic metaphor? (p. 124)

While traveling back from Point No Point, I wonder about whether we perceive “the reality, illusion, oversight, technical error, and [perhaps even] wrong thinking” of our leadership conceptualizations and daily assumptions. Are Greenfield’s observations something to consider as I explore my experiences on the landscape of teacher leadership?

Keller, research notes, March, 28, 2016

(re) Searching Using the Autoethnographic Lens

Using autoethnographic inquiry, I explore teacher leadership. My experiences are reflected upon and situated through self-narrative writings. These self-narrative reflections are then unpacked in relation to existing literature on the phenomenon of teacher leadership. According to autoethnographic pioneers, Holman-Jones, Adams, and Ellis (2013), autoethnographic writing is “more socially conscious than autobiographic works” so as to both provoke and invite others into wondering about a question at hand and the dominant discourse on the subject (p. 23). Autoethnographic inquiry intentionally highlights personal experiences and stories to examine their relationship to predominant cultural experiences and practices.

While reviewing my own autoethnographic materials and self-narrative texts, I interpret my own experiences in relation to prevalent views of teacher leadership in order to offer an interpretation which reflects the qualities of authenticity and verisimilitude

differently than can other research texts. Writers of narrative accounts do not seek to provide a truth, but instead seek to tell an authentic story that resonates with the readers in ways that cause them to pull forward experiences of their own and to relive those experiences with new insights and understandings (Holman Jones, Adams, & Ellis, 2013). It is when the narrative is believable or plausible to the reader that it has the potential to reverberate, causing ripples within the individual's own experiences which inform, enlighten, and educate. These micro-events, according to Ellis (2009), can apply to and inform discussions about macro-structures and processes. "This can happen through examining lives one at a time and encouraging voice, person by person, as well as through the explicit focus on social justice or connection with an interest group, ideology, or party politics" (p. 15). I am struck by findings based on an extensive four-year narrative inquiry into head teacher leadership. Crawford (2009) found that teacher leaders benefited from the therapeutic benefits in writing autoethnography. She observed self-reflection for self-knowledge made theory more meaningful and illustrated those experiences to others in a similar situation. She contended autoethnographic research was needed to encompass the larger and more complex story of head teachers and their leadership experiences.

Skirting the Issue

I ache all over. Why did I spend years throwing myself against an invisible force in what I thought was a super skirt? I really thought that by putting on the outfit

'teacher-learning leader' something different would have happened. I imagined it differently.

It appears I was naïve in thinking the outfit's spandex and formal properties would defend me. Oh, flexibility assisted me at times, but tailoring and formalizing the role did not protect me. I underestimated the powerful possibilities within egalitarian traditions and the competing forces about learning and leadership. I did not anticipate the tug on my hemline by students ill-served, or the loose threads I would find in the fabric of an educational organization.

When I contemplated taking this journey of an autoethnographic inquiry into teacher leadership I was searching for answers. I needed to understand what happened when I was a teacher leading beyond my own classroom.

I realized I wanted to reflect on how leading a change initiative evolved and affected me. I was curious about the inner and outer spaces of leadership and where teacher leadership resided.

At this moment, when I consider all I have witnessed, I realize I am tired and disillusioned. I hope this year of study will heal and re-energize me. Perhaps in re-searching my experiences I can return to the sweet spot of teaching, to the time and place where I feel significance and hope.

Keller, research notes, February 12, 2012

Autoethnographic inquiry seems the salve I am seeking. If leadership requires a crucible because “ leadership always emerges after some rite of passage, often a stressful one” (Bennis, 2009, p. xxiv) perhaps, then, I can understand as I explore the rite of passage I experienced when my role became more formalized as a teacher leader. As I set out to write this dissertation, the reflexive and subjective orientation of autoethnography was something to which I was drawn. I desired the therapeutic offerings of the autoethnographic approach because I found experiences of leading as a teacher difficult. It is the exploration of this difficulty that situates autoethnographic research as important, as critical to revealing leadership, and as relevant through its verisimilitude for other teacher leaders. It is both personally and contextually relevant.

Holman Jones (2005) regarded the personal nature of autoethnographic text as “a critical intervention in social, political and cultural life” because it “move[s] writers and readers, subjects and objects, tellers and listeners into [a] space of dialogue, debate and change” (pp. 763–764). My experiences lead me to question how we nurture leadership when schoolhouses and educational landscapes seem inhospitable to the role of teachers leading. What is the nature of this inhospitality? Why is it we have remained so reluctant to invest in the possibilities of teacher leadership? Through my autoethnographic inquiry, I seek to reveal and explore a story of teacher leadership that will be discussed, debated, and critiqued in order to enrich understandings and practices of teacher leadership in the field of education.

Peering at the Inquiry Questions

The aim of my autoethnographic inquiry is to explore my life experiences as I moved from my initial realizations of the complexity of teaching and leading within the classroom to within school settings and finally to the outer layers of school systems. Existing conceptualizations and literature on teacher leadership (Bangs & Frost, 2016; Danielson, 2007; Katzenmeyer & Moller, 2009; York & Duke, 2004) serve as a backdrop to my inquiry. Teacher leadership has been difficult to conceptualize according to York and Duke (2004) because it has spanned an “expansive territory under the umbrella term, teacher leadership” (p. 206). Their foundational meta-analysis of research on teacher leadership showed that while there was an increase in recognition for the need for teacher leadership in school reform efforts, the construct of teacher leadership was not well defined conceptually or operationally. Katzenmeyer and Moller’s (2009) definition of teacher leaders noted that “teachers who are leaders lead within and beyond the classroom, identify with and contribute to a community of teacher learners and leaders, and influence others towards improved educational practice” (p. 17). Their definition suggests certain teachers are selected or identified as leaders but the murky area of when teacher leadership develops among informal roles, and how it influences participation and collaboration in professional learning communities regardless of position or designation, is missing. As well, how teacher leadership has been influenced by policy and reform agendas about teacher performance and teacher professionalism is missing (Frost & Harris, 2003).

As I look at the challenges I encountered with teaching colleagues and administrative structures when my role was formalized as a teacher leader, and analyze my experiences, I concur with Warnock (1976/1978), philosopher and former special education teacher, that there is more in our experiences of the world “than can possibly meet the unreflecting eye, that our experience is significant for us and worth the attempt to understand it” (p. 202). To understand these experiences, I use a reiterative process of autoethnographic inquiry that requires narrative storytelling, reflection, and analysis of experiences.

Reflecting on my experiences, I wonder:

- What is teacher leadership?
- What spaces exist for teachers to ‘lead from within’?
- What inner and outer spaces might be imagined and re-imagined for teachers to ‘lead within’ throughout their career?
- How are informal and formal teacher leadership similar and different?

Reflecting on the Inquiry Influences

My dissertation questions emerge from both my professional experiences and from several key doctoral student experiences as I examined literature on leadership. At the time of my comprehensive exams, I pursued the questions set before me, but I really did not see where my research or methodology would take me. Initially provoked by the required reading and examination of Fullan, Hill, and Crevola’s (2006) *Breakthrough*

approach, I examined their systems perspective of teachers within school reform. These authors offered “expert instructional systems” with a “set of powerful and aligned assessment tools tied to learning objectives... [with] a built-in means of monitoring and managing learning” (pp. 48–49). Elmore, in the introduction, called it “a deliberately contrarian book... with a bold model, a model that captures the main elements of what advanced researchers and practitioners of school improvement have learned from studying exemplary schools ...that will support the imperative of attention to the individual learning of students and educators to the conditions of the environment in which their work occurs” (pp. xii–xiii). I did not see it as bold, and the attention to individual learning seemed to mask any individuality. The promises and choice of language ignored the messy, emotional experiences of teachers in leadership roles as they learned alongside colleagues and students. I found it difficult to see the centrality of relationships that I know exists when students and teachers learn together, and thus my beliefs about learning were not represented. Because the stance taken by Fullan et al. (2006) concerned me, I wondered about my own story and how isolated I felt as a teacher leading and learning among students and other teachers. My conceptualizations of teacher leadership looked somewhat different from that which was conceptualized by Fullan et al. (2006), in which experiences of disillusionment and hope, which I knew to be real, were not present.

Greenfield’s writing on educational administration and the seeking of one’s self (1974, 1977) challenged and resonated with me. Perhaps it was his disillusionment that

first held my attention. Although initially my focus was on the paradigm wars and alternative realities, I found myself drawn to his questions as he explored both literature and his own experiences. It was the quality and nature of his writing and questions that drew me to also ponder whether autoethnography could help me to understand and realize the complexity and dimensions of my own leadership experiences. Greenfield questioned whether an organization was merely a mechanism for transforming individual desires into social reality. “The heart of this issue is what we are to believe about our organizations and how we should behave toward each other in them” (Greenfield, 1977, p. 89). Greenfield’s (1986) perspective of leadership also appealed to me as he contended that organizations are built on the unification of people around values where there is a “world of will: people acting out of whatever reasons seem good and sufficient to them” (p. 166). He suggested the meanings created by people bind leaders and followers and participants together in a social setting and that it then is the task of leadership efforts to create a moral order. He contended that leaders are the co-constructors of social reality and that the very existence of the group depends on an external purpose embodied by the leader and made apparent through action. According to Greenfield (1993), the literature on educational organizations was missing the experiences of the participants. He viewed that as schools are cultural entities, it is important to emphasize their humanness and differences, rather than similarities, and then describe what happens within them. Greenfield proposed ultimately that all organizations should be viewed as manifestations of ‘willfulness’. The theory of ‘willfulness’

developed by Greenfield (1986) underscored his belief that all leadership and participation within the organization rests upon the human will and imagination, bounded only by their experiences, interests, and the limits within the organization.

Prompted to think about imagination by Greenfield, I turned to Greene (1995) as she invited me to “release my imagination” and explore the role of *social imagination* within my own experiences of a teacher leading. Greene’s writing encouraged me to pursue understanding how I imagined teacher leadership in that, “. . .of all our cognitive capacities, imagination is the one that permits us to give credence to alternative realities. It allows us to break with the taken for granted, to set aside familiar distinctions and definitions” (p. 3). Reflecting on my past and recent experiences, I wondered if I could find “a reflective grasp of [my] life stories and of [my] ongoing quests, that reaches beyond where [I] have been,” as she identified how it “depends upon our ability to remember things past. It is against the backdrop of those remembered things and the funded meanings to which they gave rise, that we grasp and understand what is now going on around us” (p. 20). Most importantly I wondered if re-imagining would enable me “to cross the empty space between myself and others and find alternative realities” (Greene, 1995, p. 3) from those in my experiences.

Scanning the Organization of the Dissertation

Following this introduction, the second chapter, *Staring into Autoethnography* examines the methodology of the autoethnographic lens used to explore teacher leadership. In this chapter, I look at how autoethnography supports and challenges my

inquiry, and what this means for understanding leadership and imagination within teaching and learning.

In Chapter Three, *Cradling Leadership*, I step back into my childhood, exploring how my leadership identity developed early in life, and how it was fostered by experiences and opportunities while looking after my grandmother. Through the story, *Stained Hands*, I illustrate the centrality of collaboration and caring in relation to my understanding of leadership. I explore vulnerability and how to suspend and push boundaries that shape us.

Chapter Four *Leading From Behind a Windowless Door* views my discovery of leading as a teacher within my first classroom experience. I invite readers to think about how they would have solved the dilemmas and challenges posed in this first brief experience of an emerging teacher. My curiosity was aroused in these initial months by what was present and what was missing.

Chapter Five explores the complexity of the schoolhouse landscape within which teachers and students live, and discusses the difficulty of realizing potential when there is a lack of social imagination. This chapter is titled, *Opening a Window, Before Opening the Door*. It illustrates the tentativeness of teachers leading and highlights the opportunities and limitations within traditional autonomous teaching practices.

Chapter Six, *Opening a Door to Teacher Leadership*, explores the contested ground when teachers move from informal to formal roles while remaining in the

classroom. This chapter includes vignettes of teacher leadership experiences where I explore the challenges when leading as a teacher in formalized leadership roles.

In my final chapter, Chapter Seven, *Making Space for Teacher Leadership*, I reflect on my sense making of teacher leadership and the revelations I found while using autoethnography for inquiry. Here I re-imagine teacher leadership and wonder about the future possibilities of leadership within the landscape of education.

Each self-narrative writing selection is set aside with italics. Flowing back and forth through recollection, reflection, and analysis, I lead an autoethnographic inquiry. As I reflect on this inquiry, and on the literature regarding teacher leadership, I recall choosing the literature that resonated with me and helped me make sense of my experiences. I continually found I was balancing between what had been written about leadership and my own experiences. Autoethnography, evocative in nature and challenging in purpose, requires the participation of the reader. Readers of this work will have a role to play in this autoethnographic inquiry. Join me in exploring a teaching journey and compare your own experiences to mine. In witnessing these experiences, it is my desire that readers will wonder about the nature of leadership, when teaching and learning. But first...

A Tug

Sitting at the table of a routine morning leadership meeting, I find myself nervously picking at my pencil skirt's fibers. Tracing the subtle warp and weft of threads woven carefully into a form that means business I find a loose thread. This snag in the fabric must have happened earlier. I should have been more careful while sitting at the leadership table and anticipated the sharp hidden edges. I wonder about my wardrobe choice.

As the address begins and educational alignment and democratic hopes are explained, I try to focus and maintain eye contact with the director. In spite of the immediacy of the topic, I am distracted by a tug...tiny and quick, pulling me from the task at hand! Brushing and rushing it away I remain focused and maintain a mask of concentration, until I am interrupted again!

There is a tugging at my hemline

tug,

tug

tug

And then, as if that wasn't enough, a pinch, ever so deliberate, and quick, catches a tender piece of my skin!

And finally, when I continue to do nothing, but carry-on sitting, smiling, speaking, and seemingly seeped in the issues at hand, I hear soft simpering sounds, like that from a child clearing her throat, or the muffled sighs and sobs that might escape from the small folded arms of a defeated child at a desk.

Why is it no one seems to be hearing this?

*How is it no one notices the dilemma I experience rising above the leadership agenda
before me?*

CHAPTER 2

STARING INTO THE OPENING OF AUTOETHNOGRAPHY

...[A]n autoethnographer must look at experience analytically. Otherwise [you're] telling [your] story—and that's nice—but people do that on Oprah...every day. Why is your story more valid than anyone else's? ... Why or how should I privilege your story over anyone else's I see 25 times a day on T.V?

(Allen, as cited in Adams, 2011, p.158)

Allen, Left Coast Press publisher of numerous autoethnographies, captured a concern that one might raise about autoethnographic research, if it is viewed as simply providing a story. What makes autoethnographic inquiry a valid research process? How are the theoretical and methodological tools of autoethnographic research used during an inquiry? Why is autoethnographic inquiry particularly valuable in fostering understanding of teacher leadership?

This chapter explores the nature of autoethnographic research and how in researching with my questions, self-narrative writing and reflection were used as methods to explore and deepen my understanding of the complexity of teacher leadership. As I wondered about the emergence of teacher leadership and reflected on the situations I experienced, I moved through a landscape of epiphanies and emotions. While I selectively wrote about these epiphanies that stemmed from my teaching experiences, I

analyzed existing literature to examine how the ideas and concepts illustrated or refuted facets of my experiences and notions of teacher leadership.

Autoethnographic inquiry uses personal experience in the form of self-narrative writing to examine and critique cultural experience, but what distinguishes autoethnography from other kinds of personal work are both its evocative nature and its critique of an existing cultural experience (Holman Jones, Adams & Ellis, 2013). Like other forms of research, autoethnographic research should make contributions to existing research. With this dissertation, I want to add to a collective understanding of the complexity of a teacher's role in leading over a career and how this can enrich the description of educational leadership. My autoethnographic account comments on and critiques the interactions within schools and how routine district practices can either foster or inhibit leadership. Finally, I accept the challenge that autoethnographic writing should be evocative by embracing vulnerability with purpose and creating a reciprocal relationship with audiences in order to compel a response.

Analyzing Autoethnography

Autoethnography, a term acknowledged as early as 1975 by Heider (in Austin & Hickey, 2007) has evolved and been re-interpreted and explored by pioneers like Art Bochner, Carolyn Ellis, Stacey Holman Jones, Christopher Poulos, Tracey Muncey, and Caroline Rambo. This methodology has many forms of interpretation that Ellis & Bochner (2000) summed up as essentially “an autobiographical genre of writing and research that displays multiple layers of consciousness, connecting the personal to the

cultural”(p. 739). To accomplish this, autoethnography uses self-narrative writing to include more than the self. The particular emphasis on three elements: *auto* (self), *ethno* (sociocultural connection), and *graphy* (application of the research writing process) can vary depending on the particular goal of the writer or their research orientations (Ellis & Bochner, 2000; Chang, 2008). The explicit intention to bring the self to the surface as an object of description, analysis and interpretation is central to autoethnography.

Autoethnography, while no longer a new methodology, is one that might be challenged because of its unconventional epistemological and ontological positioning. It stems from an epistemology that sees knowledge as “imaginative praxis, rather than as an object or a product. The knowing-in-action is sought rather than knowledge-as-acquisition” (Poulos, 2009, p. 47). It uses a narrative approach to inquiry and it does not proceed via a traditional social scientific approach. As a result, it does not seek to offer a linear-causal predictive view of reality, or to rely on a positivist paradigm grounded in prediction and causation. Self-narrative inquiry, central to autoethnographic inquiry, stems from an ontology that recognizes experience offers a valid source of knowledge (Clandinin & Rosiek, 2007). According to Clandinin and Connelly (2000) when reality is represented and understood narratively, as it is relational, temporal, and continuous, experience is realized and best understood.

Using personal experiences, autoethnographic researchers seek to show and explore human social reality and its complexity. Reality and complexity are revealed by

focusing on interpretive interaction where, according to Denzin (2000), autoethnography “endeavors to capture and represent voices, emotions, and actions of those studied ... and focus on those life experiences that radically alter and shape meanings persons give to themselves and their experiences” (p. 905). By operating from this social constructionist perspective, autoethnography “enables critical reflection on taken-for-granted aspects of society, groups, relationships, and the self” (Ellingson & Ellis, 2008, p. 450). I chose autoethnography as a methodology to explore and develop my understandings of the “taken-for-granted aspects” of my teacher leadership experiences. I found power in using autoethnography that assisted me as a researcher in understanding and interpreting how the educational habits of leadership I experienced converged.

While writing, I was struck by the overwhelming reality that autoethnography and narrative writing often reveal a disillusionment or search for belonging. Neumann (1996) pointed out that an impulse to gaze inward to the self and outward in an environment converges within an autoethnographic inquiry. Autoethnography produces a “story of divided selves longing for a sense of place and stability in the fragments and discontinuities of modernity” (p. 173). In a world that often seems to “conspire against continuity and ...actively confront[s] the vague empty spaces of modern life” (p. 174) we collect ourselves, seek order, and discover meaning when writing and reading such storied work.

Reviewing Other Autoethnographic Work

Understanding autoethnography as a methodology required not only my research into the methodology and my reading of autoethnographic work by others, but it also required that I experiment with writing processes within the methodology so that it reflected my unique position and voice. In the beginning I immersed myself in reading autoethnographic work by different writers. I found each writer illustrated their research question and experience with a distinct style of writing to support their research intention. Ellis (2009), in her autoethnographic writing *Revision: Autoethnographic reflections on life and work*, demonstrated a fluid style of storying events where the analysis of existing literature was embedded so the reader is rarely aware of the on-going analysis. Poulos (2009) in *Accidental ethnography: An inquiry into family secrets* slowly explored and revealed his analysis through poetic forms and storying. I found Poulos masterful in the way he used poetic forms and writing to slowly reveal the notion of being deliberately secretive. In contrast, Grainger's (2011) writing, *Silent moments in education: An autoethnography of learning*, used few examples of self-narrative writing so that she remained shrouded by discourse analysis. The rarity of her self-narrative written forms increased the dramatic effect on the reading. Critical theory was used to probe her experiences illustrating the notion of how certain voices and ways of thinking are often silenced.

Each of these differing examples of autoethnographic work illustrated for me how analysis might illuminate the research without overshadowing the self-narrative writing

and its prominence within the process of autoethnographic reflection. The art of telling one's tale, whether embedding it or pushing it up against existing theories and literature, varied according to the style and purpose intended by the author and started me wondering about how I would present my experiences.

If autoethnography can operate as a bridge connecting autobiography and ethnography and assist me in studying the intersection of my self with others and the landscape of educational settings, as Ellingson and Ellis (2008) contended, I wondered if it would help me understand the intangible facets of teacher leadership. I was concerned about the challenge for myself as an autoethnographer where I would be both the author/researcher/observer and the subject or the observed of the research. Theory, method, and data in the form of self-narrative writing and research practice, would become intertwined enterprises. Poulos (2009) demonstrated that “they are each formed in the process and remain as a whole, deeply intertwined networks of a lived experience” (p. 48). To explore my lived experiences was something I sought, and, in the process, I learned there were aspects of autoethnography that needed elucidation for my research. These included: self-reflexivity, consciousness, the role of memory, and the view that writing is itself a method of inquiry.

Illuminating Self-Reflexivity

An autoethnographic research process draws from the concept of *conscientization* coined by Freire (1971) where the researchers become aware of their position and create

a space to change the perception of the resultant reality (Starr, 2010). Autoethnography aims to illuminate, develop, and open up readers to often un-explored layers that lie between the conscious and unconscious realms of human life (Poulos, 2009). Through the process of writing-reflection-analysis there is a cycle of enlightenment, reflection, and action as critical self-analysis and understanding occur in relation to the cultural and social world (Poulos, 2009; Starr, 2010).

In beginning this writing research process, I identified and then examined my roles and actions of leading in a variety of contexts. According to Chang (2008), after the selection of a research topic, which is refined and at times re-directed, autoethnographic research requires digging deep into memories and excavating details by examining self-narratives. For me, this process was recursive in nature and is illustrated in Figure 1 when I discovered the power of reflection and removed the dust from my past experiences.



Figure 2.1. Removing dust from the mirror.

Personal memory becomes the building block of autoethnography because it gives a context to the present self. Memory is used to open the door onto a past of experiences and helps to re-construct meaning and understanding.

Reflecting on the Role of Memory

Personal memory becomes the building block of autoethnography because it gives a context to the present self. I used a variety of techniques to recollect memories and facilitate my reflection. Initially I only wrote about powerful past experiences that frequently focused on working with students. The writing itself was therapeutic and revealing for me. As I built a large journal of stories, I used the technique of creating a timeline of significant events in both my career and personal life, as suggested by Chang (2008) in *Autoethnography as method*. This assisted me in organizing my memories and self-narrative writings. It also was helpful in analyzing those experiences and gaining *consciousness*.

Dewey (1934) asserted that attaining *social consciousness* involves a risk and a venturing forth into the unknown, bridging what we are living through in our present and what survives from our past. In bridging this gap, I merged into an imaginative state during narrative writing. Greene (1995) illustrated it offered, the much-needed “gateway through which meanings derived from the past experiences [can] find their way into the present and enable us to give credence to alternative realities [and] ...break with the taken for granted, to set aside familiar distinctions and definitions.” (p. 3). I used this *gateway* then to explore my experiences and retell them in a narrative form in order to understand and discover how a sense of teacher leadership might emerge, survive, thrive or even die. The act of writing self-narratives “tend[ed] to smooth out details, leaving a

kind of schematic landscape outline” (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000, p. 83). The act of writing narratively, “help [ed to] fill in the richness, nuance and complexity of the [educational] landscape, returning [me] to a more complex, and puzzling landscape than memory alone” (Chang, 2013, p. 83). While I chronicled the past and created an autobiographical timeline with memorable events and experiences, I discovered how the story moved forward and backward and then back onto itself again.

Re-searching

I am on a journey now exploring experiences stored in numerous notebooks, dusty cardboard boxes, and items categorized in the filing cabinet in the garage. These spaces are packed full of memories. Some I have rolled up or folded carefully while others have been quickly tossed away and hidden from sight over the years. Unpacking, I push off the dust and cautiously unwrap each memory. At first, I recognize an event, a face, and an emotion. As I turn events over and over and reflect, I see something I had not noticed initially with startling realization. At times I can't find the experiences fast enough, as I am searching for something that I sense must be there. When the memories start quickly tumbling from the cabinet, at first I don't recognize any pattern in their appearances. I try ordering them in chronological order, and then theming them, but this only disguises the truths hiding within them.

As I lay the memories out I am stunned and surprised. I turn them over and over like small stones and wonder “How is it I have forgotten that?”

How is it I missed that the first time I examined this experience? Even the second time when I considered this experience at another time in another context, I could not see it.” There emerges a story hidden among all those stories, buried deepest among my packing. See Figure 2.

Keller, research notes, February 5, 2013



Figure 2.2. (re)Searching in the garage.

Inspecting Writing as Method

Within the research cycle, the power of narrative texts depends upon their rhetorical staging as “true stories” that really happened to the writer. In the telling of these stories, Richardson (2000) explained, writing is used as the method of inquiry to help us see how we construct the world, others, and ourselves. In telling these stories, fiction-writing techniques can be used to evoke reader reaction. Techniques such as dramatic recall, strong imagery, allusions, subtexts, flashbacks, flash-forwards, tone, shifts, dialogue, inner monologue, fleshed out characters, and unusual phrasing are among a few of the techniques that might be used (Richardson, 2000). I discovered that the challenge of writing autoethnographic text required creating both narrative and expository writing, so that the differences in their orientation flowed naturally and remained complementary.

I found that while writing narratively, my reading style changed. I could no longer read for information or detail in the same way, but instead I began reading with a writer’s eye, turning details over and wondering how to create a vivid picture of my experiences. The narratives I developed situated the phenomenon of teacher leadership within my own life experiences and are intended to be evocative, so as to draw the reader into the experience. This process of writing narratively deepened my understanding and assisted me in capturing the complexity of my leadership experiences.

Pelias (2011) illustrated how narrative writing functions as both realization and record: both process and completed text. Like Pelias (2011), taking up “the process of

using language to look at, lean into, and lend oneself to an experience under consideration” (p. 660) helped me to clarify and enhance my own experiences and observations. The narrative writing itself was a method of inquiry that offered me “the act of burning through the fog of [my] mind until it finally claim[ed] a space in understanding” (p. 665). While researching, I discovered the difficulty of the reiterative approach to examining these narratives. See Figure 3.



Figure 2.3. Reflecting on writing as method.

I didn't select the topic. It found me. I had been writing around it for some time. As I started to dig up memories from my baggage, the stories emerged, the topic

unraveled, and the questions surfaced along with my curiosity. Then the stories seemed to be leading me, pouring out of me, and I could not write quickly enough to capture my thoughts on the page. At times I was lost in experiences, surfacing from a memory, only to submerge again into the vortex of events as I described and reviewed them.

I stopped at one point, went back again, and returned to an initial story and started to analyze it. I wondered, 'What is it I am actually digging into? What am I being pulled into?'

As I started to see layers... I froze...I realized I was starting to shape the tale.

I went back to dig into the memory layers and I continued to unpack, resisting the temptation to analyze. When does telling and re-telling end? Does it ever with autoethnography? I have ready access to memories, but the story emerging keeps unfolding and shape-shifting. Mesmerized, I find that the past, present, and future become entwined and a memory takes shape.

Keller, research notes, March 5, 2015

When I faltered with my methodology, I often turned to the advice offered by Chang (2008) to 'refine my topic'. I found this sounded so intentional and controlling, and I feared something would be lost in the process of gaining a new insight and fixing a concept. Instead of refining and reducing, for some time I found myself falling into a

vortex that kept pulling me deeper and deeper into specific details and emotions. As layers unfolded and emerged, and time evaporated, I wondered why I was so mesmerized by the past.

Pondering Over the Process

To collect my stories and artifacts and then make sense of the thick description of my experiences, I kept a researcher's journal, which was a large file cabinet of artifacts and notebooks, which I returned to many times. As I moved from reading autoethnographic work, to writing from epiphanies within experiences, I then gradually re-examined my experiences, and collected artifacts. Finally, I reviewed a collection of literature on the topics of teacher leadership, social imagination, memoir, and research techniques in narrative inquiry, and re-examined my narrative writing.

While reviewing artifacts and writing I re-considered them to check on their diversification of perspective. Chang, Ngunjiri, and Hernandez (2013) reminded me to consider a variety of diverse artifacts. I found as I worked with the ideas of Chang, Ngunjiri, and Hernandez (2013), I conceptualized them differently. The techniques offered by Chang, Ngunjiri, and Hernandez (2013) assisted me with my exploration so that it became thorough and rich, and I appreciated the clarity and reassurance of the table format they offered. I found I needed to re-conceptualize their recommendation, as it didn't capture my own experience in researching. My experiences are illustrated in Figure 4.



Figure 2.4. Reconsidering autoethnographic artifacts.

In my re-conceptualization, I began exploring artifacts from my experiences and files of letters and photographs. My self-observation was re-iterative arriving both after and during my self-reflections as I kept moving back and forth from recollections of a past experience, framed within my present context, to wondering how it might appear to

me in the future. Imagine that the cross-section view in Figure 4 is in fact a whirling vortex. Imagine that my experiences and reflections are pouring out of me. Each layer moves continuously in a spinning vortex, clockwise, forming a funnel such as a whirlpool, such as one that is formed when the drain is opened in a bathtub. Reflections, observations, and analysis flow together moving inward as they speed through time. Gradually, as they are explored through writing, they seem to achieve an unwavering or still state, a state that I find mesmerizing.

Revealing Advantages

Experienced autoethnographers assert there are a number of benefits and values in conducting autoethnographic research. Richardson (2000) asserted that if writing is a way of knowing and a method of inquiry, then writing personal stories could be therapeutic for authors as they make sense of their experiences. This process offers the potential to help autoethnographers improve and better understand relationships, raise consciousness, and promote cultural change (Bochner & Ellis, 2002; Crawford, 2009; Muncey, 2010; Ellis & Bochner, 2000). Importantly, autoethnographic writing can be a powerful tool for educators dealing with human relations as it enhances cultural understanding of self and others. It has the potential to transform perceptions, and to motivate individuals to work toward coalition building.

Methodologically, it can offer access to the primary data source that does not require formal permissions and wait times with participating organizations (Chang,

2008). While Chang (2008) recommended a literature review as the main source of research ideas at the initial stage of research, I chose to borrow from a grounded theoretical approach (Charmaz (2006/2011) by writing self-narratives first about my experiences and then moving into a review and exploration of the literature as a means of unpacking my narratives. While using an autoethnographic approach of unpacking, I wrote a journal in which I dug deeply into my experiences. I then laid my experiences alongside conceptualizations from the literature in order to re-search them and to come to new and different understandings and meaning.

Considering Criticisms

The debates regarding autoethnography emerge out of many disciplines. In particular, debate has explored how ethnography and biography relate to one another (Ellis & Bochner, 2000). The comparison of autoethnography to criteria normally applied to traditional ethnographies or autobiographical standards of writing has led to concerns that it is either lacking in social scientific standards or artful literature (Ellis, Adams & Bochner, 2011). Autoethnography has also been challenged as too narcissistic or self-indulgent (Ellis & Bochner, 2000). It has been criticized as lacking rigor and limited in methodological validity when compared to traditional standards for reliability, generalizability and validity. Finally, there is the concern that an autoethnographer might be motivated by self-aggrandizement, viewing the journey as that of a hero.

In exploring the justifications for this choice of methodology, I turned to

Clandinin, Pushor and Orr (2007) who outlined a framework for understanding why a narrative inquiry is justified. I find that autoethnographers value narrative truth and this changes as the genre of writing or representing an experience changes. The questions of reliability, generalizability, and validity are altered by the context, meaning, and utility of these terms (Ellis, Adams & Bochner, 2011). The context of reliability changes into a question as to whether the narrator is credible and could have experienced and believed in the accounts described. Validity is not established in a traditional sense, instead for autoethnographers, validity means that their work seeks “verisimilitude.” What matters is whether the storying of events enables the reader to enter a subjective world of the teller and feel the experience is lifelike, believable and possible. Generalizability moves from random samples of respondents to the situation where readers test whether the story speaks to them about their own experiences and the lives of others they know. It is determined by the extent to which the specific autoethnographer is able to illuminate general and unfamiliar cultural processes. According to Ellis, Adams & Bochner (2011) the questions most important to autoethnographers are “who reads our work, how are they affected by it, and how does it keep a conversation going?” (p. 9). Using autoethnographic inquiry, I explored my experiences of leadership within the landscape of schools and educational settings and I wondered at how these experiences shaped, encouraged, or discouraged leadership within teachers.

Perceiving Teacher Leadership

Writing self-narratives and self-reflection helped me to understand my way of thinking about teacher leadership and my experiences within the landscape of schools. My concept of teacher leadership is located in my beliefs about learning and teaching and it has been shaped by my experiences. While exploring teacher leadership, I used a self-reflective research process that recognized multiple truths and sought understanding through self-in-relation (Surrey, 1985). There was an interrelationship between telling the story and knowing where knowledge and story became inseparable. Turning my experiences into a story provided “insights into the observations, experience, interactions, and intuitions that assist[ed] [me] in understanding a complex phenomenon” (Kovach, 2009, p. 94). The focus of this autoethnography is not the literal study of myself, but of the space between the self and practice.

Autoethnography provided me with a framework for an inquiry that bridged the tensions between personal/social, theoretical/practical, and the self/other and it helped to inform theory and highlight my lived experiences and struggles within it (Huberman, Grounour, & Marti, 1993; Kincheloe & McLaren, 2005; Starr, 2010). Through this research I hoped to illustrate how intuitive and experiential work construct knowledge. The self-narrative stories move in different ways among different facets of leadership, the landscape of classrooms, the landscape of schooling and learning, and my own personal life outside of school. These stories emanated from a series of questions that kept surfacing in my mind: how my leadership identity evolved, what mattered when I led

informally and formally, why I summoned up images of students and classrooms from my past as I sought to understand teacher leadership more fully, and how I wrestled on the “contested ground” (as suggested by Little, 1995, p. 48) and re-imagined a space for teacher leadership.

Observing Ethical Considerations

Clandinin and Connelly (2000) raised the question, “Do [I] own the story because [I] tell it?” Although my research is focused on myself, other people are always present in the self-narratives, either as active participants in the story or as associates in the background. I recognize there will be “relational ethics” for this dissertation, and that this is heightened for autoethnographic inquiries. According to Ellis, Adams & Bochner (2011), this requires an autoethnographer to show her/his work to others implicated in or by their texts. As well, to protect the privacy and safety of others who might be identified, the topic or circumstances discussed might involve altering the characteristics like gender, name, place, or appearance. As I understood the requirements of an ethics board for autoethnographic research, I recognized my responsibilities for informed consent, right to privacy and the need to protect the identity of participants from harm. To obscure identities, I used pseudonyms and created composite figures based on factual details recalled from my experiences. While the essence and meaningfulness of my research story is more important than recounting actual detail, I remained aware of how protective devices could influence the integrity of my research and how my work might be interpreted and understood.

My purpose was to pursue an understanding of how my identity as a teacher leader emerged from my experiences. From this I illustrated how these experiences shed light on cultural assumptions and have implications for continued research in teacher leadership. I also realize my motivation in writing this dissertation was to bring a storied sense to my reflections on teacher leadership experiences and reveal and understand the cultural norms I encountered and tried to overcome.

CHAPTER 3

CRADLING LEADERSHIP

No one leaves his or her world without being transfixed by its roots.... We carry with us the memory of many fabrics, a self, soaked in our history, our culture; a memory, sometimes scattered, sometimes sharp and clear, of the streets of our childhood, of our adolescence; the reminiscence of something distant that suddenly stands out before us....

(Freire, 1992, p. 24)

Under the prairie sky I grow up quickly. Climbing into and out of the lilac grove shadows and alley arteries of my neighborhood, I emerged, a gangly girl with stubborn curls and a curious eye. Early in my youth I questioned rules and stood up against authorities for causes I believed in: the ban of girls in kite flying competitions, the segregated entrance into the school, the streaming of students in reading groups, the schooling of children with disabilities in the basement, and the revolution in our parliamentary club. While all are worthy causes, it is outside of school, while looking after my grandmother, that I learned the deep and often intangible lessons of leadership. I am reminded of that summer my hands shadowed my grandmother's hands and I learned the notions of caring and collaboration.

When I return to this experience, it is always with a sharp inhale of breath that I return to the place where I grew up, to that same small town where I was an outsider on weekends and holidays. They were brief sporadic visits, but the name of this town conquers up vivid images from my past:

My grandmother's swollen and berry-stained hands,

My grandfather's cap and stretched sweater,

Dusty gravel roads and ditches framed with glittering shards of glass,

Waves of heat playing over fields and resting ponies,

Hollyhocks rubbing and the twirling of maple seedpods against the grey shingle clad house.

And with those images I am transported back to my grandmother's swollen, berry stained hands.

My Grandmother's Berry Stained Hands

On weekends and holidays, I would travel to the small-town to assist my grandmother. The bus would drop me at the highway's edge and first entrance to the town, a mile from my destination. From a whirl of dust kicked up by the departing bus, I emerged into a small town world, different from the city where I was raised. Walking into town along the dusty graveled road, framed by ditches of Brown-eyed Susan, Sage, and Goldenrod, past the cemetery and field of resting ponies, I would finally see my grandparents' house. It appeared at the edge of town, peeking from under the cover of tall hollyhocks shaded by maple trees. This simple grey shingle clad house was adjoined

by a large garden, where tucked among the raspberry canes, I would find my grandmother, pail in hand, wearing her yellow rose patterned kerchief, and my grandfather's discarded sweater.

This town was filled with women like my grandmother. These women had followed men as settlers to a new country to raise families and homestead. They were the generation that would birth the cooperative movement, as they understood the extreme dimensions of isolation and the need for collaboration. Women, like my grandmother, journeyed through loneliness and hardship for the promise of community and prosperity. When farming became too difficult or possibly a son was ready to take over, these women left the land either alone or with ailing husbands to create a life they hoped possible in the nearby town.

By the mid-1970s many of the original homesteading men had died and aging widows like my grandmother populated the town. Few of these women could drive an automobile, let alone imagine journeying independently beyond the borders of their community. Instead they found purpose in establishing households and gardens that had replaced their farms. Gradually as their adult children moved to nearby cities and pursued work and starting families, these women found their parental role of mother replaced by the role of grandmother. A daily exchange in mothering children and grandchildren was now frequently substituted with letters, phone calls, and occasional visits on holidays.

I was Dora's granddaughter, Phyllis's girl to all who saw me. At eleven, I was tall and gangly and the eldest of all the granddaughters. And so, I was chosen to take care of my grandmother when my mother and aunts could not pause in their own routines. By the age of eleven I had accompanied my grandmother often on the city bus to her doctor appointments. I sat with her at clinics. I sat with her at the hospital. I sat with her on the bus. But what I saw and knew of her became more significant when I came to assist her during my eleventh summer.

I knew my grandmother's swollen, berry stained hands from buckets of berries she picked and offered me.

From pies rolled out, pinched, and prepared for me,

From card games of Old Maid and Whist,

From shaky writing on birthday cards and grocery lists,

But, I really did not know those swollen berry stained hands until I became a shadow to them that summer.

That summer, my hands learned how to pinch a pie and pick buckets of berries. They learned how to hold trump cards during a whist game. But what I wasn't prepared for was how my hands would learn to shadow hers when she struggled to conquer the basic skill of dressing herself. Each day, my young nimble fingers were needed to tug on fasteners her arthritic fingers could no longer manipulate. Stationed behind her, she directed me in how I should tug on the fasteners while she balanced the flesh colored form from the front. Tugging over sagging folds of skin on her back I would hold my

breath and then push and pull until all the eye and hooks connected. Only after her undergarment was fastened over the newly acquired breast form and ready to remain inconspicuous under her floral day dress, would we begin the other routines in our days together.

Initially I was both embarrassed and inexperienced to help her with this intimate act. I was just eleven years old, hardly experienced in dressing others except for those in doll form. Tasked with dressing my grandmother, I was at first blundering and awkward. Trembling behind her, I would listen to labored breathing and follow her faltering voice while her swollen shaking hands fumbled leading us onward. At times, she would drop the breast form she was trying to maneuver and I would have to scramble below her to the floor or under the bed to find it and then we would begin again. Our awkward antics would at times cause us to falter in our serious single-minded pursuit and we would erupt into nervous and embarrassed giggles.

As young and inexperienced as I was, I was needed for the tasks at hand. There were no other community resources or family to step in to help out. Frequently women who became less able to care for themselves left their homes to live with a daughter or son. My grandmother's fierce attachment to her garden and the joy she found in those brief summer months of harvesting led to my role as assistant housekeeper and personal attendant. Over the weeks, I gradually grew confident and more adept in helping with tasks around the house like simple cooking, daily dressing, and errands. What I was not yet ready for, was how I would eventually help with the dreaded bath.

The cooking was often entertaining, the daily dressing awkward, but the impending bath was something I feared. It was not just the nakedness I dreaded, although that would, no doubt, be awkward and embarrassing. It was what I had not yet faced, I feared most. I feared what I could only struggle to imagine and what I had avoided looking at each morning. I knew there would be scars and a wound on my grandmother's body that I could no longer avoid and would have to witness.

On that first dreaded bathing day, after gallons of warmed water were poured into the bathtub I could no longer hide from the challenging extent of my new role. Now needed as a physical support, I found myself silently braced against the wall, approaching and avoiding, lifting and lowering, and gently bumping up against my grandmother.

It was not the lone breast now flaccid and sagging that startled me. It was not the realization of how decades of gravity and tugging by four nursing babies could wear away at her. It was the remnant of a wound and the scarring of cutting that took my breath away. Where her breast had been was now an alien landscape of tiny intricate feathered veins and shiny baby-pink cuts and stitch lines. Tracing those stitch lines with a clutched washcloth, my grandmother's swollen hands searched through feathery, fine lines of loss, of removal, and of prevention, while my young hands, tanned and nimble waited nearby. Breathless I watched her swollen berry-stained hands search among the scars and new contours of her withered body. Finally my grandmother dissolved into tears and gasps that seemed to erupt from somewhere deep below the wound, from years

of loss and life. And I, that eleven-year-old girl, rocked beside her until the water around us developed such a chill we eventually found our way out of the silence.

Retrieved from memories hidden away, I have chosen to share this story as it illustrates the often-intangible complex dimensions of caring and collaboration. My experiences caring for my grandmother illustrate how vulnerable we each were. Our interactions required thoughtful negotiation and empathy as we learned to exchange in following and leading and ultimately in trusting one another. I think of leadership and its collaborative and caring relational dimensions this way.

A Nod to the Caring Relational Dimensions

Leadership, for me, is always in the service of others and guided by a vision that respects the response of the cared-for. I find that Nodding's (2012) conceptual dimensions of a caring relation illustrate my experiences and ideals of what leadership for and by teachers can look like. Noddings wrote, "Teaching is one of the foremost of personal relations ...which involves establishing and maintaining relations of care and trust" (p.771). During this relationship, she illustrated caring as relation:

In an encounter or sequence of encounters that can appropriately be called *caring*, one party acts as carer and the other as cared-for. Over time, in equal relations, the parties regularly exchange positions. Adult caring relations exhibit this mutuality.... The response of the cared-for completes the caring relation. Without it, there is no caring relation – no matter how hard the carer has tried to care. This conclusion is basic to the idea of *caring as relation*. (p. 773)

I learn caring as relation most deeply with my own relations first, and then gradually as I grow into the role of a teacher and mother. My experiences in caring for my grandmother, and how she cared for me, remind me of how we continually negotiate within our spaces and bump up against one another awkwardly at first. If we can find those who will support us and help us negotiate our beliefs and accept our vulnerabilities, change and transformation is possible.

In my stories, there is a recurring theme of isolation, but persevering and commitment leads to finding a community, whether it is a community of two or a community of others alike and different where struggles and changes emerge that we do not imagine at first. Noddings (2002) made the case for caring as a moral orientation, suggesting it “is a mode of shared control” that might prevent certain harms and meet particular needs (p. 14). Noddings distinguished between ‘caring-for’ and ‘caring-about,’ illustrating that caring-about “supplies an important motive for justice and generates much of its intent... moving us from the face-to-face world into a wider public realm.” (p. 22). Central to Noddings’ care theory is her belief that “caring-about (or, perhaps a sense of justice) must be seen as instrumental in establishing the conditions under which caring-for can flourish.... Caring-about is empty if it does not culminate in caring relations” (p. 23). Caring-about requires attending to the challenge of interchangeably ‘seeing big’ and ‘seeing small’.

When I imagine caring, I see it as requiring complex collaboration and thus I envision it in the image of hands. I see hands moving through a process of negotiation

and transformation. One might suspect the often-used image of a circle of hands pressed in sand, used frequently in presentations to capture the concept of team building and collaborative work relationships. My image of hands goes further back to a time and a place when my grandparents held my hands, and I would watch those hands and learn how to shadow them. The stains on my grandmother's hands that I observed were indications of daily interactions, and histories lurking in the background. Greene (1995) illustrated how consciousness and awareness of authoritarian and environmental influences begins to develop in childhood. From my childhood I recall such concentrated observation and intense reflection that led to this first collaborative experience where the two of us became one and disappeared into the experience. This type of transformation of individual identity is at the heart of my conception of collaboration and leadership.

Holding a Lens Over Collaboration

Prior to considering caring as an essential element of leadership, I was intrigued by the opportunities I saw in collaboration. When I began inquiring into collaboration, I found that my notion of collaboration was shaped by my experiences and it differed from the conceptualizations of collaboration I found in the literature and in my education for the role as a special education teacher.

It is an old concept, but *collaboration* is bandied about like a common term we all understand and identify with successful leadership in education (Head, 2003). The concept of collaboration evokes many emotions. It may embody hope for innovation and creation when collaboration is viewed as an opportunity to build capacity in its

participants and trigger change within a school community. On the other hand, where trust is fragile or knowledge is uncertain, collaboration may amount to mere compliance or passive resistance and become “contrived collegiality” (Hargreaves & Dawe, 1990, p. 238). According to Head (2003), this disappointment in collaboration often occurs when “functional” conceptualizations of collaboration are used to achieve a mandated initiative or policy.

As I reviewed the literature on collaboration and searched for a common definition, the concept stretched from simplistic references to a team or a group focused on problem solving, to the more complex processes involving situational learning where there was an emergence of new forms of meaning. It seems that there is little consensus as to the definition because the process of collaboration is dynamic. Part of the difficulty lies in the issue identified by Jakubik (2008) who recognized collaboration as offering both tangible outcomes – which might include the task at hand – and the intangible outcomes, which she characterized as the “experience of being, acting, thinking and feeling together” (p. 9). When I reflect on my own experiences, I find that collaboration is often narrowly conceptualized and that it cannot be generalized as an intervention in all settings with all people. According to Baker, Khan, & Teo (2011), there is often an assumption that once the benefits of collaboration are apparent, collaboration will simply happen, but collaborative relationships may be filled with difficulties that are fatal to them. When there is slow evidence of output, “collaborative inertia” results. This is especially evident when there are no tangible rewards. Here I find that the concept of

collaboration needs to satisfy both the constructivist and postpositivist dispositions, as experience alone is not viewed as sufficient.

As I looked back to research in this area, positivist and postpositivist approaches have largely informed the research on collaboration. What emerges from it is a particular way of conceptualizing collaboration that seems to clash with my own experiences. I see in the research literature related to teacher collaborative practices a parallel to the developments in teacher leadership practices (Idol, 1996; Murawski & Swanson, 2001; Scruggs, Mastropieri, & McDuffie, 2007). I see a postpositivistic stance that appears to offer a reassuring clarity, but it is limited in its depth of understanding the messy experiences of collaboration that can shape us. Central to prior research, I found, was an inquiry into whether collaboration improved student achievement scores. As the topic of co-teaching and collaboration in the field of special education emerged throughout the 1980s and into the 1990s, it was a response to policy initiatives focused on creating an effective inclusive education (Idol, 1996; Puglach, 1995). The research, driven by a postpositivist approach, focused on how collaboration and co-teaching could be defined, what its barriers and required elements were, and whether it was effective in increasing student achievement scores or changing teacher practice. The concept of collaboration when operationalized was applied to co-teaching settings, and then evaluated as to whether it was successful if it increased achievement among students who were identified with intensive needs. Collaboration, in these research studies, was viewed as an entity

made up of separate variables that could be defined clearly and developed if the conditions were ideal.

When I think of collaboration, I wonder about deep collaboration that requires complex negotiation and can result in transformation and innovation of teaching practices. Collaboration, I find, is often an end in itself (Heron & Reason, 1997). My interest in collaboration goes beyond the various collegial types of cooperative activities identified by Rosenholtz (1989). She identified increasingly interdependent collaborative interactions which included lower level interdependent activities such as staffroom storytelling and scanning issues, to increasingly complex tasks of seeking aid and giving assistance, sharing or exchanging instructional materials and ideas, and finally higher interdependent joint work or instructional problem solving and planning where collective responsibility was required. She found higher levels of collaboration were dependent on teacher efficacy. If teacher efficacy is central to participation in collaborative practice and teacher leadership, how do we create collaborative experiences that might build teacher efficacy? Perhaps we need to create an environment with spaces where this is possible.

I am reminded of my beginning and the early lessons I learned about leadership and an environment that cultivated it from my parents and grandmothers. I imagine my conceptualization of teacher leadership in the image of the prairie crocus.

Contemplating the Prairie Crocus

Yesterday, a forceful wind almost persuaded me to give up my search for signs of spring. The undertaking was at first deceiving, as the bright sun encouraged and drew me out to explore the landscape. Once out there, I found the warm, inviting sun competed with a forceful biting wind from the north. That wind almost swayed me to give up searching among the barren grey ground. Frozen prairie terrain like this reminds me of the instant coffee in our cupboard. It too is a freeze-dried version and a feeble substitute for the real thing.

In our family, the return of spring is most celebrated when we discover the prairie crocus. Different from its west coast relative, the prairie crocus is a novel spring bouquet on our freeze-dried prairie landscape. One cannot find crocuses by merely surveying from a distance or causally and quickly walking nearby. One must walk slowly and carefully through a seemingly inhospitable landscape knowing they will emerge in spite of the previous seasonal difficult conditions.

Searching, but finding no immediate signs among the bland bluffs of tall poplars, I slowed my brisk walk and instinctively turned toward the path along the winding river. Moving slowly and carefully along the gentle hummocky ground, I found her. Staring downward at a small pale bouquet, I witnessed spring's beginning and arrival. My grandmothers and mother often led me by the hand to such a place. Back then, I never imagined that a crocus at the feet of my grandmother would mirror my experiences.

The prairie crocus, like teacher leadership, is almost invisible at first glance on a vast flat landscape. It's only when you come upon it, you wonder how it is you didn't see it sooner. This spring bouquet heralds hope after a long season of winter and reminds me of the classroom world and teacher leadership. Crocuses, like teacher leaders, emerge from improbable conditions where they are often sheltered near a showier image of juniper or grasses. At times they are even found on the impossible terrain near snow and ice. They spring up in clusters most often, but occasionally a sole blossom will pop up, always near the gathering of other crocuses. While crocuses have a brief celebrated season in spring, if they remain rooted in the landscape they will not only flourish, but also seed others. I recall my grandmother's warning when I first reached out to pick one. She counselled me that, if removed from the landscape, a crocus would never survive for very long. She warned that to thrive, crocuses must stay rooted in the landscape before they could flourish and seed others. And then, she assured me, if the conditions were just right and I was watchful, one day, I would be able to see a vast carpet of pale purple blooms.

Thirty years to the day, I stared into a similar bouquet on a frosty April morning much like this one. That morning, as I wed myself to teaching, the bouquet was unobtrusively nestled on the edge of a freeze-dried prairie playground. Curious and idealistic, I excitedly paced back and forth while supervising during recess on the prairie playground. My attention was pulled from watching students when out of the corner of

my eye I stepped into it, the first spring bouquet of crocuses and my initial steps into leading. See Figure 5, the search for the prairie crocus.

Keller, research notes, April 15, 2015



Figure 3.5. In search of the prairie crocus.

I question, as I look back on my experiences, if the ideal of teacher leadership remains intangible and invisible because my teaching profession does not accept and foster leadership roles for teachers within the classroom, school and school system

landscape. In failing to create opportunities for teachers to lead both formally and informally in school settings, my profession has ignored the learning needs of both teachers and students. In failing to observe the intricate and embedded work of teachers within a school and scatter them among a system, we fail to understand how teacher influence is embedded in the work of both students and colleagues. Like searching for a prairie crocus in spring we make assumptions and look beyond our current surroundings for more prominent representatives of leading, instead of looking for the foundational leadership among teachers and students in classrooms.

If teachers are to be leaders in curriculum, instruction, professional learning, and school redesign, then they require an imagination both social and empathetic, and a space of in-house supports so they flourish within the classroom, school, system, and community. I find the prevailing beliefs in the individualism and autonomy of teaching within a classroom challenged and refreshed when teachers consider how to foster a community learning-centered view within a school and school district. For some time, I do not realize how precarious the ecosystem in the school is, and how it is at first disrupted by yearly changes in staffing. The notion of community and the value of individual contributions are routinely discouraged when transfer policies lacking transparency and opportunity are imposed on teachers and administrators, so they can serve some larger system purpose.

When I leave my classroom and school landscape for the role of consultant in a district office I realize afterward how some colleagues feel abandoned and demeaned by

my choice to leave the classroom. I gradually come to understand system leadership through that experience, but it is in my first teaching assignment that I explore teacher leadership in an unexpected way. This first teaching assignment takes me on a journey into teaching and leading I find hard to imagine.

CHAPTER 4

LEADING FROM BEHIND THE WINDOWLESS DOOR

My beginning as a teacher was in isolation, on a flat prairie landscape, as a stranger to a new community and an unimaginable classroom world situated behind a large windowless door.

Spring was late arriving the year I emerged searching for work as a teacher. Job prospects were bleak as a recession held a grip over the entire country, and so it seemed a miracle when a lone advertisement appeared in our local newspaper. Brief in description it read:

Wanted immediately: temporary teacher

Grade three-replacement position requires CV and reference letters.

Experience desirable and required.

After applying to the advert for this unknown distant school, I continued job-hunting for any position that would recognize my new degree and meager experience. I was surprised by both the speedy response for an interview and the larger-than-expected group of curious strangers crowded into the school board office for that interview. Unaccustomed to small towns, I assumed it was their small-town way to get to know a new teacher. Perched before them at the interview, I had stuffed nervousness and enthusiasm into a newly acquired interview outfit that consisted of a fresh white blouse

beneath a blue blazer and matching pencil skirt. The actual questions or my answers during that interview are difficult to recall, but impressed on my memory is the image of a group of weathered and worried faces. I worked hard during that interview to impress upon them that I could be the confident teacher they required, as I realized this was probably my only opportunity before the current school year ended. I never questioned why the position was posted. I had no questions or expectations about what might be ahead of me. I only marveled at my good luck when I was actually hired.

This hiring process preceded a long-awaited school spring break. While students and teachers had already escaped for holidays, my supervising principal, hat-in-hand, faced one more task before departing - my new-teacher orientation. Leading me through a wide hallway, the principal toured me past towering windowless doors, each shielding a classroom entryway. I learned from him that this old two-storied brick schoolhouse was like many others of its vintage, built during a prosperous agricultural era when rural communities were booming with families and surrounding farms. The school was now a maze of chopped up boxes of classrooms and narrow stairwells that had evolved over the years, based on changing needs. Following the principal as he chatted and pointed out school features, I found myself at the far end of the school in an upper hallway and before a large door. It was here that the orientation halted and the principal hastily opened the classroom door and dropped a set of tarnished classroom keys into my hand.

Stepping into that classroom, I witnessed the immense loneliness of barren shelves, blank chalkboards and vacant walls. Aside from the clock, featured on the front

wall and a picture of the Queen and flag of the country, everything had been emptied, erased, or removed, everything, except the worn collection of twenty-some desks jammed with papers and books and a lone dominating teacher desk hovering at the front of the room. I turned to the principal as he looked down at his hat and cleared his throat.

“That last teacher, up and left with everything! She, er, she...well ... she had a ... breakdown. Spent most of her time in that back storage closet, we learned. Damn mess. Them kids ‘ill be a handful! Put your foot down and don’t you worry. We’ll be coming in every morning for the first while to keep an eye on things!”

As he glanced around, he paused and then added sheepishly, “I’m headed out of town for the week, and the other teachers... well, they’re gone. Well, ah, there’s another grade three teacher who lives in town, and she, er... well, she could, well... she might pop in during the break. Mind you, it is the break.”

As I looked again toward the storage closet, the principal disappeared. I had no names of anyone to contact. No further tours of the school or map of this new world beyond my room or hallway were offered in that hasty introduction. Nor was there anyone to ask where things might be to help with the daily duties required. I did not realize the “mess” my principal referred to was not limited to the former teacher’s predicament, but a larger more insidious one. This mess I would encounter would challenge every preconception I had prior to coming into the job of being a teacher.

Scanning the room, I hoped my one possible place of belonging was in the worn teacher desk at the front of the room. Peering inside the shallow, wooden top desk drawer I found several pieces of broken chalk, a worn and chewed pencil, minus the eraser top, and the required official paper registrar listing twenty-four faceless student names and birthdates. Clutching that very first classroom key I gaped at the teacher desk and the emptied storage cupboard. Would my teaching fate be that of my predecessor? Why did I pretend I knew I anything about teaching at that interview? What was I thinking when I signed up for this job in the middle of nowhere? Waves of fear and disbelief swept over me until, gradually, the ticking of the clock and a blank stare from the Queen prompted me that time was waning, and I alone would have to do something.

Immersed in Surviving

At this point, I really had no idea of the harshness of the situation. I also had no idea that my first encounter, while extreme, was quite common. I had never seen a vacant emptied classroom and so I did not realize all the materials teachers contribute to make a room a vibrant learning space. The furniture, as in the standard issue student desks and teacher desk, I would realize later were the original relics from when the building was first built, and I would learn over the years that these classroom features were rarely upgraded due to insufficient funding. The technology, at that time, consisted of a phone in the hallway and a clock and bell synchronized to ring at set times for the entire school. The one box of pale yellow chalk I would be issued was a precious

resource for use on the numerous wall-sized chalkboards. The difficult class I was about to meet, I would learn, time and time again, was routinely given to the new hire, as astute colleagues would often shuffle teaching assignments avoiding the daunting experience of a challenging cohort of students. Danielson (2006) reinforced in her research that it remains common practice to give new first year teachers the least desirable assignments, spaces, or tasks, which their experienced colleagues knew it wise to avoid. Lortie (1975) likened being a new teacher to being marooned on an island facing challenges of survival.

I wonder today why I did not run away from that assignment. Emerging without anything to compare it to aided me as the idea of abandoning that first teaching job was inconceivable at the time. Teaching was a life I wanted. I had dreamed of being “the teacher” long before attending University. During high school I had negotiated afternoons off for a month so that I could assist in an elementary classroom and decide between being an elementary or secondary teacher. I enjoyed the sustained time with students and was curious about how younger students learned. As well, as a child in school, I had carefully watched my teachers and classmates. Careful observation and experimentation had taught me about social positioning and power. When I was not in the center of a discussion answering questions, I was often actively disengaged from the tasks at the front of the room, leading a spirited sideshow at the back. Timeouts in the hallway had taught me lessons about routines in the school, and adventures on the playground had taught me how to survive and negotiate the interests of others. As a child

I had watched both inspirational teachers and those that struggled with classroom management and then disappeared at the end of the year. I had no idea that my past enthusiastic shenanigans would follow me and I would find some of my less admirable former-self reincarnated in my future students. All of my past experiences should have prepared me for what I would witness, and yet it was still a shock. This first classroom world, I discovered, was unlike anything I had ever imagined.

The first day arrived and I was fueled by only a fitful bit of sleep. Worries had haunted me throughout the week of the April break. In preparation I had been like a homeless wanderer, scrounging through student desks to piece together what work had been done. Rummaging through collections of worksheets, workbooks and small trinkets I tried to imagine those students. From that meager and desperate beginning, I planned some initial lessons and a schedule. Scanning the room, besides the clock, flag and portrait of the Queen, I had few teaching artifacts to offer, except one small brass apple-shaped bell and a box of art lessons I acquired during my internship.

When the first bell signaled school-startup, I leaped into action and peered into the hallway where I found the principal now hat-less. Awkwardly, he introduced me to three other teachers stationed by their classroom doors, but a second bell followed quickly and sent everyone marching into their classrooms from that small shared-hallway. Students, who had suddenly appeared with that first bell, sorted themselves into their respective rooms and the teachers followed, closing the doors behind them.

I was left following the principal through my classroom doorway to the front of the classroom. Standing before the students, the principal cleared his throat, looked around the room, and then pointed at me:

“This here is, Mrs...,er, er, Miss... Keller, yes, Miss Keller is the new teacher.

She will be here every day, yes, every day till the end of the school year,” he nodded at me. And capping the introduction, his tone deepened and warned,

“And you can all heed my words; from today on, things are going to change!”

Immediately student heads looked down. No one said a word or glanced around.

Pleased with this repentant response, the principal nodded again at me and bustled away, closing the door on the scene with me staring wide-eyed at the students.

I had planned my initial moments over and over, but with the discomfort of that introduction, I nervously just plunged in, forgetting to introduce myself, say hello or comment on why I was there as the new teacher. Instead, I began with the first task, the taking of attendance. I nervously started fumbling through the list of names in the register. It was three quarters through the list, after the usual names I was familiar with, that I made my first mistake.

“Seen?” (no answer).

“Is... Seen... here?” (I repeated more loudly and slowly).

“Seen Green?”

*One tiny boy looked up, glanced around, and stuttered, “It’s Sh—sh—aw—n—n--
T-t-t-teacher... I-I-I’m Sh-Sh- Sean.”*

A nearby boy grinned and piped up, "Rhymes with yawn. Waiting for Sean is a real yawn! Yawn... it's Sean. Got it?" Laughter and chatter erupted leaving both Sean and myself red faced. I tentatively continued through the remainder of the roll call. Surviving this first task without any further incident, I fumbled forward to finding out how the class typically began with daily routines.

The earlier scene of student repentance with the principal grew into a stony wall of silence when I asked questions. Student heads remained turned down and not one child raised a hand to answer my questions. All eyes were fixed downward to their desks, except one set. Staring back at me was one pair of bright icy-blue eyes on a most cherubic looking girl with bouncing ringlets. She was the likeness of a child starlet or live Eaton's beauty doll. With unblinking eyes, she locked on mine from her position front and center in the classroom. Gradually I would notice two friends who flanked her on either side. One was the boy who had earlier piped up mocking Sean. I would quickly learn how this triad could dominate over the class. And so, I began a journey into a classroom world, I learned, was a microcosm of the town, itself.

Kindness and cooperation were definitely lacking in those first weeks. Disadvantaged children, like Sean, were quiet and almost invisible. On the fringes at recess and in the classroom, they averted their eyes in those early weeks. At the water fountain, I would witness a daily jockeying for prominence where those most popular would secure a place in line to leisurely drink. Others, either too timid or without power and social position, would fall to the back of the line, often missing the opportunity for a

desired drink at the fountain. Further torment from classmates was also evident in the bruised and pinched wrists and arms of those bullied. I came to see that at the center of the domination was the cherubic looking child along with several key-supportive friends. The trio would derail events in the classroom, tantrum when unhappy with expectations, and throw any structure I attempted to put in place into a tailspin.

Left alone in the brick walled classroom, hidden behind a windowless door, I felt desperate and wondered about my fate. The students who had been running things resented my arrival and wanted to restore their dominance. The others who meekly followed or avoided them cowered at the sidelines. The materials I had on hand were uninspiring, as everyone seemed uninterested in the workbooks and worksheets left in their desks. Now without the guidance and pre-existing structure I had had while an intern, these initial weeks reminded me of the final scene in the novel, Lord of the Flies. Golding's (1954) classic tale had been required reading in my final year of high school, and I did not anticipate the relevance of that story until this classroom setting. At the end of Golding's novel, a lone adult comes upon a group of schoolboys who have survived on an island by struggling with savagery and attempts at contesting for power. Golding ends that apocalyptic novel with an ominous scene of a lone adult staring at children lost from innocence and order. Like the final page of that novel, I found myself plunged into a similar scene wondering how to turn these chaotic events around. Unfortunately, Golding's novel had neither a sequel nor tips to turn to. In those opening weeks help did not appear from my teaching colleagues. There were no small overtures by teachers to

check on me beyond my formal administrative visits. Token staff meetings had been discontinued by the end of April as teachers and administrators raced for the year-end finish line. Throughout those initial weeks, my teaching colleagues and their ways of handling a class remained a mystery, hidden behind enormous windowless doors.

My problematic classroom, which had eventually come to the attention of the community, was generally blamed on my predecessor. It was rumored she had been an incompetent teacher who had been too long at the job. I also heard two staff acknowledge that once she had been a very innovative teacher, but neither seemed to know when or how her demise arrived, except that gradually over the years she kept to herself and seemed somewhat peculiar to colleagues. Eventually, the students' former grade one teacher would confide that this group of students had taxed all of the previous teachers during their brief schooling history and the bets were on as to whether I would be victorious or crumble on the job like my predecessor.

To reinstate control of the class and prevent further embarrassment in the community, a committee of five administrators: the principal, assistant principal, director, superintendent, and neighboring school principal each took turns observing and tracking how the classroom would be re-established. With much of the year lost, they were now accountable to an angry board of trustees and parents. What I didn't realize until the first week was over was that this schoolhouse had no principal or assistant principal working on site. When the new high school was built next door, it became convenient to place the offices of administrators in either the high school or division

office. The circumstances in my classroom now required all the administrators to re-adjust their usual routines and provide an unusual school site appearance with a weekly monitoring and observation of the situation.

As a brand-new teacher learning the complex qualities of teaching and running a classroom, I had mixed feelings about this daily monitoring and observation. While the adult company and possible on-site assistance was a welcome relief, I also felt my lack of knowledge and experience was exposed and I was at the mercy of their judgment. The administrators certainly made their presence known when they arrived. As committee members they arrived individually, each dressed in a suit, carrying a notebook for observations. Afterward, if time permitted, they would stay and talk about classroom management in general, insisting that I assert myself as the boss and manage the students. They offered me little relevant practical advice beyond generalities or an occasional fond reminiscing. The director would often slip into an anecdote about his first teaching position, or the superintendent would offer me a journal article to read. Although, they seemed well intentioned, the ideas they offered seemed indifferent to my dilemma of how to navigate through complex relationships and power dynamics that had developed among the children. Of the committee, the principal and assistant principal seemed the most aware of various children and their families. The biggest help my committee offered in those initial weeks was the break from the bad behaviors and temper tantrums, for when the administrators were on hand as observers, the children were quiet

and obedient, believing a misstep would be a mistake. Once my observers left the room, those docile personalities would vanish.

Discoveries and Supports

As I reflect on my beginning steps as a teacher, I recognize that my supervising administrators cared about my success, but their years away from teaching in the classroom seemed to result in detached impractical understandings of the realities I faced. Positioned in their roles of authority with superficial supervisory experiences they would appear and disappear when it was convenient for them. The suggestions I received seemed inadequate in comparison to the challenges I witnessed. I needed steps of specific advice tailored to the fluctuating situations. As a result of my lack of experience, my initial weeks were focused on a course of trial and error in order to survive.

Sergiovanni (2001) described leading within a school as similar to moving a giant amoeba from one side of the street to the other. From moment to moment in my classroom, I too felt as if I was “pulling, pushing, patching holes, supporting thin parts, [and] breaking log jams” of an invisible giant amoeba (p. 6). While I had to keep responding quickly to little individual diversions and difficulties, I also had to keep sight of the overall goal of activating a community of learners. The complexity of leading in the classroom was one my administrators were unable to resolve for me.

As I looked at a classroom of anarchy led by children over many months, I wondered how I would assume a position of leader and obtain power. Just because I was

an adult and the teacher clearly only gave me a thin veneer of authority. The laying out of rules and routines suggested by my supervisors triggered eye-rolling from students and little cooperation. What I came to realize was I needed to shape and re-imagine the current classroom and lure the children through their imaginations and curiosity to a world I believed could include everyone. This was one of my first experiments in creating a classroom community of learning, unbeknownst to me, through the toying with social imagination.

In an effort to change the classroom drama, I first tried interrupting the patterns of bullying behaviors, by punishing them with the removal of recess. This tactic would work briefly, but as we slipped back into chaos, I gradually realized I needed to pull them toward something more alluring than punishment with a detention, threat of a phone call home, or a visit by the principal. I gradually realized a possibility in harnessing storytelling if I wanted to re-write the current plot and ominous ending.

And so stories rescued me in the beginning first as a distraction, and gradually as a promise for a world I dreamed of for these students. At the start of each day and after lunch, I would pose riddles and puzzles for the class to solve. These gradually turned into short detective stories where we would try to solve each mystery. This was a quiet, calming time in the room and the children were caught up in inquiring more at the task at hand than in derailing and dominating one another. Gradually groups would play at being sleuths throughout their recess and lunch hours mimicking the roles we had in the classroom and inventing adventures.

When the detective series ended, I searched for something bigger and equally enthralling. I needed something more powerful, something that would not merely interrupt and re-direct, but actually transform the way students had been behaving and relating with one another. In the school library, I found my salvation and power in a book I had known as a child, The Secret World of Og written by Berton (1961) and later illustrated by his daughter, Patsy. According to Berton (2006), this tale was written to entertain and distract a family of six quarrelling children one summer. Berton created stories where his own children found a secret world of Og under the floorboards of their playhouse and went on adventures encountering the miniature green people. The tale of adventure seemed perfect. I hoped, that if this tale became ours and we imagined a secret world under our schoolhouse floorboards, we too might learn to interact in a different way.

Each day I would read a chapter or section, stopping when there was heightened suspense and everyone's curiosity was peaked about where events might lead. We would then discuss, draw and write while exploring our own imagined versions of the upcoming adventures. After each daily reading, the book was carefully stored in the top drawer of my teacher's desk and no one but I, the teacher, could read from it. The story became my talisman and I held it over those children initially, using it as a reward. When behavior improved, I would share increasingly more of the story.

Gradually the book held us breathless and rocked us in laughter. Transported to a new world, we reinvented ourselves as we dressed up and painted ourselves green like

the people of Og. While teaching math, I would routinely put my hair in rollers and imitate the Og teacher demonstrating a whimsical way of calculating. Drawing from my own years of working as a summer camp counselor and my delight in wearing costumes, I found an answer to my predicament of managing the class by creating an imaginary world and routines with these children. They now imagined living a secret world of adventure where the rules were different from the town and school. Although I had little formal knowledge of curriculum, I tried entwining lessons and concepts into our story. As the story played out both in the classroom and on the playground, gradually the domineering and bullying behaviors faded. In venturing into literature and the secret world of Og, we were able to suspend our identities and roles and reinvent a shared utopian world.

It was challenging to create a classroom world so quickly, and at the end of those three months I was physically exhausted. I found I had not only survived, I had also thrived. I saw success come in dandelion bouquets clutched in small hands during recess, lilacs carried from home in mason jars wrapped in tinfoil, and the final season of glorious peonies proudly cut from gardens and displayed on my desk. My neighboring classroom colleagues gradually emerged from behind their windowless large classroom doors, curious about the secret green world we had created. My brief acquaintance with school colleagues ended with the wrap-up of the school season. While administrators and trustees were pleased with the turn-around of that classroom, I was not rewarded with another year of continuing to learn how to be a teacher of grade threes and

exploring the secret world of Og. Instead, I was offered a new position where I was told my skills were needed. I was transferred next door to the infamous and challenging high school where I would tackle teaching English to grade seven students and leading a newly initiated gifted education and resource program. There I would discover new ways of teaching and other ways of leading on a staff of teachers I had not yet encountered.

My first classroom teaching experience showed me some of the complexities and challenges that teachers face each day when teaching and leading learning opportunities for students. Three months felt like a lifetime of lessons. I found that I had to be a leader and establish a following and build a community. There was nothing glamorous in it. Sergiovanni (2001) illustrated leadership as a moral obligation where an “ordinary [person is] required to make uncommon commitments to try to fulfill obligations.” (p. ix). I agree that in that position I felt an obligation to turn the classroom into a world free from the disturbing behaviors I initially witnessed among the students. What guided me in understanding those commitments and obligations and envisioning a new world for that group of students? My desire to teach was fueled by a passion to make a difference and change the world. My committee of administrators tried their best to support me, but they seemed unable to solely address the social injustices I saw everywhere in that room, on that playground, and in that community. These injustices, I would find out in the following year, would be dramatized in frightening ways.

There were several supports I have not mentioned. Another new teacher across the hall solved my dilemma when she shared how to initially secure control within the room. I was shocked when children would throw a tantrum and refuse to follow my requests. At first it was a battle of wills as I found myself pitted against the cherubic looking child who directed the class. Gradually, I learned how to leverage punishment and rewards at first by simply threatening to write down names on the board with the consequence of three strikes, which would result in a student being held back after school and missing the bus. Missing the bus meant a subsequent call to the principal and a parent for a ride and that meant there would be a conversation and further consequences with a more ominous threat. I was amazed at how students avoided this consequence. Oddly enough, I never had to call a parent or hold anyone back after school.

Relying on punishments and consequences alone would not have been enough to build the classroom world and relationship with those students that I hoped for. The need to be on a heroic journey of intrigue gradually drew us together. I wonder now what prompted me to follow a path with children looking for alternative worlds within literature. It perhaps stemmed from my own experiences where books had always been a sanctuary for me. In stories, I had found one could escape the harsh realities of life and reinvent oneself. *The Secret World of Og* offered a microcosm of characters who mirrored many of the personalities and events in our room. The adventures illustrated our own struggles to find belonging and significance. The tale offered comic relief, triggered curiosity and induced empathy. Unknown to me, I would realize years later that

I found the four ingredients of belonging, fun, freedom, and power described in Glasser's (1998/2001) *Choice Theory*. As we immersed into our secret world these four qualities would become the staples of our classroom community.

When those three months took their toll on my health, I eventually lost my voice while I was battling an on-going virus. I refused to take a sick day to recover, as the newly formed world we had created was precarious and I was almost at the finish line. My problem in being heard by the students from the front of the room was resolved by staging a simple ventriloquist act. Beside me, each student volunteer would pretend to become a puppet and speak to the class on my behalf. Whispering beside the child I would assume a teacher/ventriloquist persona. We took up staged conversations like one from a previous era and this routine rescued me and amused and directed the students. The front of the room and solitary teacher desk slowly became a shared space, and with those more daring students, we would banter back and forth leading the group.

While I led unaccompanied from the front of the room in the first month, by the final month, students joined me in contributing to the class and supporting one another. Each day had been an on-going test as I built up my own repertoire of ways of leading and managing within a classroom. I never forgot the fateful storage cupboard I faced at the back of the room. I wondered at times about my predecessor whose career had ended there. How had she so quickly evaporated from the school world I had recently joined? The interpretation that dominated among the community and children was that she was

incompetent, and had been for years. There were also knowing nods as to how taxing this group of students had been for other experienced teachers during the previous years. I could not help wondering how something like this could have happened. Why did my predecessor become so isolated and so invisible? How was it no one intervened earlier? How could such an event happen in the midst of a small staff, within a small school? Perhaps it was a by-product of the massive windowless doors that were firmly closed when the bell rang. My helpful colleague, the other new baby teacher stationed in a classroom across the hall, disappeared with summer's arrival. Her non-renewed temporary contract meant she had not earned a place in that community for another year, and I would miss the invaluable timing of her relevant solutions and friendship.

Overcoming Isolation

As I reflect through this narrative writing, I see now how prevalent isolation was both in my first teaching experience and for the students who were socially ostracized. I realize now, I was just beginning to construct myself as a teacher and unknown to me, as an emerging teacher leader. Taylor (1989) explained that in coming to understand one's self, and to determine what our relationship is to some ideal of the good, "we must inescapably understand our lives in narrative form, as a quest" (p. 52). I would wonder over this first teaching experience many times, as I would immerse into the teaching profession and the role of teacher I yearned for and imagined. That first teaching position had a significant impact on me. On one hand, it suggested to me that I could survive and

lead in a challenging teaching context. On the other hand, it left me wondering about the challenges on the teaching landscape and the isolation I had never envisioned.

Teachers often remember their first teaching year most vividly, according to Hargreaves (2005), and it tends to shape the way they look at teaching for the rest of their career. Michael Huberman (1989) provided extensive lifespan research into teaching, illustrating how during the initial three years, if a teacher survives and isolation is overcome, they then can move into building competence with a desire to change things. My initial three months felt like three years.

Looking back, I realize I had more than the usual amount of daily supervision in the initial three weeks. Although my supervisors seemed unable to offer me the assistance I sought, they did sanction my experimentation and problem-solving exploits. I had a great deal of autonomy and independence, in part because no one coming into the room seemed to know any better way to take matters in hand and create a utopian classroom world. As a result, no one insisted I follow a prescribed way to teach. It was a relief that I found the resources within the children and myself.

This beginning moved beyond the windowless doors to collaboration with colleagues, formal teacher leadership roles and the inevitable questioning of organizational hierarchies, and educational policies and practices. Throughout these experiences I continually moved in and out of the classroom world and questioned what leadership could mean for a teacher and learner and how I would find space for that ideal of leadership within the teacher role.

CHAPTER 5

OPENING A WINDOW, BEFORE OPENING THE DOOR

Those initial three months were followed by a year of events I found disturbing. On the surface, one would think all was well and my transition to teaching in the high school was a success. Teaching grade seven English was a good fit given my love of literature and enjoyment of middle years students. In an effort to find a place on that staff, I signed on to volunteer for any unwanted extra-curricular assignments. Outside of teaching hours, I became the senior girls' basketball coach, spending countless hours either in the gym or crisscrossing the countryside for competitions. As the producer and director of the variety night performance, I was kept busy working with students in the noon hours. I became a member of any required committee work and, if that were not enough, I enthusiastically spearheaded directing and preparing a first-ever community dinner theatre event. I was able to take all of this on, as I had the advantage of being young and my lonely hours in a new community motivated me to find ways to connect with colleagues and learn all I could about the teaching world. I also had an earlier important training ground: in my own high school years I had been highly involved in leading many aspects of high school life, and I enjoyed the return to throwing myself into these pursuits as the teacher.

As to my hours in the classroom, my successful transition was due to finding the most instrumental and inspiring resource that makes growing teacher talent possible. I

found a generous master teacher willing to answer my daily questions, share resources, and invest in seeing me succeed. Without her shrewd advocacy on staff and daily tips of encouragement, I doubt my role in leading a new resource program would have taken shape, with increasing numbers of students signing up for help. All of these experiences were fulfilling and kept me very busy, but... while I had successes and encouragement from colleagues and administrators, I could not ignore what was happening on that staff and the attitudes within the community.

Three months into the school year, three colleagues left their jobs due to stress. While two were new to the profession, the third was experienced but new to the community. These teachers taught the older students in a different wing of the school and as I was working with the middle years students, I rarely saw them unless there was a staff meeting. Their exodus contributed to growing low morale on staff and the administration appeared unable to deal with daily student discipline difficulties that had triggered the premature departures. I would eventually learn this high school had a history of losing at least half of its teachers each year. I, it turned out, was one of five new teachers needed that year to bring special skills to a troubled school landscape.

During hallway supervision, I witnessed how the senior students would threaten teachers and give them a hard time. Mysterious acts of vandalism were reported occurring to their homes and vehicles in the night. Though the school hallways and the senior wing were very different from the atmosphere I enjoyed in my own classroom, I found I just could not ignore the difficulties experienced by these colleagues, especially

after a routine day when I bumped into the extent of malice that lurked in a few in that community.

Peering into the Locker

While hustling from a variety night rehearsal to supervising the noon hour homework club, I accidentally came upon it, the reputed malice I had heard whispered in the staff room. Before me were tall senior student backsides huddled together partially concealing a commotion coming from the locker. Laughing and repeatedly kicking the door, they didn't notice me approaching. I witnessed the shoving and toying of something being stuffed away from sight. Coming from the other side of that locker door, was a small voice bleating out for help, and urging me to action.

"Hey, stop that! Who is in that locker?" I shouted while moving closer.

The largest boy and apparent leader, slowly turned and slyly shrugged, "And who's asking?"

Momentarily stunned by the unexpected challenge, I swallowed and summoned my voice, "I am. Step aside now and open the locker door!"

"And what you gonna do about it?" the tallest boy asked squinting at me.

No one moved, and no one else met my gaze. Taller than me, in spite of my heels, the leader and his following formed an impregnable wall around the locker.

What was I going to do about it, indeed? I was shaking as I recognized his reputation, from all the rumors: rumors reputed he bullied teachers and students,

rumors reputed he caused the vandalism and torment inflicted on departed colleagues. No other adults were nearby. No other students were loitering. Everyone had vanished, and there was now just a tall menacing reputation before me, and no witnesses for what would happen next.

The squawking voice behind the locker door continued bleating for help. It had now firmly attached itself to my conscience and even if I wanted to, I was unable to walk away and ignore the situation.

“Look, you’ve had your fun. Move aside now and let that kid out,” I commanded firmly, while inside my heart wobbled wildly. Silence followed at first, surrounded by averted eyes and one piercing stare until, I, grasping for some leverage and response, pushed on blindly and announced, “Look, I can walk away and report this incident to the principal, and if that fails I will go somewhere else... on to the RCMP, but I will not stop pursuing some consequences for your actions! I have nothing to lose and I am not worried about staying.”

Pausing dramatically, the leader slowly spit on the floor, and then he opened the door and pulled out, none other than Jerry, a skinny grade seven boy from my English class. Jerry was pesky in nature and often far too taunting and gabby for his own good. He was routinely up to some mischief in the back corner of the classroom and I had few doubts that he probably provoked the locker treatment. He was just the perfect size and irritant these boys might want to toy with. While I was contemplating this probability, Jerry, in typical annoying fashion, grabbed all the attention by throwing a backhanded

insult and jeering, “So long fatheads!” As his departure diverted the group’s attention, the tall boy leading the commotion leaned over me and whispered, “Next time, we might be raping teachers for getting in the way. Like you, I have nothing to lose!” The words reverberated and then reached onto and into my ears, crawling all over me, disheveling my cloak of confidence and belief in the security and structures of that school and the town to protect both teachers and students.

Any teaching successes that year seemed very fragile that day. I was puzzled by the way colleagues’ difficulties were not addressed. I was disturbed by the prevailing attitudes in that town. In spite of the opportunities and mentoring I received, as the months continued on, I imagined that there must be a better world out there. It should be easier in another community, and in another school.

A number of students and colleagues remain very memorable from that first teaching community, but what stands out as I look back was a tall gangly boy with distinctive ginger hair. This boy was Aidan and he rarely seemed to fit his desk. In fact, he was at odds with that desk. Aidan was either awkwardly crammed into the desk or falling out. He stood out from his peers only in part because of his glorious ginger hair. This hair that he was often teased about had a migrating cowlick that when not springing outward could be controlled when he wound it around his nervous tugging fingers. He would often disappear into a book or into a distant gaze beyond the classroom window. He was usually alone, gazing onto or out of the window: dreaming, missing the

instructions, searching for a misplaced crumpled worksheet, or chewing at the broken pencil he clutched while awkwardly writing. When his peers noticed him, it was to taunt him or laugh at his peculiarities. His feelings of awkwardness and misplacement remain imprinted on me.

As a teacher I related to Aidan. I also retreated into books, looking for an imaginary world for an answer to my predicaments. Like that desk, I found the space of classrooms and schools often stifling and isolating. I struggled with the way colleagues worked in isolation dependent upon their own resources. Like his cowlick, I found it difficult to tame my inclinations and resist questioning the policies and rules laid out for me. I was fine when fully immersed in working with students. That work was energizing and exciting once we got past the initial start-up of the year. I relished creating courses and designing lessons. At the end of the year with questions about whether there was something better out there, I would follow Aidan's gaze out the window, across the prairie, toward the west.

What's Special About Being Special?

Following Aidan's gaze, led to another rural school district where I moved from regular classrooms to my first segregated special class. I was hired to teach a grade six/seven-split class of students for their next five years. Another group of twenty-some students, but these students were identified as learning disabled and educationally challenged. They were streamed together for help.

Once again, a room full of trustees and administrators interviewed me, but this time I learned that there were parents of some of the students among the trustees. They had hopes for their children in this class and wanted a teacher who could deliver them. It was an unusual challenge to think beyond the one-year teaching commitment with a particular group of students and imagine a continuous five-year relationship. Until the interview I had no idea about the position's unique challenges. The questions I was asked required I consider how I would envision this task. While my experiences in creating a summer camp world were invaluable, I felt confronted by the immense responsibility for the well-being and growth of these students.

Can you imagine the responsibility? Could I offer enough to guide these young people in all curricular areas over five years? Would I have a depth of instructional skills? Would I be inspiring? What if I couldn't deliver what they needed?

I ask these questions now, but then, I had no idea what was ahead of me. In my early years of teaching, I was surviving and learning by taking one step at a time, learning and absorbing as quickly as I could. Huberman (1989) refers to these initial three years of career entry as critical to building competency. Even with long, late nights of preparation I often found myself either copying a photocopy of a photocopy, or quickly and superficially mentally framing up a lesson laid out in a teaching text and hoping it would fit the context. To create from some imagined place of originality and intertwine the interests and needs of students took time and practice. Rarely was there time to consider collaborating with colleagues.

Unlike my first classroom setting that was an empty shell, I walked into a world with ample materials and information. An accomplished teacher had cared for these children until her departure for a maternity leave. Educationally and experientially, she surpassed my meager year with her two Masters' degrees and a career of several decades. Before she left, she had taken the time to gather a massive portfolio for each child and she framed it with numerous standardized tests along with teacher made unit tests and work samples. It is important I not give the impression that this was merely a superficial pursuit in assessment and evaluation. She had fought for services for these students by using the standardized means to support their learning. There was a power in those tests she believed in. As I looked around I saw photos of my future students holding animals, playing games, smiling and laughing. They illustrated a classroom showered in a teacher's commitment and love. As she shared her hopes for these students, I could see she doubted my lack of experience and qualifications and wondered if I would do.

This class framed as two combined grades, had such detailed student histories and individualized materials it was as overwhelming as that first empty shell of a classroom from my first assignment. While I had survived and even thrived while learning how to create a classroom community, and I had even been helpful as a heavy lifter of extra-curricular activities, I had little understanding or experience in how to offer instruction so extensively differentiated and individualized. As well, it was daunting

to be following in the steps of a master teacher who the students loved and followed with devotion. I also no longer had my reliable mentor master teacher on staff to help problem-solve my daily questions.

After my orientation, I went home and cried. A terrible mistake must have occurred. Why me? Why hire me to take over from someone so accomplished and experienced? Who was I to have been given so much trust to teach these students for the next five years? They believed more about me than I believed in myself. I did not yet have the knowledge of how to unravel information from those standardized assessments. They meant nothing to me; they only suggested a dearth of deficits. How would I juggle all those subjects, materials, and individualized plans? How would I find my way through an entire school year? How many of us cry not tears of joy when receiving a new assignment, but tears produced by cold, clammy fears of doubt and inadequacy.

There was also another much bigger challenge I would face. It was the biggest and most significant challenge I would run into day after day. My predecessor, administrators, and the trustees unfortunately never recognized this challenge. It was a secret burden that these students had to bear. It was the challenge I would come to know in many places, in other school divisions, in many grades, over several decades and it would cause me to re-examine the careful work of my predecessor, the vision of my administrators and support services. While these students had been carefully selected, and supported by a skilled, knowledgeable, and experienced teacher, it did not erase the stigma they endured each day in being placed in a segregated class.

Students and staff outside of that classroom viewed them as “different,” “deviant,” and even “delinquent.” They were considered the misfits, the special class of dumb kids, the least potent, the least popular, and few wanted anything to do with them. To add to the challenge, they had one more burden that just reaffirmed they would never fit in. They had Daniel.

Daniel brought me back to images of Aidan’s hair. While his hair was not ginger in color, it had the same roving cowlick, but now multiplied. Wild tufts of hair sprung from all angles above eyes that would hide from and avert your gaze. Daniel was a twelve year old who really seemed like a four year old in nature and needs. While he had few language skills that he delivered in a robotic tone, he did have a notable gift. He had an uncanny ability to recall any concrete item, even if he saw it only momentarily. For instance, if I misplaced a book, he could instantly recall where I placed it. If I gave him a deck of cards and laid them out before him, once they were turned over he could recall exactly where each card was placed after only briefly glancing at it. He and his mother were the first people to teach me about autism and the complexity of giftedness. Working with Daniel also revealed to me how to teach reading in new and novel ways.

Put to the Test

I learned many important lessons during this teaching assignment. The first task I faced was dealing with some type of standardized assessment needed by the school division to secure funding and provide pretest/posttest data. The superintendent of special education came to see me just prior to the students starting and asked how I

would assess them with standardized assessments. I had a whopping year and three months under my belt and no idea beyond the usual assessment for learning and evaluation at the end of a unit of study. Together, we decided I should use the Canadian Test of Basic Skills now known as the Canadian Achievement Tests. Students began at different places in the test booklets based on what we knew of their past performances. It was a long laborious process getting through each test. I witnessed how challenged many were to even track reading the words in one booklet and then transfer their thoughts into answers that resembled a prompt in a multiple choice and finally to recording an answer by filling in a bubble sheet with the corresponding answer. The tests were the same tests I too had taken as a child but now, watching and reading the tests through the perspective of these students, I saw the challenges very differently. I saw the anxiety and puzzlement as students worked on questions. Physically tracking between readings from a booklet to finding the correct answer was a struggle for many. I encouraged them, and I prodded them until the required task was done. I then told the students we would park the test results on a shelf and at the end of the year we would retest and look at our progress. I assured them there would be progress.

I searched the materials and tests looking for curricular content and skills I should teach the children because I believed there must be a connection and worth in something believed to be so informative. I took the time to show students how multiple choice tests worked, how to perform re-reading, skimming & scanning, and making the best guess possible when they didn't know the answer. We worked on those skills and I

told them this was preparation for their future test writing challenges, like writing a drivers' license test or surviving in a senior science class. We became pretty good at writing a variety of assessments and curbing anxiety. I also picked the Canadian Tests of Basic Skills apart for topics we were curious about. One topic that surfaced was the skills needed to read a map and orienteer oneself. I discovered the people in this rural setting did not routinely use maps. They knew the landscape so intimately; it was like inserting a foreign language to mark off spaces in kilometers and attend to compass readings. And so the students taught me about that landscape: the gullies and hillocks, the poplar groves where the owl family lived and where the students hunted for rabbits for daily meals of stew. In turn, I shared my love for exploring stories. We used a set of compasses and drew maps and eventually created illustrations to explore that landscape.

While geography and the stories about their landscape interested most of the students, it did not fit the needs and interests of Daniel. Figuring out what to do with him was challenging. I worked hard to design a personalized curriculum and twice a week, sometimes more, I met with his mother who drove the school bus each morning. She would pop in with her newborn baby and we would look at how we could strengthen what he was learning, both at school and at home. Sometimes our "meetings" involved just holding her baby and giving her a chance to release the burdens of raising Daniel, the eldest of her four children. The goal to increase his literacy skills, and increase his participation within the classroom, the school, and community unfolded gradually with the occasional bump. I learned how to use language experience approaches to teach him

to read. I also learned how to listen and observe while teaching lessons. Together, Daniel and I drew illustrations of the things he loved, and include the language attached to those things. This was an era that had little technology for generating images, so much of the work generated included my own primitive art skills that drew much laughter in the class as well. Gradually other students stepped in to help illustrate and support the language Daniel was learning.

Each day involved figuring out what Daniel could do and how he could grow beyond the dismal expectations given to the family by the doctor who assessed him. When I first arrived, he was working away from the class in an old storage closet with the support of an educational assistant. I did not believe storage closets were the answer to developing people. I had seen first-hand how they led to problems. Daniel was a child of many dimensions and challenges. Daniel was a novel himself.

All the while, as I was learning all the curriculum areas and how to motivate and inspire these students, I came to realize my students needed some social capital in this school if they were to thrive. I tackled the first source of power for any student - playground clout. I saw how these kids hugged the hallway walls when they walked in the school, how they averted their eyes when speaking with the most popular, how they did not make the teams, and how routinely they were on the fringes of noon hour and extra-curricular activities. I decided we needed a good dose of the seventies' version of Stewart Brand's counterculture cooperative new games (Fluegelman, 1976). As the new hire, I was put in charge of the daily noon hour extra-curricular sports program. Once

again, I would pull from my repertoire of summer camp experiences and my New Games Book (1976). I introduced a school of young people to ways to play these games that fostered participation and cooperation. The games were creative twists on traditional sports where participation was valued and competition redefined. In physical education class I taught my students the cooperative new games, so they would have an advantage of understanding the rules and much needed extra practice when I instituted them into the noon hour program. While these games were designed to level the playing field among people and reduce competitiveness that limited participation, my students needed them in order to build on much-needed confidence and physical experiences.

Once the intramural season began with the entire school, my students were quickly ready to become referees and they often had to settle disputes, as they knew the games inside out before their peers had encountered them. It was a tough and challenging role to take command of refereeing the playing field and not all of them could do that, but at least five stepped into those positions, and most could now actually participate at noon hour.

With that increase in social capital at noon hour, we also needed some status in what we were learning. I found refuge in both the experiential learning opportunities of science class and the imaginary possibilities in literature. We raised and experimented with rats. Who would think that would give us special stature in the school? These were the misfits, the special class, the least powerful, and the least popular. Bored by the routine study of the Canada Food Guide as the basis of many a health program, I

decided to study student nutritional habits and try some research. We received support from the University of Saskatchewan to study the health of three white laboratory rats for two months. We simulated the eating habits of students in the school and raised the rats on the food offered in the vending machine, the school canteen, and a healthy student lunch such as rabbit stew. Our class became quite popular and our research project drew observers from around the school. We weighed and measured and documented our daily observations and tracked the changes we noticed in our rats. We then challenged the eating habits of the school and quality of canteen meals. This was long before the popularity of questioning vending machines and a celebrity chef presence, Jamie Oliver (2011) was going on in schools; it had us feeling like we were pioneers.

To fuel our imaginative side and understand the possible world these rats might have emerged from, we read Mrs. Frisby and The Rats of NIMH (1971). There was something perfect in finding another secret world, a world where there were super rats that could read, write, build elevators under the ground, and engage in heroic efforts. I was underground again as in the Secret World of Og (1961), searching for a world that could explain and minimize our perceived differences and feelings of inadequacy. The question of human intelligence that surfaced in this novel guided us in exploring and understanding the burning fear that my students believed they were less intelligent than those in other classes. They had been tested over and over again with intelligence tests and still they remained segregated and “special.” This was a stigma we tackled each day.

At the end of the first year, the students re-took the Canadian Tests of Basic Skills as requested by my administration. The students, thankfully, improved with significant gains in all areas. More importantly, those results were evident in their daily work, and overall displays of self-esteem. For year two, I received five more students who were sent from other schools in the division in the hopes this class would be an answer for those who seemed unreachable.

For the second year, I branched out and offered to teach all the grade seven students for one hour a day, so that my students might have an integrated classroom experience. I sacrificed my preparation time in the hopes that I could see my students included in an academic class.

Small miracles and wonderful stories happened during those two years. It was incredibly challenging, but very rewarding. I was given a great deal of autonomy to create and imagine curriculum in that space. Administrative supervisors came out occasionally and shared in searching for ways to help these students learn. No one seemed to be an expert. I realized I was the one closest to these students and to what was going on and, while there were ideas out there to pull from, ultimately it would come down to me fostering a relationship with these students where we worked together to come up with a path and a place for all of us to learn. Those students taught me a great deal about finding and then navigating a landscape of possibilities.

The entire time, I never emerged from behind a closed door. There were sightings with extra-curricular work and special projects, but conversations and collaboration

regarding the daily teaching and assessments were rare. I looked out from a window that faced a brick wall several feet away. It gave window light and a narrow glimpse of what might be beyond, but essentially it remained limited in scope. Such limitations were reflected in both the attitudes of my colleagues and the opportunities for youth in that school. Most of my colleagues never accepted the students I was working with. A cult of popularity prevailed. The most athletic and the most popular remained firmly ensconced in the daily decisions in that school.

I found that after creating opportunities behind the classroom door, it was insufficient for me to work in isolation from my colleagues. I wondered why the learning needs of these students were addressed so differently in other contexts and why there was so little acceptance of student differences. I also wanted to learn from other teachers and compare my experiences. While the essential lessons learned in a segregated special education class were beneficial, I found more difficult lessons would follow as I pursued learning and leading in collaborative relationships and co-teaching opportunities.

Looking back, I realize this was a time of innocence in many ways. It was safer in my own classroom. It was easier to create and design with students. The real challenge came when I tried to do this with colleagues. While I paint a picture of what must have been a utopian world, it was not. I found that while I could create a world and space of opportunity for these students in my classroom, it was not enough. I was on an island in that school, as were the students. It was uncertain if they would be accepted or

even thrive beyond our classroom door. The five-year plan for these students to have one consistent teacher was founded on a great deal of consideration, but I felt students needed not only to believe they could emerge from that world but also have opportunities to succeed in any classroom. They needed to experience other teachers and forge their way in environments not so carefully managed. My colleagues seemed uninterested in opening their doors and accommodating that dream. Once again as I stepped back and surveyed this classroom, I found it had a windowless door. The one window was small and looked onto a brick-adjointing wall. There was no prairie expanse to stare out at and dream. There was nothing left to do but open the door and walk toward a different reality. This work took me in and out of the province to learn from other universities and school divisions in Western Canada.

CHAPTER 6

OPENING THE DOOR TO TEACHER LEADERSHIP

As someone who's been in education for 50 years, serving as both a teacher and principal, I've found that it's *always* been a promising time for teacher leadership. It's just never been a successful time. It's never happened on a wider scale.

(Barth, 2013, p. 10)

As the calendar months and seasons spun by, I continued my travels on the teacher treadmill. Throughout this time I found myself moving to accommodate family commitments and I now looked at education through the eyes of a parent. Looking back at the timeline of my career, I see I moved every three years. (See the career timeline of stages in the Appendix). Then I would pause to pursue a new degree, and try new roles that ranged among itinerant teaching, co-teaching, consulting, to eventually a teacher-learning leader role that would have me pause the longest in any setting. There I examined my teaching experiences with a critical eye. While it is decade since I stepped into that teacher leadership role, I wonder about those challenges and opportunities I experienced when I tried formalized teacher leadership.

The Initiative

In April 2008, there are whisperings of a new initiative, and a great deal of curiosity follows as we hear our school district will seek to renew the work in high

schools. For the first time in my career I learn teachers will be formally recognized as leaders of learning while remaining in their classroom context. I am intrigued about the idealism of this new role, teacher-learning leader.

Shoulder-tapped by the principal and encouraged by colleagues, I am successful in my application for the position of learning leader, a role that offers one release hour a day to work with two other teacher learning leader colleagues in a large high school. At this stage of my career, I am established with several more degrees, and interested in how to advocate and provide for students in need of different opportunities to learn. My own two daughters, now adolescents, also motivate me to consider how to change things as they raise questions about the worth and quality of the formal education they experience.

In preparation for my new responsibilities, I purchased a new outfit that I hoped would give me the confidence I might need when working at a leadership table. This outfit consisted of a casual jacket and two new pencil skirts. According to the labels on these garments, they were made from washable spandex and assorted man-made fibers. I hoped they would offer me the appearance of needed stature for my anticipated meetings and learning sessions, and that the fabric would also offer the flexibility needed during the demands of daily teaching and collaborating with colleagues. I intentionally chose the tailored straight and narrow cut hoping it would make me look taller, but I realized my impulses to move freely and challenge the limited space on my chair might be a problem. I wondered about this new wardrobe choice until one colleague interrupted my

thoughts by observing, “There’s something different in the way you look these days.” While she registered the subtle change in my dress, I’m not sure she noticed how I was starting to now “look” at things very differently.

Now released from a portion of daily classroom duties and working within a trio of learning leaders, I participated in various meetings and learning sessions. It was exciting to be invited to a table of new colleagues and consider what might be needed for changing professional learning and traditional structures. Peering around the table, I register there are both administrators and teachers representing each high school; some are experienced and noted for their history of teaching excellence within the classroom while a few newer teachers bring specialized technological knowledge and an effective rapport with colleagues in their building.

At first the role and initiative were vague in details. When I started asking questions, I was told the initiative had an emerging design, and that an ability to tolerate ambiguity was an important trait for a leader. And so, I brushed away any doubts and shelved my curiosity in those first months as I was swept up by the enthusiasm of setting off in renewing the work within our high schools. The common refrain the time was a gleeful, “Now, we will drive the school bus!” and we were giddy with the anticipated prospects.

In those first months, staff and administrators seemed both curious and wary about the initiative. Prior to students returning that year, we had some foreshadowing of what we might be up against when we had an eclectic group of representative high

school students lead our first district professional learning session. They offered their vision that questioned the organization of programs, the role of the teacher, and the environment needed for learning. Their presentation was entirely framed by their own experiences and dreams for what schooling should be. I found the presentation very thoughtful, but it quickly provoked teacher resentment more than any of us anticipated. When the presentation was opened for teacher questions, I witnessed a simmering anger and defensiveness as teachers posed questions from the floor. Most teachers who lined up to ask questions challenged the students as if the students themselves held all the power and were the orchestrators of schooling experiences. Together, with a colleague, I helped facilitate the follow-up question and answer session, but I was blindsided by the tones of anger and territorial defensiveness. I was not prepared for this initial reaction by many of my peers, and I learned it was only the beginning of exploring this contested ground.

In preparation for the work ahead, I read stacks of books that referred to student engagement in learning, and leading assessment within classrooms. Looking back now, I realize I took in the words and ideals, somewhat superficially, as I barely perceived the consequences of renewing the existing traditions of a high school. The real lessons emerged in the actual working with colleagues and students.

Initially the initiative felt different and appeared fresh in its approach. We were invited to challenge and explore our teaching practices and the settings we worked within. As we began with the hopes of students, parents, and teachers in setting the

direction for our work, the renewal initiative seemed generative and optimistic. I thought renewal would not carry the same baggage as the word ‘reform,’ which I had observed seemed synonymous with top-down efforts at reorganization, restructuring, and often, ill-conceived change. Over the years, I had observed many ill-conceived ventures into trying some approach that had lacked both substance in vision and suitability to the needs within the classroom context. I recall when we began the initiative; a colleague asked whether it would ever succeed, as we had no blueprint. I resolutely argued we did not need a blueprint, as we were building a home not a house. I believed were delving into our educational beliefs and relationships inspired by students, families, and teachers. I thought we were trailblazers and embraced the notion of exploring with colleagues the guarded terrain of our educational landscape. I dismissed the need for confining our work in a blueprint and her ideal of building a house. I was naïve in those days.

Searching for Teacher Leadership

Barth (2013) wryly pointed out that, while the time has been ripe for it, the promise of teachers’ leadership has never been successful, at least on a larger scale. As I compare my own experiences and reflect on teacher leadership literature, it is puzzling to me that, in spite of a wealth of rhetoric advocating for the promising benefits of teacher leadership as a critical element in educational reform efforts, it seems, “not to have taken hold in either a strategic or systemic way” (Coggins & McGovern, 2014, p. 15). I question, as I look back on my experiences, Does the ideal of teacher leadership remain

intangible and unsuccessful because we do not believe leadership is a quintessential part of teaching, and teachers a quintessential part of educational leadership? Also, if there is a lack of belief in the value of teacher leadership, have we not made space for that leadership so that it can flourish? Little's (2003) review of 14 years of the development of teacher leadership illustrated a persistent ongoing tension that hampers teacher leadership efforts.

Teacher leadership generally, and more specifically teachers' collective initiative on matters of purpose and practice, was observably constrained even in these 'existence proof' cases... by a recurrent set of tensions and dilemmas: the tension between professional autonomy and collective obligation; the tension between a school's or group's internal priorities and external demands. Further the current policy conditions—entailing a narrowed vision of educational goals and processes together with tighter controls over teachers' work—have rendered conditions of support for teacher leadership steadily more tenuous. (p. 416)

Earlier, Little (1995) explored the question of whether there was organizational legitimacy for teacher leaders. She found there was a clash and illustrated the prevalence of assumptions taking place on “contested ground” when teachers became involved in change efforts (p. 47). She found teacher leaders had to learn how to juggle and negotiate restructuring efforts on an inhospitable landscape. The work they did required creatively using collaboration, experimentation, and flexibly using time and space within an

existing environment that seemed more supportive of existing bureaucratic controls of evaluation and curriculum alignment with few opportunities to lead while remaining in the classroom.

When I stepped forward to try a formalized teacher leadership role, I felt well outfitted in both my establishment in the school, district, and in my desire to examine my profession. What I did not realize was how this new formalized position might affect others' desires to be recognized as leaders and how I might be perceived as competing for a rare opportunity. The very source of my influence and opportunity for innovation within a school setting now became tainted by a peer's professional frustration and I discovered how one can clash with colleagues when we step out of our classroom to lead within a school setting.

Corralled on Contested Ground

After the initial gathering of our student-led opening district professional learning session, I found myself faced with another unanticipated challenge of teacher leadership. During the opening days of the school year, school staff traditionally began with a learning session off site where they would engage in team building pursuits. This was a popular opening event, where colleagues could catch up with one another after the summer away and also escape the impending structures of the school facility and the monotony of large-scale professional development.

That warm September, we found ourselves off-site at a nearby tourist ranch that offered facilities for large groups to convene and experience a Wild West ambience. The

Wild West themes were, at best, remotely connected to our renewal learning agenda, but the site had been booked and paid for earlier in April and tradition now prevailed as we reverted to the routine of getting out of the school to visit and play with one another. Typically, in the past our administrators and members of the professional development committee would organize these events and lead teacher teams but, on this day, our new sisterhood of teacher-learning leaders was introduced in color-coded bandanas to lead groups to each venue and support the team-building ventures.

Dressed with yellow bandana accessories, my group started in the corral's mazes and proceeded to the lassoing event. It was all a bit bizarre and tangential, that we were even considering tying our notions of collegiality and professional learning to the western rodeo atmosphere and a lasso event, but I was not going to fight the hopes of the inner cowboy in my colleagues. Taking the lead, I described our next event and pointed the way. To assist the flow and speed of our arrival, I stepped aside to hold the gate open for team members. I had been warned to carefully latch the gate after our entrance and my delicate city-slicker fingers fumbled for a while with the foreign latch. This time-consuming fumbling caused me to surface far from the group I was supposed to lead. I now had to move quickly through a shadowy corral maze in order to catch up with everyone at the lassoing event. Turning repeatedly from one tight corner and dead-end to yet another within the maze, I suddenly tripped, slamming into the fence and a corner post. Confused by my unexpected lunge, I blinked at the darkness and perceived a distorted shadow blocking my way.

Pushed up against the fence and hidden in shadows, I struggled to understand what I was experiencing. The distorted shadow and twisted face towering above me were those of a close colleague. I had worked with this colleague often in planning and leading professional development sessions. We had collaborated in how to re-engage struggling students in his classroom while I supported from the resource room. He was a talented teacher who understood his subject well. We had been a creative productive team in the past, but on this day his voice changed as he hissed the words, "Who's the leader now?"

At the time, I wondered if what had happened was unique to my own situation and relationship with that colleague. Perhaps I even doubted myself while stepping into the new titled position and identifying formally with leading as a teacher. I did not want to alarm my fellow learning leaders and taint the enthusiasm of leading during our opening days, so I convinced myself to remain silent about the episode. The anger I witnessed, while corralled by that colleague, reminded me of past experiences of bullying and anger on the playground when I had been a threat to others. During the months that followed I wondered about my new influence and opportunity in leading. I wondered if I would collide again into the obstinate power and anger held by some colleagues as we challenged the traditional practices within our high school.

Now as I look back at this experience, I see I skirted the issue by staying silent. The territory I crossed into that day, when I locked horns with a colleague, illustrated how navigating the terrain of the workplace landscape is complex especially within a

profession that offers little space for leadership and few collaborative opportunities. That day, I found myself face to face with a prevalent problem where colleagues do not always accept and legitimize other colleagues becoming leaders. Barth (2007), adding to the work of Little (1995), illustrated the presence of egalitarian norms as one key factor limiting the promise of teacher leadership. He found it prominent in schools where colleagues suggested all teachers should be equal and there continued to be hesitancy among teachers to call themselves leaders and draw attention.

This continuing “taboo of elevating oneself above others” and the suspicion of appearing to rise above one’s station (Barth, 2013, p. 10) has been called *tall poppy syndrome* (Crowther, 2012). This leveling tendency is instigated by “teachers [who] are, in a way, their own worst enemy when it comes to unlocking leadership because they don’t welcome it, typically don’t respect it, and often feel threatened by one of their own taking it on” (Barth, 2013, p. 11). Barth further warned that the teacher who takes a leadership role could even expect to be punished and ostracized by fellow teachers. The physical workspaces of individual classroom siloes and the regime of scheduling also contribute to limiting teacher leadership efforts. Continually working in parallel teacher universes produces a fear among teachers that they do not have skills to lead other adults and collaborate effectively.

Historically, according to Troen and Boles (1994):

Teaching is not a profession that values or encourages leadership within its ranks.

The hierarchical nature of public schools is based on the 19th century industrial

model, with the consequent adversarial relationship of administration as management and teachers as labor. Like factory workers in the 1800s, teachers all have equal status. Leadership opportunities are extremely limited. (p. 275)

Beyond the managerial department and coordinator roles I encountered in large high school settings, I found that formalized teacher leadership opportunities to explore classroom practices have been rare, and often inadequately transparent in indicating their particular role and responsibilities. After positions for teacher leaders were first sanctioned by the principal or through district office decisions, the role was gradually eroded by the perceived need for system data collection, a need for mandated professional learning sessions, until it was reduced in significance to a convenient extra helping hand for daily duties as they arose.

When I moved from working in elementary schools to high schools, I learned that the number of staff and disciplines privileged within a school influenced the organization of those contexts, contexts frequently driven by organizational concerns. In each of those settings it was my impression that teachers experienced responsive professional development when they found authentic collaborative learning opportunities with a colleague influential in having particular skills within their school settings.

A Blurry View of Teacher Leadership

What then is teacher leadership and why is it so difficult to conceptualize? Much of the difficulty appears to lie in its informal and collective nature. The “murky” nature

of leadership, according to Leithwood and Riehl (2003) remains because “its present status is highly dependent on a set of possibly fleeting, modern, Western values” (p. 4). These fleeting values, according to Leithwood, remain rooted in a prominent belief to limit leadership to individual efforts in solving problems and finding solutions. A central difficulty in how we have conceptualized teacher leadership stems from the tension between an individualistic versus a collective notion of leadership.

Sergiovanni (2001) contended that we try to use leadership like it is a concrete concept, which is perpetually insufficient because the ideal is fluid in nature and dependent upon the particular context. “When we look in schools,” Fink (2005) observed, “Leadership is everywhere and does not rest exclusively on the shoulders of a few formal leaders.... It is like culture; it is intangible, non-rational and non-linear.” (p. xx) I wonder if this intangible quality of teacher leadership is partially due to its collective or distributed nature. With this type of leadership, the distinction between followers and leaders tends to blur and a different power relationship of shared agency is implied (Gronn, 2000). It seems this shared agency has been attributed to effectively distributing leadership, explaining how members and organizational structures can enhance or limit participation.

Waking and Seeing the Sleeping Giant

In my second year as a learning leader, I encountered a memory that perplexes me often. In that experience, I discovered leadership and the subtle ways that it can be shared and fostered when we are invested in learning. I was reminded of it one day while sitting

in a session of teacher learning leaders and learning coordinators. The question was posed, “Describe an inspirational educational leader. How did he or she lead in that role?”

No one says anything. In a room full of talkative teachers, something has happened that I do not understand. There is a hole, a gaping hole in this conversation on leadership and experiences. It is only when one teacher speaks up, and I see her, a face from my past, from a decade earlier in another school division I recall an inspirational leader. She describes the same person I envisioned as an impactful leader. It is funny when paths cross after a great deal of time. It takes me back to that classroom again with all those student needs. I never thought at the time that a colleague would be going through the same dilemmas, but seeing her, sensing the problem, I am reminded of seeing leadership and shared agency.

An Unexpected Encounter with a Leader of Teachers

Amid juggling long nights of lesson preparation and extra-curricular commitments, my turn came for the formal supervisory visit as a new teacher to the division. The director was scheduled to visit and I carefully planned for it. I had had other frequent supervisory visits in my previous school division. Prior to this I had been observed, and a discussion of the nature of the lesson followed. If things went well in my lesson, I would receive superficial compliments on elements they liked, maybe a suggestion for an improvement, and then a formal letter in the mail, outlining the visit.

In the past these had caused me a bit of anxiety but, overall, they had been positive experiences. This time the observation took a different direction.

This supervising director of education was a quiet and seemingly shy man. He seemed to observe and listen carefully while I did the usual things: framing a lesson, emphasizing the concept, and then interacting with and assessing the students' understanding as they tackled the work. The director watched for some time and then unexpectedly moved from observing at the side to walking along the desks among the students. He quietly conversed with students, looking at their work, asking them how they felt about school and (strange to me) was not focused on my performance. I, in turn, found I was watching and following him. As he moved from child to child, asking questions or musing about their families, he would simultaneously look at a particular book or work. He seemed to observe and listen to the children more than he watched and listened to me. At one point he moved to the board and drew a diagram, illustrating a concept that had emerged in the lesson for several students. It was much clearer and simpler in explanation than my attempt. For someone who I had assumed was shy, he showed firm, assured movements and yet his voice gently invited questions and contributions.

What followed in my supervisor's assessment were a series of questions and an unfolding conversation where I learned a great deal about intentionality and intuitiveness in leadership. I also witnessed how space was made for leadership when it was shared.

Did you know when you squat down beside a child as they ask a question that you change how you are both positioned? Now you are both equal height. Both of you can take on the work and have authority. That's why Jeff responded so quickly and with confidence. That is why he persevered with the task.

Did you realize in each movement you invite your students to learn with you? When you stopped and paused and thought out loud and weighed Sherri's answer, you demonstrated respect and curiosity and showed her how important her thoughts were. Then you tracked your thinking and modeled for them how to problem-solve.

I was only intuitive. I had not considered the power I had and its effect on students. I did not consciously think about how each of my actions, words chosen, or thoughts shared might affect each child so profoundly.

That day, I met a true leader of teachers. It was evident he valued teaching as he slipped smoothly into the intricacies of the work and possibilities for improving opportunities for students. His observations were not superficial or formulaic as in my previous supervisory visits; they were grounded in the intricacies of what was happening. He was not vague or superficially complimentary. He provided me with specific examples and challenged my assumptions. I would not realize until much later how many teachers he inspired and how carefully and deeply he thought about caring for all children. That brief classroom visit inspired me to move from intuitive skills to intentionality and, later, to creative design.

Leadership as Distributed and Interactive

Leadership, within a distributed perspective, is not limited to individual attributes, but instead is recognized as socially influenced and found in the process or interaction, which is the result of leaders, followers, and the situation (Gronn, 2000; Harris 2011; Spillane 2006). Spillane (2006), building on Gronn's (2000) work, nudged teacher leadership from the individual efforts to "the activities that influence motivation, knowledge, affect, and practice of other organizational members in the service of the organization's core work" (p. 11). The authority to lead therefore is not exclusively located in the formal positions, but dispersed throughout the organization, across and within structures, roles and routines. Distributive leadership understandings have been used to reveal how organizational structures have enhanced or limited teacher leadership in an effort to improve leadership capacity and school reform efforts (Grogan & Shakeshaft, 2011; Rutherford, 2009). Teacher leadership quietly flows among both formalized and informal roles illustrating how embedded it is within a supportive school and organizational landscape.

I question, as I look back on my experiences, if the ideal of teacher leadership remains intangible and invisible because the teaching profession does not promote and accept essential leadership qualities within teachers, especially if teachers themselves imagine something different for students and the school house they live within. If teachers are to be the real leaders in curriculum, instruction, professional learning, and school redesign, then they will require an imagination both social and empathetic, and a

variety of approaches that are differentially effective for many circumstances. To move from the prevailing autonomy of teaching within a classroom to a community learning-centered view within a school and school district requires imaginative inquiry and leadership among all participants.

I slowly begin to fathom the challenge of supporting learning and recognize the necessity of embedded leadership happening in schools most acutely when I return to work in a school district office and become a consultant. I wonder at the energy and time spent by district personnel in planning professional learning for teachers. It became a preoccupation that was missing consultation or considerate invitation. Instead of being responsive, it turned into its own learning agenda. I witnessed the folly in our ways vividly on the day we gathered teacher-learning coordinators together. Looking around I witnessed anger and frustration in the down-turned eyes and crossed arms, until a voice lamented, "This isn't what we expected. We didn't come here for this!" At that moment, I felt quite sick and could only stare downward and pick at loose threads in my pencil skirt. How had we become so preoccupied with hearing our own voices? When did we start echoing the phrases of research articles we did not understand deeply and had not yet experienced ourselves? How was it we were so busy leading, we forgot how to follow and care for and about others?

Troubling Teacher Leadership

In spite of the positive rhetoric on what teacher leadership can offer, literature outlines difficulties that have continued to hinder its success (Barth, 2003; Crowther, 2012; Goodwin, 2013). I return frequently to read about the many benefits and important offerings of teacher leadership when it remains rooted in schools and the classroom (Fullan & Knight, 2011; Goodwin, 2013; Hallinger & Heck, 2010; Leithwood & Sun, 2012). I learn how it seems obscured and hindered by a lack of external supports that were also missing in my experiences.

As I seek to re-imagine teacher leadership, I am drawn to the excitement and empowerment I found in my formalized leadership experiences, but I am also puzzled by how the educational landscape was still rife with barriers. I found myself recognizing my own experiences in the barriers identified in the literature. Repeatedly, when formalized teacher leadership positions were not embedded in the schoolhouse, district, and community they floundered and disappeared. I found, that as Gronn (2000) illustrated, unclear roles, blurry responsibilities, and a lack of distributed power relationships were major barriers in building personal and social capacity.

When teacher leadership was an add-on I witnessed the on-going tension between individualism and collectivity as a leadership ideal. Repeatedly I watched the tendency of teachers seeking an egalitarian ethos that thwarted teacher leadership efforts. This was further problematized when there was a lack of continuous responsive learning opportunities and resources for professional development that recognize the different

professional needs over a teaching career span (Muijs & Harris, 2003; Struyve, Meredith & Gielen, 2014). As a result, this missing element had me returning numerous times to Universities to study and deepen my understanding of the profession I was committed to. Reviewing the chronology of how teacher leadership has developed, as a phenomenon helped me understand why these barriers have persisted, but I wonder if amid recognizing those barriers, whether we really believe in the possibilities in teacher leadership.

Finding Myself in a Teacher Leadership Timeline

The phenomenon of teacher leadership is not new. In 1933, Dewey used the phrase ‘teacher as leader,’ stating, “The teacher is the intellectual leader of a social group...not by virtue of official position, but because of wider and deeper knowledge and matured experience” (in Collinson, 2012, p. 248). Successful teacher leadership within the classroom is a prerequisite for successful teacher leadership beyond the classroom, according to Collinson (2012)’s findings from a study of exemplary secondary school teachers. Muijis and Harris (2006) found teacher leadership was the key to school improvement because “it was seen to harness teacher creativity and devolve work and responsibility from the head [principal]” (p. 965). Such in-school classroom leadership can offer timely and relevant collegiality and professional learning for teachers who are often juggling classroom demands and collaborating on the fly.

While teaching, I realize perhaps we share more often than we realize. In my rush to use the photocopier I inadvertently leave an assignment and class materials or discover a colleague’s work forgotten there. I am curious about this finding

of a colleague's work even if it is irrelevant to what I am teaching as it is a window onto another classroom practice. I notice from the assignment, the tone in the directions, the style of organization, the clarity of the request, and guidance offered to the learner. I re-examine my own artifacts in light of these findings. At times I have found my own prepared work re-surface in other classrooms and in student binders of work and I feel like I have seeded something in another space. It is a small accidental interaction, but I see how even the accidental discovery at the photocopy machine and a quick conversation at the mailbox can seed new ideas as we continue rushing on our daily treadmills.

During the 1980s, while I was cycling along prairie side roads that connected my first small town teaching assignment to the rest of the world, the first wave of teacher leadership as a concept emerged in the literature. The term *teacher leadership* was used in the United States when the pivotal document *A Nation At Risk* (1986) triggered questions about the ineffectiveness of schools in North America (Coggins & McGovern, 2014). According to Silva, Gimbert and Nolan (2000), teacher leadership developed largely in the 1980s and 1990s as a response to improve educational performance. They contended that it was largely not successful, as teachers were “neutered by the bureaucratic routinization of teaching and learning that [grew] out of administrative attempts to control schools as places with teachers as deskilled workers and students as uniform products” (p. 11). In spite of tightening the managerial elements and striving for consistency and excellence, they reported, this era lacked both a focus on participative

leadership and a much-needed exploration into the instructional work that happened in classrooms. “Teachers [continued] to work in isolation segregated from one another in egg-crate classrooms ... [while] little attention [was] paid to teachers who had created their own leadership roles and exerted that leadership without leaving classroom teaching” (Troen & Boles, 1992, p.9). During this era, dissatisfaction with the status quo and lack of professionalization in teaching grew in North America.

A wealth of problem identification within school settings and among teaching practices that followed was believed to be instrumental to improving educational performance but it, too, did not lead to an obvious increase in teacher leadership (Troen & Boles, 1992). The ideal that all teachers could engage in and propel teacher leadership was not yet realized as it continued to be restricted by the notion that teacher leadership was in the domain of the administration that sanctioned how it was distributed and assigned (Bangs & Frost, 2016). I recognize my teacher learning leadership opportunities surface during the second wave in the development of teacher leadership. This phase was fueled by research acknowledging that teachers should play a more important role in the arena of the school and school district (York-Barr & Duke, 2004). The ideal of teacher leadership initiatives now promoted the expertise of experienced or skillful teachers, and sought to capitalize on their instructional knowledge. Initially, opportunities to develop curriculum, provide staff development support or be a team leader remained outside of school-based teacher leadership positions “still apart from rather than a part of the daily work of teachers” (Silva, Gimbert, & Nolan, 2000, p. 780). School district initiatives

continued to prescribe the learning for teachers, rather than involving teachers in designing the learning opportunities that they perceived were needed.

This limited involvement of on-site teachers in shaping their own professional learning was further restricted by an era of budgetary restraints (Hargreaves, 2011). Hargreaves pointed out that, as recessions accompanied this era, they led to both a financial restraint in schools and a demand for accountability. While remaining funds continued to focus on a highly centralized curriculum and the monitoring of student growth with standardized testing, this emphasis failed to foster the desired professionalization and empowerment of teachers. According to Darling-Hammond (2010), also missing was the much-needed understanding of the impact of growing demands for learning needs within an increasingly diverse student population.

Out of this second order of change, emerged the present third wave, which is characterized as having an anti-hierarchical philosophy that values professionalism and collegiality (Silva, Gimbert, & Nolan, 2000). This third wave, according to York-Barr and Duke (2004), “reflects an increased understanding that promoting instructional improvement requires an organizational culture that supports collaboration and continuous learning and recognizes teachers as primary creators and re-creators of school culture. This involves teachers within and outside of their classrooms” (p. 260). This wave initially fostered communities of practice (Wenger, 1998) nuanced in specific roles and expectations such as professional learning communities (Wenner & Campbell, 2017), critical friend groups (Donohoo, Hattie & Eelis, 2018) and instructional coaching

(Knight, 2008). While these emerging efforts were intended to foster collaboration and review professional practices, teacher leadership efforts continued to be troubled by the tensions of “contrived collegiality coerced by mandates to achieve specific district or Ministry-determined goals” (Osmond-Johnson, 2017, p. 27). In spite of attempts to align organizational efforts and improve the capacity of leadership, it seems that teacher leadership has continued to be tenuous.

Reviewing Relational Leadership Influences

Troen and Boles (1992) observed out that “while the literature of the 1980s and 1990s challenged the top down nature of schools and emphasized a re-structuring of the role of the teacher in the organization, [leadership] ignored the critical role that gender played in the history and organization of teaching” (p. 8). Teaching jobs, dominated by women, continued to be low-status, while the majority of administrative positions continued to be held by men (Welham, 2014). Most teacher leadership positions continued to be determined not by teachers, but by those higher up in the school organization. The gradual shift to fashioning new collaborative ways of working within the school community is suggested by some studies as the eventuality of a female-influenced relational leadership style on the profession (Haslam & Ryan, 2008; Hertneky, 2014; Wasley, 1991). Schein (2010) offered an explanation for the slow visible changes in the make-up of an organization’s leaders when he summarized leaders’ desire to propagate their own likeness and the static quality of organizations:

Culture is ultimately created, embedded, evolved, and manipulated by leaders...culture comes to constrain, stabilize, and provide structure and meaning to the group members even to the point of ultimately specifying what kind of leadership will be acceptable in the future... dynamic processes of culture creation and management are the essence of leadership and make you realize that leadership and culture are two sides of the same coin. (p. 3)

I consider the supremacy of presiding leaders in Schein's statement. I contemplate the enduring traditional practices and tensions affecting gender and roles while I survey my experiences. I wonder about the notion of culture when I consider all the elements that contribute to an educational learning landscape. I ponder while wiping the dusty mirror in the garage, what has changed over time? As I look at my hands clutching a rag made from a discarded skirt, I am surprised at how my hands resemble those of my grandmother's. I contemplate why I repeatedly turned to wearing a pencil skirt.

This Skirt

*This skirt is old and faded
All the color's washed away
I've had it now for more damn years
Than I can count anyway*

This skirt I wore
beside you, on school photo day,
I hoped I looked like business,
but, I laughed until I cried, then went away.

This skirt I let out
When the baby came early that year,
At times green and down with sickness,
Your kindness showed me not to fear.

This skirt became a costume,
We donned it like a cape,
Pinned close, it held us together
Hidden on the teaching landscape.

This skirt was exchanged
For a sisterhood of stretchy pants,
With teachers I found friendship,
We created and escaped into the dance.

This skirt, now worn and torn,
Concealed below my aching heart,
Ghostly fingers tugged that hemline,
A reminder of my part.

*This skirt is a brave old relic
With a brave old history
I now grasp it while dusting,
a fabric soaked in memory*

*So old I should replace it
But I'm not about to try²*



Figure 6.6. Retrieving the pencil skirt.

² *Italicized lines from Chapin Carpenter (1988), This Shirt, State of the Heart (Album)*

Scheining a Light on Assumptions

As I try to understand my teacher leadership experiences, I reach for cultural analysis as a way to further illuminate my experiences of teacher leadership. According to Schein (2010), cultural analysis “helps to explain some of the seemingly incomprehensible and irrational aspects of what goes on in groups, occupations, organizations, and other kinds of social units that have common histories” (p. 21). While the lure of understanding something of concern is powerful, Schein warned that cultural forces such as social reality with “its espoused beliefs and values and the level of underlying assumptions” continually operate outside of our awareness and limit our perceptions (p. 32). He pointed out that a clash emerges when one’s “individual reality that is learned from experiences and has an absolute quality of truth is not shared by others” (p. 119). A kind of consensus must emerge on whose experience to trust and what social reality will build the basis for common ground.

A further challenge emerges if an organization and its leaders and members are to thrive during an era of rapid change. An era of uncertainty requires re-examination of the current way of doing things so as to accommodate what appears to be a more complex, fast-paced, and culturally diverse future. Schein (2010) contended that in order to do this, leaders would find that “organizational boundaries and networks need to be loosened and then redefined” (p. 279). Each member, and especially those leading change efforts, would need to become perpetual learners, flexible and adaptive to the growing demands for creating new resources needed for constructing new knowledge. The difficulty for

teacher leaders working toward such a change is that culture is “a stabilizer, a conservative force, and a way of making things meaningful and predictable” (Schein, 2010, p. 365). The challenges in this paradox, Schein contended, are found in the reality that while we seek and value strong cultures and admire how they achieve effective and lasting performances, we will be thwarted by this same force of stability as it makes it hard to change things. He added that it might be difficult to recognize cultural elements as they operate below the surface and subtly guide us in how we conceptualize leadership and envision leading learning. Our perceptions concerning the environment and expectations we construct for learning relate to our understandings of time, space, and our prior cultural learning experiences.

Barth (2007) added to this notion of how “the culture at a school dictates what newcomers must and must not do until they have experienced for at least two to three years the toil of the old timers” (p.160). Once this obligatory three years is past, Barth asserted, new teachers will be “so immersed in the culture, that [they will] no longer be able to see with the clarity of a [newcomer], the important aspects of the school’s culture such as patterns of leadership, competition, fearfulness, self-interest, or lack of support” (p. 161). I was reminded of this one day in the staff room when I was once again corralled by a work colleague.

Stepping Off the Line

I was reminded about the territories teachers mark out for newcomers during the autumn that I was transferred to a new high school. I now had ample experiences in working with colleagues for many consecutive years in one high school as a department head and learning leader.

After being away on an educational leave, I prepared to return to a teaching position. In early January I contacted the superintendent assigned to my area and shared my interests for my next work placement. I was informed all decisions would be made at the staffing table in May and that I would be well taken care of. Knowing there was an informal Division policy to transfer teachers after an educational leave, I anticipated a move. While this policy was not set in stone, I had observed how it was routinely practiced. Among teachers it was also rumored that the transferring of staff was the customary way of moving non-conforming or ineffective teachers through the system if, and only if, a deal between principals could be struck for a trade or exchange.

With no consultation or input, at the end of June, hours before a staff farewell banquet, I learned where I would work. While the placement could have been far worse, and was in fact favorable, I wondered at how I had had no role or influence in the decision. The tardy timing of such a significant event seemed inconsiderate. It was puzzling to me that a profession requiring great caring and investment in the relational work with students and among staff persisted in this impersonal transfer practice to serve

the system needs. The investment in my educational leave seemed to be of no consequence when I was assigned a new position in a new high school.

Now well into my career and having spent a lengthy period of time in the same school, in spite of requests that I start a number of new programs around the system, I had decided I wanted to know one school community well over a longer period of time. I had forgotten how colleagues establish territory, particularly the most experienced on staff. From the couches or corner tables in the staff rooms, I had learned early on in my career that casual comments are often disguised challenges. I was the recipient of such a challenge the morning I set out to take time to drink a cup of tea and join new colleagues in the staffroom. This new staff room was a large space with many empty chairs, except for a small congregation of veterans occupying the couch. I was startled when a voice called across the room from the couch.

“No one with autism should be allowed in science classes. They just can’t learn science. (pause) In my experience when I tried to teach, they just couldn’t get it. It’s a waste of time and effort having them in those classes!”

It was not clear at first, as to who was being addressed but, given that I was alone at the central staff table, the increased volume seemed to be for my benefit. Looking up and over to the couch, I saw three sets of eyes peering at me, issuing a challenge. The voice that broadcasted the challenge belonged to a long time veteran, outspoken and known for her influence both on the staff and in the community of athletics. In the

district, I was known for advocating for autistic students while in my role as a resource teacher.

I contemplated whether to accept the challenge and step in and tackle the issue. The others remained watchful. No one stepped in. No one ventured to say anything. And so, after no rescue from the tea leaves in my cup, I decided to plunge into that ill-informed comment.

“Have any of you heard about Temple Grandin? Maybe you saw a recent movie where Claire Danes stars as Temple Grandin. It was an HBO production. Well, the great thing about that film is they really capture Temple Grandin’s story of a world-renowned scientist who benefited from her unique autistic insights. She designed the most amazing animal-holding facilities in abattoirs. Curiously, she recognized the emotions of animals and realized there would be a better way to reduce their anxiety, which resulted in improving the quality of meat. The most interesting part for me is how she realized the importance of emotion and its influence on anxiety in spite of her autism. She is an entertaining speaker and uncommon scientist. She really turned my thinking on its head and challenged my assumptions about autism.”

There, I took the bait. I went on way too much, perhaps, when I was flooded by my own nervousness.

The topic was quickly abandoned, and no one looked at me as I left the staffroom wondering whether those colleagues really wanted to understand autism, or if this was a test to see what side I was on.

What are those “sides”?

When I looked around the staff room, I realized there was a vacancy in that space. Younger staff members seemed to be missing. I wondered, were they preoccupied with student activities over the noon hour? Were they working over the lunch hour to keep up? Had they sought an excuse to avoid dealing with the staff room banter? I wondered how the challenge I had just faced might be enacted with them. Would I have dealt with this challenge differently as a new younger staff member? Would I have silently disappeared into the business of the day and retreated into my classroom space?

If “school cultures cannot be changed from without [then] they must be changed from within” (Barth, 2007, p. 162). Barth offered that the most critical element of any school’s culture is to provide an “ethos hospitable to the promotion of human learning” (p. 162). The first major purpose of a school, then, is to provide a culture hospitable to human learning, and the second major purpose is to make it likely that students and educators will become and remain lifelong learners.

This seems a clear argument for the need for in-house teacher learning leaders, but I wonder how we can entertain an “ethos hospitable to the promotion of lifelong human learning”. The daily treadmill for teachers detracts from opportunities to share in discussions where we examine our beliefs and explore our practices in how we understand learning. This might be an important starting place for change and provide the conditions where a collective of caring and collaboration can thrive on our educational landscapes.

Cultivating Leadership within an Educational Landscape

Cultivating a landscape of learning and collaboration requires re-imagining how we cultivate communities of practice (Wenger, 1998). The cultivation of supports within an organizational landscape was further illustrated by Wenger, McDermott, and Snyder (2002):

Communities of practice are a natural part of organizational life. They will develop on their own and many will flourish whether or not the organization recognizes them. Their health depends primarily on the voluntary engagement of their members and on the emergence of internal leadership. Moreover, their ability to steward knowledge as a living process depends on some measure of informality and autonomy. Once designated as the keepers of the expertise, communities should not be second-guessed or over managed. (p.12)

They caution, while some may argue that this suggests that there is nothing we can do to cultivate communities of practice, they suggest that in fact, “organizations need to cultivate communities of practice both actively and systematically [for] their benefit as well as for the benefit of the members and the communities themselves” (p.12). They warned that if organizations fail to take steps to support communities of practice they will be unlikely to achieve their full potential and instead witness practices limited to friendship lines, fragmented local contexts, or communities not developed at all, “either because people do not know about each other or because they do not have the time and energy to devote to community development....Without intentional cultivation, the

communities that do develop will depend on the spare time of members, and participation is more likely to be spotty, especially when resources are lean.” (p.13)

I see cultivating leadership most lucidly on the educational landscape when I view the emergence of prairie crocuses in spring: then I can re-imagine teacher leadership. Peering into a thatch of crocuses I see the micro level or heart of educational leadership, informal in nature and tied first to the relational and instructional work of teachers with students within the classroom. While we tend to think in terms of adults learning from adults in communities of practice, I found that I needed to create a community of practice with my students by first listening and observing when collaborating and imagining in how to foster learning within our classroom community. I found that my personal sense of agency developed before I experienced collective efficacy and collaboration beyond classroom doors. Encompassing all of this are the organizational conditions for energizing learners and promoting a diversity of opportunities where beliefs are shared and rooted in social imagination. See Figure 6.



Figure 6.7. Re-imagining teacher leadership on the educational landscape.

Just as the prairie crocus requires a constellation of conditions to take seed, grow, and flourish, so does teacher leadership depend upon organizational conditions that offer social imagination and conditions to foster personal and social efficacy. Within the image of the prairie crocus is the heart of personal leadership conditions (commitment, knowledge, situational understanding and self-efficacy) needed for fostering personal capacity. Beside, and interconnected to these social conditions where relationships

include trust, reciprocity, and collectivity, so that learning networks develop and social capacity is fostered. This occurs among student learners and adult learners.

Conditions Needed for Fostering Teacher Leadership

There is much concern about improving leadership capacity, but the nature of what teacher leadership might require in order to flourish seems to slip into curiosity about how leadership is distributed and formalized within schools and systems. Harris (2003) suggested that teacher leadership is “the process of facilitating the personal growth of individuals or groups” and this interaction results in learning or knowledge development (p. 2). Like Spillane (2006), Harris and Muijs (2003) contended much of the leadership literature had been premised on individual endeavors rather than on collective actions and it was this tendency that overlooked or dismissed the relevance of where teacher leadership flourished within each context. Leadership is found not just in the personal qualities, regardless of formal or informal role, it is found in “those activities that influence motivation, knowledge, affect and the practice of other organizational members in the service of the organization’s core work (Spillane, 2006, p. 11). I would concur, and add that the relationships formed during experiences where we are successful influence our motivation and knowledge and build our personal leadership capacity for a variety of roles or contexts.

Frost and Harris (2003) illustrated personal conditions as a key factor in the exercise of leadership and included additional sources of “authority, knowledge,

situational understanding and interpersonal skills” (p.490). The context where teachers display leadership and develop these attributes refers to actions both inside and outside the classroom when they participate in the process of creating a learning-oriented school space. This implies that there is always a smooth path from personal interests and autonomy to investment in community ideals and healthy and productive communities of collaboration if teachers’ leaders are at the helm. Unfortunately, the success of teacher leadership is at times unclear as the very conditions for its strength also challenge its capacity. Barth (1986) commented on the landscape of the schoolhouse and the characteristics of teacher leaders, likening them to obstinate goats rather than complacent sheep. Their need for autonomy and individual tenacity remains important to their ingenuity and perseverance, but Barth lamented that schoolhouses were not set up to tolerate individuality and that in fact, schools and school systems diminish the possibility of individuality.

Searching Self-efficacy

To understand the social conditions needed for fostering teacher leadership, we need to return again to the personal conditions that will foster personal capacity and in particular self-efficacy with its interconnection to collective efficacy.

Bandura’s (1997) work continues to be prominent in identifying the characteristics that contribute to self-efficacy. The characteristics outlined by Bandura closely parallel the observations Huberman (1989) made during his career stages research. They both

identify four sources for fostering self-efficacy that encompass social and organizational elements. Bandura demonstrated that successful prior experiences convince the individual that they will be successful if they persevere. In addition, the opportunity for vicarious experiences of seeing others succeed also influenced self-efficacy and served as a model in how to achieve tasks. This experience offered social comparisons to help one assess the likelihood of success. In addition to successful and vicarious experiences, the support of verbal persuasion from a significant other informed feelings of efficacy through encouragement or discouragement. Finally, Bandura identified there must be an understanding of the task at hand and one must be able to assess their physical reaction to the situation as an indicator of efficacy. The four sources for building self-efficacy as identified by Bandura (1997) illustrate how a supporting colleague and effective instructional coach can be instrumental in helping foster self-efficacy in teachers and foster teacher leadership.

Cooper Stein, Macaluso, & Nevis Stanulis (2016) refined Bandura's model of self-efficacy when they applied it to teacher leaders in particular. They found teacher leaders' self-efficacy encompassed "the perceived nature of self-efficacy which rests on one's interpretation of her potential for impact, not actual potential for impact." (p. 1005) Expanding on Bandura's (1997) definition of self-efficacy, they viewed teacher leaders' beliefs in their capabilities to organize, execute action, and the impact on the degree of effort committed to a task. Those teachers with higher teacher efficacy were found more

likely to generate positive outcomes for students, experience greater job satisfaction, have less stress, and stay in teaching longer.

If teachers' leadership requires an exercise of leadership and influence that is shaped by relationships with colleagues and students within the existing organization, then at the heart of teacher leadership is one's perceived personal capacity. Personal capacity includes special knowledge, self-efficacy, commitment, and situational understanding. Social conditions encompass and influence personal capacity, which is further impacted by organizational conditions. While the role of teacher agency in fostering a belief in student learning potential and activating other teachers is central to the development of collective efficacy and teacher leadership, it is also influenced by the ecosystem within which teachers find themselves working within.

The extent and effectiveness of working relationships between and among teachers requires collaborative communities where participants trust and support one another. According to Frost and Harris (2003) acquiring this form of social capital consists of the degree of trust among stakeholders and is reflected in the extent and quality of relationships between its members and supporting division personnel. They found professional learning communities of practice, the crucial resource dependent upon and also fostering collaboration, and the delicate relational work in negotiating and activating peers to be instrumental in strengthening the influence and success of teacher leadership. At its very core, Frost and Harris (2003) contended, teacher leadership rested

on the foundation of teacher self-efficacy and the advocacy in administrative partnerships.

Looking at Leadership Lifespan Conditions

Huberman (1989) explored individuality by identifying the professional life cycle of teachers from differing continents and decades. He investigated the careers of secondary school teachers with the question as to what the most influential determinants within and outside school institutions were. From this research, he saw career development as a process, not a series of events, with specific phases and influences on how teachers viewed their teacher identity and participation. Huberman's (1988) research offers a perspective with an "[analytic tissue] incorporate[ing] both a psychological and sociological perspective" on how the characteristics of an individual might affect the social surroundings of the organization and they are in turn affected by it (p. 120). Huberman's (1989) stages of 'establishment and examination' are relevant to understanding the complexity of my experiences and add to the clarity of Barth's observations on teacher leadership.

Huberman (1989) found after the initial years of survival, if teachers persevered and were successful and they became comfortable with organizing and delivering instruction, they would move their interests beyond the classroom to working with colleagues, or into more experimentation within their own classroom. In particular he found upper secondary teachers differed from their elementary colleagues; they were able

to pursue other options longer and sought positions that offered desired freedom from direct supervision and greater instructional mastery.

Alongside the consolidation of an instructional repertoire, Huberman (1989) found teachers' experimentation and activism led to subsequent attempts to increase their impact within the profession. Huberman found teachers in the 7-18 years category of experience started to reassess both their own impact and any inconsistencies they found in the school or school district. While they often were stepping out to lead a department or committee, they showed an independence and understanding of the interdependence of relationships during this phase. Huberman termed these tendencies as either "experimentation with activism" or "reassessment with self-doubts". While experimentation and activism thrived within the classroom settings, most of the doubts reported by teachers were institutional, where they reported being "worn down by the routine aspects of the profession, or 'disappointed' by the social climate or the quality of the administration within the building" (p. 45). Those that achieved an acceptance of their teaching career tended to actively seek novelty and challenge every five or six years.

When Huberman questioned teachers as to whether they would pursue teaching again knowing what they knew about the profession, women, notably those working part-time, were more likely to choose teaching again over men. Huberman found that men who remained in a teaching role and tended to put "all their chips on their professional self-image, with no countervailing engagements outside the school" (p. 48) did not seem satisfied with teaching and in retrospect would not have chosen the profession.

Peering at a Career

Much of my career parallels the stages outlined in Huberman's (1989) work on the professional life cycle of teachers across continents and decades. I wonder at his findings in the stages of career development and ponder if knowing all of this might have been a useful navigational tool when I was travelling the teaching landscape and making decisions about my career choices. Staring in the mirror today, I wonder about the final career stage.

Huberman found that between years 19-30, teachers gradually disengaged from career pursuits indicating either serenity with a relational distance or disregard and conservatism. The deciding factor in whether teachers felt serene or bitter depended on their involvement in leadership roles. Huberman, Grounour and Marti (1993) further investigated the withdrawal stage of teacher careers over time and across continents, finding those who spent their years teaching and experimenting at the classroom level tended to remain serene and satisfied. They found that teachers gradually tended to tighten their influence focusing on a particular assignment and disinvesting in school and system work. Those who had spent time engaging in issues at the school and district levels were most disenchanted and bitter. The irony of extending one's engagement and influence and its link to disillusionment has been termed "Huberman's Paradox" (Lieberman & Miller, 2004) where "on the one hand, [while] teachers were stimulated by their involvement in reform work and leadership within their school... that very work led to burnout, disaffection, professional conflict and disappointment" (p. 40). Huberman's

(1996) research predicted that teachers who invested consistently in classroom-level experiments with an early concern for instructional efficiency were far more likely to be satisfied than their peers who had been heavily involved in school-wide or system innovation. Initially, the concept of the Huberman's paradox (Hargreaves, 1994) drew me to this research, but I became increasingly curious if there were patterns in life cycle research among teachers that might explain teacher leadership ideals and disillusionment I had experienced while travelling that landscape.

Scanning a Career

My career meanders along an invisible river valley. Hovering above it like a hawk, I see a time line emerge that resembles a series of oxbow lakes, not quite connected to the major river but intentionally moving circuitously away from and toward something intangible while pocketing in their creation, a unique ecosystem.

I stepped away from teaching positions or communities every three to four years searching for something beyond the existing context. Was each step away prompted by disillusionment with the current state of affairs? Perhaps it was an insatiable craving for learning something new. My longest sustained work experience within one school coincided with a reform initiative when my teaching role was formalized into a teacher learning leader role. Looking back now, I realize in many ways, it was surprising that it happened.

Seeing Big

When I survey and scrutinize the list of major events both in my life and career, and then illustrate these events by using color, re-occurring significant events are revealed. It was Chang (2008), in *Autoethnography As Method*, who gave me the initial idea of chronologically reviewing each element. She instructed “consider your research focus, select and chronologically list major events or experiences from your life or career. Describe the circumstances of specific events and why they are important.” (p. 157). I then converted these writing exercises into a compilation of timelines and found applying color, symbol, and an image helped me distinguish between re-occurring or significant events. The use of CSI (color, symbol, and image) developed by Ritchhart, Church & Morrison (2011) in *Making Thinking Visible* also helped me to identify and distill the essence of my experiences and develop metaphorical connections. See examples of career timelines in the Appendix.

It was this experience that fostered metaphors and generated the idea of a series of oxbow lakes and my sense of peering as a hawk looking at unique ecosystems. Choosing a way to illustrate the timeline of events symbolically and then use color to distinguish and reveal re-occurring or significant events helped reveal the informal aspects of teacher leadership and my decision-making influences at the time. It also illustrated how the events both in my career and life outside of school interplayed. Reflecting on my career phases, the personal, social and organization conditions influenced my decisions and journey as a teacher leader.

CHAPTER 7

MAKING SPACE FOR TEACHER LEADERSHIP

In our rush to reform education, we have forgotten a simple truth: reform will never be achieved by renewing appropriations, restructuring schools, rewriting curricula, and revising texts if we continue to demand and dishearten the resource called the teacher on whom so much depends.

(Palmer, 1998, p. 3)

Telling One's Story

Re-examining the events we have lived through, and the stories we have told about them previously, allows us to expand and deepen our understandings of the lives we have led, the landscapes we have lived within and travelled, and the work we have explored. Crawford (2009), over 4 years working with department heads in the U.K., found that, while narrative inquiry revealed leadership demands, teacher leaders themselves benefited most from the reflective 'storying' of their experiences. Brill (2008) also captured the therapeutic effects of telling leadership war stories. He found the process of reflective storytelling allowed new and emerging leaders to take charge of their own growth and development.

I find that reflective storytelling helps me explore and understand my past experiences and current reality. Metaphors in my stories help me open my experiences and emotions to others. They offer playful reflection when exploring within the spaces of

my wonderings. Metaphors open the space of experience for others to join in considering teacher leadership. When I see or hear insightful views from other educators, I find solace in a community of educators. Critical and thoughtful questioning fuels my reflective nature and helps me comprehend what is operating in the settings where I work. Discovering differing perspectives offers me the challenge and opportunity for addressing inequities and disappointments in our educational settings.

Greene (1995) wrote of the desire to reclaim a sense of possibility in our day-to-day interactions and her thoughts are a salve when I am frustrated or disappointed. She reminds me of why I continue searching in different spaces to see more and to hear more when she relates, “[that] by such experiences we are not only lurched out of the familiar and the taken-for-granted, but we may also discover new avenues for action... and we may experience a sudden sense of new possibilities and thus new beginnings” (p. 379). When I tire of the excuses for the lack of responsiveness by colleagues, bleak offerings for students, inadequate and wasteful practices of institutions, I summon up images of students and classrooms from my past experiences and turn to metaphors for what ought to be.

Searching for Sky Hooks and Walking Sticks

There is a time when we reflect and look back on the year and its events and then look forward to all that might be possible. At times I have found myself spending that time, New Year’s Eve, in Mexico. Like many parts of the world, there is the custom of bringing the New Year in with a celebration of great illumination with fireworks. Along

with fireworks, sky lanterns are used in some parts of the country to capture the wonder and hope of the upcoming season. These sky lanterns are a simple technology. The lanterns only require a canvas covering, a candle, a flame, and gentle hands to release them onto an uplifting breeze. Resembling a small hot air balloon, the cloth-covered lanterns, powered by a simple candle's flame, gradually float into the night sky. As they float and lift into the sky, they gradually appear as if they are a part of a greater constellation of stars. Magically floating over the ocean surface, the lanterns transform from stars in the night sky into the reflections of an image of a giant translucent jellyfish over the water. The vivid stars in the sky seem to become one with a magical dancing ocean creature. The burning flame energizes the flight and produces the fanciful creature, and then it slowly burns out and falls back to earth. When I see sky lanterns in the night sky, I am always reminded of the hope and magic in learning alongside students. When I see sky lanterns I remember Jesse and how he taught me, the teacher.

Learning with Jesse

The day Jesse arrived, I heard him before I saw him. Appearing like a ghost, pale, disheveled he held only a ragged broken binder. Long and lean, he sauntered into the room and flopped down onto the couch along with a bang of his binder. It was not unusual for new students to drop in, but his dramatic entrance drew everyone's attention, especially when he withdrew a lighter from his jacket and began flicking out a flame, which he continued to stare into intently.

Unassigned and unknown to me, I searched his face for some sign of introduction or acknowledgment. Interrupting his silence, I plunged in asking what he was looking for. Below a wild cowlick, his piercing black eyes darted back and forth avoiding mine. After what felt like a lengthy pause, he replied, "Got no problem. Just need to be here." Looking at the lighter and the haggard binder, I wondered what would come from working with this student.

This classroom, I now found myself teaching within, was a high school resource room for students to attend and receive assistance in learning. The couch holding Jesse was at the entryway to this classroom. From this entrance, it funneled into a typical classroom space, confined by shelves and chalkboards. Scattered around the room were tables and workstations where interactions between teacher and students were quite fluid in nature. There were no prescribed lessons from the front of the room. Some students registered to attend on a daily basis, while others dropped in on a need basis. I operated an open door policy where students could drop in if they needed help or access to computers and materials we had on hand.

Most days there would be a random group of twenty or more students working and seeking help with whatever task or problem was before them. My job would be to figure out both the assigned task they brought in and connect and assess the student's learning needs and skills for the assignment. Daily needs might span the gamut from helping students study for a drivers' license, read or scribing for an exam, deciphering an assignment's expectation, understanding a key concept, editing an essay, while

monitoring daily mental health and social well-being. Some students would choose to attend each day over their entire high school career; while for others it would be a temporary sporadic encounter, dependent on their specific needs and goals.

To help with this wide range of on-going requests, I was assisted by a group of educational assistants who would help both in the resource room and connect for me the work happening in individual classrooms. Like the students, they would rotate turns in the space, sharing their observations, resting their haggard binders, and seeking clarification on how to assist students or understand the daily work that surfaced from classroom teachers. These educational assistants were a valuable force as they had an intimate view of both the classroom and hallway spaces and they connected students to learning when it seemed formidable. From day to day, there was an adventure into some new curricular area or assignment. Often teachers, administrators, and parents would join our space and stop in with questions about some student that needed help. Supervising ten educational assistants, monitoring the casework for over two hundred students both directly and indirectly and mentoring new teachers in a large department of student services, all contributed to a busy school day and had Jesse been anyone different, perhaps the three-ringed circus I helped orchestrate would have obscured his presence.

Each day when Jesse would turn up late, coffee in hand, he would pull out the binder he now stored behind the couch, all the while watching the room. He wanted no help, and no obvious attention. Instead, he would focus his gaze between his lighter and

his binder, while I moved around the room working with individual students or setting up small groups. After the first week of regular attendance, I enquired into Jesse.

Enquiries with guidance counselors and administrators confirmed, Jesse did need “to be here”. He arrived with no cumulative record outlining his school experiences, but he had shared a story of growing up in flying dust and travelling and attending too many schools he could barely recall. According to the counselor he was looking for housing and undoubtedly gapped in his schooling.

Gradually when his attendance became predictable, he was scheduled into a reading class I offered for youth who struggled to read and learn. This became his only class, as no one expected he would stay for long, nor was it clear he would fit into any other structured classroom settings.

Initially it was not easy to get to know Jesse. Some days, he could only rest his head on a desk. Other days he would burble little conversations like sideline notes. Jesse’s small smatterings of imaginary conversations did not seem to follow any line of reasoning or stay on topic; they just slipped out trickling through the work of others and distracting those nearby.

Of all his traits, most curious was Jesse’s fascination with the night sky and stars he knew by name. Tracing the constellations, he would recall the names of gods and heroes. He similarly loved the oceans with their mysterious dark depths. His eyes would shine with delight when he had time to explore the oceans and heavens. While he struggled to read words, he would disappear into the images of oceans and the night sky

and ask a steady stream of questions. The pictures would lure and hold him and he then would try to hold onto smatterings of words found on the page.

While Jesse would attempt to read on his own and talk frequently in class, he would never write. He refused to write, in spite of the daily request and expectation to produce writing. His struggle to write and organize his thoughts was prevalent in that classroom. As a class of misfits, when we came together we would regularly serve tea and share writing. I facilitated this form of a writer's workshop each week encouraging students to question how we formulated our thoughts and captured them on the page. We looked at reading passages through the eyes of imaginary writers and Jesse participated in these conversations, but still he would not write.

Although he attended each day, and became quite skilled at pouring tea and participating in discussions, he did not attempt or complete any assignments or work required. Gradually after two months of ongoing encouragement and prompting, I tired of Jesse's demands: the way he needed to be reminded about staying on task, the steady distraction of others and his refusal to produce any work. His constant stream of questions, and seemingly unrelated babbling, slowly seemed less charming and more of an obstacle that derailed the course of instruction.

When report card season descended and we had nothing to show for Jesse, aside from observations and a perfect, though routinely late, attendance record, I panicked. I decided to push on him to produce something, demanding he produce something or drop the class, further claiming it seemed a waste of his and my time. Jesse stared straight

ahead, banged his binder shut and walked out of the room. I regretfully believed that was the end of Jesse.

The next day, true to form, Jesse appeared late for class with a coffee in hand, and appearing as if nothing had happened. The other students were busy writing when he walked up to my desk, and looking down at me, he murmured, “You keep goin’ on about me doing nothing, well, here!” He shoved a packet of folded worn papers onto my desk, claiming, “You wanna see writing, look-it this.”

Picking up the flimsy worn papers that were soft and pilled on the surface, I imagined each sheet as a thin piece of fabric that had been pulled many times from a pocket until the smooth papery surface folded to the touch. The writing before me resembled that of a child’s awkward scrawls. The story that Jesse presented was itself not memorable, but what was remarkable was its survival. I would learn he had written it when he was in grade three and miraculously it had survived numerous moves from foster home to foster home.

Holding it up like a diploma, he lamented, “You know I never passed anything since grade three. I just keep getting passed over and over.” And with that he picked up his writing and returned to the space in his desk. At seventeen he identified the paradox of all his years. While he was placed in a new space each year, he was also ‘passed-over’.

Report card season descended like the weight of heavy snows in winter. Busy writing long individual educational plans for the numerous and growing numbers of

students I was supporting, I was preoccupied with my work. Meetings with collaborating teachers and families pulled me away from the classroom and one day Jesse's tardy appearances stopped as abruptly as when he had appeared on that sunny fall day. No one seemed to know where he went or why. Enquiries were made again, but they were now futile. Jesse and the grade three writer's diploma had evaporated.

With that one gesture of sharing his precious accomplishment, Jesse left a marked impression on me and stopped me in my tracks and routines. My self-righteous pursuit of helping students in reading assigned tasks and writing the required essay was confronted that day, and I paused to wonder about why we write in school and whether we really ever write to learn.

Jesse reminded me of the power we can find in our experiences and how we might hold them within a narrative. His sustained effort to hang on to that story amidst the turmoil and uncertainty in his life showed me the importance of the memories we carry and the stories we choose to tell about our lives.

Jesse taught me about inner and outer spaces and the interconnections found within those spaces. I learned from his love of the night sky and his knowledge of stars that there is a need for some greater hope that offers visions of possibilities. I observed when he was fascinated by the earth's inner space, oceans could hide mysteries that there is delight and wonder in how we might find ourselves in an imaginary secretive world. When Jesse would dream of imaginary worlds in the oceans and the night sky, while

tucked into a worn-out utilitarian desk, he conjured a world offering both nearness and remoteness, illustrating the immense possibility of students and their thoughts.

A Tug on One's Memory

Jesse, ghostlike, shrouded in memories, joins other students that have passed through my life and haunt me. There are some illuminated by their ideals, hopes, and amazing resilience and others who remain a puzzle I still need to understand. When I sit at a meeting to debate some policy or discuss some planning direction for student learning, these students join me like ghosts. Each child and youth slips out of a stored memory. They emerge and distract me from the meeting space I find myself in.

A tug, tiny and quick,

Brushing and rushing it away, I stay focused.

Until,

There it is, again.

Definitely, a tug on my hemline.

Small invisible fingers pinch my calf!

And finally when I do nothing, but carry on--- sitting--- smiling---and talking,

From below,

I hear the sound of throat clearing, followed by heavy muffled sighs

that seem summoned from invisible folded arms on the table before me.

And then as if it wasn't enough,

another pinch follows, and grasps all of my tenderness.

I hold up each ideal and wonder what would Jesse say, would that fit for Aiden, or Sean? I switch to my parental hat and wonder would I wish this for my daughters? We underestimate the effect we have on the students we teach, on the climate of the classrooms we influence, and the contributions we offer and share with our colleagues. Memories of students and colleagues that have passed through my life surround me. There are many that demonstrated remarkable hope and resilience and remain like sky lanterns for me.

The Spaciousness Revealed in Leadership

So, is leadership really a never-ending reflection on actions that address our hopes and lurking fears? When we are not seeking some vision of possibility is it a wrestling with the reality of perpetual incompleteness within our present context? I understand leadership more lucidly when I consider leading in action. I readily recognize it when we are engaged in caring, committing, serving, observing, negotiating, trusting, respecting, and reflecting. When I try to see it in its entirety as a whole and one thing, it becomes more difficult. As a noun, I see contributions from our efforts, but if leadership is only relegated to individual leaders leading it seems insufficient and shallow. When leading is a vortex of actions within a community of many interconnected participants, it has immenseness for an instant in the vortex of actions and beliefs that encapsulates it.

The Inner and Outer Spaces of Teacher Leadership

I wonder about the image of learning we offer those who consider teaching. I wonder why we do not spend more time pondering what lurks beneath all those efforts and focus on how “learning is all around us, it shapes and helps create our lives—who we are, what we do. It involves dealing with complex and intractable problems, it requires personal commitment, it utilizes interaction with others, it engages our emotions and feelings, all of which are inseparable from the influence of context and culture.” (Boud, Cohen, and Walker, 1993, p.1). Instead, we spend time on many superficial details regarding evaluation, curriculums, key outcomes, and deadlines for minute data collection.

I want to use the words leadership and learning as if they are interchangeable. I see glimpses of leadership when I find opportunities to learn and grow as a teacher and when there is space to not only collect together and to create, but to challenge and experiment. I appreciate when the speeches and menial itemized reports are reduced at meetings and we open opportunities to discuss the current realities and dilemmas we face. Those conversations are never easy, nor do they quickly resolve difficulties, but they do enable us to see and hear one another, and realize we need more time for such dialogue and understanding of our differences. It would be simple to say we need to work on one particular thing very well and deliberately, but teacher leadership is fused throughout a classroom, school, community, and system, and teacher leadership is anything but simple.

It requires on-going caring, commitment and courage to support the hard and difficult work that changes hour by hour over a teacher's career.

Learning About Learning

Learning is central to my view of educational leadership and teaching. Learning is a hunger within me, insatiable at times. Learning is rich and revealing when shared like a meal. It becomes more than the food and the dishes that hold it when it is wrapped and held by the conversations and those at the table I dine with. Sometimes learning is served at a table, carefully planned, and constructed in design. At other times learning is just a casual happening, like biting into an amazing ripe peach by a river bank, or sharing a granola bar, awkwardly split in half, with my office mate when we are working too late. Teacher leadership offers a space for satisfying my hunger for learning.

As I wonder about what is needed that can help foster and sustain teacher leadership, I see the belief that teaching itself is quintessential to leadership and it offers a foundation for realizing learning potential for all its participants. The notion of recognizing only leadership activities outside the classroom continues to undermine the value and importance of work in daily teaching. If we believe teaching is a quintessential leadership function, then we need to invest in the craft of teaching as teachers evolve daily and over a life span of career interests. In-house professional learning opportunities by and for teachers are one way to address the need for meaningful pursuits.

I question our current organizational structures of leadership and wonder why we place so much energy on the principal role as an instructional leader and yet frequently omit the inclusion of opportunities for master teachers to participate as mentors, and instructional coaches within schools. It is strange to me that there are not more opportunities to deepen and develop mastery in instruction for teachers and offer opportunities for teachers to grow and develop within this role.

The number of teachers who desire to continue working with students and colleagues in classrooms throughout their career is significant. One context of this information was collected in a MetLife Survey from 1000 K-12 public school teachers for a provider of insurance and employee benefit programs. According to the MetLife *Survey of the American Teacher: Challenges for School Leadership* (MetLife, 2012) fewer than 16% of teachers surveyed were somewhat interested in becoming a principal, including 6% who were very interested in that option. Most teachers (69%) were not at all interested in becoming a principal. Instead, they expressed a strong interest in combining a role of mentorship and teacher leadership with a combined classroom role. (*Learning Forward*, December, 2013, p. 9). Seventy five percent of the 500 principals surveyed expressed stress and concern that their role had become too complex and that instructional leadership was the greatest stress for principals in secondary schools (MetLife Survey, 2012., p. 3). Less satisfied teachers were more likely to be working in schools where budgets and time for professional development and collaboration had decreased in the past year (MetLife Survey, 2012, p. 4). These findings reinforce the

need to provide in-house relevant professional learning supports. Time is needed for daily collaboration often done on the fly. Collaborative structures are needed to guide and support inquiry in how to improve teaching capabilities and learning opportunities for both students and teachers. In-house domains of expertise are essential if people are to share and develop their potential.

The Empty Plate at Breakfast

The roles of teacher-learning leaders and instructional coaches were eliminated today in response to budget constraints. I am told it was an unfortunate reality but it is a time for making difficult decisions. Who made this decision is unclear. It seems it was coming for some time, as the learning leader role appeared to be eroding. The investment of learning leaders in the craft of teaching and working within the classrooms instead turned into a new ladder for those who aspired to administrative roles outside of a classroom. Eventually that ladder broke down. Principals lamented that experienced and talented classroom teachers were no longer stepping forward to lead formally as learning leaders or instructional coaches. I wonder how many teachers want to see a hybrid role where they can work both within the classroom and yet beyond their classroom duties and stay invested in teaching and not administrative duties. I wonder why we have lost this space for sharing teacher leadership.

Keller, research notes, April 2017

Visible On-going Supports for Teacher Leadership

In my first teaching experience I learned the danger of removing administrative supports and applying superficial external supervision to complex problems. I often wondered why those roles that should serve teachers and school communities were not in-house. Barth (2002) challenged the often repeated claim “our school is a community of learners” by questioning whether schools in fact fulfilled the difficult promise of offering a “place full of adults and students who care about, look after, and root for one another and who work together for the good of the whole, in times of need and in times of celebration” (p. 8). I also learned over and over, that schools were rarely communities that took responsibility for the welfare of every staff member so that their community was operating as a whole.

One particular problem that I see which demoralizes teachers and school administrators is the policy of transferring staff without conferring with them about their professional learning needs and career hopes. I find these informal but reoccurring practices puzzling and discovered several times how they can interfere with innovative work and reduce the leadership opportunities for teachers in schools. I learned from veteran teachers that these informal practices are used to solve the difficulty of getting rid of problematic staff. When colleagues struggle with teaching or do not fit with the current administrative practices, they are transferred to a new school, until they gradually gain a reputation for being a difficult staff member who is considered poor at teaching.

When colleagues who are interested in returning to university and acquiring further education take an educational leave, they are not returned to their original assignments. Instead they are transferred to a new setting to meet the needs of the larger organization. There is rarely a conversation or inquiry into the professional needs and learning interests of that teacher. As one colleague pointed out to me, teachers and school administrators are routinely being punished with these transfers in some way. Reform efforts are often interrupted when a key leader is removed from the school. As well, there is a lack of any transition considerations for either the exiting staff or the new staff member coming in. The new staff member quickly finds out that they now have the most difficult teaching assignment or “new initiative”, the least desirable and most isolated classroom real-estate in the school, along with the daunting challenge of forming new collegial relationships with a cautious clique particular to that school.

A revolving door of administrators with no or few opportunities to transition into positions is difficult for both the administrators and staff. There is little to no time for colleagues to discuss how the school is run, what is working well, and how to support one another in the complex work of working with youth. Instead shortcuts are taken as the school year is like a fast-moving treadmill with little time for reflection or consideration of how it might work as a healthy and supportive community. Everyone appears in survival mode or they hide out in their own territory.

I often wondered if the principal felt alone on an uncontrollable, busy treadmill. During the first year of new principals, I found very little happens in any reform efforts

as they try to figure out the school landscape. Frequently I witnessed administrators trying to figure out where they fit into the existing educational landscape... and those who were usually more successful collaborated on decisions and consulted with invested parties. Those who rode in with ideals oblivious to the existing values and personalities usually floundered, in spite of any good ideas that they might have been transporting.

Understanding the Importance of Collaborative Learning Opportunities

Teachers need opportunities to grow leadership skills and learning dispositions with colleagues. Communities of practice models (Wenger, 1998) illustrate how such qualities might be mentored and fostered. When creating an ecosystem for educational leadership, three interconnected conditions, the personal, social and organizational were illustrated in my crocus conceptualization. Communities of practice share these three fundamental elements, but they are termed ‘practice’, ‘community’, and ‘domain’. Wenger, McDermott and Snyder (2002) illustrated the personal conditions as practice, the social conditions as community, and the organizational conditions as domain. They reveal how the domain creates common ground and a sense of common identity by affirming its purpose and value to all stakeholders. The domain inspires members, guides their learning and gives meaning to their actions. Boundaries are transparent so as to enable members to decide on which activities to pursue and what is worth sharing, thus creating organizational capacity and conditions that will foster social capacity and personal capacity.

According to Wenger, McDermott, and Snyder (2002) the community like the social conditions “creates the social fabric of learning” (p. 28). “Community is an important element because learning is a matter of belonging as well as an intellectual process, involving the heart as well as the head” (p. 29). The practice consists of personal conditions requires specific knowledge that is developed, shared, and maintained through the sharing of information, ideas, stories, and language. When these three elements work well together and are infused within an organization, they form a community of practice where people can share knowledge and assume responsibility.

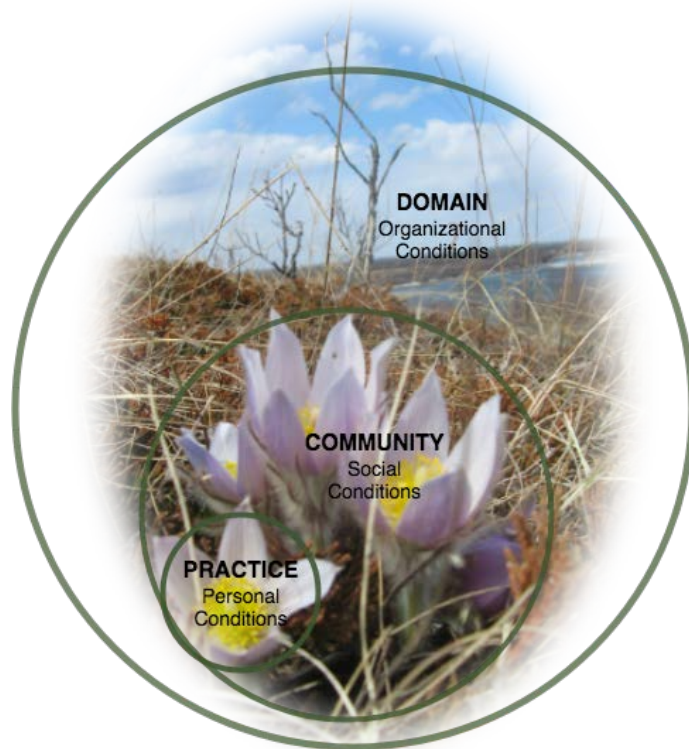


Figure 7.8. Community of practice conditions for leadership.

I find more recently, that action research projects offer a participatory way to foster personal capacity, social conditions and contribute to our organizational conditions. In 2011, when I began exploring through action research projects, grant funding opportunities outside of the school district's funding agenda became a powerful mechanism for fueling and supporting creativity, innovation, and teacher leadership. I created projects to address the gaps in student learning opportunities I discovered in my own practice and in the concerns raised by teaching colleagues. We formed new collaborative pursuits that bonded teachers both within their schools and beyond their school borders. One of my searches was into visual literacy as a bridge for reading opportunities for those marginalized in learning from print. Surveying our research report I see those ideals acted upon:

The project offered a visible way to experience authentic inquiry and led to a process of redefining pedagogy. As a group, we received many requests for sharing our learning resources with teachers and consultants outside of our study. Teachers in a support role, whether that was as a teacher librarian, instructional coach or learning coordinator found their influence increased within the school and this encouraged opportunities to collaborate with colleagues. (Keller & Guttormson, 2015, p. 22).

Looking back, I realize that I was immersed in facilitating an inquiry into understanding leadership, learning, and collaboration.

Teachers consciously engaged in taking risks in how they worked with students in their classrooms and many mentioned how their instructional approaches changed over the school year. Each participant increased their collaboration with other colleagues either by supporting others or in seeking those who might help increase their skills. (Keller & Guttormson, 2015, p. 20).

As we pursued our questions and beliefs, I realize, we were all leading the work collectively and that we had created a community of practice. Leading belonged to no one individual and we were now seeing ourselves as leaders.

Imagining Ourselves as Leaders

I am startled and dismayed when I realize the reality regarding leadership in Schein's (2010) summarization of a leader's desire to propagate their own likeness:

culture is ultimately created, embedded, evolved, and manipulated by leaders...culture comes to constrain, stabilize, and provide structure and meaning to the group members even to the point of ultimately specifying what kind of leadership will be acceptable in the future... dynamic processes of culture creation and management are the essence of leadership and make you realize that leadership and culture are two sides of the same coin. (p.3)

Often I naively believed we could change our situation by working at the school level, only to find efforts thwarted by a structural barrier in the timetable, calendar, or inadvertent decisions made by administration or colleagues.

I also come to realize that if I do not think in the same way and belong to the same membership of the existing leaders, I will not rise within the ranks of the organization, no matter how hard I work, no matter how effective my efforts might be, I just will not be trusted. I see then why there are so few changes in the make-up of our leadership and that diversity of thought, values, and visible backgrounds is so threatening.

Elmore (2000) identified the dilemma in activating leadership for change:

Contrary to the myth of visionary leadership that pervades American culture, most leaders in all sectors of society are creatures of the organizations they lead.

Nowhere is this more true than in public education, where principals and district superintendents are recruited almost exclusively from the ranks of practice... one does not get to lead in education without being well socialized to the norms, values, predispositions, and routines of the organization one is leading. So relying on leaders to solve the problem of systemic reform in schools is, to put it bluntly, asking people to do something they don't know how to do and have had no occasion to learn in the course of their careers. (p. 2)

I realize over time that many who rise too quickly to administrative positions have a shallow experience base in understanding the dilemmas and challenges in schools that teachers face. I question how they interpret and story their initial experiences and whether they value the role and worth of a teacher and the students in their care, as they

seem more preoccupied with some invisible quest to attain worth on a larger scale that operates solely outside of the classrooms and schools.

I contemplate the lack of diversity in roles and perspectives prevalent in formal positions in public education and wonder about our actual imaginative vision and the desire to reduce complex work to one attainable goal. It is often unclear to me, as to why what we are preoccupied with matters, who it is that is actually doing what and for whom, and how they imagine we will get to this destination. The difficulties I perceive and opportunities I want to contribute to in education seem divorced from the experiences of many of my supervisors.

Many times I find that my supervisors refer to literature superficially as their experience base, but they lack a depth of understanding and empathy for those in the actual situations. Often, I realize that I am looking at those who always were ‘winners’ while in educational and sports settings, and they seem to avoid reflecting on why they arrived at the winners’ circle and who is still missing.

Thus, there appears a “*reality, illusion, oversight, technical error, and [perhaps even] wrong thinking*” of teacher leadership within a landscape where we really have not believed in its potential (Greenfield, 1993, p. 124). Limiting leadership to administrator roles seems not to have changed much in our educational settings. Professional learning plans offer few opportunities to diversify skills and work opportunities beyond the mid-career portrait of working in isolation within one’s classroom. I am struck by all of this

when sitting at a basketball game. While watching a year-end high school game, I ask a nearby parent if her daughter has any plans for her future. She confesses, “She asked me if it would be okay if she only became a teacher”.

Re-imagining Teacher Leadership

So, what does looking at my experiences mean for teacher leadership? My purpose for this inquiry was to explore my experiences so we could better understand teacher leadership within our educational landscapes. Teacher leadership, like the prairie crocus, is an overlooked sign of hope on our educational landscape. While teacher leadership positions have been recognized in educational literature for their importance in offering in-house supports for mentorship and professional learning, teacher leaders have frequently been discouraged and undone when they were used to propagate reform initiatives. As well historically these leadership roles have continued to struggle during each recession era because the extent of their importance was not clearly understood and supported (Hargreaves, 2005).

Huberman’s (1988/1989) research on the life span and career perspective of teaching was important in helping me understand the dimensions of teacher leadership over a career. Awareness of these phases: how teachers initially move through isolation and survival, followed by excitement while building competence if they are successful and supported, until eventually how they might deepen their establishment and examination of their practices within the way an organization functions to support

learning, could support teachers as a navigational tool during their careers. Currently, as waves of teachers reach the final career stage where they gradually disengage from career pursuits, I hope we might prevent disillusionment and extend engagement in the complex work done in schools and communities. Life span research might help prepare teachers and foster teacher leadership if we offer this as a support over course of their careers so they can understand that landscape and journey they might take as a learners.

What practical and social significance is there from this research for teacher leadership and the renewal we might seek in schools that will benefit students and staff? Central to the difficulties in re-imagining teacher leadership is re-examining the existing schoolhouse and school district landscape. That landscape has been missing a rich ecosystem of collaborative roles where teachers can build personal and collective efficacy. What is happening within our school landscape if we have no recognized or formal teacher leadership positions working in-house? Are we endangering the spirit and landscape where teacher leadership can exist and flourish in informal ways? Are we sending a message that leadership outside of the classroom is the only form that matters? Are we losing valuable resources for supporting the learning of both students and staff when learning is complex and challenging in a rapidly changing society? Have we inadvertently created a career ladder out of the classroom instead of a healthy “lattice of support” within our classrooms and school landscapes? (Supovitz, 2014, p.3) Building capacity for leadership requires developing a continuum of leadership opportunities within the school and classroom and over a teacher’s career span. These opportunities

should be more than organizing extra-curricular events and limited to the daily duties of a classroom.

When considering the professional landscape of the schoolhouse, I have witnessed the value of collegial instructional coaches and collaboration. In-house teacher leaders can help support a healthy learning environment for staff and can foster co-teaching partnerships in each classroom. Upon reflection, I find the era of the one teacher siloed per classroom unrealistic and ineffective as the diversity of student learning needs and expectations of community members for the success in a classroom has increased. Today, I marvel at the diversity of skills, experiences and networks of working professionals required to support the wide range of learning needs. This type of collaborative work requires re-examining the daily schedules of teachers and provision of time for on-going collaboration. Daily collaboration needs to be built into teaching schedules with additional release time for extensive collaboration when initially planning for and assessing for the progress of students. Built-in support addresses the need for educators to value perpetual learning. As well, in-house master teachers can assist in problem-solving complex learning challenges, mentor younger staff, and motivate other staff to aspire to working with adult colleagues as part of their role. This on-going professional development can remain embedded in the school and be more responsive to both teacher and student needs.

Why do we struggle to re-imagine teacher leadership?

Like an ecosystem, personal conditions, social conditions, and organizational conditions are vulnerable when there is a lack of social imagination. It is this utopian thinking that is at the heart of teacher leadership for it fosters learning opportunities for students and colleagues while promoting caring, collaboration, and creativity.



We can re-imagine teacher leadership when we consider the experiences within the story where a child finds caring and commitment to follow and lead while holding her grandmother.

Figure 7.9. Emerging into the space of leadership.



We can re-imagine teacher leadership when we learn the story of an emerging teacher who finds the answers to an educational problem within herself and her students.

Figure 7.10. Exploring the space of leadership.



We can re-imagine teacher leadership when we learn the story of a positional leader who shares the space of leadership with a teacher so she can see herself.

Figure 7.11. Experiencing the space of leadership.



We can re-imagine teacher leadership when we step onto the educational landscape and survey with critical self-reflection on our experiences and the domain of space offered within communities.

Figure 7.12. Realization of leadership experiences.

Reflecting on Using an Autoethnographic Lens for Inquiry

When I began this journey, I wondered if I could find a reflective grasp within my stories and on-going quests that would help understanding of teacher leadership. I wondered if using imaginative praxis and an autoethnographic inquiry would help us explore the spaces between ourselves and others and find answers to what teacher leadership is and why it has been deemed unsuccessful on a larger scale.

Initially when I began this inquiry, I wondered if I had taken on a methodology that was too formidable and yet underestimated as simplistic and questionable within the traditions of research. I wobbled at times in accepting the epistemology and ontology of this methodology. The ideals of reliability and validity slowly transformed to ideals of authenticity and verisimilitude. Generalizability moved to considering whether the self-narratives could illuminate the research questions and invite readers to consider their own experiences. Gradually I came to understand the value of a narrative truth in representing and exploring experiences of leadership and the educational landscape I had travelled and lived within.

My autoethnographic inquiry process involved learning about and through my methodology. I retraced through my narrative writings of experiences, educational literature and philosophy to understand the concept of teacher leadership. At first the inquiry process began with me just trying to understand what autoethnographic research was, who participated in it, and how I too might find my voice and explore my experiences. While the autoethnographic literature and the use of an autoethnographic

lens opened imaginative praxis for me, it also challenged and provoked me. As I learned how autoethnography is the exploration of a self and the space between a social construct explored through writing, I found I was frequently challenged by the task of writing.

Writing narratively and balancing it with expository texts so that they were complimentary and flowed, but also pushed the inquiry into new spaces was a continual challenge. There were many times when I was literally in a tug-a-war with the methodology.

From my experiences with autoethnographic inquiry, I found possibilities for leadership when writing narratively. Writing narratively evoked deeper thinking and I could conjure images and metaphors that opened the spaces of my experiences. Then when I worked with expository texts I would find myself disappearing at the “reductionist boundary” (Clandinin & Connelly, p. 141). At times I would be awake and aware, and then self-conscious about my language in researching, my practices of visually representing concepts, and even my use of APA when citing author’s full names and I wondered frequently, what would and should this be framed like “autoethnographically”?

I gradually found myself writing to learn and using writing as method. I noticed I changed as a reader and started to read as a writer. I became fascinated by the power of metaphors and framing a story and viewpoints. I was drawn now to exploring leadership creatively, metaphorically, and poetically.

Now working from within an ocular metaphor I saw my experiences illustrated in disturbing the dust on an old mirror, searching through a file cabinet of experiences and literature, and looking within while behind windowless doors. The constant reminders of the challenges of teacher leadership were illustrated by the pencil skirt and the wakeup call from the tug and the pinch at my hemline. Metaphor gradually became a method during this process.



The metaphor of the file cabinet, almost forgotten and now relegated to the cluttered garage space, represented both my experiences and the process of researching them. I delayed the traditional literature review on the topic of teacher leadership and at first wrote narratively from within my experiences. I then repeatedly explored epiphanies and experiences within them that continued to trouble me.

When I returned to the file cabinet representing a wealth of educational literature on the topic of teacher leadership, I found myself re-examining literature that resonated

with me or troubled me, asking myself, “Who is telling this narrative and why?” I wondered about the researchers to whose work I found myself drawn. Whether it was Mary Warnock and Maxine Greene encouraging me to explore my experiences, or the wry humour of Roland Barth or the frank revelations from Alma Harris and Thomas Barr Greenfield, I noticed that they illustrated their ideas with a voice of experience that provoked me by their candor and willingness to dig into an issue that I too had experienced or wondered about. Each of the writers that I was drawn to were compelling and invited me to listen and join them in the space of exploring teacher leadership.



The metaphor of the pencil skirt helped me understand my experiences when I was a teacher leading among colleagues. This artifact, from my early teaching days that I turned to time and again when I formalized my role as a teacher leader or consultant, represented the status I sought when leading as a teacher with colleagues. Even though the skirt’s tailored properties offered me the illusion of appearing taller and official, I found it was often too confining and limiting for the messy relational work in classrooms and schools where I sought flexibility and space for movement with others. While the skirt often became a verb when I skirted issues or avoided difficult colleagues,

it remained part of a uniform I wore when leading and a symbol referring to the dress women have traditionally worn when seeking status while still serving others. The pencil skirt is one of those fashions that reminds me of the outskirts or fringes where I have observed that women often find themselves confined to when they enter into a leadership arena.

Since working with the methodology of autoethnography, I now wonder if there are unique insights perhaps only found in this approach to understanding leadership. I was struck by the layered and reiterative reflection required, the way that I became so enwrapped and committed when in the process, the vulnerability and exposure, and the continual critical self-reflection where I was unpacking and re-telling my stories. While I often felt vulnerable and ill at ease in being so exposed, I gradually found that this was replaced with a sense of empowerment found in the methodology's participatory qualities. I was finally able to gaze inward and then outward and explore spaces that at first glance seemed empty or ignored. This methodology illustrated for me an intriguing bridge between the tensions of personal, social, theoretical, and practical elements while researching and it helped me explore theory while highlighting my experiences and struggles within it.



I wonder about the promise of using autoethnography's participatory elements for fostering learning and teacher leadership. Using elements of autoethnography such as memoir writing, examining scenarios of experience, and storying experiences might be helpful tools for preparing preservice teachers, or while working with teachers and students, and for school staff and school districts when they are searching for ways to understand what is happening within their communities and trying to imagine a better world. Maxine Greene invited all of us to release our imaginations when she shared,

“Of all our cognitive capacities, imagination is the one that permits us to give credence to alternative realities. It allows us to break with the taken for granted, to set aside familiar distinctions and definitions.... Imagination is what above all, makes empathy possible. (Greene, 1995, p. 3).

Re-imagining the leadership potential of teachers is tied to fostering the personal and social conditions that are supported within an organization that recognizes the leadership capacity in teachers, students, and families. Consideration of how leadership is fostered and flows among all those participants can shape an educational ecosystem that nurtures teacher leadership capacity. Slowing down the teacher treadmill, reflecting on one's contributions, re-examining and questioning the nature of our daily practices, and reflecting on what we hope for learning for all our participants requires re-imagining our current state.

EPILOGUE

Standing in the garage, I contemplate what I should dust off and pack for my next position. I have been packing and unpacking for some time. Staring at the boxes and files from previous jobs and assignments, I contemplate what might prepare me for my next teaching adventure. I think I will bring my curiosity and tenderness for meeting new students, along with caring and commitment, and top it off with my insatiable love of learning laced with knowledge collected from many experiences. That should fit into this new wheeled-luggage needed for traversing a vast educational landscape.

It is time again to return to the classroom with all its comforts and challenges in learning alongside students and colleagues. Like previous assignments, this new position will be yet another experimental attempt to bridge the gap for students found struggling in schools. This time I will try to reach the most disenfranchised and oldest of students in a public education system where I am employed. There is one subtle change, I am now supported by plans to co-teach and collaborate with colleagues in this new setting and there is time set aside for all of us to work together if we choose to do so.

As I wander through a high school building, dating back over a century perched on the banks of a prairie city river, its past is very present. Despite the previous renovations and changes made to this building, the classroom spaces remain chopped up and seeing one another is difficult. Following the principal who guides me through a maze of hallways, we arrive at the space for my next assignment: a room set off in the back recesses of the school, affectionately known as “The River’s Edge”. I recall being

here one cold February with a group of teachers as we stepped into an exploration of what it meant to be visible in learning and plunged into an action research project. I was taken then with the name of the classroom and the green-hued light I observed coming from the east as it reached over the river.

Interrupting my examination of the space and light, the principal surmised, “It’s going to be messy, but we know things need to change. It hasn’t been working. You will have the help of others, but we really need your leadership.”

He looks around, “I hope this will be all right.”

I know this space very well.

I emerged in this space as a small girl tucked away in a desk, admiring the freckles on my neighbor’s arm, as they seemed to illustrate a constellation and reveal a whole universe contained on one child’s arm.

I entered this space on a spring morning in April when I stepped carefully as new teacher into a world of opportunity and wonder.

I revisited this space often to seek its comforts and curiosity in working alongside colleagues and students.

Returning to the conversation with this principal, I realize in spite of the numerous times I have entered a new classroom and school space as a teacher, I have rarely heard those words, “We really need your leadership”.

Working from the river’s edge, I will dip my toes into the murky waters and with students and colleagues question our experiences and re-imagine learning and leading.

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APPENDIX

Career Stages

Stage 1: Leading From Behind Closed Doors

Stage 2: Opening a Window Before Opening a Door

Stage 3: Experimentation and the Unfolding Complexity

Stage 4: Reflection and Renewal

STAGE 1: LEADING FROM BEHIND CLOSED DOORS

1985, April- June

Move to small town for first teaching position

Transfer to high school to start new resource program

August- June, 1985/1986

Resign from school division for a new position in a new division and opportunity to live near fiancé

Aug –June, 1986/1987

*Move to hometown
Start new position
Marry November 1, 1986*

Aug- June 1987/1988

Move with spouse to Winnipeg

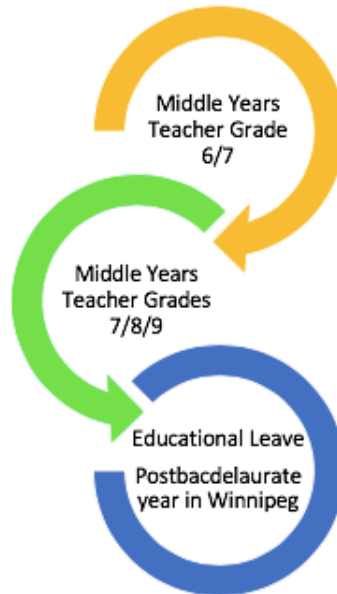
Sept- June 1988/1989

Return to school- Post graduate studies in Curriculum and Special Education- Co-teaching and Collaboration



Commitments that connect me to colleagues and the school landscape:

- Coaching Senior Girls' Basketball;
- Drama Club Staff Supervisor;
- Variety Night Director;
- 1st ever Community Dinner Theatre Director and Planner;
- Gifted Education Project- committee member



- Coaching two Jr. Girls' Basketball;
- Daily Intermural Noon Hour Program Supervisor
- Middle Years Art Program

- Volunteering with Special programs: Inner city FAS program; Supporting teachers returning to the classroom; Tutoring students with learning disabilities and anxiety;

STAGE 2: OPENING A WINDOW BEFORE OPENING A DOOR

Aug- June 1989/1990

Move back to hometown and new school position within previous school division;

Aug-June 1990/1991

Have first child, June 9th

Sept-June 1991/1992

*Move to new northern community for spouse's new work position
School fire occurs in April of 1992 while I am away- all materials are lost in the fire*

Aug-June 1992/1993

Move to home community and previous school

Aug 1993-Aug 2001

*Move with spouse to Burnaby, BC for work
Start a parent/child drop in center*

*Have second child in December 1994
Return to Grad school- July 1998-2001 to work on Master's degree*

Teach at SFU, Consulting with families and supporting students with learning difficulties; Work as a research assistant

Move home to Saskatoon August 2001 to support family

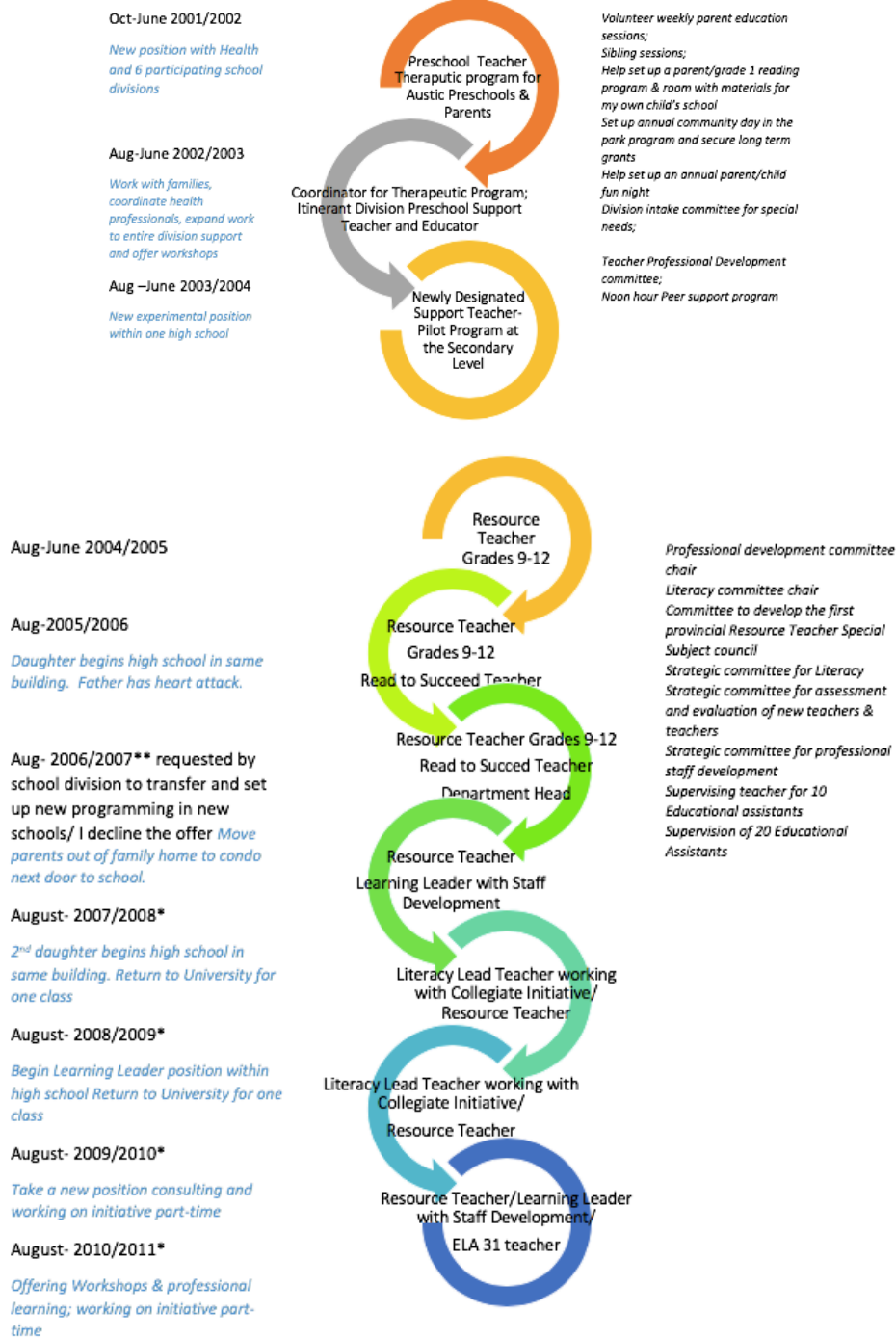


*Coaching Jr. Basketball
Coaching Distance Running
Drama Production Director
Division chair for resource teachers committee
Workshops on assessments used by resource teachers
Pilot teacher for new grade 8 provincial social studies curriculum*

*Coaching Jr. Basketball
Resource teacher division committee work;
Chair of School Improvement Committee
Insurance adjustment and rebuilding of the classroom spaces and materials;*

*Set up and run an early childhood drop in program in the community;
School Parent Counsel & district representative;
Set up Learning through the Arts program with University of Toronto;
BC Reading Council;*

STAGE 3: EXPERIMENTATION AND THE UNFOLDING COMPLEXITY



STAGE 4: REFLECTION AND RENEWAL

September –August 2011/2012

Awarded an educational leave; full time studies, working on McDowell project at home school; research assistant at U of S; strategic committee work on system evaluation for teachers and administrators with school division;

September 2012-November 2012

Return part-time to new school; McDowell project work, Start PhD dissertation

November 2012-June 2013

Serious family illnesses with both parents and daughter

August- June 2013/14

New job-Educational Consultant 2nd McDowell Project- Visual Literacy Instructional Coaching training at the University of Kansas

August-June 2014/15

3rd McDowell Project; Design & coordinate SLAM Literacy project; caring for parents

August-June 2015/16

3rd McDowell Project; SLAM Literacy project; caring for parents

August-June 2016/17

Live in Scotland from August-Dec; Time for dissertation writing.

Return to division work as a consultant; Mother dies. Consultant position ends. Learning leader & instructional coach positions are cut and end in the division.

Provincial facilitator training begins. Dissertation writing continues.



- Action research Stirling McDowell Project
- Strategic Committee work for New Teacher Assessment
- First conference presentation
- Research assistant project work

- Research assistant work
- Presentation on PhD journey
- 2nd McDowell Project
- Division Committee Work- Professional Learning committee, Strategic Committee for Student Equity and Success Committee for Leadership Direction

- Action research on Visual Literacy- 3rd McDowell Project
- Presentations on Visual Literacy @ 3 conferences
- Presentations on student engagement
- Presentations on life span work of teachers
- Workshops on instructional coaching
- Workshops on discipline literacy