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## Setting the Stage for a Narrative Inquiry: Negotiating Relationships and Understanding School Landscapes

*Narrative inquiry is a qualitative research approach that brings rigor and depth to the understanding of human experiences. It is important that the researcher become enmeshed in the school context in order to develop a heightened sense of the world view of participants. Critical to beginning a narrative inquiry are negotiating relationships and understanding the classroom and school landscape in which the inquiry takes place. Negotiating authentic relationships and understanding the school context set the stage for meaningful findings about teaching and learning in schools.*

*L'enquête narrative est une approche en recherche qualitative qui apporte une rigueur et une profondeur aux connaissances sur les expériences des êtres humains. Afin d'acquérir une conscientisation accrue de la vision du monde des participants, il est important que le chercheur soit enchevêtré dans le contexte scolaire. Une enquête narrative doit nécessairement impliquer, d'une part, la négociation de rapports et, d'autre part, des connaissances sur l'école et la salle de classe dans lesquelles l'enquête aura lieu. La négociation de rapports authentiques et la connaissance du contexte scolaire préparent la voie pour arriver à des résultats significatifs portant sur l'enseignement et l'apprentissage dans les écoles.*

### Introduction

Poet William Blake wrote that a close observer can “see a World in a Grain of Sand.” Narrative inquiry, with its emphasis on studying “how human beings make meaning of experience by endlessly telling and retelling stories about themselves that both refigure the past and create purpose for the future” (Connelly & Clandinin, 1988, p. 24), is a qualitative research approach to examining the grains of sand that make up the educational milieu. As a narrative researcher, I seek to understand the world view of my participant by situating myself in his classroom and school environment for an intensive period of observation.

Whereas quantitative research inclines toward generalization through measuring cause-effect relationships and operationalizing theoretical relationships (Denzin & Lincoln, 2000), qualitative research is a “situated activity that locates the observer in the world” for the purpose of studying people in their “natural setting” in order to interpret phenomena “in terms of the meaning people bring to them” (p. 3). Whereas quantitative research is detached, qualitative research based on surveys, interviews, and short observations seems semidetached. Although such research reveals worthwhile information about participants’ views and practices, it does not closely examine

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participants' lived experiences. Narrative inquiry, with its emphasis on puzzling over the storied lives and "professional knowledge landscapes" (Clandinin & Connelly, 1995) of teachers, is a qualitative research approach that brings greater "rigor, breadth, complexity, richness and depth" to inquiry (Denzin & Lincoln, p. 5).

But how does one conduct narrative inquiry? Although there are good books on beginning qualitative research (Wolcott, 2001) and narrative inquiry (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000), my most valuable sources were the stories of other narrative inquirers. My research was guided by Professor Michael Connelly and modeled on the experiences of other narrative researchers at the Centre for Teacher Development at the Ontario Institute for Studies in Education of the University of Toronto. Scholars without informal networks of narrative researchers with whom to exchange stories orally may benefit from written accounts of the lived experiences of narrative researchers at various stages of the inquiry process. In this article I offer an account of the first stage in my effort to understand classroom teaching as a situated activity. In particular, I focus on two aspects of the narrative inquiry process: negotiating relationships and understanding the school landscape.

"You don't exactly penetrate another culture, as the masculinist image would have it. You put yourself in its ways and it bodies forth and enmeshes you," writes distinguished anthropologist Geertz (1995, p. 44). For this to happen, according to Clandinin and Connelly (2000), the researcher needs "to be there long enough and to be a sensitive reader of and questioner of situations in an effort to grasp the huge number of events and stories, the many twisting and turning narrative threads" (p. 77). The researcher needs to observe closely and devote considerable time to understanding the particular educational landscape. To become enmeshed in the culture and understand the meaning people bring to their experiences, it is necessary to negotiate meaningful relationships with participants. Throughout, it is vital that the researcher maintain flexibility and openness as the inquiry develops (Clandinin & Connelly). As I progressed in my inquiry, I reduced the number of participants as my focus shifted toward understanding the personal practical knowledge and classroom practice of one teacher. As my single participant faced new challenges during the next stage of our collaboration, I adapted my inquiry in order to help him work through these challenges. Ultimately, the research question changed again after the stage was set until our collaborative relationship became the focus.

In order to explore this initial stage of my narrative inquiry, I draw on field texts written during my first weeks with teacher-participant Bob Fitzgerald and the grade 4/5 students in Room 28 of Lippincott School (pseudonyms are used throughout). I visited the school 56 times that year, with visits generally ranging from four to eight hours. Stories, presented in italics, are interwoven with my perspectives on Bob's personal professional knowledge (Connelly & Clandinin, 1988) as revealed through his classroom practice. Also, having chosen to adopt a narrative inquiry stance, I was conscious of my presence in these stories as a researcher telling Bob's story, a supporting actor in his drama and a character on my own journey of discovery.

I hope that this depiction of the first stage in my four-year narrative inquiry will be useful to other researchers considering situating themselves in educational milieus.

### *Negotiating Relationships*

As a qualitative researcher interested in studying the personal practical knowledge of teachers, I needed to negotiate strong relationships with a teacher or teachers who were receptive to my observing their teaching and discussing teaching with them. The first steps were to negotiate entry into the school and then into the classrooms of interested teachers. This initial negotiation of entry was later followed by many other negotiations of relationships. These included negotiating my exit from three of the four initial relationships and regularly renegotiating my relationship with the final teacher-participant, Bob Fitzgerald. The negotiation of entry began with obtaining the permission of Principal Lois Dexter.

*I was eager to begin my research at Lippincott School. I had been searching for a research site in the months after I was awarded a research and study leave, but it was not easy to find individuals and schools ready to welcome the intrusion of an educational researcher. A colleague suggested contacting Principal Lois Dexter at Lippincott School. Although elementary schools had withdrawn services the previous year, job action seemed unlikely that year. Many teachers, however, were wearing green ribbons to demonstrate their opposition to cuts in educational funding. To make matters worse, the first week of school marked the arrival of the new provincial elementary curriculum that teachers were to implement immediately. The principal had informed me on September 15 that teachers were already feeling overwhelmed by the increased demands on their time and energy. If I wanted to get participants, I would have to pitch my proposal in such a way that I would not be seen as an imposition; better still, I could offer assistance with the implementation of computers (Based on Field Notes, September 28, 1998).*

### *Meeting the Volunteers*

*Principal Lois Dexter arrived in the hallway with a woman she introduced as Diane Corcoran, one of four teachers who volunteered for my research project. She was wearing a green ribbon on her blouse (supporting teacher job action) and two smaller green ribbons as earrings. She was on duty, so we had to converse while she patrolled the halls speaking to kids. Diane said I could drop by any time that week or next if all I needed to do the first time was observe (Based on Field Notes, September 28, 1998).*

I had spoken to Diane briefly two weeks earlier, when she followed me into the hall after I presented my research proposal at a staff meeting. Although she was busy and would have preferred that other teachers volunteer, Diane indicated a willingness to participate. As a MEd graduate, she valued educational research and sympathized with teachers who wished to conduct research.

At that meeting, I had circulated a memorandum describing my "Proposal to Research Teacher Use of Computers at Lippincott Public School." I outlined my purpose, methodology, demands on participants, ethical assurances, and benefits to them. This document had been carefully crafted to reflect suggestions made over the telephone by the principal the previous day. In order to cast a wide net, I indicated that I was happy to work with both novice and experienced computer users. I also stressed that I was willing to help with

computers in the classroom. I had hoped to work with two computer-literate participants and the teacher-librarian, but time was passing and my options diminishing.

After the staff meeting, it took over a week for the principal to return my calls. I was emotionally drained as I waited. My entire sabbatical year seemed on the line as I worried about finding another research site at this late date. When she returned my call, Lois apologized for the delay. "Nobody has approached me," she said. "I never imagined how stressful it would be for everyone when we had spoken in August" (Field Notes, September 25, 1998).

The wider landscape that pressed against Lippincott School added considerably to the level of teacher stress. The amalgamation of local school districts, new funding models, and newly arrived curriculum documents (Gidney, 1999) created a volatile environment in which teachers felt under attack. As Troman and Woods (2001) note in *Primary Teachers' Stress*.

Teacher stress has accompanied restructuring ... Restructuring is a response to perceived educational inadequacies for the modern world. As teachers have been blamed for many of the problems in education, it seems clear that restructuring has had major implications for the teachers' work and their workplace. (p. 3)

Although I was frustrated by the delays, I was also sympathetic to the demands on administrators in these challenging times. I knew that Lois had a staffing meeting at the board, internal school crises, and family demands.

With nothing to lose, I pressed Lois, suggesting that teachers might be more willing to volunteer if they were approached directly. I mentioned that Diane had indicated interest after I presented. Lois promised to make another announcement, then follow up personally.

On Friday afternoon the principal informed me that four teachers had volunteered. I was exhausted, relieved, and elated at having negotiated entry. And yet four teachers seemed *too* many. I suspected that I would have to reduce the number over time.

My offer to help with computers in the classroom was a factor in getting volunteers. I was seen as a "computer expert" who could help teachers more effectively use computers. I was willing to help, but it was the response of teachers to computers in their classrooms that was my primary interest. Dennis Chow, a young kindergarten teacher, had a computer station set up in his classroom. Anna Bedard in grade 6 was open to and excited about developing new computer-based activities, but I worried that active involvement might take away from my time to observe teachers like her in action. I was prepared to immerse myself in the environment, but was also concerned that too much active involvement might diminish opportunities to observe the webs of classroom complexity.

I felt internalized tensions between how I presented myself to potential participants and my primary interest in teacher personal practical knowledge. Although I accurately presented myself as interested in the implementation of computers, I was more interested in the possibilities it generated for understanding how teachers construct knowledge. By being present and of use, I sought to develop relationships of trust which would enable me to penetrate deeply into their personal practical knowledge as lived in practice. The exact

course of my research, however, remained fluid as I wished to maintain flexibility in responding to the interests of my participants, the nature of the situation and questions that emerged for me as a researcher.

In narrative inquiry the intent is to understand “teaching and learning in classrooms as a temporal process reflecting the biographic histories of classroom participants” (Connelly & Clandinin, 1987, p. 130). Although narrative inquiry, like case study, is concerned with examining in depth the social context of education, it concentrates on the individuals in the situation rather than the situation itself. As a fluid approach to inquiry, narrative “accounts for teaching and learning actions in terms of participants’ history—their narrative unities as these unities may be shown to bear upon observed classroom events” (p. 132). Whereas case study observes situations carefully to test hypotheses (Stake, 2000), narrative examines classrooms closely in order to uncover the personal practical knowledge and the teachers’ professional knowledge landscapes (Clandinin & Connelly, 1995) of participants and how these influence classrooms and schools.

The fluidity of my inquiry and my particular interest in the stories of one participant led me to narrow my study to one participant and abandon the initial emphasis on computer implementation. Although I did not systematically pursue a particular research question developed before the inquiry and prefer the use of the first person, I am just as committed as a case researcher to assuring accuracy and avoiding falsehoods in my rendering of life experiences through stories.

Before focusing on the process of negotiating and developing a relationship with Bob Fitzgerald in Room 28, I examine my first impressions of Lippincott School. Negotiating relationships, however, is closely linked to understanding the school landscape, as observation and interaction set the stage both for the inquiry and the relationships.

#### *Exploring the School Landscape*

A successful launch of my research study required both negotiating relationships with teacher-participants and understanding the school landscape in which they were working.

##### *First Impressions of Lippincott Public School*

*Lippincott School was a magnificent three-storey red brick building gracefully accented with rows of cream bricks. A grand staircase rose gently to the school door. A bustling crowd of siblings, parents, and grandparents jostled as they picked up the children.*

*As I opened the front door, a woman in a black pantsuit left holding a certificate and chatting happily with a little girl. Caucasian, Oriental, and Black parents dressed casually or in business attire mingled in the entranceway with Islamic women with heads and even faces covered. One Muslim woman shepherded six children through the doors to a waiting mini-van.*

*Inside the school entrance was a large foyer filled with colorful announcements and signs on the walls and mobile bulletin boards (Based on Field Notes, September 28, 1998).*

The cosmopolitan composition of the school and the harmony of the picture offered a complex web of social relationships that I found tantalizing. Was the group entering the mini-van one family? How were they adjusting to the

differences between the cultures of home and school? What was it like to learn or teach at Lippincott School?

*Beginning in the Midst: Composing Field Texts*

As I entered my research world, I was curious about these puzzles and filled with a sense of wonder about the complexity before me. Aware that my task was to observe closely, I was careful to report what I actually saw and heard with a "sense of detachment" (Wolcott, 2001). When I drew inferences, I was careful to distinguish these from my observation through the use of words such as "he seemed to be pleased" or by italicizing the inferences. Aware that in ethnography and narrative "the initial focus is often vague and ill-defined," I sought "to be flexible and responsive to the ideas and issues which emerge[d] during the course of data collection" (Foster, 1996, p. 19). I included thick description (Geertz, 1995) in an effort to not miss anything of importance by focusing too narrowly on my preliminary questions. Later, as my focus sharpened and narrowed, I became more selective in what I recorded in detail.

While my researcher-self attentively observed school life in order to write detailed field notes that could be analyzed later, my teacher-self was rapidly framing my first impressions in relation to my school experiences. My teacher-self felt that these initial incidents made it likely that this was a good school in which students were happy and parents supportive. Although I was studiously careful not to let my impressions obscure my observations, I was also mindful of Polanyi's (1958) recognition that tacit knowledge based on our personal experience of the world is crucial to interpreting observational data and making new discoveries. This led me to convey my impressions, analysis, and interpretations in journal entries. The walk through the school conveys my first impressions of the school as recorded in my field texts.

My head was filled with observations, impressions, and possibilities during these early days in the field. Foster (1996) writes, "It is essential that time is made to do this otherwise significant information can be forgotten or distorted" (p. 46). The procedure I began to use that day, and continued for the entire research project, was to observe closely while in school but not write notes during class. As I wished to blend into the environment rather than be perceived as an ever-present recorder, I only scribbled a few notes in a stenographer's pad while in class. Occasionally, when a moment seemed essential to my inquiry, I scribbled detailed notes then and there. At the end of the day I would rush home to begin writing field notes in which I conveyed the rich details I had observed. These early field notes, thick with description from my observations and experiences, proved key to my inquiry. Over the years, I would return to them again and again as I told, retold, and relived my field experiences (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000).

*Negotiating the Relationship with Bob Fitzgerald in Room 28*

The strongest relationship I developed was with Bob Fitzgerald. This relationship, combined with my interest in how he adapted his professional knowledge and practice to the context of Room 28 of Lippincott School, led me to select him as the sole teacher-participant in this narrative inquiry. Initially I had planned to observe for one year, but my intensive first year of field research would be followed by less frequent visits over the next three years.

Before focusing on the negotiation of our research relationship, I tell stories derived from field notes written during the initial stage of my research. These stories convey my understanding of the classroom landscape, our developing relationship, and the evolving nature of my inquiry. I then discuss our agreement to collaborate and some of the subsequent renegotiations.

*Meeting Teacher-Participant Bob Fitzgerald*

*Bob arrived laden with a knapsack, a plastic bag, a canvas briefcase and a plant. He smiled and apologized for being 10 minutes late for our 8:15 meeting, but he had had to return home to get some pots and pans for a colleague. Putting down his load, he shook my hand warmly and expressed his delight to see me. He then unlocked the door, turned on the light, and laid his bags on the table by the window. The plant was from his garden and was to be added to the collection of plants on the ledge. Bob, in his early 50s, reminded me of a monk with his pale complexion, tonsure of grey hair, and grey attire. Although he seemed a little ruffled and beleaguered, I immediately responded to his rich baritone voice, warm and caring manner, and keen interest in ideas (Based on Field Notes, October 7, 1998).*

A week earlier, when she described the teachers who had agreed to participate, Principal Lois Dexter said that she did not know Bob well as he was an “administrative assignment” who had been sent to her school by the board. In my journal that evening I noted after having met Bob for the first time, “Bob struck me as a teacher who has been around a while and who may possess some baggage; the administrative assignment label raises a possible flag. On the other hand, he seems open to learning and very pleasant to me” (Journal, September 28, 1998).

Looking over these field notes years later, I am struck by the aptness of these early details. Bringing pots and pans for a colleague reflected a generosity in collegial relations that would emerge as a key quality in the years to come. The garden from whence the plants came proved an important place in Bob’s interior and exterior landscape. Philosophy was a great passion and joy, which manifested itself in *reverence for life* (a term from Albert Schweitzer that was displayed on a poster) and his efforts to develop a strong sense of discipline (*focus* was a term Bob often used) informs his classroom practice in intriguing ways. When I reviewed these field notes months later, I felt fortunate that I had stumbled onto such moments as these, and years later I maintain a sense of wonder about the events and themes conveyed in my detailed field notes. In retrospect, I recognize that I had become attentive to rich contextual detail and highly attuned to what was occurring.

The presence of such details in the field notes also acts as a check against smoothing out details that do not comfortably fit a preconceived schematic outline. Although this mass of details added to my sense of confusion at the time, it is through them that a complex portrait began to emerge of Bob as a teacher.

*Life in Room 28 (Based on Field Notes, October 7 and 14, 1998)*

*The first students rushed into class, greeted Mr. Fitzgerald warmly, shed their coats, and looked curiously at the stranger seated at the back. “Who is that?” Karim asked, “Are you a student teacher?” As other students arrived, they too looked toward me*

*with curiosity and whispered among themselves as they settled into their seats. Their joyful energy filled the room, and then dissipated as they settled into silent reading.*

*The students seemed open and trusting. When Mr. Fitzgerald suggested showing me their stories, many did so eagerly. Abidah, who wore a full-length dress and covered her head with a long silk scarf, informed me that she was Muslim and went to school at the mosque every evening. Eleven of the 30 students were of Islamic heritage, with many of the girls traditionally attired. The Islamic students were diverse ethnically and in their traditions. Also, there were six Chinese, 11 Caucasian, and two Hindu students.*

The class seemed a safe place for these students. I wondered about whether this was due to their age, their school, and/or Bob Fitzgerald's relationship with them. While I was focusing on their teacher, I soon realized that I could not write about Bob without including his interactions with students and the effect they had on each other.

Indeed, the students were major characters in the ongoing drama. Although I drew on conversations and interviews to identify Bob's perceptions, it was through his interactions with the students in the classroom that I sought to understand how his personal practical knowledge was embodied in his practice. In a play, the protagonist is put into situations that reveal important personal characteristics and how his past shapes his present. These interactions are often more revealing than dialogue.

In real life, as in a play, the protagonist both reveals himself through, and is changed by, interactions. Bob's story of transformation took place in relationship with his students who, I argue below, played an active role in his development. In examining the role of teacher as curriculum maker (Clandinin & Connelly, 1992), I acknowledge the importance of four commonplaces: teacher, learner, subject and milieu (Schwab, 1970). By studying Bob in his classroom, I witnessed him interacting in dynamic relationships with learners, subject matter, and milieu.

During my first day in the classroom, I began to realize that I was not a "fly on the wall," that my presence was noted, and that the presence of the researcher did influence the nature of the class interactions. Generally, when visiting secondary school classes, I have felt that I was noticed initially then largely ignored by students. These elementary students, however, seemed to regard me as a person, not a role. Being in Room 28 and planning to spend the entire year there, I had become part of the classroom community. Whereas I arrived on the scene intending to focus on my participant's knowledge and practice, I soon became aware that I was living in relationship with Bob and the students in his class (Journal, October 14, 1998).

Although I was attentive to collecting notebooks of summary descriptions of events and records of conversations (Foster, 1996), I was conscious that I worked in a dynamic system. My presence changed the landscape, and I was living my narrative as a teacher and researcher as I observed and puzzled over classroom interactions. Although I was generally quiet and unobtrusive, I was neither invisible nor static. Indeed, I was always mentally and emotionally engaged in observing and interpreting. I was also aware of my own impressions, feelings, and judgments, which were recorded in my journal. By recording these in my journal, I was acknowledging their presence and preserving



them for future analysis. In later stages, I drew on these entries in order to document my changing perceptions and the development of our collaborative relationship.

As Room 28 was the stage for much of the drama, it is important to convey the character of the room and its furnishings.

*The Character of Room 28 (Based on Field Notes, October 7, 1998)*

*Room 28 resembled the teacher who occupied it. The "Reverence for Life" sign, Value of ... books, Impressionist and Group of Seven paintings, plants along the window ledge and the clutter of resources all reflected facets of Bob's identity as a teacher.*

*The room, like the school, was well maintained and painted a bright turquoise. The surface color, like a thin coat of makeup, could not disguise the fact this was an old classroom in an old building. The wooden floors, although well maintained, showed the effects of thousands of little feet. The stuccoed walls and majestic door recalled an era of both traditional education practice and respect for educators. The wood-veneer desks formed four islands of eight to 12 desks cutting lengthwise through the room. Tucked behind each desk was a plastic chair on a metal frame.*

*Along the walls were tables and shelves covered with stacks of bright new textbooks and plastic tubs filled with old books and resources. Beside the door was a storage cupboard and a listening center. Bulletin boards were covered with art prints. A six-foot shelving unit was filled with novels for independent reading. Above was a sign that read "Reverence for Life," and the space above the bookshelf was brightened by a print of a fox with cubs. A display case prominently featured a well-worn set of books with titles such as *The Value of Courage: The Terry Fox Story*.*

*A weathered desk covered with papers was a visible reminder of the multiple tasks of a classroom teacher.*

*The class spilled out into the hall to become part of the larger school community. A bulletin board featuring student copies of paintings by famous artists was a public space in which denizens of Room 28 communicated their identity and interactions to the school. This attractive yet conventional display contrasted sharply with the equally bright pastiches of imaginary animals displayed across the hall.*

*Standing beside the window, I was reminded of the larger societal landscape. Across the street I could see the quiet residential neighborhood in which the school is located, as well as the busy commercial street to the south. As I looked out at a magnificent view of the downtown skyline, I wondered how much the world of commerce was influencing the classroom. The gleaming new textbooks beside the window were a reminder that a rigorous "expectations-based" elementary school curriculum was in its first year of implementation. This view, however, was not visible unless one stood close to the window. While I was sitting down, only light and sky distracted from the interior world of the classroom. Bob and his students seldom looked out the window. The world seemed contained, for now, in these four walls.*

*Room 28 as a Three-Dimensional Space*

Revisiting my initial description of Room 28 inspired me to ponder its place as a three-dimensional space in Bob's professional practice and my narrative inquiry.

Although I was only just beginning to grapple with the concept of landscape at the time, the statement "Room 28 resembled the teacher who occupied it" reveals some awareness of connection between the outward ap-

pearance of a classroom landscape and the inward life of the teacher who inhabits it. The reverence for life that pervaded the classroom and the famous pictures on the walls brought with Bob from his previous school were outward manifestations of his personal practical knowledge. They also looked backward to his past as a teacher and invited me to ponder how his past experiences informed his present activities and his hopes for the future. I also noted that Bob's desk and room were cluttered, even messy, and suggested that he was possibly a little disorganized. Again, the outward manifestation seemed to suggest inward characteristics. On the other hand, the overwhelming number of resources also suggested the inner strengths that Bob brought to the teaching enterprise.

As I too was part of the three-dimensional space, my outward journey sparked an inward journey. My journals reveal many of my tensions during this time. One challenge was resisting moving from observation to interpretation too soon, to work out a problem genuinely rather than impose a theoretical framework on the field research (Thesis Supervision, November 9, 1998). Another was resisting the "do-gooder" temptation to change Bob's practice (Field Notes, November 19, 1998) and instead letting him direct my assistance in his teacher development. Although I diligently recorded these tensions, they were not made explicit in my work with Bob. Instead, I continued to observe closely, ask questions, and be responsive to his concerns.

Reading my journal entries, I saw a researcher who sought to reconcile his commitment to progressive pedagogy with his respect for traditional practices and idiosyncratic characters.

#### *Positioning Lippincott School on the Wider Landscape*

Although I was to spend most of my time in one classroom, I was aware that each classroom existed on a wider landscape, what Clandinin and Connelly (1995) term a "professional knowledge landscape." This landscape had geographic, spatial, and temporal qualities. The life of Lippincott School in previous years had shaped the school in which the teachers worked, whereas the ongoing life of the school was framed by day-to-day experiences with other professionals in the office, staff room, and hall. The nature of the local community and the relationship between parents and the school, by influencing the students, undoubtedly contributed to the interactions between teacher and student and among students. The wider community of which this neighborhood is a part also shaped attitudes and contributed to the general atmosphere of the school, as did the policies of the Ministry of Education, the rise of the knowledge society, and immigration from nations in turmoil. Due to the relationships between people, places, and things, this was "both an intellectual and moral landscape" (Clandinin & Connelly).

Although my research ultimately focused on Bob Fitzgerald in Room 28, I was always mindful that "no man is an island, entire of itself; every man is a piece of the continent, a part of the main" (Donne, 1624), and thus the school, neighborhood, school board, and the outside-of-classroom world in which teachers lived needed to be kept in mind at all times. The school, the students and even the classroom were part of that world, and as the story unfolded, I became aware that I was too.

One aspect of the three-dimensional space was the neighborhood that lay beyond the classroom window. Although Bob and I seldom looked down at the streetscape below, the children of those streets were ever-present in the classroom.

#### *A Walk through the Neighborhood*

*The residential neighborhood near the school consisted of two- to three-storey row and semidetached houses. Although many were of modest construction, they were attractively painted and had well-tended yards. There were many signs of gentrification: newly cleaned bricks, new driveways, sports-utility vehicles, and the sound of renovations. Although the people wandering the neighborhood were diverse—ranging from elderly couples to Muslims in traditional attire to young middle-class families—I was surprised that most seemed to be of European ancestry.*

*The arterial road, however, offered a different picture. The family-owned variety stores and fast-food restaurants, many of which served halal pizza and chicken wings, were modest. On the second and third floors of these buildings were modest apartments occupied by recent Muslim immigrants (Based on Field Notes, September 28, 1998).*

Due to its large and poor immigrant population, the school had been identified by the school district as inner-city. The diversity of the population at Lippincott School is evident from the “School Profile” that is created each year for the school board and made available to parents. In both the 1998 and 2000 profiles, 58% had a “primary language other than English.” Over 15% of the students had been “living in Canada for 5 years or less”; in 2000, this number was broken down further to reveal that 9% of these students had been in Canada less than two years. Clearly this significant population of immigrants and refugees was the basis for the principal’s description of the school as inner-city. The students in Bob Fitzgerald’s class reflected this diversity. Of the 30 students in his first class at Lippincott School, 11 were Caucasian, six were Oriental, and 13 were from the Near East or South Asia (Field Notes, October 16, 1998).

#### *Negotiating an Ongoing Research Relationship*

During the first four weeks of observing Bob and the other participants, I often struggled with the fluid nature of my inquiry. While sitting at the back of a classroom or puzzling over field notes, I sought to find a particular question or theme that would give shape to my inquiry. In the meantime, I followed my thesis supervisor’s advice by keeping detailed field notes and journal entries. Michael Connelly said, “You see the world in a grain of sand.” Thus he advised that I “fish or cut bait” as the more people you work with the less you will see (Thesis Supervision, September, 30, 1998).

As I continued my visits, I sought both to identify which teachers would make the most interesting participants and what the nature of the inquiry would be. Ultimately, I decided to “trust my gut” (Field Notes, October 16, 1998) and work with the teacher with whom I had developed the closest relationship, even though he was the least skilled with computers.

In letters to the other three participants, I wrote:

Over the past few weeks, I have had many wonderful experiences and also a few frustrations as I have conducted my work. The wonderful experiences are with the open and helpful staff and students of Lippinott. The frustrations

concern the challenges of working with several teachers. Observing four teachers, helping students with computers and acting as a resource have each been enjoyable, but have resulted in being too busy to conduct the kind of intensive work I would like. Thus over time, I have been scaling back my plans, on the advice of my thesis director. First, I planned to reduce to three then two. Now I have settled on one person, Bob Fitzgerald, to be the focus of the research. Working with one person, I hope to explore more deeply issues concerning teacher development and computers. The questions I wanted to ask are still in my mind and will still be part of my work, but the scale has been reduced. An old saying states that the world can be found in a grain of sand; hopefully, narrowing my work will lead to more depth. (October 26, 1998)

Before negotiating my exit from the classrooms of these three teachers, I sought Bob Fitzgerald's consent to focus on his practice and his classroom. I recorded the conversation as follows:

Bob is delighted with how things are proceeding and enjoys having me in the classroom. I tell him the same about him and the kids. I then decide to go out on a limb. I tell him of my predicament, then say I would like to work with his class alone ... I explain that I want to build on what he is doing in the class. I suggest looking over the curriculum together to see where I can help him achieve his goals for the year, using computers as an aid where appropriate and in moderation. He is receptive to this ... I would need some of his time after school to discuss philosophy of teaching, his life and experiences. No problem, he says. I would need to check with [the principal] and my thesis advisor. We would need to not say anything to the others until I get clearance. Bob speaks of how much he enjoys talking to me and how much I add to the class. The kids will really benefit, and I will help make sure you get what you need, he says. (Field Notes, October 16, 1998)

Over the coming months we would renegotiate the relationship more than once. The first major shift occurred when Bob received a harsh performance review from Principal Lois Dexter (Field Notes, October 29, 1998). In the weeks that followed, Bob sought my assistance in using the computerized report card software and my advice as he adapted his classroom practice in response to her feedback. The relationship that we developed as I adapted to Bob's interests would become the focus of my inquiry. Throughout, our ongoing negotiation of relationship was based on mutual friendship and respect. Although I ultimately directed the course of my research, I was always receptive and responsive to Bob's interests and needs as a teacher-participant.

#### *Conclusion and Implications*

In this article I share my stories as an educational researcher setting the stage for a narrative inquiry. These stories of negotiating relationships and coming to understand the school landscape are thick descriptions of school life. Through them I hope I illustrate the importance of researchers enmeshing themselves in the school context in order to become sensitive readers of the complex narratives of teachers' and students' experiences.

Negotiating relationships was more complex than simply negotiating entry. It involved the development of relationships of trust, particularly with the central teacher-participant. In selecting my participant, I trusted my sense of the relationship more than external factors. This trust developed and deepened over time as I demonstrated my genuine interest in him, the class, and the

school. Through my many hours of observation, our frequent conversations, and the assistance I provided in a time of need, I conveyed empathy and respect for Bob as a teacher, and together we developed a collaborative relationship. Also, becoming enmeshed in the life of the classroom provided me with valuable insights that helped me negotiate meaningful relationships and develop the central puzzle of my inquiry.

Understanding the school landscape both inside and outside the classroom was another research dimension. It was primarily developed through taking the time to observe closely and take detailed field notes. It involves observing detail and learning to see the larger picture with an “enlightened eye” (Eisner, 1991). My observations of the children in Room 28 and the wider school landscape provided a context for understanding Bob’s experiences and the personal practical knowledge that informed his teaching practice.

Through these stories, I hope I provide the reader with a sense of how narrative inquirers puzzle over their work in order to understand lived experiences of the grain of sand that is the classroom teacher. This, however, was only the beginning of a long and intense research process in which there was an ongoing negotiation of relationship and understanding of the school landscape. Also, the focus of my inquiry would shift from Bob Fitzgerald’s personal practical knowledge to the collaborative relationship that we developed together as we responded to a critical incident in Bob’s professional practice.

Narrative inquiry is an intense, uncertain, and time-consuming form of educational research. By enmeshing oneself in the “swirls, confluxions, and inconstant connections” (Geertz, 1995, p. 2) of life as lived in a particular educational landscape and systematically recording one’s observations and perceptions, a narrative researcher can develop hindsight accounts that convey the complexity of lived experience. By negotiating relationships of empathy and respect with participants, narrative researchers can better understand and convey the experiences of students and teachers.

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