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# Teacher Stories, Parent Stories, Stories of School: Educator/Parents Navigating School Landscapes

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TEACHER STORIES, PARENT STORIES, STORIES OF SCHOOL:  
EDUCATOR/PARENTS NAVIGATING SCHOOL LANDSCAPES

by

Jennifer C. Nelson

A DISSERTATION

Presented to the Faculty of

The Graduate College at the University of Nebraska

In Partial Fulfillment of Requirements

For the Degree of Doctor of Philosophy

Major: Educational Studies

Under the Supervision of Professor Elaine Chan

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May, 2016

TEACHER STORIES, PARENT STORIES, STORIES OF SCHOOL:  
EDUCATOR/PARENTS NAVIGATING SCHOOL LANDSCAPES

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University of Nebraska, 2016

Advisor: Elaine Chan

Situated within this narrative inquiry are four parents, who are also educators, negotiating their teacher/parent identities while examining their praxis within their classrooms. Educators, who are also parents, have a unique position within education. They have a personal, practical, professional knowledge of schools—and a personal, practical knowledge of their children. In the process of juxtaposing these parent stories of teaching and learning with their own child(ren) alongside their teacher stories of teaching and learning with their students, various curricular practices are called into question. It is the personalized stories that often bring silenced voices to the forefront; thus, the researcher draws on narrative inquiry as a means for the participants to reveal tensions and complexities of negotiating the dual roles of being both parent and teacher upon the school landscape. The educator/parent narratives, composed over eight months, reveal common themes of tension concerning: 1) challenges of implementing developmentally appropriate curriculum in relation to high-stakes standardized testing; 2) tensions experienced surrounding various school and district policies; and, 3) challenges of navigating relational complexities within the current climate of high-stakes standardized testing. Permeating throughout these

educator/parent narratives are examples of the tensions the participants experienced as a result of educational policies that did not seem to take into account these educator/parents' personal, practical, and professional knowledge. The participants' voices illustrated time and again, ways in which they believed they were silenced, marginalized, and/or ignored; these incidents, in turn, contributed to feelings of frustration and disempowerment. The educator/parents in this study continue to live on uneasy school landscapes, where they feel their pedagogical competence is undermined, and their voice and agency is often thwarted in this high stakes-testing, policy driven climate. This research study contributes to the field by providing a glimpse into educator/parent knowledge to inform our understanding of teacher knowledge.

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## CHAPTER 1

### Introduction

*As I looked over Grace and Emily's report cards from the second quarter of their kindergarten year, I was troubled by how little the report cards told me as a parent. My twin girls had been attending kindergarten for half of the school year and all I could gather from their report cards were a series of "3's = Meets district standards", and "4's = Exceeds district standards", as well as a handful of canned comments. Some of the comments were generalized and included: "Grace is able to work and play well with others"; "Emily is an engaged listener and participates in class discussions!" Other comments were more specific: "Grace is able to identify two and three dimensional shapes and writes numbers to 19"; and "Emily is able to read 10/12 of the level 1 kindergarten words, blend '-an' and '-at' words and read text by pointing to the words." The report cards were generic. They were lifeless and dull. How was this information useful to me as a parent? Nowhere on those report cards did I see my daughters. There was nothing that came close to describing their personalities, interests, talents and gifts. Their voices were absent, and I felt saddened and somewhat depressed about the lack of teacher insight. Nowhere on the report card was there evidence of how my child made meaning of her curriculum, herself and others. I am left wondering about the intent of these evaluations of my children and what they might mean.*

As an educator and parent, I feel very conflicted. I know firsthand the pressure educators feel today. As a parent, I see my daughters as two unique individuals. These are my children and I know them as only a parent can know

them, intimately from birth to the present day. On school mornings I wake them, warm and ruffled from sleep, breathing them in as I hug them and kiss them “good morning.” I send them from our private home off to public school hoping their teacher(s) can see the essence of who they are. By placing my child in another’s care for nearly seven hours of the day, I am placing my trust in that adult to be a caring other (Noddings, 2003) for my child; and, I want to trust this caring adult to have my child’s best interests in mind while he or she is with her.

Yet, I wonder about how well my child will be known? How do I prevent my child from becoming reduced to a test score or labeled with one of those educational acronyms? How will I avoid becoming a marginalized parental voice? Will there be opportunity for my daughters and me to participate in the educational conversation— especially when the conversation is about them? These are some of the questions I grapple with as a parent and a teacher.

As a middle school teacher, I also understand the knowledge and expertise educators possess about curriculum, teaching, and learning. Mindful educators are constantly negotiating the complexities within the classroom as they seek ways to make meaningful connections between curriculum, self and other. This is not easy to do because each student has different experiences, different abilities, and different learning rates. Adding to these complexities, educators must often work within the inhibiting pressures of prescribed curricula, standardized tests and achievement agendas. Working within these boundaries can be exhausting, and it is tempting to merely cover the curriculum while ignoring the particularities of individual learners. When this happens, educators

can lose sight of the child before them reducing the child to a test score or a label. In turn, parents receive limited information about their children as learners. They receive even less information about their children as holistic human beings. Grumet's (1988) words speak to my concerns about my children entering, as well as being evaluated, by this institution known as public schooling.

How in the name of humanism can a school defend an evaluation report that tells parents that in view of his or her capacities their child is doing very well? Not only has the school seen fit to describe the child's present activity without reference to the context in which it is taking place, it presumes to make that evaluation contingent on its assessment of the child's essential being (p. 173).

The increasing mandates for testing, coupled with increasing levels of external scrutiny, regulates what "counts" in school and can restrict what is seen and communicated about students' progress. The complexity of learning is frequently reduced to a number between 1 and 4, and more often than not, the report card may not reflect the child that the parent knows.

### **Statement of the Problem**

Everyone has had experiences with the institution of "school" and its long-standing practices. Over time and through contact with schools—whether positioned as students, educators, staff, parents, family, and/or community members—we come to know the patterns, the consistencies, and the predictabilities inherent and across schools. Safe walk to school night, parent-teacher conferences, concerts, assemblies, report card days, fun night, sporting events, and field day are common practices in many schools. As a classroom teacher, I assumed a certain "taken-for-grantedness" about these typical school practices. I did not think to question them. I did not think about how the parents

and/or families of my sixth grade students perceived these practices. I naively believed that my school did a great job of involving parents/families in its practices. It wasn't until my own children entered kindergarten that I understood what it felt like to be an "outsider" on the school landscape. Although I had an "insider's" knowledge of school and the routines and practices, there was a clear separation between my parent self and my children's school.

The boundaries became evident on my twin daughters' first day of kindergarten. I remember that morning as we kindergarten parents waited outside of the school building with our children on that momentous day. We made small talk with each other as our children talked and fidgeted in their respective classroom lines awaiting their kindergarten teachers' emergence from the building. The sounding of a loud school bell signaled that school would officially begin in five minutes, and the four smiling kindergarten teachers emerged from the building to greet their newest pupils. There was a commotion of good-byes, hugs, kisses, a few tears, and before I knew it, our children were being led inside the school building. I watched in awed silence as my daughters held hands and followed their classmates inside—not once looking back in my direction. Then, the door closed and I was left standing outside feeling not only a sense of loss, but also a sense of uncertainty and confusion questioning my place upon the school landscape.

I know that I am not alone in feeling this way. Scholars like William Ayers, Alan Block, and Debbie Pushor have shared their narratives of personal experience navigating the school landscape via their own children. In addition,

much has been written about parent involvement/engagement, parent communication, and parent partnerships. The research literature tends to be research *on* parents, rather than research *with* parents. Educators who are also parents have a unique position within the school landscape. They have professional knowledge of schools and personal knowledge of their children. From talking with educator/parents, I have gained glimpses of how being a parent has changed who they are as teachers and how they teach, as well as call into question curricular practices.

### **Theoretical Framework**

The theoretical framework of this dissertation is deeply shaped by the works of one of the paramount philosophers in education, John Dewey (1916, 1934, 1938, 1943). For Dewey, education, life, and experience are one and the same. Education is life and life is education. To study life and to study education, is to study experience. As a philosopher of experience, Dewey theorizes the terms *personal*, *social*, *temporal*, and *situation* to describe characteristics of experience based on his principles of interaction and continuity.

Considering the quality of interaction and the quality of continuity in any given situation, Dewey highlights the possibility of understanding experience as educative or mis-educative. Dewey (1938) believed that experience is educative only when it continues to move a person forward on “the experiential continuum” (p. 38) while mis-educative experiences, those that are disconnected from one another, have the “effect of arresting or distorting the growth of further experience” (p. 25). Dewey’s conceptualization of the nature of experience

created a way to explore experience, and for Clandinin and Connelly (2000) his ideas shaped their understandings of narrative inquiry as a way to represent stories of experience.

More specifically, Connelly and Clandinin's (1999) narrative conceptualization of identity as a "story to live by" situates my understanding of educator/parent identity. Stories to live by are revealed in how we tell storied compositions of our lives to "define who we are, what we do, and why..." (Connelly & Clandinin, 1999). The potential of narrative inquiry to remake life in classrooms, schools, and beyond is centrally situated in Clandinin and Connelly's (1998) understanding that it is education that lives at the core of narrative inquiry "and not merely the telling of stories" (p. 246). They write:

We see living an educated life as an ongoing process. People's lives are composed over time: biographies or life stories are lived and told, retold and relived. For us, education is interwoven with living and with the possibility of retelling our life stories. As we think about our own lives and the lives of teachers and children with whom we engage, we see possibilities for growth and change. As we learn to tell, to listen and to respond to teachers' and children's stories, we imagine significant educational consequences for children and teachers in schools and for faculty members in universities through more mutual relations between schools and universities. No one, and no institution, would leave this imagined future unchanged (pp. 246-247).

This understanding of narrative inquiry as attending to and acting on experience by co-inquiring with educator/parents who interact in and out of classrooms, school, and in other contexts into living, telling, retelling, and reliving stories of experience, lives at the heart of this research study. The study of narrative is the study of the ways humans experience the world, and experience

is understood as “the stories people live by. People live stories and in the telling of them reaffirm them, modify them, and create new ones” (Clandinin & Connelly, 1994, p. 415). In presenting the stories of experience of my educator/parent participants, I offer glimpses into the complexities of their dual educator/parent knowledge and how it shaped aspects of their teaching and their parenting.

Clandinin and Connelly (1995) utilize a landscape metaphor to talk about space, time, and place. This metaphor has a “sense of expansiveness and the possibility of being filled with diverse people, things and events in different relationships” (p. 4). According to Clandinin and Connelly (1996), within the landscape are two fundamentally different places, “the one behind the door with students, and the other in professional places with others” (p. 25). Teachers cross the boundaries between these two places several times a day, and as this research study documents, it is the split existence between these two places that created tensions and dilemmas for the educator/parent participants.

The place on the landscape outside of classrooms is an abstract place where teachers receive knowledge funneled into the school system filled with other people’s ideas about what is right or necessary for children to learn. Others believe they possess a knowledge of teachers and rationalize reasons for their imposed prescriptions upon the educational landscape. Clandinin and Connelly (1996) write, “researchers, policymakers, senior administrators, and others, using various implementation strategies, push research findings, policy statements, plans, improvement schemes, and so on down the conduit into this out-of-classroom place on the professional knowledge landscape” (p. 25). When



teachers are expected to implement, enact, teach and assess what is predetermined by others above them in the conduit, it can be tension-filled, to the point of stripping them of their moral agency. The educator/parents in this study dwelled in this tension-filled space—a place where others believed they held knowledge of teachers, sometimes leaving the educator/parent participants with feelings of disregard and distrust.

Such feelings are not new to educators. The application of the principles of scientific management within the structure, organization, and curriculum of public schools in the US became dominant in the 1900's (Kliebard, 2004). Based upon research evidence from the modern day era of high-stakes testing in US public education, the fundamental logics guiding scientific management have resurfaced 100 years later, as teachers' classroom practices are increasingly standardized by high-stakes testing and scripted curriculum. As such, Au (2011) argues that public school teachers in the US are teaching under what might be considered the 'New Taylorism,' where their labor is controlled vis-à-vis high stakes testing and pre-packaged, corporate curricula aimed specifically at teaching to the tests.

Despite these external parameters and others' understanding of knowledge of teachers, Clandinin and Connelly (1995) contrast this concept with their explanation of teacher knowledge. They describe teacher knowledge as:

That body of convictions and meanings, conscious or unconscious, that have arisen from experience (intimate, social, and traditional) and that are expressed in a person's practices...It is a kind of knowledge that has arisen from circumstances, practices, and

undergoings that themselves had affective content for the person in question. Therefore, practice is part of what we mean by personal practical knowledge. Indeed, practice broadly conceived to include intellectual acts and self-exploration, is all we have to go on. When we see practice, we see personal practical knowledge at work (p.7).

I focus in this research study on teacher personal practical knowledge that was also informed by the participants' dual roles of parent and educator. Their experiences and knowledge of being a parent inherently became embodied, interwoven, and a shaping influence into their teacher knowledge. The educator/parent participants in this study utilized this dual knowledge in their classrooms—safe places—where they felt secure to live out their personal practical knowledge as teachers alongside the children with whom they worked. As the participants' narratives revealed, the professional knowledge landscape became an exceedingly complex place with multiple layers of meaning depending on each of their stories, and how they were positioned on the landscape.

### **Purpose of the Study**

The purpose of this study is to use narrative inquiry to depict the experiences of four parents who are also educators, negotiating their educator/parent identities while examining their praxis within the school landscape. Teachers live within two professional places. One is the relational world inside their classrooms with their students. The other is the abstract world, outside of their classrooms, where they meet all other aspects of the educational enterprise such as the philosophies, the techniques, the materials, and the

expectations that they will enact certain educational practices. However, if one is a parent, time is also spent with one's own children. This time spent with one's own children also contributes to a teacher's personal, practical, professional knowledge. Educator/parents cross the boundaries between these places within the landscape on a daily basis. Juxtaposing these parent stories of teaching and learning with their own child(ren) alongside their teacher stories of teaching and learning with their students, provides personalized accounts offering insight into these stories of experience (Connelly & Clandinin, 1988) that can inform educational practice.

### **Research Questions**

As a teacher, researcher, and mother, I am led to ask: What might be learned if we heard educator/parents' stories of their children's schooling experiences and their stories of their own experiences as parents in relation to the school landscape? How can exploring the relational tensions shaping educator/parent's lives, both in and out of the school landscape, be understood as educative and part of reframing education? What might become foregrounded from this research that currently is not being attended to in the literature or in the field?

### **Significance of the Study**

Family involvement in children's schooling is recognized as one of the most important issues in school life. However, how that family involvement is negotiated within schooling is complex. "In the case of parents, they must choose

to be involved in the ways that the school dictates or else they will be construed as a problem; alternatively, they may choose to protect their children's interests, in which case they will be seen as a problem—overly involved and unable to turn the schools around,” (Nakagawa, 2000, p. 449). This contested ground Nakagawa relays is one that is further complicated when the parent is also an educator.

Teachers have the power to significantly affect learning, and educator/parents have a unique perspective on teaching and learning. The role of parent changes consciousness as a teacher. Friere (1985) uses the term, *conscientization*, to define “the process in which men [sic], not as recipients, but as knowing subjects achieve a deepening awareness both of the sociocultural reality that shapes their lives and their capacity to transform that reality” (p.93). Gaining increasingly levels of critical consciousness is a twofold process. It is a process of perceiving, first, one's place in reality and, secondly, one's capability as an agent of change. Being an educator/parent has increased the levels of critical consciousness for the participants of this study and may bring to light troubling elements of teaching and learning and what to do about them.

For example, before having my own children, I gave little thought to the amount of homework I assigned. One of the subjects I taught was math, and homework was assigned on a daily basis. I often heard that the homework took some students up to an hour to complete. I regretted that it took some students a longer time than I had anticipated for them to complete the homework assignment. However, I also believed that the extra practice of homework would

strengthen their math skills. And, isn't that a good thing? It was not until I became the parent of children, who have regularly assigned homework, that I viewed homework as an unwelcome intrusion into family life. As a sixth grade teacher today, I do many things differently—including how often and how much homework I assign. My critical consciousness as an educator has been raised through my experience as a parent.

For this research study, I focus on the experiences of four participating educator/parent participants seeking insights into how their critical consciousness has increased. I am interested in how these tensions are personally, and professionally, navigated and narrated. I seek to unpack the narrative tensions and examine the lived consequences for these educator/parents both in and out of the classroom.

## CHAPTER 2

### Review of Literature

#### Parent Involvement versus Parent Engagement

There is a growing body of research on parent involvement in schools, and the benefits of involving parents in their children's education are widely documented. Much of this research has shown parental involvement improves learning and increases student achievement (Epstein, 2005; Hoover-Dempsey, Bassler, & Brissie, 1992; Hoover-Dempsey, & Sandler, 1995; 1997; Jeynes, 2005). Equally important, parent involvement has been found to promote positive student attitudes and behaviors (Jeynes, 2007b; 2010). Researchers have also established that when parents are involved in their children's education, there is an increase in students' school attendance and an increased sense of positive feelings of self (Berger, 2008; Fan & Chen, 2001). These findings provide credible evidence to support a collaborative partnership between parents and teachers, two uniquely significant stakeholder groups.

However, an overview of the literature shows this does not seem to be the norm. Many parents experience a disconnect between their children's teachers, curriculum, and school. In many cases, the school seeks to establish a partnership with parents, yet the relationship is often one-sided with the school exerting control and dictating the parameters of parental involvement (Bennett, 2007; Miretzky, 2004). The existing research has acknowledged the term "parent involvement" often means facilitating the school's agenda (Pushor, 2007). Parents are expected to monitor homework, maintain communication between

home and school, organize and participate in school fundraisers, volunteer in classrooms, and attend school functions. The nature of this relationship is unequal in its balance of power with “involved” parents doing the tasks educators ask or expect them to do. Educators are perceived as experts, possessing a professional knowledge of teaching and learning, seeming to know what is best for children. As a result, parents are left with little voice, or choice, in how they may contribute to their children’s schooling.

Within the elementary and secondary school landscape, there may be other reasons that educator and parent relationships fall short further limiting meaningful family involvement. These reasons include teachers being unprepared and unsure as to how to effectively work with parents (Flanigan, 2007; Hansuvadha, 2009), as well as language and cultural barriers (Carreon, Drake, & Burton, 2005; Delgado-Gaitan, 1991; Garcia Coll, Akiba, Palacios, Bailey, Silver, DiMartino, & Chin, 2002; Pushor & Murphy, 2004). In many areas, urban schools are often isolated from the families and communities they serve (Warren, Hong, Rubin, & Uy, 2009); or there may be a lack of trust as well as communication between school and home (Adams & Christenson, 2000; Miretzky, 2004). Educational discourse in the form of family-school contracts (Nakagawa, 2000) has provided further hindrances. Parents are invited to become involved in an attempt to “fix” what is wrong with their child’s school (Fine, 1993) putting conditions on the family-school relationship. Perhaps one of the most difficult barriers to overcome is the hierarchical relationship that has been established with educators being perceived as experts rather than equals

with parents (Lasky, 2001; Smit, Driessen, Slegers, & Teelken, 2008). As a result, there are few opportunities for parents and educators to expand and elaborate on their traditional roles that relegate the authority, status, and power to those within the school.

Although I have been using the words *parent involvement*, it is worth noting that in recent years the term *parent engagement* has gained usage and acceptance. Parent engagement emphasizes parents working alongside educators as knowledgeable equals who are committed to fostering the growth and well-being of each child. Pushor (2007) states: "With parent engagement, possibilities are created for the structure of schooling to be flattened, power and authority to be shared by educators and parents, and the agenda being served to be mutually determined and mutually beneficial" (Pushor & Ruitenberg, 2005, pp. 12-13 as cited in Pushor). I prefer the idea of *parent engagement* because it represents placing parental knowledge next to teacher's "personal practical knowledge" (Connelly & Clandinin, 1985; 1988; Clandinin & Connelly, 1995; 2000) to work toward a common goal for each child. This type of a relationship would allow parents to be more than visitors on the school landscape. It would allow for a sense of reciprocity based on a shared engagement benefiting the home, school, and community (Pushor, 2007). However, no matter the terminology, negotiating a place for parents within their children's schooling remains a difficult endeavor full of mixed messages and unclear expectations. Some of this difficulty may be attributed to the vast range of influences from which educators and parents draw to inform their work with children and the



complex intersection of different kinds of knowledge that contribute to a body of teacher knowledge.

### **Funds of Knowledge**

According to Gonzalez, Moll, & Amanti (2005), every human being regardless of the characteristics of age, gender, culture, religion, socioeconomic status, parent or non-parent, is a holder of “funds of knowledge.” These funds of knowledge are “historically accumulated and culturally developed bodies of knowledge and skills essential for household or individual functioning and well-being” (Moll, Amanti, Neff, & Gonzalez, 2005, p. 72). Our funds of knowledge develop out of all our experiences, formal and informal, and, as a result, they are specific, situated, and contextual, shaped by the family and places into which we are born and live. Each individual’s funds of knowledge are unique--interwoven into the fabric of his/her being comprising one’s identity. In the following paragraphs, I will address the differing funds of knowledge, then draw upon my own life to illustrate how they may contribute to shaping a sense of identity in a variety of ways.

### ***Funds of Knowledge as Personal***

In his book, *Personal knowledge: Towards a post-critical philosophy*, Michael Polanyi (1958) wrote in depth about personal knowledge, which is discovered by each of us as we pour ourselves into the particulars of the reality that surrounds us. It is the knowing to which we passionately commit as we engage with the world and are changed by it (p.64). This knowing becomes part

of the fabric of who we are as “we live in it as the garment of our own skin” (p. 64). We participate in both shaping our personal knowledge and being shaped by it (p. 65).

My personal knowledge as a parent, for example, is shaped by my understanding of the fragility of life as I experienced a very high-risk pregnancy with my identical twin daughters, Grace and Emily. Even after my daughters were born ten weeks premature, I learned how important it was for me to sit by their incubators and observe them in order to get to know them. They were connected to so many medical tubes and monitoring wires that I could not hold them often or easily. However, by watching them, taking their temperature, changing their tiny diapers, and learning how to interpret the readings on the various machines they were attached to, I began to build an understanding of what was normal—and what was not normal. Because of these experiences, I am eternally thankful for their lives and have a deeper understanding of what it means to live in the moment while appreciating all of the surprises, complexities, and tensions that accompany being a mother. My personal knowledge is a reflection of my lived experiences and comprises the garment of the skin in which I live.

### ***Funds of Knowledge as Practical***

In her research, Elbaz (1981) conceptualized knowledge as practical, as that knowledge which is “directed toward making sense of, and responding to, the various situations of” (p.49) a particular role. While Elbaz’s research specifically examined the practical knowledge of teachers, one can understand

how practical knowledge is held and used by anyone in a particular role—doctor, mechanic, chef, or musician. She understood this sense-making knowledge included one's personal knowledge and one's funds of knowledge in a situated moment in time and place, within a social context, and influenced by one's general theoretical orientation (p.49).

Practical knowledge, for all of us, reflects the knowledge we hold and use in the varied and multiple roles in our lives. When I think of practical knowledge in one role of my life, playing golf, for example, I can see the structure of my practical knowledge at play. I have played the game of golf since I was eight years-old; however, my golfing has been inconsistent over the years because of the demands of my time – pregnancies, babies, young children, taking classes, teaching classes, weather conditions, and availability of golfing partners. As a result, when I have the opportunity to play a round of golf, I try to remember to relax and “play my game.” Because I am usually out of practice, I hit some balls on the driving range and practice my putting and chipping on the practice green before teeing off. On the first nine holes, I use my three-wood from the tee instead of my driver. The next club I will use depends on where my first shot goes and how far I am from the putting green. If I am over 150 yards away from the green, I will probably use my hybrid club. If I am less than 150 yards away from the green, I will choose an appropriate iron for the remaining distance until I am on the green, and I can putt.

Golfing, for me, is relational. Sometimes it is about a relationship with whom I am playing with—my children, my husband, my mom and dad, my

brother and sister, or friends. In addition, golfing is always a relationship between me and my game—the mental, physical, emotional, and spiritual aspects of myself and the intricacies on the golf course. Relationship is the “coherent account” (p.50) that captures my “doing as informed by knowledge” (p.62), my golfer’s practical knowledge.

### ***Funds of Knowledge as Professional and Craft***

Moll, Amanti, Neff, and Gonzalez (2005) described funds of knowledge as household knowledge, knowledge held and used by members of a household as they engage in social and economic relationships (p. 73). In their particular study of households in the border region between Mexico and the United States, they found that “household knowledge may include information about farming, animal management...construction and building, related to urban occupations as well as knowledge about many other matters, such as trade, business, and finance...”(p.72). Such household knowledge may be professional, the result of education, training, or experience in a particular field or for a particular occupation. The term professional knowledge is used in the broad sense to capture the knowledge one develops in the pursuit of earning a living.

Household knowledge may also include craft knowledge, that knowledge that is honed in the development of life pursuits. These life pursuits may also enhance one’s social and economic relationships, but the term may also be used to refer to knowledge that arises from one’s hobbies, pastimes, or recreational activities—gardening, painting, or baking. One’s professional and craft

knowledge is often used as an identifier by others. For example, “You should see my mom’s garden; she can grow anything!” Or, “This is my neighbor, Bee. She is an amazing quilter.” As a result, the professional and craft knowledge one possesses becomes a common descriptor of whom one is in the world.

My professional knowledge is situated in the field of education. It has been developed through my formal schooling and training through university degree programs, professional development, and academic conferences. It has been shaped by my informal engagement with colleagues, in collaborative conversation, planning, teaching, and assessment activities. It has been broadened and deepened by my lived experiences as a middle school teacher, university pre-service teacher instructor, and educational researcher. While professional knowledge is often associated with a certificate, diploma, or degree, such knowledge encapsulates much more than formal training.

Over the years, my professional knowledge has grown as I have gained a variety of teaching/learning experiences working with sixth graders, families, pre-service teachers, university college professors, school and district administrators, and community members. When I was a new teacher, before having a family, I rarely thought to question my school district’s policies and practices. For example, whenever I was asked to implement a new curriculum, I did so without questioning deeply whether or not it was developmentally appropriate for my students. I think back on my sixth grade science curriculum, which was designed by the publisher to be targeted at an appropriate reading level for students in grades 6-8. However, my colleagues and I quickly learned that the science

textbooks were actually written at an eighth grade reading level. As a result, our sixth graders had a difficult time comprehending the text, and I felt the need to create PowerPoint's for every chapter to help them understand the material. As a new teacher, this experience was one of the first of many that would lead me to question the pre-packaged, one-size-fits-all curricula as well as helping me to trust my professional knowledge and judgment in teaching and learning experiences with diverse learners.

Another example of how my professional knowledge has developed over the years includes my experiences in graduate school. As a doctoral student, my knowledge of teaching and learning was broadened, deepened, and challenged as I read authors such as John Dewey, Nel Noddings, Madeline Grumet, Jean Clandinin, F. Michael Connelly, William Ayers, and Deborah Pushor to name a few. These authors, and many others, became "friends" who influenced my critical thinking and allowed me to enter into dialogue, to question, and to reimagine teaching, learning, self, and other in new ways.

My craft knowledge is less defined, more ephemeral, reflecting passions that have captured me at different points in my life. For example, I like to cook and create a variety of dishes in the kitchen. I am the primary meal planner, grocery shopper, and chef in our household. With no training or formal instruction in the kitchen, I garnered my craft knowledge through reading recipes in cook books, watching The Food Network on television, trial and error, and conversing with others who like to experiment in the kitchen. I use my craft knowledge almost every day as I prepare our family's dinnertime meal. This craft knowledge

has become something I can share with my husband and children when they choose to accompany me in preparing our meals, and in turn, it has become a special part of our family's household funds of knowledge.

Just as with personal and practical knowledge, we are all holders of professional and/or craft knowledge. While children (who do not have paying jobs) do not have professional knowledge, they do have craft knowledge. They have rich funds of knowledge of soccer, Legos, Rainbow Looms, and Minecraft. They possess funds of knowledge from their active engagement in sports, music, dance, and art—passions they share with other family members. All human beings then, regardless of age or formal education, by virtue of their interactions in and with the world, possess and use funds of knowledge (Gonzalez, Moll & Amanti, 2005).

### **Funds of Knowledge of Children, Teaching, and Learning**

By understanding funds of knowledge as personal, practical, professional, and craft, it becomes evident that both educators and parents hold rich funds of knowledge of children, teaching, and learning. Educators and parents utilize their personal knowledge when they engage in the particulars of their worlds with children. It is a reflection of with what and with whom they interact, to what and to whom they attend. It is a reflection of their lived experiences as they determine who they are, and who they will be, in these adult-child relationships.

Educators and parents utilize practical knowledge, sense-making knowledge, as they live within situational contexts with children. Their practical

knowledge is used as they respond within the moment, drawing upon their experiences with self, children, family, schooling, and education. Their practical knowledge is what they draw upon as they “confront all manner of tasks and problems” (Elbaz, 1981, p.47).

Educators utilize professional knowledge, the knowledge they gained through their formal degree programs, as well as the informal and ongoing knowledge they continue to develop through their daily interactions with children as their careers unfold. Differently, because being a parent is not recognized by society as being a career, many parents develop their knowledge of parenting and children through activities like reading books, attending classes, and seeking advice from experts, family members, or friends. Educators and parents utilize craft knowledge; knowledge utilized in their life pursuits, which reflects their interests and hobbies, and which complements, informs, contributes to, and enriches their lives lived with children.

Educator knowledge and parent knowledge, then, are similar as both are comprised of the personal, practical, professional, and craft. At the same time, educator knowledge and parent knowledge have much that make them distinct from one another. The nature of the context in which adults and children interact, as well as the relationship that exists between them, make them distinct from one another. The funds of knowledge that educators and parents possess are multifaceted, interconnected, and complex. Furthermore, when one is an educator and a parent, both roles along with the funds of knowledge intersect at school and at home, creating tensions and complexities. In this research study, I



seek to highlight and examine the complexities that my participants encounter navigating both roles—that of educator and parent. Additionally, on a school landscape where educational policies are made and enacted, these educator/parents' funds of knowledge were challenged on a regular basis as they sought to establish relationships among students, self, and curriculum.

### **A Pedagogy of Relations**

Currently, No Child Left Behind (NCLB) legislation is creating a high-stakes, standardized test driven curriculum in our nation's schools. Educational research on the effects of high-stakes testing on the classroom practices of teachers, as well as the classroom experiences of students, finds that these tests are “essentially controlling what knowledge is taught, the form in which it is taught, and how it is taught” (Au, 2010, p. 3). What this means is that instructional content is determined by what is on the high-stakes test. If it is not on the test, it is likely that it will not be taught in the classroom. Furthermore, the structure of the high-stakes test often dictates how the content knowledge is taught—usually in decontextualized pieces of information that have no meaning or relevance to the learner. Moreover, the high-stakes tests frequently have timelines attached to them with impending deadlines. As a result, teachers often shift their pedagogical methods as they move toward teacher-centered classrooms focusing on lecture and rote-based teaching/learning strategies in order to cover the content for the test. Such practices undermine teaching and learning by disregarding the development of self in relation to other(s) and subject matter. Teaching and learning focused on predetermined ends and

efficient production places value on sameness rather than unique potential.

Dewey (1938) states,

When preparation is made at the controlling end, then the potentialities of the present are sacrificed to a suppositious future. When this happens, the actual preparation for the future is missed or distorted. The ideal of using the present simply to get ready for the future contradicts itself. It omits, and even shuts out, the very conditions by which a person can be prepared for his [sic] future (p. 49).

Dewey is not disregarding the importance of the future, as he claims it “is not an Either-Or affair. The present affects the future anyway” (p. 50). It is an educator’s responsibility to see the potential in the present. There’s a givenness in the present that is productive which, when attended to, may positively impact the future. Lingering amidst the potential in the present can allow for a greater cognizance of difference, creating possibilities for authenticity, integrity, and identity in the making and remaking. Teachers who attend to the making of identities—both in their students and in themselves—must recognize “how interhuman relations affect and define teaching and learning...[and how] meaningful education is possible only when relations are carefully understood and developed” (Bingham & Sidorkin, 2004, p. 2). The importance of relational pedagogy coupled with the complexity of teaching and learning is examined in recent teacher education research emphasizing themes of care, teacher agency, and authority for cultivating caring relationships with students to foster learning (Jardine, 1992; Macintyre Latta & Field, 2005; Noddings, 2003; Sidorkin, 2002; Stengel, 2004; Thayer-Bacon, 2004; Van Manen, 1991). These themes increasingly resonate with me as a parent and as an educator.

As a mother, I am my child's first teacher. Our teaching/learning relationship has been a responsive one centered on love and care. For example, I began reading books to my daughters before they could speak or read themselves. As toddlers, they would snuggle into my lap, and we would read all manner and variety of picture books. They would delight in listening to stories, often interrupting me to ask questions or point out something in an illustration. Certain books became favorites, and we would read them over and over again. Eventually, the text would become memorized, and they would want to "read" the book aloud to me. I recall the pride on their faces as they concentrated and worked on "reading" their books often modeling the cadence and inflection they heard in my voice. I share this example not because my daughters were early readers or particularly gifted at reading. They were neither. I share this example because I believe they enjoyed reading due to the relationship we built with each other through literature. Reading presented an opportunity for us to bond over books as well as open up conversations about a variety of topics. In addition, through sharing common texts the form and substance of our interactions shaped our responses to one another. Situation and context were not divorced from purpose or pleasure.

Sidorkin (2002) claims that relations should be the aim of education. This does not mean we should disregard subject matter. But, rather, the subject matter is what brings us together. We build relationships with the subject matter and among each other. As a parent and an educator, I am convinced that relational pedagogy is integral to learners and learning. However, what I see in

my children's report cards does not reflect this ideal. Standardized and homogenized curriculum influenced by high-stakes testing does not reflect this ideal. There seems to be little room for the voices of parents or children, and I find that troubling. As a parent, the message I receive is one that divides school and home into two separate zones. And, I question this divide. Are we not working toward the same ultimate goal? Shouldn't the goal for educators and parents reside in fostering the development of persons? If this is our goal, and I believe it is, then our roles, whether they are parent or teacher, are not so different.

I turn to the thinking of other feminist educators who have articulated the need for relational pedagogy within the school landscape. Grumet's (1988) examination of knowledge evolving through the context of human relationships, Noddings (1992) consideration of care, Roland Martin's (1992) idea of the Schoolhome and its three C's of care, concern, and connection, and Thayer-Bacon's (2003) theory of relational epistemology assist me in my understanding how relational pedagogy is integral to the nature of teaching and learning. As a feminist teacher and educator, I find a kinship with the thinking of these authors, and many others, who attend to the relational spaces among self, other(s), and subject matter. The primacy of caring relationships that foster individual growth and well-being within communities committed to embedding these ways of being with others is at the core of such thinking. Noddings (2003) contends "we affect the lives of students not in just what we teach them by way of subject matter, but

in how we relate to them as persons” (p. 249). In other words, teachers have a moral and ethical responsibility to foster the development of the whole child.

As an educator and a mother of three school-aged children, I worry about the consequences to learners and learning when relational complexities are not adequately attended to. Additionally, I am convinced that individual differences in children hold potential and possibility for teaching and learning. But this narrative I am constructing for myself is often in tension with what I see in my children’s progress reports and what I hear in their stories as they tell me about their schooling experiences. Attempting to reconcile these tensions while navigating the school terrain alongside my children is not an easy task. Through talking with other parents, who are also educators, I realize that I am not alone in feeling troubled and confused about our place within our children’s school landscape.

I consider next the ways in which this complex body of knowledge is shaped by knowledge, which educators who are also parents, have acquired through their dual roles as both teachers and parents. I then explore this body of educator/parent knowledge using a narrative inquiry approach.

## Chapter 3

### Methodology

#### Approach to Inquiry

Clandinin and Rosiek (2006) suggest that narrative inquiry is a collaborative process between the researcher and the participants; this exploration occurs over time and requires a thoughtful and intentional exploration process through the living, telling, reliving, and retelling of their stories to better understand the issues at hand. Furthermore, this work validates ordinary lived experiences, which they explain:

...[As] an exploration of the social, cultural, and institutional narratives within which individuals' experiences were constituted, shaped expressed, and enacted—but in a way that begins and ends that inquiry in the storied lives of the people involved. Narrative inquiries study an individual's experience in the world and, through the study, seek ways of enriching and transforming that experience for themselves and others (p. 42).

In my role as the inquirer, I am cognizant that the participants and I enter the project with our stories already as works in progress and know that these stories will continue to be lived, told, relived, and retold once the study is complete. Clandinin (2006) notes, "Participants' stories, inquirers' stories, social, cultural and institutional stories, are all ongoing as narrative inquiries begin" (p.47). While acknowledging that these stories to live by are continuing to be lived out by my research participants, it is my responsibility to adopt a vigilant stance in being attentive to seeking a balance between my voice as the inquirer and the voices of the educator/parent participants in attempting to understand their stories, embracing their temporality, and beginning the process of

transforming them into narratives that will offer a way to understand the complexities of how personal knowledge informs their professional knowledge as well as how professional knowledge informs their personal knowledge. I seek to examine what kinds of experiences shape teacher knowledge, looking at the intersections of the various roles they play as educators and parents. These stories provide glimpses into the kind of influences that may shape a person's knowledge, helping us to determine how we know what we know.

An integral part of this narrative inquiry is the three-dimensional space that encompasses the dimensions of interaction (personal and social), continuity (past, present, and future), and situation (place) that forms the framework for interactions with research participants and which exists throughout the entire inquiry process (Clandinin, 2006). The metaphor of the three-dimensional space is instrumental for me as an inquirer since it provides me with a means for addressing the relational knowledge resulting from the negotiation of research relationships that form the foundation for narrative inquiry work.

Clandinin and Connelly (2000) emphasize that "narrative inquiry is the study of experience, and experience, as John Dewey taught, is a matter of people in relation contextually and temporally" (p.189). The educator/parent participants are in relation, and I, as the researcher, am in relation to my participants. I was able to delve into the three-dimensional space along with my participants through multiple conversations, observing them in the midst of teaching/learning within their classrooms along with their students, and through the artifacts they shared with me. Not only did this process provide me with

greater insight into their lives as educators and parents, but also potentially symbolized the cultivation of relational trust as the participants shared and revealed what was significant for them. “Narrative inquirers cannot bracket themselves out of the inquiry, but rather need to find ways to inquire into participants’ experiences, their own experiences as well as the co-constructed experiences developed through the relational inquiry process” (Clandinin, 2006, p. 47). In reflecting upon Clandinin’s suggestion that negotiations occur from moment to moment within the three-dimensional space associated with narrative inquiry, I am reminded that in engaging with the educator/parent participants, I am “...walking in the midst of stories” (p.47).

Narrative inquiry is a fitting medium to explore the experiences of parents, who are also educators, negotiating the tensions between their personal and professional identities as they encounter differences in and among learners and learning within the school landscape. Clandinin and Connelly (2000) explain, narrative inquiry provides a way for trying to understand individual’s experiences through the stories they live. “People live stories, and in the telling of these stories, affirm them, modify them, and create new ones” (p. xxxvi). Our stories to live by are fluid, composed over time, in a multiplicity of situations and experiences.

Through the living, telling, reliving, and retelling of these stories, I hope to educate myself and others by gaining access to knowledge of multiple storied lives that the participants lived out and which influenced their stories of teaching and parenting. Moreover, I seek to explore the tensions that unfold as these



educator/parents seek to establish a place for themselves on their children's school landscape. I seek to explore the conflict of their lived experiences as both parents, and teachers, as they question their personal role in their children's education, as well as their professional role to their students.

The current climate of education often positions teachers to focus on the efficiency of student behavior and the completion of tasks toward a predetermined end. This narrow focus constrains teaching and learning in one direction ignoring what individual students and contexts might offer. As a result, there is a pedagogical blindness (Aoki, 1992) to the relational complexities embedded within teaching, learning, self (teacher) and others (students, subject matter, context). Teaching/learning understood as a set of skills to be mastered, ignores the particularities of individuals and contexts. The possibility of seeing each child (Ayers, 1993) as unique and contributing to the learning community is constrained. The potential and hope present within relational pedagogy is lost, consumed by predetermined learning agendas for all, regardless of what individuals may bring to learning situations. Teaching through a lens of limitations and deficits surfaces underestimated costs for teachers and learners. Block (2001) relays these costs as often violent to personal identities. Macintyre Latta (2005) relays the violence to teacher and learner identities through disregard for self-understandings, pedagogical tone, and plurality in learning situations.

Relational pedagogy is socially motivated, socially embedded, and derived from the personal narratives of experience. Narrative is a form where the interplay of time, place, experience, and personal knowledge can be represented

fully. The relations, connections, and interactions are parts of the whole.

Connelly and Clandinin (1988) state unity is conceived of as “a continuum within a person’s experience which renders life experiences meaningful through the unity they achieve for the person” (p. 74).

The main claim for the use of narrative in educational research is that humans are storytelling organisms who, individually and socially lead storied lives. Thus, the study of narrative is the study of the ways humans experience the world. This general notion translates into the view that education is the construction and reconstruction of personal and social stories; teachers and learners are storytellers and characters in their own and other’s stories (Connelly & Clandinin, 1990, p. 2).

Narrative demands such as a search for unity, evolving and reforming as knowledge is constructed and generated. Therefore, to talk of the act/experience of creating meaning takes a narrative form, acknowledging the multiplicity of knowing and the dialectical relationships involved. Narrative inquiry creates a space to explore the tensions between the “complex meeting spaces of the personal and relational” (Macintyre Latta, 2004, p. 330) and the “scripted story of school” (Pushor, 2007).

## **Research Methods**

The phenomenon of interest in narrative inquiry is the story. Human beings lead storied lives, both individually and socially. Our experiences (past and present) as well as our interactions with others shape and give meaning to our stories while influencing future stories. Connelly and Clandinin (2005) explain:

Narrative inquiry, the study of experience as story, then, is first and foremost a way of thinking about experience. Narrative inquiry as methodology entails a view of the phenomena. To use narrative inquiry methodology is to adopt a particular view of experience as phenomena under study (p. 477).

My understanding of educator/parent identity is grounded within Connelly and Clandinin's (1999) narrative conceptualization of identity as a "story to live by." In their research into teacher knowledge and school contexts, they reveal how we tell storied compositions of our lives to "define who we are, what we do, and why..."(p. 17). A sense of fluidity shapes our story to live by as it is composed over time, recognizing the multiplicity of situation and experiences we embody. As I learned about the experiences of my participants, I realized the extent to which these multiple storylines interweave and interconnect, bearing upon one another and how we come to understand our selves (Connelly, Clandinin, & He, 1997). We live, tell, retell, and relive our life stories (Connelly & Clandinin, 1998) as we negotiate our selves within and across various social contexts. For example, within the context of my own life, I may draw upon my understanding of myself as a mother to make meaning of a particular experience. Although this knowing will also be present as I make sense of myself in other situations, it may linger in the background while my self-understanding of being a teacher may come to the foreground as I make sense of another situation. As a teacher, my story to live by is "both personal—reflecting a person's life history—and social—reflecting the milieu, the contexts in which teachers live" (Connelly & Clandinin, 1999, p. 43). Understanding educator/parent identity as story to live by calls for a relational understanding between educator/parents and the

contexts in which they work and live. In this way, educator/parents both shape and are shaped by their particular school landscape as well as the school landscape where their children reside.

Nonetheless, Creswell (2008) emphasizes that the collaborative relationship in narrative inquiry can be a strength. It will give voice and empowerment to those whose stories are being told, and “telling a story helps individuals understand topics that they may need to process and understand” (p. 531). Finally, telling stories comes naturally to people who want to share their experiences, and narrative inquiry captures a normal “form of data that is familiar to individuals” (p. 531). Clandinin and Connelly (2000) explain “the narrative inquirer may note stories but more often records actions, doings, and happenings, all of which are narrative expressions” (p. 79).

I propose that giving voice to educator/parents so that they have the opportunities to tell their “stories to live by” (Connelly & Clandinin, 1999) is appropriate and worthwhile and can provide insight and create new understandings of teacher knowledge. Exploration of possibilities related to these questions through “retelling...is to offer possibilities for reliving, for new directions, and new ways of doing things” (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000, p. 189). Teacher knowledge and knowing affects every aspect of teaching. It affects teachers’ relationships with students; teachers’ interpretations of subject matter and its connection (or lack of connection) to students’ lives; teachers’ treatment of curricular ideas and planning as well as evaluations of students’ progress.

Simply put, teacher knowledge is derived from personal experience. Connelly and Clandinin (1988) write:

Personal practical knowledge is in the teacher's past experience, in the teacher's present mind and body, and in the future plans and actions. Personal practical knowledge is found in the teacher's practice. It is, for any one teacher, a particular way of reconstructing the past and the intentions of the future to deal with the exigencies of a present situation (p. 25).

I would argue that, like teachers, parents have personal practical knowledge that is derived from personal and social experience. Parents have a unique and personal knowledge of their child(ren) that others do not. I have learned about difference from each of my own children, Grace, Emily, and Porter. My identical twins, Grace and Emily, have been different from the beginning. Before they were born, I had fears about being able to tell them apart. Would I need to leave their hospital identification bands on their wrists to identify who was who? I remember placing them next to one another as newborns and noticing that they did not look identical. They did not look alike at all. In fact, my husband and I even questioned the doctors about the possibility of them *not* being identical. We were assured that they were identical; however, their differences were not limited to appearances. One was a serious sleeper, and one was more interested in her surroundings. One was a big crier, and one was more content and quiet. One liked to babble, and one liked to observe. As they have grown, their differences have magnified. One is reserved and prefers to curl up with a book, while one is talkative and prefers to be playing with her brother. On the other hand, our son, Porter, has brought a whole new set of differences into

our lives. He has been active and very tactile from the beginning. As a baby, he wanted to be constantly held and snuggled. He did not want to be put down or left alone. It was almost as if he was permanently attached to my hip. He has also been agile from a young age—climbing upon a chair and walking across our dining room table (and safely back down) at 14 months of age. He loves sports of all kinds and if there is a game, he wants to play it. He is rough and tumble and everything “boy”; yet, he still has a propensity to be in close physical contact with us. He needs to have “snuggle time” and likes to have either a hand or a foot touching my husband or myself.

As parents, Dann and I have marveled at each of our children’s strengths and gifts, and we have come to appreciate each of their idiosyncrasies. Their identities are precious to us—very much in the making, forming, and re-forming. We want them to discover what they are passionate about as well as what they need to grow and nurture their identities in the making. It is through Grace, Emily and Porter that I have gained a profound appreciation for Max Van Manen’s (1991) insistence that teaching—and, in my opinion, parenting—ought to show itself as “openness to children’s experiences,” “as subtle influence,” “as holding back,” “as situational confidence,” “as improvisational.” Teaching ought to “preserve a child’s space,” “save what is vulnerable,” “prevent injury or hurt,” “heal (make whole) what is broken,” “strengthen what is good,” “enhancing what is unique,” while supporting personal growth and learning. In order to achieve these goals, teaching needs to include “mediating through speech, through silence, through the eyes, through gesture, atmosphere, and example, giving

new and unexpected shape to unanticipated situations, converting incidence into significance, never forgetting that teaching always leaves a mark on a child” (pp. 164-173).

### **Role of Researcher**

Clandinin and Connelly (2000) explain, “As researchers, we come to each new inquiry field living our stories” (pp.63-64). They elaborate:

Their lives do not begin the day we arrive nor do they end as we leave. Their lives continue. Furthermore, the places in which they live and work, their classrooms, their schools, and their communities are also in the midst when we researchers arrive. Their institutions and their communities, their landscapes in the broadest sense, are also in the midst of stories (p. 64).

They suggest that by exploring narratives, field texts will encompass personal anecdotes, autobiographical narratives, field notes, conversations, research interviews, documents, family stories, teacher stories, observations, audio-taped interviews, and photographs.

Clandinin and Connelly (2000) explain that narrative inquiries often have an autobiographical sense and these “narratives of experience” (p.121) form the basis of our inquiries. In the process of living alongside the participants through living, telling, reliving, and retelling of their stories, I am increasingly aware of how inquiring about their lives and experiences as educator/parents at times seems to echo inquiries into my life and my attempts at making meaning of being an educator/parent upon the school landscape. As a teacher and a parent, I am interested in learning how other educator/parent’s “personal practical knowledge”

(Clandinin, 1986; Clandinin & Connelly, 1986, 1995; Clandinin & Huber, 2005; Connelly & Clandinin, 1985, 1988, 1999) informs their practice.

Furthermore, as a teacher and a parent myself, I am also aware that I am a participant in my study. Through occasional self-disclosure about my personal and professional experiences and being attentive to the interactions, continuity, and situations found within the three-dimensional space that brings together the narratives of the participants and myself, I resonate with Conle's (2000) belief that personal narrative is "...very much like a quest, an artistic and an intellectual one" (p.191). She explains, "In personal narrative inquiry, the body of knowledge to be explored is the writer's life. The motivation is therefore likely to come from the writer's interests, her expertise, as well as the particular lifeworld that is her own" (p. 195). For me, personal narrative served as a starting point for this study.

I consider reflexivity to be essential to the research process providing a means to address the empirical data collected and its interpretations across all phases of data collection. This reflexivity highlights resonance between individuals, which Conle (1996) describes "...as a way of seeing one experience in terms of another" (p. 299). To ensure the inclusion of reflexivity and development of resonance, I am aware that the relationship between the educator/parent participants and researcher play an integral role in the process of narrative inquiry as it has the ability to nurture personal and professional growth.



As the researcher, as part of the ensuing participatory relationships that develop during the narrative inquiry process, I am cognizant of the importance of my ethical responsibilities to represent the stories told by my participants, and to be careful not to interrupt the stories that sustain my participants. More specifically, such responsibilities associated with ethical concerns encompass issues of anonymity, ownership of stories, and the ways in which I storied the participants and myself, and the relational responsibility toward others in the stories being told. According to Clandinin and Connelly, (2000), ethical concerns are constant considerations throughout the research process and may often be modified during a story due to "...the possibility that the landscape and the persons with whom we are engaging as participants may be shifting and changing" (p. 175). "For those us wanting to learn to engage in narrative inquiry, we need to imagine ethics as being about negotiation, respect, mutuality and openness to multiple voices" (Clandinin, 2006, p. 52). In regard to ethical considerations, Shulman (2002) states, "The only way to avoid confronting such ethical dilemmas [issues of visibility and anonymity] in professional work would be to stop acting entirely. And that would itself be unethical" (p. vii).

To address ethical dilemmas, Internal Review Boards were established in Universities to address some of these ethical issues in research. Keeping in mind these ethical concerns, informed consent was obtained by having each of the educator/parent participants sign the consent forms, which had been given approval by the University's Internal Review Board before participants began their involvement in the study. Additionally, the schools and the district office

provided letters of permission for the study to be conducted. Information obtained during this study that could identify participants has been kept strictly confidential. Pseudonyms have been utilized for identifying references to educator/parents, children, students, schools, or school districts.

New to my work as a narrative inquirer, I turned to Clandinin and Connelly (2000) for the following guidelines to use during the data collection process and the subsequent analysis: 1) revisiting and retelling stories of the participant; 2) exploring my own stories of experience; 3) using narrative inquiry to study experiences of the participants and myself; 4) focusing on experience and following where it leads; 5) incorporating literature that is relevant to the study and allows me to refine notions of narrative; 6) focusing on moments of tensions relevant to inquiry which may be associated with temporality, place and balance of theory, people, action, certainty, context, and my place as the researcher; 7) returning to my own stories of inquiry experience to create a set of inquiry terms; and 8) developing growth of such narrative strands as ethics, ownership, and facts to illustrate how experience lives with us throughout inquiry. By using these guidelines for utilizing the methods and procedures associated with narrative inquiry, it is important to remember that “[w]hen researchers enter the field, they experience shifts and changes, constantly negotiating, constantly reevaluating, and maintaining flexibility and openness to an ever-changing landscape” (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000, p. 71).

Not only must I remain cognizant of negotiating the researcher/participant relationships, but I also need to be mindful of negotiating the purposes involved.

As with other research methodologies, narrative inquiry offers the ability for a study's purpose and content to adjust throughout the research process. Moreover, it also necessary to consider how the transitions from the beginning to the end of the study might be negotiated as field texts are transformed to research texts through ongoing data analysis. Finally, I am mindful of Clandinin and Connelly emphasizing the researcher's responsibility in being attentive toward maintaining a balance between the researcher's voice and voices of the participants being heard.

### **Context and Limitations**

Despite careful attention to complexities of learning about the experiences of my participants and recognition of ethical issues that include nuances associated with consent, confidentiality, researcher-participant relationships, challenges of gathering information about my participants, I also recognize the importance of acknowledging limitations. Clandinin and Connelly (2000) remind me that I need to be "wakeful and thoughtful about all of [my] inquiry decisions" (p.184), and I would be remiss not to mention the limitations of this particular study.

One of the factors to address in this research is that all of my educator/parent participants are women (mothers). While it would have been interesting to also consider the perspectives of educators who are also fathers, the sampling in this study was such that female educators/mothers were identified as interested and willing participants.

Furthermore, due to the limited amount of data I was able to collect from one of the participants, I decided to combine her data with another participant. Both participants worked at the same school, and their responses to questions I asked highlighted similarities in their experiences and the circumstances in their teaching. Therefore, while recognizing the unique contributions of each of the participants, it seemed to make sense to create a composite of their data, thus resulting in the portrayal of four educator/parent narratives for this study.

I also wanted to address my own role in this research. Because I have been, and am currently, a teacher in this same school district as my educator/parent participants, I may be labeled as being “too close” to the research. I know the school district, its policies, and inner workings. Having taught in this school district for thirteen years, and having been a parent of children in this district for eight years, I am familiar with many of the teachers, administrators, school district officials, and families.

Finally, the literature on narrative inquiry acknowledges potential limitations in its design. Clandinin and Connelly (2000) state that one of the criticisms of narrative inquiry is that it is “essentially a linguistic form of inquiry,” (p. 77) that of story recording and telling. Carter (1993) acknowledges problems with veracity and fallibility relative to the re-storying that takes place where distortions in the “story” can occur, and authenticity of the story can be called into question. Similarly, Creswell (2008) cites “ownership” of the story as another concern in narrative inquiry.

Other tensions are very real, as well, and must be acknowledged: establishing trust, balancing involvement, and maintaining objectivity. “How to experience the experience,” according to Clandinin and Connelly (2000) is a tension that is always present for the narrative inquirer because the narrative inquiry is relational, and the reflexivity of moving back and forth in the act of balancing and maintaining trust, involvement, and objectivity is part of the narrative inquiry process.

### **Data Collection**

According to Polkinghorne, “the final story must fit the data, while at the same time bringing an order and meaningfulness that is not apparent in the data themselves” (Verhesschen, 2003, p. 461). This study began with volunteer educator/parents responding to either a flyer I posted on University bulletin boards or an email that I sent to them. After receiving University Institutional Review Board approval for the project, I received permission from the school district to contact all building principals to explain the research and request access to teachers. Five educator/parents, two middle school, and three elementary school teachers agreed to participate in the study. One elementary school educator/parent participant taught Level 1, English Language Learners in a Title 1 building serving mostly students who participated in the free/reduced lunch program. The other two elementary school educator/parent participants worked in the same building, where less than 20% of the students participated in the free/reduced lunch program, with one teaching kindergarten, and the other teaching fourth grade. The two middle school educator/parent participants both

taught sixth grade in the same building, where 12% of students participated in the free/reduced lunch program. One of the sixth grade teachers self-identified as a language arts teacher, and the other sixth grade teacher identified as primarily a math teacher but also taught one section of social studies.

Data was collected from the educator/parent participants over the course of seven months, from January through July 2014. Over that time, each educator/parent participated in a series of three individual author-designed, open-ended audiotaped interviews, and one focus group interview. The interviews were categorized into three themes: 1) Teaching philosophy and beliefs about teaching; 2) The role of parent as a shaping influence into an educator's professional development/growth and students in the curricular environment; and 3) Beyond the classroom: Examining the big picture of curriculum (See Appendix A). These conversations totaled over twelve-and-a-half hours of recorded time and generated 322 pages of transcribed field text.

The interviews were semi-structured to allow for generative conversations, avoiding imposition and allowing participants to share their motivation, ideas, and rationale for engaging in the inquiry. In addition, I asked educator/parents for descriptions of critical stories or incidents that portrayed the significances they describe as important to their teaching/learning lives, their students' lives as well as their children's lives. I used echoing and probing questions to delve into the qualities inherent to these incidents.

When I speak of critical stories/incidents of importance, I am specifically referring to incidents in which the educator/parents recall events that supported

and fostered learning with their students--or deterred learning progress. Additionally, critical incidents that happened to their own child(ren) that supported and fostered learning or deterred learning were explored. Educator/parents were asked to talk about the consequences for their students, their child(ren) and themselves.

In addition to the audiotaped interviews, data was collected from classroom observations. I was able to observe each educator/parent participant in her classroom teaching and learning with her students at least two times during January 2014–May 2014. During classroom observations, I took field notes and pictures of the classroom. I also referred to existing research literature as an important component of the data collection process, informing readings of all data on an ongoing basis.

Finally, I conducted a focus group interview in July 2014, which served as an opportunity for the educator/parent participants to converse about common themes that emerged from the data collection. (See Appendix B). Three of the educator participants were able to participate in the focus group interview.

### **Data Analysis**

The educator/parent narratives, composed over time, provide me, as the inquirer, and the educator/parent participants with access to primary concerns and considerations that become shared understandings. The detailed accounts reveal a multifaceted portrait of each participant. These were intended to provide readers with insights into the particularities of each of their educator/parent

experiences, offering rich descriptions through their eyes and words. Analyses following each account reveal nuances of grappling with emerging tensions and reoccurring themes in an attempt to more deeply understand this body of teacher knowledge that is shaped by so many factors within and beyond a school context.

Verhesschen (2003) states that “Since it is in our narratives that we show the meaning of our experiences and it is narratives that give insight into what is meaningful for us, narrative deserves a place in educational research” (p. 562). However, these “stories” must be treated in context as my own interpretations open up new dimensions, new ways of seeing, and understanding.

While utilizing narrative inquiry for this study, I have also taken into consideration the levels that Creswell (2008) implements in a case-study approach. The first level of the data analysis included examination of the transcribed audiotapes and the field notes for emerging themes via the utilization of a coding process. I used “open codes” (short phrases marking initial thoughts about concepts or categories of meaning). I grouped these open codes into categories that were meaningful into the context of each case. The codes were then developed into themes. Data was written in narrative form as well as re-storied using educator/parent participant’s words. Creswell (2008) describes this process as one in which “the researcher gathers stories, analyzes them for key elements of the story (e.g. time, place, plot, and scene), and then rewrites the story to place it in a chronological sequence” (p. 528).



Following individual analysis of the data, level two of the data analysis process involved a cross narrative analysis identifying themes common to all narratives. A cross narrative analysis looked beyond the particularities of each participant's narrative accounts to discover similarities and significant differences. Finally, level three of the process involved a group analysis of the data to extend these finding further, identifying emerging themes.

Always mindful of the reflexivity in this process, as ongoing analysis continued, critical moments of pause, contemplation, and reflection occurred throughout the data analysis process. Reading and rereading of the data, mindful of the educator/parent participant's experiences and words, enlightened me and allowed for a reflexive process in the analysis of data that provided for glimpses of reframing teacher knowledge within the educator/parents stories to live by.

### **Honoring Original and Organic Voices**

As a narrative inquirer, I was committed to building a researcher-participant relationship that permitted the educator/parent participants to engage in discussion about their teacher knowledge as informed by their professional knowledge as teachers, and their personal experience as parents. Knowing how difficult it is to represent others' accounts of their lived experiences, and the connection between those accounts and what is actually lived, I was committed to representing my educator/parents' voices in this research study. I sought to establish a collaborative relationship between my participants and myself, a

relationship in which we could establish time, space, and voice for them to share their narratives. Britzman (2002) provides further detail about voice by writing:

Voice is meaning that resides in the individual and enables that individual to participate in a community...The struggle for voice begins when a person attempts to communicate meaning to someone else. Finding the words, speaking for oneself, and feeling heard by others are all a part of this process...Voice suggest relationships: the individual's relationship to the meaning of her/his experience and hence, to language, and the individual's relationship to the other, since understanding is a social process (p. 34).

An attentiveness to language and the personal voices of the educator/parent participants in this study allowed me entry into their personal, practical, and professional knowledge. One of my responsibilities as a researcher was to reconstruct and critically re-present the voices of my participants, and in doing so, care for their integrity, humanity, and struggles. As each of the participants described their experiences different roles were revealed. For example, in Meredith and Gwen's narratives, their teacher identities came across more strongly while in Kara and Rebecca's narratives their parent identities came across more strongly. Their differing and diverse narratives serve to highlight the complexity of teacher knowledge and how it is shaped. Furthermore, I decided to include the words of my educator/parent participants in much the same way they shared them with me resulting in some lengthy vignettes. I believe their voices and, in turn, their narratives of experience are powerful and ought to be heard in their original, organic form.

## CHAPTER 4

### Meredith Michaels

#### **“You Will Not Believe the Morning I’ve Had!”**

I arrived at Capitol City Elementary School on a warm day in May to interview, Meredith Michaels, one of my educator/parent participants. The school was located downtown, near the capitol building. Surrounding the school were clusters of apartment buildings, single dwelling homes, some historic buildings and the Governor’s Mansion. The school was newly renovated for the 2012-2013 school year, and I could easily view the new, colorful playground equipment through the chain link fence bordering a busy street.

Capitol City was a Title 1 school that served 320 diverse children in pre-school through fifth grade. According to the Capitol City Elementary profile brochure, 89% of students qualified for free or reduced lunch. In addition, within the population of 320 children: 73% were classified as minority students; 4% were classified as gifted learners; 15% qualified for special education services; and, 39% were English Language Learners (ELL). Meredith was one of the school’s ELL teachers. However, she was the only Level 1 ELL teacher, which meant that she was the only teacher who worked with ELL students who had little to no English speaking skills.

As a narrative researcher, I had a list of prepared questions to ask her based on one of our earlier conversations. However, upon meeting me in the school office she blurted, “You will NOT believe the morning I’ve had!” I glanced

at the school clock and noticed that it was 10:00 a.m. School had been in session for one hour.

Meredith, who usually met me alone, had two students with her. She introduced me to Tabark, a new fifth grade girl from Iran; and, Behrouz, a third grade boy. She motioned for me to follow her, Tabark, and Behrouz down the hallway to the computer lab. We entered the computer lab, and Meredith introduced Tabark and Behrouz to the computer teacher. I overheard her explain to the computer teacher that Tabark needed to take the NeSA fifth grade science and math tests. I also heard her tell the computer teacher that Behrouz could serve as an interpreter for Tabark. However, Behrouz spoke Persian and Tabark spoke Arabic—so, he may not be much help as an interpreter. But, he was the only student at Capitol City School who spoke a language close to Arabic. Meredith then asked the computer teacher to escort both students back to her classroom when Tabark finished the NeSA exams.

As soon as we left the computer teacher's classroom, Meredith looked at me and said, "This has been the craziest morning! That poor girl! She just arrived here from Iraq. This is her first full day here. We only have 12 days of school left. And, here's the kicker, she has to take the whole battery of NeSA tests!" Meredith appeared visibly shaken. She threw her hands up in the air and shook her head.

Below, in Meredith's own words, is her account of that morning.

*We got a new student at Capitol City part-way through the day on Tuesday. Her name is Tabark and she is from Iraq, and they have just arrived in the country. With 12 days of school remaining, they went ahead and enrolled her. She is truly a Level I; she does not recognize all of the letters of the alphabet—our alphabet. But the concerns I have are this:*

*She's a 5<sup>th</sup> grader—so she's here for 12 days. And they said, 'Well she'll get used to how you do lunch and the routine and the building.'*

*And I said, 'Yes. And after 12 days, she will never return to this building. She will go to Elmwood Middle School. So I don't know that getting into the idea of a routine, knowing where the gym is and going through our lunch line here is necessarily valuable learning for her.'*

*So, she's not going to get much out of 12 days. And out of 12 days, yesterday the ELL department took our field trip. On the 19<sup>th</sup>, the Capitol City 5<sup>th</sup> graders do their 'End of Career at Capitol City Party' as well as a field trip to the Zoo. We also have field day in there, so you know...Not exactly a true picture of what school is going to be like in America.*

*So, I was a little frustrated about that to begin with—that they would start her here. If she were a second, or third, or fourth grader—I would say, 'Absolutely! Things would be familiar and in August, she would be way less stressed.'*

*She's not going to learn anything here in 12 days because of her fear factor, and her level of stress and anxiety, and trying to figure out if she should follow this kid or that kid or trying to figure out where she's supposed to go...you know, so anyway. I was frustrated with that because of her being a 5<sup>th</sup> grader.*

*Well, today I had to take my transition materials for my 5<sup>th</sup> graders over to Elmwood Middle School because today's the day they are due and nothing like waiting until the deadline! So, I drove them over there this morning before school and I was talking with the team leader—the ELL team leader at Elmwood.*

*And as I handed her the things, I said, 'Everything in here is pretty much what you normally see. The only one I want to call to*

*your attention is the one on top. She's a new student, brand new from Iraq, she just started yesterday.'*

*And she says, 'Oh. Yeah. We have the brother.'*

*And I said, 'I thought all the older siblings were over at the High School.'*

*And she said, 'Well, one of them is. But the brother that is here is an eighth grader.'*

*So they started him with 12 days as well in a building that he will not return to.*

*And we were talking about how frustrating it is and then she says, 'Well, I bet your day today looks a lot like my day today.'*

*And I said, 'What do you mean?'*

*She said, 'Well since the NeSA testing window doesn't close until 4 o'clock this afternoon, they are held accountable for the NeSA testing.'*

*So, the brother—the 8<sup>th</sup> grade brother whose name I don't remember is at Elmwood doing the 8<sup>th</sup> grade NeSA. And, I had forgotten, because we had completed all our NeSA testing. And we were very proud that we had gotten everything done and our testing coordinator had sent everything back to the District office.*

*And, she's right. The testing window doesn't close until 4 o'clock today. And, my new student as well, is responsible for the NeSA. Even though she does not know how to write her name in English. She wrote beautiful Arabic. Beautiful—like you could frame it. Like art...Beautiful calligraphy art.*

*But, she cannot write T-A-B-A-R-K using our letter for her own name. But, she has to take the 5<sup>th</sup> grade NeSA tests. So, here we are.*

*So, I called school from Elmwood saying that we're going to figure out what to do because we don't have the materials for her. Our computer integration specialist, who has been to a lot of the testing coordinator meetings because she was trying to work out the technology piece, was given permission to go ahead and administer the NeSA to my new student.*

*So I'm just counting the ways we're doing wrong by this child and her brother. To start them for 12 days in a building that is not a place they will return. To make them sit through the entire battery of NeSA tests in one day. Not to mention...They're not going to pass!*

*...And technically, they can read it aloud to her. But, what's the point? Right. So there you have it. (Laughs) So, that's how I started my day. I'm thinking sweet. I got the field trip done. I'm making the deadline on this transition stuff, and then the teacher over at Elmwood reminded me about the NeSA window being open until 4:00 pm today...And I went, 'Oh yeah. You're right! You're right. You're right.'*

*And my question for the District is, 'Why do you start those students? What is the point?'*

*By law, the day you visit any LPS facility, if you're in that attendance area, you have to be allowed to enroll and begin on that day. That's the law.*

*But, I think we could easily talk to most sane parents and say, 'Here's the problem, your child will only be here for 12 days and then would be going to a different school. And, it doesn't make much sense to start, and in 12 days everyone else in your neighborhood is going to be home. Why don't you keep them home?'*

*And the one at High School, maybe go ahead and start. But, that child had 7 days, and then it's going to be finals week at High School.*

*But to me, what they are doing to these two children, the eighth grader and the fifth grader, what they are doing, to me, just seems hurtful. To have started them...And I was complaining originally, why start them for 12 days? Now I am complaining, why didn't they start them on Monday? As of Monday, the NeSA testing window would have been closed and it wouldn't have mattered.*

(Interview: May 9, 2014)

Upon hearing Meredith refer the District, I understood that she met the registrars at the ELL Welcome Center. New students, who speak a language other than English, begin the registration process at the ELL Welcome Center where bilingual liaisons are available to help with the registration process. The ELL Welcome Center is located at Elmwood Middle School, where Tabark's brother had enrolled. I asked Meredith if the people at the District would have known about the NeSA window closing on Monday. And, if they had known, could they have advised Tabark and her family to wait until Monday to enroll her in school? Meredith responded:

*Yes. Yes! I mean, if really what we can say is this is sort of lesson in futility anyway...Why add to that? You get to go back and make up the whole battery of NeSA testing. I mean that's just insane! It's just not cool.*

(Interview: May 9, 2014)

I paused the recorder, because after 10 minutes, Tabark was done with her battery of NeSA testing. The computer coordinator had come to Meredith's room with Tabark and Behrouz. She handed some papers to Meredith and volunteered to escort Tabark and Behrouz to their respective classes. Meredith set the papers on her desk and resumed to our conversation.

*So she must have just clicked through [the tests]. They must have convinced her. But, you know we can't tell her that. I mean, that's the other thing, we have to read her the same directions we read everybody else which means nothing to her. And, you know...It's just...It's just crazy...*



*And, when I was at Elmwood having this conversation with Valerie, the principal at Elmwood was standing there and he said, 'Oh I wasn't aware there was a younger sibling. You have that child.'*

*And I said, 'Yeah, but in 12 days, she'll be yours!'*

*And he said, 'So you're giving the NeSA?'*

*And I said, 'It looks like I am going to be.'*

*And he said, 'And she's going to pass, right?'*

*And I said, 'Well of course she is. Because if she doesn't, then that means it will be an indication of the quality of instruction that I've given her (laughs sarcastically) in the last 48 hours.'*

*And he laughed. Because you know that [Tabark's NeSA test score] will count against our school, and it will count against me as a teacher.*

*So if we're looking at the idea of rating schools and rating teachers on their effectiveness, our school—and me, as an ELL teacher—we will not look competent according to her score. But, there will be not an asterisk next to that score that says, 'She's been here 48 hours.' So, there you go. You know, it is just craziness.*

(Interview: May 9, 2014)

## **NeSA Testing Guidelines**

I was as surprised as Meredith to learn that Tabark, a non-English speaking student, was required to take the NeSA tests upon her first full day in a new school. I did some investigating and learned that all students are required to take the NeSA Math, Science, and Writing. This is a requirement regardless of whether the student registered just recently, as was the case for Tabark. The

local Educational Service Unit (ESU) policy for NeSA Reading (R), Math (M), Science (S), and Writing (W) states:

All students will participate in the NeSA-R, NeSA-M, NeSA-S, and the NeSA-W with or without accommodations (see “NeSA Approved Accommodations”). The only exception applies to the NeSA-R—Recently-Arrived LEP students (who are ELL level 1 or 2 and have been in a US school for less than one year) are not required to take the NeSA R, but must still participate in the NeSA-M, NeSA-S, and NeSA-W. LEP students must complete at least one item on a given NeSA test to be considered as a participant (all ELL levels). Items with no responses will be counted as incorrect. Students who meet the NeSA-R Recently-Arrived LEP definition may also participate in the NeSA Writing in their native language. Students who write in a language other than Spanish or English will count as participating, but not receive a score on the NeSA-W. (Nebraska Department of Education, 2013-2014)

This story was significant to Meredith, and it left a lasting impact upon her because she identified several ways in which Tabark experienced mis-educative (Dewey, 1938) situations as the result of District implemented policies. Meredith’s personal, practical, professional knowledge was overlooked—not even considered, from her telling of the incident, in this situation with Tabark.

Unfortunately, the policy-makers who created the testing date window for the NeSA exams may not have considered the situation Meredith encountered with Tabark. In so many instances, educational policies connected to high-stakes testing are created and implemented without consulting the people whom the policies affect the most. As Meredith stated above, Tabark’s NeSA test scores will “count against” Meredith as well as Capitol City Elementary. Au (2012)

states, “Teachers are being held more and more ‘accountable’ for test scores and student achievement while they are being required to take less and less responsibility for their curriculum, pedagogy, and what actually happens in their classrooms,” (p.103). This was even more severe in Meredith’s situation with Tabark because there had not been any opportunity to work with Tabark at all before the testing. Yet, upon arrival at her new school, Tabark was expected to take the full battery of high-stakes NeSA tests.

Meredith felt strongly that the policy concerning the NeSA testing ought to have exceptions, and that professionals who know and work with students ought to be the ones who have a voice in the exceptions. Ladson-Billings (2006) states this “disparity between what we know is right and what we actually do” (p. 8) with culturally and linguistically diverse children in K-12 schools must be remedied in future policies and practice. I cannot imagine anyone who listened to the circumstances regarding Tabark’s situation would think it be beneficial, necessary, or worthwhile to have her participate in the NeSA testing. Furthermore, I would argue that having Tabark take a high-stakes test in which she was so obviously academically unprepared for was unreasonable and educationally inappropriate.

Meredith described this situation as “hurtful” to Tabark. I would argue that it was also “hurtful” to Meredith, whose dual knowledge as an educator/parent was dismissed in this situation. Meredith shared with me that she became an ELL teacher to work for a more socially just world. She viewed teaching as a way to reach some of the most underserved students, and as a way to tackle the

enduring effects of poverty, racism, and other forms of oppression that continue to affect so many in her school community. In teaching, she saw a powerful profession where she could develop meaningful relationships with her students and their families. To Meredith teaching was the work that would allow her to assist her ELL students in becoming actively and intellectually involved in their education, and eventually, their world. The fact that Meredith had no voice in the high-stakes testing situation with Tabark may be interpreted as disregard for her professional knowledge, content area expertise, knowledge of her students, their cultures, and their communities.

### **More Than a Classroom Teacher**

Meredith had stated that she has cared about her students over the years; however, being an ELL teacher has given her a unique perspective on teaching and learning. As a Level 1 ELL teacher, she usually had less than 15 ELL students in her classroom. Because they were in her classroom for the majority of the day, she got to know them quite well. In fact, she also knew her students' families as she described below.

*...Because our District is a very small geographic region right down here by the Capitol, almost all of our kids walk to school. And so, Grandma walks with them, or Mom walks with them, or a sibling walks with them. Or a group of them will walk with one parent—all of them with the same language, so one parent kind of gets all the kids from this country and walks them all home.*

*And so I get to know the extended families. I know Tulaclure's grandmother, I know cousins, I know aunts, I know uncles, I know whoever comes to get them, and I have crosswalk duty so that also helps.*

*But, that's one of the reasons it would be hard to leave here. It isn't just the kids who are in your room that particular year, it's that you really have become a part of their community, and they've become a part of mine. And, I know their whole family. I know what day the baby's due.*

*I had a situation this fall. A former student of mine from Green Middle School, who is now well into her 20's, recently had her first baby. And when I had that student at Green, her mother was pregnant, and so the youngest child in this family is a boy named Hector. And I held Hector when he was a very, very young baby. Because mom brought baby Hector with her to the older sister's parent/teacher conference.*

*Well, Hector is now in this building. And the student I had, has grown up and had her own baby. She came to an event here at school to see Hector perform. And she let me hold the new baby, whose name is Daniel.*

*I was holding Daniel, and Hector came up to me and hugged me and said, 'Mrs. Michaels, I want you to meet Daniel. He'll be the next member of our family that you get to teach English.'*

*So, first, I cried--a lot. That's really, (A) how old I am—how long I've been doing this (laughs). And, (B) that's the thing that's probably more meaningful to me than anything. I have been a part of this family since Jenny was 12, and she's now well into her 20's. And she can't wait for me to teach Daniel.*

*Now I probably really won't ever teach Daniel because he's going to grow up with parents who speak English. So he may not ever need my services. But the idea that here I was holding the next generation...So mom was there, the oldest of the children in the family I taught were there, the youngest one—who's still in my current school, and then I was holding the baby of the third generation of this family that I know.*

*So yeah, that's pretty amazing. I didn't grow up in a small town, but that's pretty small town. Where if you had lived and taught [in a small town], you would know the whole family...all the generations and the good things and the bad things. And they know that about you! (Laughs)*

(Interview: April 16, 2014)

Meredith found herself involved in her ELL students' community due to the relationships she had established with her students and their families. On weekends, she often stopped at their homes to help in big and small ways. For example, one time a student had asked her to come to her family's apartment because there was an annoying beeping sound coming from the ceiling. They wanted the beeping sound to stop but didn't know what to do about it. Because Meredith was a familiar and friendly face, they were more comfortable asking her for help instead of the landlord. So, Meredith stopped at the family's apartment and discovered that the smoke alarm needed a new battery. She obtained a new battery for the smoke alarm and showed them how to change it. The beeping sound stopped, and they were relieved and grateful.

Being part of her students' community was something Meredith had been doing since becoming an ELL teacher; something she had described as her "true calling." However, she did not begin her teacher career as an ELL teacher; she began her career as a middle level English and social studies teacher. She taught both English and social studies at two different middle schools over the course of 13 years. She then taught ELL students at another middle school for eight years, and this is her fifth year teaching ELL at Capitol City Elementary. She has taught all levels, 1-5, of ELL students with a Level 1 students having no or very limited English skills to Level 5 students being at the advanced level of

English language skills. Below, Meredith describes the steps that guided her journey toward becoming an ELL teacher.

*Being in a Title 1 environment has hugely shaped my teaching. When I taught at Paxton Middle School for my first 9 years, it was not officially a Title 1 building. It is now, and has been for some time, but it wasn't when I was there.*

*However, that didn't change the fact—that it didn't have the Title 1 label—we still had the Title 1 issues: poverty; kids from families where there isn't a lot of support for education; where there isn't a lot of history of education; or an understanding of the importance of education; or how to navigate through the educational system. And in addition to that, it was one of the first ELL centers in Lincoln.*

*And so that was huge for me because of the diversity within the traditional American citizenry, African American kids, and Native kids, and kids from an Hispanic background, but then also the real richness of the diversity that was added when you had that other whole layer of ELL kids from literally all over the world.*

*And some of them being here in Lincoln, and located where they were because of its proximity to the University. And so, some of those students come from families who are very driven educationally, and their parents are here doing doctoral and post-doctoral things and whatever. Those kids have had world-class educations in parts of the world, and just don't have English. While at the same time, Lincoln being a refugee resettlement location historically speaking, they would be in the same classes with kids who had never literally held a marker or a scissors.*

*And so, I think those are the key things looking back, the love of English, the love of social studies, history, those are left-overs from my own education—the classes that I loved, and the teachers who impacted me when I was a kid. So that's how I got to English and social studies; but, what has impacted my career is the families of the kids I teach. The diversity and their struggles to understand the educational system...and at the same time, in ELL especially, their overwhelming gratitude that anyone would educate their child is pretty amazing. Those are the things that have landed*

*me here—the steps I have made along the way, have largely been as a result of that once I got into teaching.*

(Interview: April 16, 2014)

### **A visit to Meredith's Classroom**

During this class visit, there were seven students in Meredith's classroom—two girls and five boys. Normally there would be nine students; however, two brothers were absent today for a very important occasion. They were with their mother and sister traveling to Omaha to obtain their green cards.

The two female students, who were sisters, were wearing headscarves and appeared to be shy. They were quiet and did more observing than talking. On the other hand, the five boys were a boisterous bunch. They were talkative and in each other's physical space as they poked at one another and giggled and laughed.

One of the more outgoing boys, Hanni, stood out because he appeared to be the leader of the bunch. In fact, he was dressed like he was "in charge" wearing dark pants, and a lavender dress shirt with a purple tie. His lavender dress shirt was accented with buttoned-up dark vest and a purple pocket square that matched his tie. The other boys were dressed more casually wearing pants or jeans with either tee shirts or button down shirts. Because of the way Hanni was dressed, he looked like he should be the boss of something; I got a kick out of observing him. When I asked Meredith why Hanni was so dressed up, she told me that he had worn that same outfit all week long—and she did not know why.



As the students entered the classroom they noticed the May calendar on the whiteboard in the front of the room. It had captured their attention because this was a new month, May, and it looked different from the previous April calendar. All five boys crowded around the calendar and began talking.

Hanni asked Meredith, "What's this?"

Meredith explained, "This is the May calendar. It is a new month today, May." Then she referred to the sentences above the calendar. She pointed to the first sentence and stated, "Yesterday was Wednesday, April 30, 2014. It was the last day of April."

Then she pointed to the second sentence and read, "Today is Thursday, May 1<sup>st</sup>, 2014. Today is the first month of May. We have many important days in May."

Another boy asked, "Important days? What?"

Meredith pointed to Thursday, May 8<sup>th</sup> on the calendar and said, "On May 8<sup>th</sup>, we will have our field trip to the Children's Museum. We will eat a picnic lunch on the college campus and take a tour of the football stadium. Then, you will get to meet some of the college athletes."

Hanni asked, "They will take a picture with me?"

Meredith responded, "Yes. We can take pictures." All of the boys looked at each other and smiled.

Then another boy asked, "No math?"

Meredith nodded her head yes, “No math.”

“Yay!” The boys yelled.

Meredith then points to Wednesday, May 21<sup>st</sup>, and says, “On this day, in the afternoon, we will have a field day where we play games outside.”

The students respond by clapping.

Then, Meredith pointed to Thursday, May 22<sup>nd</sup>, and said, “This is the last day of school. We will celebrate Hanni, Mohammad, and Tria’s birthdays on May 22<sup>nd</sup> because their actual birthdays are in the summer. We will have cake and gifts, and then it is summer break. No school during summer break.”

“How many days of no school?” asked one of the boys.

“Eighty-one days of no school,” responded Meredith.

The students looked at each other with wide eyes. Hanni made a whistling sound and said, “I like it.”

Another boy replied, “May is a good month.”

(Classroom Observation: May 1, 2014)

I shared this glimpse into Meredith’s classroom to illustrate the dynamics that were at play during that morning. The students were comfortable with each other, their environment, and Meredith. They were inquisitive and interested in the new calendar as well as the upcoming special occasions. I need to clarify that it seemed like the boys were excited about the month of May, and the upcoming

summer break from school. I believed they were looking forward to the things they were going to celebrate and do during the month of May; however, they may not have been looking forward to 81 days without school.

Meredith had shared with me that long breaks, like summer vacation, were often difficult for her students. Many of her students lived in apartments and did not have backyards in which to play. Her students looked forward to coming to school because there was food, and friends, and things to do during the day. In their apartments, they may not have a bike, they may not have video games or access to other forms of entertainment. In addition, there was not a neighborhood swimming pool, nor did they have a way to get to a swimming pool. The majority of her students' families did not have access to a vehicle. Her students did not play on organized sports teams because they had no way of getting to practice or games. As a result, her students were limited to their neighborhood, and wherever they could walk. So, a break from school was often something her students did not look forward to—or enjoy as much as most of their American peers.

Because Meredith understood that breaks from school were challenging for her students, especially the refugee students who had recently arrived and did not know their neighborhood, many people or have a lot of resources available to them, she took it upon herself to do something about it. Meredith was an active member of her church, which was located just three blocks from Capitol City Elementary. As a member of her church's Mission and Outreach Committee,

she enlisted them to provided some assistance to her students during the summer. Below she explained more about that.

*For the past five years, one of my fellow church members has figured out a way for 12 of my kids to attend four weeks of Summer Community Learning Center programs through church foundation grant money. Now that doesn't take care of the whole 11-week summer, but for four weeks out of the summer, they can swim twice a week, they can have food, they can play games, and go to the State Capitol, or to the museum...they can do all the stuff.*

*And she's been able to finagle money for 9 or 10 of my kids in previous years. And this year, she finagled more. I think we'll have a dozen kids, and then I'll pitch in for a couple more because usually I have more kids than she can afford. So we kind of do that.*

*But the thing is, Summer CLC is \$75 a week per kid. Well, my refugee families can't come up with that. You and I know for daycare—for breakfast, lunch, and field trips—that's a pretty sweet deal. But, for a family that's struggling financially, you don't have \$75 a week to spend on that.*

*The teaching and parenting...in my job, I see two sides. Two completely different sides, and it's helped me realize what I take for granted as normal is not everybody's normal.*

(Interview: April 16, 2014)

Meredith acknowledges the connections between teaching and parenting through the relationships she has established with her students. Her students come to her seeking to learn the English language. However, I would argue they learn much more than English because of the caring relationship Meredith has established with them and their families. In doing so, she presents a very different picture of education. A pedagogy of relation becomes the building blocks of her curriculum. What ensues carries over into her students' community

as evidenced in her being a part of one family for three generations, to visiting students' homes to assist with various needs, to providing opportunities for her students to have summer fun through obtaining funds to enroll them in Summer Community Learning Center Programs. None of this would be possible if Meredith had not established a caring relationship with her students.

### **How Being a Parent Shaped Meredith's Teaching and Learning**

During one of our conversations, Meredith shared that being an ELL teacher has caused her to realize the privileges she assumes as a middle-class parent. Her daughter, Layla—an eighth grader who was adopted from Korea—looks forward to the weekends, holiday breaks, and summer vacations because she has a bike and a scooter to ride. She has rollerblades, video games, swimming, team sports, and instrumental lessons that provide a break in the routine. She has a parent who can take her to a friend's house, or to the movies, or to the shopping mall. The possibilities for entertainment are many. In addition, she eats three meals a day, as well as snacks. She doesn't have to rely on school, or the backpack program, for her meals or food for the weekend.

Similarly, Meredith's daughter, Layla, is aware of the privileges she has as an American middle-class young adult. Because her mom is an ELL teacher, Layla, has been witness to people and situations her peers have not. For example, Layla knows that when she outgrows her clothing, her mom will take it to school for students who need them. She knows that after church on Sunday mornings, they often stop by some of Meredith's students' homes to assist them

with whatever they need. For example, they'll stop by Sweeper's apartment and pick up the bike he received from the Mad Dad's bicycle give-away and take it to the bike shop to have it repaired. Or, they'll stop by Beran's apartment to drop off a winter coat because he doesn't have one and it's supposed to snow on Monday. Maybe they'll deliver a basket of fruit and other food items to a newly arrived refugee family because Meredith knows they literally have no food—nothing to eat if they don't drop something off for them.

Layla sees, participates, and assists in many of the actions her mother does on behalf of her students and their families. As a result, Layla has an understanding of refugee families and ELL families that many people her age do not. Meredith shared with me that Layla has experienced tensions among her friends because of this. She had heard her friends complain about going to Disney World because they have already been there several times. She becomes irritated at her friends, who wear designer jeans and complain about what Layla perceives as "petty problems." She has even told Meredith that she thinks many of her peers are "spoiled brats."

Yet, Meredith reminds Layla that not everyone lives in a world where her mother works with refugee families. Not everyone is aware of what certain families may need in terms of clothing, food, or other assistance. She explains to Layla that it does not make her friends horrible people or "spoiled brats." She has told Layla that if her friends knew Sweeper, or Beran, and their families, they would probably pitch in and help them, too.

Meredith has described her daughter as an introvert, and at a place developmentally where she is unable to articulate her feelings to her peers. So instead of saying something like, ‘You know what’s funny about you not wanting to go to Disney World?’ Or, ‘Did you know there are kids in Lincoln who don’t have...’ Instead of talking about it with her peers, Meredith has shared that Layla is very judgmental toward them. She is judgmental about what they say, what they wear, and how they talk. As a result, Meredith and her husband, Chris, describe Layla as being in a “cocoon stage” at this point in her development. They describe Layla as wrapped up very tightly within herself, and they are hoping and waiting for a butterfly to eventually emerge.

On a parallel note, Meredith has shared that when her refugee students first arrive at school, they are often wrapped up tightly in their cocoons. They are quiet and keep to themselves. They need extra time to grow and adjust to their new surroundings. They each need different things, which Meredith tries to assist them with, before they can emerge and spread their wings. Below, Meredith explains how being an educator/parent has shaped her teaching and learning.

*I think I am much more maternal toward my students, and I have a hard time deciding if that would have happened anyway—sort of as a result of age, you know what I mean? And the other thing is because I am now teaching elementary after so many years of middle school. It’s easier to be more maternal when you are talking about 6-or 7-year-old than it is when you are talking about a 14-year-old. But I do notice that about myself...I notice I get called, ‘Mom,’ a lot more (chuckles) instead of Mrs. Michaels.*

*Anyway, but I think the other thing is, my own daughter has had a successful academic career, but there have been some social things...and I think there are still...she’s still in a fight to*

*survive socially. She's struggling with how she's going to get through this adolescent thing. She's not particularly comfortable right now socially. Her father and I keep saying she's wrapped herself in a really tight cocoon, and we just keep hoping a butterfly comes out. But, we're not sure when it will be! (Laughs)*

*It is a hard time. It is a hard time. And, she's racially different. And she could not be more...you could not make capital letters any bigger to spell 'nerd' than you would need to apply to her...um, so anyway...and it's kind of heartbreaking because you see her really struggling and trying to fit in...and right now the good news is—I guess the good news is, she's comfortable at home.*

*But she would choose to be home more than she would choose to be involved in things. And we really have to push her out of the nest to get her to be involved with her peers because it's just safer and easier to just be at home. And she's a wonderful person at home. And I want the world to experience how wonderful of a person she is, but she clams up when she's out in the world. And that hurts me. And then I think, you don't realize how cool she is!*

*But it's because she's not letting you realize how cool she is. Anyway, it's made me much more empathetic to the kids who don't fit in--especially my ELL kids here at Capitol City.*

*I teach Level 1 pretty much exclusively. You know, they come to me, and they don't know which is green and which is purple. I mean they don't know...They've never held a marker, they've never...They don't know. They've never touched a computer because almost all my kids are refugee kids, and they are so scared to be out in the bigger, general population. Even in this little school that is pretty darn okay with diversity and is usually pretty sensitive about things. Even here, they're scared of it.*

*And I recognize that's kind of the same fear Layla has—for different reasons. But it is a similar kind of fear. My students don't want to speak up because they will be laughed at—because they will sound different, or they won't know the right word, or they won't know what the subject matter is, or they won't understand the question, and they will give the wrong answer.*

*Layla doesn't want to speak up—not because she doesn't understand English. But because she's just not comfortable in the*



*social experience right now and so, she'd just as soon stay cocooned at home.*

*And these guys today when there's NeSA testing and there's a change in schedule—they're not happy and they want to come back into my room. I really don't say that just because it's me—it's just because they know this is an okay, safe place. And, I've worked hard to make it an ok, safe place. Because, I think in my head, that is influenced by Layla needing an okay, safe place during her day, too.*

(Interview: April 23, 2014)

As I listened to Meredith describe her daughter's school experiences and tensions, I wondered if being a parent had allowed her to be more wakeful in her teaching. I wondered how adding a parenting lens to her teaching lens affected her practice. I asked her about seeing her student through that dual lens, and here was her response.

*Yes...I think that's true because you see kids and you recognize that something is wrong—or something is not right, or they're not feeling comfortable. You pick up on that more. I think I'm more attuned to the really quiet ones. Even if I were teaching general education right now, I think I would be much more attuned—especially those four little years I was at Smith Middle School with really big classes with really outstanding, outgoing, confident kids who were playing club volleyball and going to tournaments here and there, and who had been going to this lesson all of their life—and who had had all the privileges all of their life.*

*And I can remember going home at the end of the day and grading papers and coming across a name and going, Oh, I wonder when the last time I spoke directly to that child was?*

*Because they were the quieter ones in a building with so many confident and comfortable kids—and I don't mean that in a negative way. They're confident, and that's great, because they've had all those awesome experiences and they have all that support,*

*and they know how to do school. And even there, you still have your quiet book-wormy, nerdy kids that are more like my daughter is now. And I can remember thinking, Oh, I don't think I've spoken directly to that child in a while and, I need to make a point of that!*

*And, I think because I have one of those kids in my basement, (laughs) her preferred hide-out, I would be even more so aware of those kids—even if I were teaching in a bigger general education setting. At least I would like to think I would be more attuned to those kids. I would make sure that even if they didn't speak up, I would work harder to learn about them. Are you an awesome artist? Are you really, really good at oboe? Wow! Tell me more about that?*

*I've always wanted to know my kids, and I think it's really, really important to know each of them—but I will admit, the quieter ones take more work. And, in the busy-ness, they're easier to overlook because they do their job, and they sit there quietly, and they don't make problems.*

*I know when Layla was in sixth grade, for example, there was a large, overweight boy, who was the subject of poor peer interaction. And he was on Layla's team, and she had every class with him—because they were in differentiated classes, and they were tracked in classes together throughout the day.*

*And she would come home from school, and say, 'There was a new seating chart in such-and-such's class. I'm still sitting next to this same boy.'*

*And I knew it was because Layla was going to be the last person in the world to say something to him about his weight, or make fun of him, or whatever. And, that he would sit there and not harass her for being quiet and nerdy.*

*But, on the other hand, I thought, really? Can't my kid sit by somebody else during the whole year, in any of her 7 periods during the day? Because maybe socially she could find another person she could learn to like and become comfortable enough with to form the beginnings of a friendship...But, not if you put her in the back row with the chubby kid every single time.*

*I never said anything to Layla's teachers. And, now, they're kind of friends. So, um, it's okay. And he's Jewish on top of it. I didn't realize that until Layla said, 'You know that kid I had to sit with all through 7<sup>th</sup> grade? He's Jewish.'*

*And then I realized what she sees in him: he's physically different, and there's something else about his background that is different. And, she's physically different, and there's something about her background that is different since she's an adopted Asian kid.*

*At the time, it kind of made me cringe...you know, really? Really? But then I've thought about the times I've made seating charts and thought, okay, I'll put this quiet kid next to this problem child. And give a little buffer. That's really not fair to the quiet kid.*

*And, at least it's worth checking with your other team teachers to see if they're putting that same quiet kid next to the potential trouble child! Because that's not fair to the quiet kid to be the buffer 7 periods out of the day!*

(Interview: April 23, 2014)

After listening to Meredith describe how being a parent has impacted her teaching, I wondered if being a teacher allowed her to be more wakeful as a parent? I wondered how, or if, her teacher knowledge influenced her parental knowledge. I asked Meredith if the role of teacher carried over into her home life, and here was her response.

*I think I'm more aware of the social struggles Layla is facing right now because I've seen them played out by other kids over the years. So maybe a parent who isn't in school every day of her adult life would think, Well, I just have a quiet kid and it's okay. And she can just stay home and read books and play on the computer, and you know, whatever.*

*Maybe they would just be more likely to...Not that I don't accept that's her personality. I do accept that that is her personality.*

*She is an introvert, and I am not. But, I'm probably more painfully aware of it. And maybe I try and push her more....I don't know. I don't push her academically.*

*My co-worker next door tells me, 'It's a good thing you're not a Tiger Mom,' when she refers to me—that I am not one—because Layla is her own Tiger Mom.*

*Layla has the perfectionist thing, and Layla...she just wants to be kind of left alone to write, and whatever.*

*But socially, I'm like you should be going to this event, or don't you want to join this group?*

*And she's like, 'NO!' (Laughs)*

*So, I think I push in that respect. And I think I'm more aware of it having watched it play out for so many years.*

(Interview: April 23, 2014)

The stories presented here highlight ways in which Meredith has used her experiences as a parent and an educator to draw parallels between family and school. School life and home life are intertwined as common threads of belonging and difference permeate both landscapes. For example, her daughter, Layla's, outgrown clothing is taken to Meredith's school to fulfill needs her students may have. In addition, Layla has witnessed the modest living conditions in which her mother's students live because she has accompanied her to their homes.

Meredith has said she believes that Layla has come to understand that she is privileged, and in turn, resents her friends for not understanding or acknowledging their privilege. Recognizing this privilege has created tension for Layla within her friendship circle. These tensions are difficult for Layla to navigate because she does not feel comfortable confronting her friends about it. Instead,

she chooses to isolate herself and process her feeling through writing or playing on the computer.

In turn, Meredith has become concerned about Layla's choice to isolate herself and withdraw into her 'cocoon.' As a parent, Meredith understands and knows her daughter. She sees Layla's intelligence, kindness, talents, and gifts. She is saddened that others cannot witness these characteristics because Layla is an introvert and would rather hibernate in the basement where she feels safe. Similarly, Meredith is witness to her ELL students' talents and gifts as well as their struggles to fit in socially with their American peers. Her ELL students do not speak up when they are mainstreamed into other classes within their school. However, once they return to her classroom, where they feel safe, they become themselves—talkative, questioning, and lively.

Meredith holds her teacher knowledge and her parent knowledge simultaneously in her mind, her body, and her heart. Her hope and dreams for Layla are not so different than the hopes and dreams she has for her ELL students: to have confidence, to be accepted by peers, to take risks, to be proud of who they are, to have a positive sense of identity, to be successful, and ultimately—to be happy. As a teacher and as a parent, Meredith purposefully and thoughtfully guides Layla, as well as her ELL students, between the landscapes of home and school while supporting them on their journeys of becoming who they are meant to be.

## CHAPTER 5

### GWEN FRANKLIN

#### **A Glimpse into Mrs. Franklin's Colorful Classroom**

Gwen Franklin is a sixth grade teacher with 24 years of experience currently teaching language arts at Connor Middle School. I first heard about Gwen from a colleague who told me about her work with the 'Make a Difference' project she implemented with her students. When I met her in person, I was impressed with the passion with which she approached teaching reading and writing with her students. She agreed to take part in my study, and after a number of conversations, I spent some time in her classroom. I write here about this time, and refer to some of the work Gwen has implemented with her students.

On the day we had decided I would visit Gwen's classroom, I arrive at the beginning of her language arts class. The routine is underway - her sixth graders are greeting each other, bustling about the classroom sharpening pencils and getting out paper. Their morning language arts block class is about to start, and there is an entrance activity projected onto the whiteboard about homophones, homographs, and similes.

I look around the room trying to decide where to sit. There aren't many open seats. Almost all of the tables are full. There are two Adirondack chairs near the back, but I decide those would not be good for taking field notes. The teacher's desk and chair face a wall, so that doesn't seem like a good option

either. As the students settle in, I see there is an empty spot at the ball table. The ball table does not have traditional chairs; instead, three students are sitting/balancing upon three brightly colored exercise balls. One of the students, a petite brunette, suggests I sit in one of the “comfy chairs.” I reply that it looks fun to sit on an exercise ball, and I decide to sit/balance upon it. I ask her how often she chooses to sit on one of the balls, and she explains that their table groups rotate on a daily basis so everyone has an opportunity to sit on a ball. She also informs me that, “You don’t have to sit on a ball. You can switch it out for a chair at any time.” She points to a couple of chairs and stools pushed under the countertop next to their table. I nod and thank her, taking note of the chairs in case my abdominal muscles get tired!

By this time, the students have settled in and begun working on the entrance activity. The quiet gives me a chance to look around. In all my years of teaching, learning, and being in schools I had never seen a classroom like Gwen Franklin’s. It seemed as if every nook and cranny of the classroom had been purposefully thought-out. It appeared Gwen had created a welcoming environment that felt more like a gathering place than a classroom. The attention to detail made me wonder about the impact of the classroom’s physical environment on the students’ mood and learning.



Gwen's classroom was bright and inviting, with hot pink and lime green as the main colors accompanied by black and white accents. The bulletin boards had large flowers and butterflies on them and there were clusters of paper lantern balls hanging from the ceiling. I asked her how she came up with the color scheme of hot pink and bright green.

*I got the ideas for the colors from Quantum Learning. I read that students perform better in an environment that has bright, vibrant colors. So, that's where I got the idea for the bright green and pink. Turquoise is also a color that works, and I have a little of that. But, I really like the colors, and it just sort of took on a life of its own. I just kept adding things, like the paper lanterns, and the flowers, and the quotes. I also like to have things in balance, so that is why you see a lot of pairs of things like pairs of lamps, pairs of chairs, and pairs of bookcases.*

(Interview: February 18, 2014)



Gwen described to me the importance of creating a welcoming space for her students when I asked her to tell me a little more about her goals for the classroom. She said the following:

*I know that I only get one chance to make a first impression, and I want my students to feel welcome, at home, and comfortable in this room. We all spend a lot of time in here, and I want them to feel like it is a special place for them. I want them to feel like they can be creative—and take risks here. We all work better when we like where we are, and that includes the physical space.*

*The space you live in can affect your mood. I've been in classrooms that are drab and appear to have not much thought or effort put into them. And, I can't stand being in those spaces. They just feel yucky to me. I don't ever want my classroom to feel that way!*

(Interview: February 18, 2014)

Gwen's description of the details of the décor in her classroom reveals some of the underlying reasons for which Gwen had decorated her classroom as described. More specifically, Gwen's belief in the importance of pleasant surroundings to foster a positive attitude toward work, a place where students feel comfortable to take academic risks, contributed to Gwen's commitment to creating a bright and engaging classroom.

I notice, in particular, that a lot of attention and detail within Gwen's classroom had been focused on books and reading. For example, toward the back of the classroom was a wall of bulletin boards. One of the bulletin boards had the saying, "A good book is a gift!" Underneath the saying gift bags stuffed with tissue paper had been stapled to the bulletin board. On the front of each gift

bag was a picture of the cover of a book. Bright green Adirondack chairs with pillows and beanbags had been placed next to these bulletin boards, inviting kids to sit in them and read.



Another reading nook had been created in one of the corners by the windows. A skinny faux evergreen tree complete with white lights and pink and green decorations stood in the corner between the two windows. There were bright green patio chairs and a small shelf of books around the tree to complete the reading retreat. In the opposite corner, was a bookshelf filled with books. Attached to the top of the bookshelf was a small string of paper lantern decorative lights. Above the bookshelf, there was a bulletin board with the word R-E-A-D in hot pink letters framed by flowers. Additional books were on display on the shelves above the bubbling fish tank—decorated with hot pink rocks and

bright green plants to mimic the classroom colors. A large number of kid-friendly books, and the way in which they were arranged reminded me of a miniature library.



I know from earlier conversations with Gwen that reading is an important part of her language arts curriculum. Her participation in the Nebraska Writing Project, as well as her own status as a published author, has shaped and influenced how she teaches language arts in her classroom. She has spoken about providing time and space for her students to read. After being in Gwen's classroom, I can see evidence of her commitment to engaging her students in

reading in the way she organized her classroom. More specifically, I saw examples of ways in which the physical space of her classroom may be seen as an extension of her curricular practices, beliefs, and herself as a language arts teacher. She has countless books available for students, sayings/quotations about reading, and comfortable spaces in a number of different places around the classroom where students can sit and spend time reading. I saw examples of ways in which the physical space of her classroom may be seen as an extension of her curricular practices, beliefs and herself as a language arts teacher.



I also spoke to Gwen about wanting her students to feel comfortable reading, and about wanting them to feel “at home” in her classroom. I saw evidence of that in her choice of seating, lighting and furniture arrangement. The interior of Gwen’s classroom had a variety of student desks grouped together. There were four-blacktopped hexagon shaped science tables. There were eight

trapezoid-shaped tables grouped into pairs to form another four-person hexagon arrangement. And, there was a rectangular wooden table with a painted lime green top and black legs. In total, there was seating for 32 students around eight tables. That did not include the additional seating areas created by Adirondack chairs, reading nooks, stools under the long countertop, and the exercise balls. Gwen described her goals for including the exercise balls around her classroom:

*The exercise balls are for the kids who can't sit in a chair. I understand that some kids need to move, and they provide a nice alternative—especially if you've been sitting in a desk chair all day. It all comes down to the kids, and I want my kids to feel at home in this space. We all spend a good portion of our day here, and I just believe it should feel like a place you want to be.*

(Interview: February 18, 2014)

In addition to the seating variations, I notice a variety of different kinds of lighting in her classroom. There are floor lamps, several sets of table lamps, and several strings of decorative lights. All of these lights were on when I was in her classroom, creating a warm glow within the space.

*I can't stand the harsh fluorescent lighting in most classrooms. I think it is draining and depressing. I rarely ever have both sets of overhead fluorescent lights on. The table and floor lamps are always on, and they provide a much softer light. The kids prefer it that way, too. They are the ones who are responsible for turning on and off all the lights. It takes some extra time to maintain this classroom, and they pitch in because they've taken ownership of the space—and I love that!*

(Interview: February 18, 2014)



I also observed evidence of Gwen’s organizational skills and practices within her classroom. Along the opposite wall was a long white board that had had been broken up into designated areas with magnetic borders. One section of the white board had the “Language Arts Schedule” and “Assignments” on it.

On the opposite bulletin board was heading “Today’s Schedule,” and several black, white, hot pink, and bright green decorations. Underneath the white board were additional shelves that Gwen had brought into her classroom. One shelf contained more paperback personal reading books; another shelf contained the *Wonders* Language Arts curriculum books. A middle shelf held eight small pink and white baskets that had student supplies like markers, scissors, glue, and tape in them. A small table by the classroom door had a large container of hand sanitizer, tissues, a basket of Expo dry erase markers, and clipboards.

With all of the care and attention to detail, it is evident the physical atmosphere of the classroom is important to Gwen. Her explanations for the inclusion of specific details in her classroom also gave me a glimpse of ways in which they reflected her sense of teacher identity. Her classroom reflects who she is as a teacher—Gwen expressed ways in which her choices reflect her commitment to making curricular connections for her students resulting in meaningful learning. In the same manner, she wants her students to feel connected to the physical classroom—which she views as an extension of their learning. She stated she wants it to be a place where her students feel welcome and at home. She wants them to feel like her classroom is a place where they can create, take risks, and grow as learners.

In creating the physical environment of her classroom, she has also taken into account her students' physical needs. She wants their brains to be stimulated and engaged in learning, so she chose vibrant green and hot pink colors to add color and depth her classroom. She knows that kids sit for many hours in hard chairs, so she provided alternative seating choices like exercise balls, stools, Adirondack chairs, and lawn chairs to allow for movement and variety. Gwen also understands that sound and light affect a person's mood, which can affect learning. As a result, she has the bubbling sounds of water from a fish tank as well as soft lighting in the form of table and floor lamps around the classroom.

Creating such an environment takes time, creativity, and thoughtful planning. At the beginning of each school year, Gwen spends hours getting the

classroom ready for her new sixth grade students. She has stated that she wants every detail to be perfect before her students step one foot into her classroom because she only gets once chance to make a first impression. It seems that Gwen's students understand the thought and care that she puts into their learning space. Her sixth graders, for example, assume responsibility for the space their teacher has created for them, by helping to look after the space; they are responsible for turning on and off all the lamps, returning items to where they belong, and cleaning up after themselves. As a result, the classroom seems to be a shared space benefitting all involved.

#### **“You Lie”: The Simile Lesson Created by Gwen**

Gwen's belief about engaging her students in their school learning is also evident in the ways she interacts with them in daily lessons. On one of the days when I was in Gwen's class, I had been so intrigued by the details around the classroom that Gwen startled me when she clapped her hands sharply together in a 1-2...1-2-3 pattern to capture the attention of her students at the beginning of their lessons. Her students answered her clap by imitating it. Silence followed. When all eyes were upon her, Gwen asked who could explain the difference between a homophone and a homograph. A blonde-haired girl with freckles and glasses explained that homophones have different meanings, and different spellings—but sound the same. She gave an example of, “by, buy, and bye.” She then explained that homographs had the same spelling, may or may not be pronounced the same, but have different meanings—like bow and bow.



Gwen asked the class if they agreed with the freckled-faced girl. The kids gave her a thumbs-up signal. She then asked who could explain what a simile was and give an example. A boy with dark hair volunteered that a simile contained the words, like or as, and was used for comparison. He gave an example, "He was as wise as an owl."

Gwen asked her student to clap once if they agreed. In response, she got one loud clap from the class. She then explained to the class they were going to play a quick round of, 'Quiz, Quiz, Trade.' She then reminded everyone of the rules. Students were to walk around the room, make eye contact with someone, and that person becomes their partner. Students were instructed to give their partner a *soft* high-five, and ask a question. If someone disagreed with their partner's answer, they were reminded to *coach* them and not *tell* them the correct answer. After both students had answered their questions, they were to trade cards and look for a new partner. Gwen then handed out little cards with different words on them and instructed the class to get up and begin playing 'Quiz, Quiz, Trade.'

I watched as the students stood up from their chairs, found a partner, gave each other soft high-fives and played the game. The classroom was bustling again, and I could overhear some of the conversations the students were having. They were identifying homophones, or homographs, or giving examples of similes. I counted 31 students and noticed that Mrs. Franklin was participating in the game to even out the numbers. I noticed that all of the students were engaged with the 'Quiz, Quiz, Trade' game. I saw smiles on their faces, heard

some laughing, and observed a sense of community. They played the game for about 10-minutes, and then Mrs. Franklin instructed all of them to return to their seats.

She then began talking about figurative language explaining that she listens to figurative language when she's in the car because song lyrics are full of figurative language. Gwen shared that her eighth grade daughter, Olivia, does not like it when she does this because she "ruins" the song by identifying all of the figurative language! As a result, her daughter can no longer enjoy music when she's in the car with Gwen. She would prefer the radio off, but Gwen never turns it off. "My car, my music!" is what she tells her daughter. Many of the students laugh at Mrs. Franklin's story about her daughter.

To illustrate her point, Gwen projects the lyrics to the song, "You Lie," by the band Perry, onto the whiteboard. She distributes copies of the printed "You Lie" lyrics to each student. She instructs them to use the highlighters, which are inside the plastic buckets at their tables, to highlight all of the figurative language in the song's lyrics.

As students begin this task, I hear things like, "Oh, I know this song!" Or, "I love this song!" Some students state they do not know this song. Another chimes in, "That's because it's a country song, Giles! And, you don't like country music!"

"No, I don't!" Giles replies.

Mrs. Franklin instructs them to attend to the lyrics, and they can discuss them in a few minutes.

Mrs. Franklin gives me a copy of the lyrics, and I notice the refrain:

“...You lie like a priceless Persian rug on a rich man's floor  
Well, You lie like a coon dog basking in the sunshine on my porch  
Well, You lie like a penny in the parking lot at the grocery store  
It just comes way too natural to you  
The way you lie.”

(2011, The Band Perry)

I read all of the simile examples in the song lyrics, and I wonder about some of the underlying reasons for Mrs. Franklin including these details in lessons for her students. I knew that she could have taught a lesson about simile using a traditional English textbook, or worksheet. Instead, she recognized several simile examples in a contemporary song that was currently being played on the radio. Not all of her students said they liked country music; however, all of her students recognized the song. I would guess that the next time they hear the song, “You Lie,” they might remember the simile activity they did in sixth grade language arts class. The class continues to discuss figurative language for another 10-minutes, and then it is time to break for lunch.

### **Navigating Curriculum, Navigating Relationships**

After the students had left for the day, I asked Gwen to tell me about her curricular thinking process. I told her that I understood there are a lot of external parameters placed upon teachers including rigid, sometimes scripted curriculums. Yet with today’s lesson on simile, she found a way to make

connections her students' lives by using contemporary song lyrics. In addition, she encouraged students to make connections with each other by playing, "Quiz, Quiz, Trade." I asked Gwen about how she manages to navigate those parameters while still being cognizant of her students, and she responded as follows, elaborating on details that contributed to her experience of developing curriculum for her students in the context of school board-wide expectations for teachers in her district.

*I had anxiety last year over this new McGraw Hill, 'Wonders' reading series because I was really nervous about the way I know I teach. The way I teach best, and the way I know I make a difference is by making real life connections between the curriculum and the kids so they can see **why** we do what we do. And, I was afraid I was going to lose that this year. I really was.*

*I also know that when they give you a book, a Teacher's Manual, and they start putting the tests online, and they're monitoring everything you're doing and how you're kids are doing on every one of those tests...I knew I had to make sure the objectives were being taught.*

(Interview: May 1, 2014)

Gwen spoke about consulting with her principal about this work.

*And, this says a lot about the principal I work for because I went to him and said, 'I don't know if I can continue teaching if I have to become a teacher who is reading out of a manual.'*

*And his response was, 'You are going to do what you need to do to make this work for you and the kids.' And he knew...He didn't question me. He just knew he could trust me to get the curricular objectives met while teaching from a place that I am passionate about.*

*So, I spent a lot of time going through each of the chapters, highlighting and creating those sheets that have the objectives for each unit and lesson so I know exactly what I have to get in. The kids are still getting what they need. And, it's okay. Now it's done. And it works.*

(Interview: May 1, 2014)

Gwen spoke about how she experienced some anxiety with the new reading curriculum since she was uncertain how it might impact upon her ability to build relationships with her students as well as their ability to build relationships with each other and the curriculum. Below she speaks to the importance of building those relationships including how being a parent guides her in her curricular decision-making.

*I really try to get to know my kids. We share writing a lot. I know that kids are different. I see the painfully shy ones, and the ones who are outgoing...I love the naughty boys--they make me laugh. They know I get them, and their personalities can shine through here. I don't use BIST (Behavior Intervention Support Team) with them because I don't need to. I know them. Yesterday, I had to go talk to Giles, I don't know if you noticed it...(No, I didn't) I just kneeled down and quietly whispered, 'Can you knock it off?'*

*I can do that—and he will stop because I have a relationship with him. You need to build those relationships with them so you can know that kid is kind of like a Christopher (Gwen's son), or that one is kind of like an Olivia (Gwen's daughter). I have to take a little bit of time to get to know them. And if I don't do that, I'm not going to know that Gracie is uncomfortable speaking out loud in class. She gets completely red in the cheeks! For book projects and things like that—I'm never going to put her in a situation where she feels uncomfortable. She's not at a developmental level this year where she's going to get up and share in front of kids and feel comfortable and proud of herself. Maybe next year she will. But, I'm*

*not going to be the person who puts her up there and traumatizes her.*

*Instead, we'll do individual one-on-one things where she comes in and shares with me. And, again that's that Mom-thing. I wouldn't want somebody to do that to **my** child. Or, I wouldn't want somebody to make fun of **my** child because she was blurting out loud.*

*There's fun you can have...when you can be sarcastic with a kid. But if they don't get it, or you don't know them well enough to understand that they can get it, you can't do that with those kids. Christopher might get it—but Olivia might have her feelings hurt if someone approached her that way.*

*If you know somebody—like a Jack or a Luke—we poke each other all day about stuff like that.*

*'Jack, do you ever shut-up? Seriously dude!' (laughs)*

*'No!' he'll say.*

*He can handle it. We can joke, and I know he loves me. And I know he would want his siblings to have me for their teacher one day.*

*But, I would NEVER do that to Gracie. Because I know that we have a different type of relationship. And when she talks to me it's like this (she whispers very quietly). I have to get down like this on my knees to really be at her level, and to know what she's saying. And that's not her fault; that's how God made her.*

*But, I'm not sure you get that until you're a mom. Because I always think, 'How would I want someone to treat this person if she were my child?'*

*I ALWAYS think that way. ALWAYS! How would I want my child to be treated in this situation? How would I want somebody to treat **my** child? That's kind of my guiding principle. So that's a Mom-thing. Big time! That's a big-time mom-thing.*

(Interview: February 18, 2014)

Gwen has two children – a son who is a sophomore in college, and a daughter who is a middle school student. As a parent, and as a teacher, Gwen was strongly opposed to the new reading curriculum her school district was piloting. She acknowledged that she would not want her children to experience the *Wonders* reading curriculum. She believed it was too rigid—to the point of being scripted. She shared her concerns in a letter to the school board emphasizing her curricular knowledge and classroom experience to support her strong opposition to what she believed was a sterile curriculum void of meaning, leaving little to no room for students' voices. However, to Gwen's dismay, the curriculum had already been purchased, and its implementation was set into motion. Furthermore, Gwen was concerned about the amount of testing the new reading curriculum required. She spoke about the frequency of the tests as well as how poorly she believed they were written.

*I think testing has become far too important. I just think it's sad that we have to consume so much time with the testing. The whole day Friday is basically testing--the whole time! How is taking four tests every week going to help anybody? Especially, when I could have told you exactly how they were going to do on that test before they took it. I could tell you exactly which kids are going to ace it, and which kids aren't, just based on the reading passages because I know what my kids know.*

*I think we've lost sight of the kids, and what they bring as unique individuals. I think we expect everybody to be performing at the exact same place at the exact same time. Why can't we meet them where they are, and take them to where they need to be? Instead of expecting them to be there--and that's not really fair to them. It doesn't work that way. Learning doesn't work that way.*

*As a language arts teacher, I can see the growth--especially in their writing and in their passion for reading. But those tests*

*don't measure of those things. Instead, they measure whether or not you can go back and find the answer in a passage. And maybe you didn't have a clue about what they were talking about. I mean some of those passages are just ridiculous! And sometimes the answer choices aren't very clear.*

*When I look at some of the items on the tests, I think they're trying to trick them. The ways the questions are worded lead me to believe the test company is trying to trick the kids! What is that proving? And what is that showing when they're trying to trick them into an answer? Are we testing their reading abilities perfectly and determining where they are? Or are we trying to figure out if they understand what the passage is about? It's crazy. That's my hot topic you can probably tell. (laughs and sighs)*

*It's utterly ridiculous when there's three of us on PLC [Professional Learning Communities] day fighting over the answers to the McGraw-Hill reading unit test because they didn't give us an answer key. What does that tell you? We have Master's degrees. These kids are 6<sup>th</sup> graders, and some of them are probably at a 4<sup>th</sup> grade reading level, and we're expecting them to know the answers to these questions when we can't even answer them! It's hard. It's really hard for me.*

(Interview: May 1, 2014)

As I listened to Gwen describe the details involved with the required reading testing her sixth graders were required to participate in, I could observe her frustration. Her voice became louder, she became animated with her gestures, and she shook her head back-and-forth as if she was saying, "No," while she spoke. Gwen's disdain for the prescribed curriculum seemed to be the result of a combination of things. She believed the curriculum was too focused on testing, and the frequency of the testing consumed an entire language arts period. To make matters worse, the tests were written in a confusing manner –



so confusing that teachers who had earned master's degrees couldn't agree upon the correct answers.

Having observed the level of detail Gwen puts into her lessons for her students and the way in which she designed and implemented curriculum for her students, I could understand why she was opposed to the prescribed curriculum and frequent testing. Gwen's teaching practice focuses on her students and helping them to make connections between the curriculum and themselves. She believed there were other ways to measure student growth and achievement. Gwen believed in authentic assessments that included students' writing, or other creations from their imaginations, that better captured their unique voices as well as demonstrated their learning and understanding of the curriculum. Because the textbook publishers wrote the tests, it was nearly impossible for personal connections to be made between the tests and the students. In addition, spending every Friday taking the tests took time away from other reading and writing opportunities from which her students could have benefitted.

Gwen also seemed to be upset about the prescribed curriculum because it did not take into account what teachers know about their students, or their teaching and learning. As a teacher who has gotten to know her students through their reading and writing, Gwen might have felt that her voice was totally disregarded in not only the choosing of the reading curriculum, but also in how and what should be taught within the curriculum. As a teacher with over 20 years of classroom experience, Gwen has personal practical knowledge (Connelly & Clandinin, 1997) of curriculum, students, teaching, and learning. For her school

district to disregard her experienced voice, in what she believed was poor curricular decision-making, may have contributed to her to feeling helpless as a professional.

Gwen's personal practical knowledge (Connelly & Clandinin, 1997) extends beyond the classroom. She also refers to her experience as a parent to inform her curricular decisions. Combining her parent lens with her teacher lens allows her to focus on students' developmental needs.

*I was a first grade teacher and I realize that kids develop at different times—nobody develops the same way and at the same time. Take it back to infant development. Babies walk at different times. Babies talk at different times. Why do we say, 'That's okay.' One baby walks at 8-months and one baby walks at 13-or 14-months. Why is that okay?*

*Why is not okay when a student is reading below grade level when that is where he or she is developmentally with reading? And with all this testing, we are all afraid that we aren't performing where we need to be. We've taken away the **developmental** part of it.*

*For example, I have kids in here--where it's very obvious to me--that they were put in school when they really probably weren't ready to be in kindergarten. And, when you're forced into a situation where you aren't developmentally ready, then every year you're struggling because you're still not really where the rest of the kids are. And what do we do with them? In education, we start labeling them, or they become behavior problems. I just really hope the testing dies down. I hope the pendulum swings back again.*

*I think it's really hard to watch some of these kids because you realize, it's not their fault. They have no control over the fact that they can't read that passage, and that they have no connection to the passage that they're reading. And as soon as their scores go down to a certain level, we take them out of every academic*

*connection class they have and put them in another reading class. It's so wrong on so many different levels.*

*And we take them out of Family and Consumer Science (FCS) where they need those kitchen skills. Take Hugh for example. I don't think he has someone at home who makes supper for him every night. So we take him out of FCS where we can teach him how to be safe, and how to cook on the stove, and how to do these things. And we put him in RTC for reading and we get that rigid—I hate that word, 'Rigid'—where hey, you didn't meet your goals so we're going to lock you down and put you in a room by yourself. It's so hard...it's really hard for me. And I have to really (motions to zipping her lip) a lot of time because right now it's all about the test scores. Right now everything revolves around the NeSA. And everything revolves around how they do on the McGraw-Hill reading test.*

*This sounds awful, but I'm so glad my kids (Christopher and Olivia) are done with this reading series and ready to go on. I'm so glad. So glad! Because once they get to high school, they'll have a couple of classes where they'll have to do the writing exam again. But the classes are meeting the needs of the kids, and there's not that push with those tests. But you have to get through 8<sup>th</sup> grade to do that. Other than that, it's (motions with her hands chop, chop, chop) especially with this reading series. I'm hoping it gets better, but it doesn't matter if you're still not there academically or developmentally. I mean some of these kids will get used to it, but it's not going to help some of these kids.*

*But, you know from undergrad and having people like Rick Meyer in our lives, we know that kids learn best when they're making those connections. They have to be passionate about what they're learning, and they have to feel a connection to it to really take it and have it become part of themselves.*

(Interview: May 1, 2014)

Helping kids make connections between the curriculum and themselves is a major theme in Gwen's teaching. She believed the new reading curriculum that her school district purchased left little room for those connections to happen. As

a result, she went through the curricular objectives one-by-one, documenting them, and then creating and building her own lessons around them.

She knows that students will remember lessons that have a personal meaning built into a context to which they can relate. Because her students share their writing with her, she knows their interests, their strengths, and their personalities. She has established a relationship with them based on who they are as unique individuals. In turn, because she knows her students, she can create lessons that will allow for curricular objectives to be met in a way that makes sense and is meaningful to her students--which is why Gwen created lessons like the simile lesson with the “You Lie” song lyrics. She searched for opportunities to let her students have a voice in their learning, and when they weren’t present, she created them.

Furthermore, Gwen uses her experience as a parent to guide her curricular decisions. She asks herself, “Would I want my child to do this?” That question is her guideline, and how she answers that question determines how she navigates and creates curriculum for her students.

Gwen stated she would not want her own children to experience the McGraw-Hill reading curriculum. She refers back to her own children when thinking about, planning, and implementing curriculum. What would she want her own children to do, learn, and experience in language arts class? Would she want her own children taking four tests every Friday—especially tests that have such poorly worded questions that even experienced teachers with master’s

degrees cannot decipher the correct answer? Her answers to those questions are what propelled her to create a more personalized and meaningful curriculum for not only her children, but for all the sixth graders on her team at Conner Middle School.

When I asked Gwen about the impetus for all of the connections she has woven among the curriculum, the community, her fellow teachers, and most importantly, her students she spoke about being a parent. She explained it began with the seed of an idea for a curricular project that would connect writing and research to kids' real-life interests, and in turn, connect to the community at large. This seed of an idea was rooted in Gwen's desire to create a curriculum she would want for her own children.

*It goes back to the Mom-thing. For me, the guiding question is always, 'How would I feel if this were my child?' I wanted a curriculum that was meaningful and my children could participate in as active learners—not something that was done unto them. I wanted them to understand that we're not learning to write persuasively because your teacher tells you to. We're learning to write a persuasive essay because you're going to use that for the rest of your life—anytime you want something. Or, anytime you want a job. Anytime you want a raise. Anytime you want people to come to your home for anything, you're going to be persuading them to do that. You have to see that connection because they don't get it unless they see it.*

*I had the idea for the 'Make A Difference' project years ago when my son, Christopher, was a sixth grader here. But, at that time, I worked with people who did not want to try it. Then by the time my daughter, Olivia, was a sixth grader, I had colleagues who were willing to give it a try. Olivia's class was the first group to experience it, and now we're going on our fourth year...And, I got*

*the privilege of helping to create a curriculum for my child! How cool is that?*

(Interview: May 1, 2014)

Listening to Gwen, I am reminded of a passage in Grumet's (1988) novel, *Bitter Milk*: "A curriculum designed for my child is a conversation that leaves space for her response, that is transformed by her questions...Curriculum decision making requires our participation, the active, responsive, interpreting activity of parents and children" (p. 173). Gwen instinctively knew this and was in the unique position to have a voice in her child's school curriculum. As a result, the 'Make a Difference' project was born. In the following pages, Gwen describes to me, in great detail, how the 'Make a Difference' project began, as well as what it has evolved into over the past few years.

### **The Make A Difference Project**

*It began as a seed of an idea after another unsuccessful year of research with my 6th grade students. The papers were lackluster and almost painful to read. How many research papers can you read about cheetahs, professional football players, and bubble gum? It wasn't even the fact that they were painful for me to read, they were painful for the students to write! I mean seriously, just how many twelve years old kids really care how fast a cheetah can run or how bubble gum was invented? And to be honest, how many of them have researched the same lame topics year after year. They start writing research papers in first grade, and I KNOW my daughter brought home a paper about cheetahs in second grade, so there you go.*

*I realized after an agonizing weekend of reading 60 meaningless papers, void of any heart or enthusiasm that I was NOT going to do research the same way again. What relevance did*

*these topics have to any of my students' lives and how were the topics going to have a positive impact on them and help them grow as learners and as citizens? The answer was simple, they weren't. So just how could we still meet the district mandates of teaching research and persuasion, but do it in a meaningful way?*

*Research is a long and fairly extensive unit in Language Arts, usually taking the full nine weeks of the quarter from start to finish. During the unit, Language Arts teachers team with our media specialist, Jackie, to teach the research lessons. Students learn how to form questions, locate information both online and in books, evaluate websites, cite resources and write the paper. Everything involved in our research is done using technology. We have gone completely paperless, and the kids and administrators love it. Needless to say, we save a lot of money on paper and copying costs! It is not uncommon to see students taking notes on Googledocs and scanning the on-line data bases on iPads, but because we have so few of them in our media, there is always a waiting list to use one!*

*Prior to beginning our second quarter research unit, Donna, Ethan, Jackie and I met to toss around some ideas of how we wanted our research to look. I shared my idea of having students research problems our society faces and how they can help; an idea that I had been playing around with for years but never had colleagues dedicated enough to make it work. They loved the idea, and our 'Make a Difference' research project was born. We started brainstorming on Googledocs until eventually the project began to take on a life of its own. We grew more and more excited as the day when we introduced the project got closer.*

*Finally, the day to unveil our idea to the 180 sixth graders in our team arrived. We met with 90 kids at a time to discuss the project; a plan we had yet to experience with any other group of students. Yes, as we explained to them, they would be our guinea pigs. As the kids listened to our idea, you could feel the excitement begin to grow in the room. Students turned to discuss their ideas with neighbors, unable to contain their enthusiasm. We asked students for ideas to place on our brainstorming sheet and they enthusiastically began rattling off dozens of organizations that were dedicated to helping both people and animals.*

*Research began the next day. Students formed questions, found sources, read and took notes on Noodletools. But something was different this year, much different. As I walked around the room, I noticed a much more somber mood than in years past. Students weren't wasting time talking to their neighbors or "surfing the net" for football scores, they were completely engaged in the on-line articles they were reading. One student, Izzy, who was researching child abuse, had tears rolling down her cheeks as she sat at her computer and read about the abuse that one three-year-old girl had endured. Later, Izzy journaled about her feelings in her writing notebook entry.*

*As I walked around the computer lab, I was amazed at the many different topics and organizations the students had chosen to research, topics that had somehow touched their lives personally. Mason researched Type 1 Diabetes and the Juvenile Diabetes Foundation because he had lived with it his entire life and understood its difficulties. Katie, an animal lover, chose to research animal abuse and support the Humane Society and JT, whose father was serving our country in Iraq, chose to learn more about the Wounded Warriors Foundation.*

*As the students learned more about their causes and connected with agency volunteers, they began asking to have speakers come talk to the classes. We thought the idea was wonderful and encouraged the students to organize these presentations for the rest of us... and did they ever! Not only did we have one speaker, we had five, all arranged by the students themselves. Volunteers from the Child Advocacy Center, Hope Venture, People's City Mission, Lincoln Action Agency and the Humane Society all delivered powerful, emotional testimonials as to why there is a need for help. Speakers shared stories and pictures that often left the students, and teachers, with tears welled up in their eyes and lumps in their throats.*

*The research papers turned out to be some of the best papers I have read in my 20 years of teaching. They were not only filled with meaningful facts and data, but also contained a piece of each of the writer's hearts. Students described the problem they were researching, why it is a problem, what is currently being done to help with the problem and what they intended to do to help. The leads pulled readers in, making them want to read more, and the*



*conclusions left them wanting to grab their checkbooks to make a donation. In a single word the papers were....POWERFUL! And, we were ecstatic!*

*Traditionally, research is taught second quarter and the persuasive writing unit is taught fourth quarter, but we decided to switch it up a bit and move our persuasive writing unit up to third Quarter. The students had done the hard work of researching, and it seemed a natural fit for the students to now take what they had learned and use it to persuade others to help make a difference too! The idea was, we thought, brilliant! So after a short holiday break, we came back to school ready to dive into persuasive writing.*

*As with the research project, the persuasive writing unit seemed to be much easier to teach, not only because the kids were motivated and had an audience, but more importantly, because the writing they were doing was relevant and had a purpose! The kids were writing their papers to educate the community about their platform and trying to persuade them to reach out and make a difference by helping others. Students were told that they would share their papers on the radio, in newspapers with family and friends. The papers would be read to anyone who would listen and who wanted to help change the lives of others.*

*One student, Andrew, became passionate about a local senator's bill to bring the 'Pledge of Allegiance' back to all of the schools in our state. Not only did he want to share his persuasive paper with family and friends, it was his goal to share it with the committee at the special session at the State Capital...and share he did! Decked out in a dress shirt and tie, his presentation was powerful and convincing. Andrew did not only catch the attention of local citizens, he caught the attention of the nation when he was interviewed about his testimony on Fox News Network!*

*Many of the other students became interested in helping out the organizations they had researched. Mr. Paulson, our principal, was being bombarded with requests to hold bake sales and food drives. One girl even asked if she could bring her horse to school to encourage students to donate to her organization, The Double Clear Equestrian Center. It was obvious the kids wanted to do more, so as a group we sat down to discuss our options. Everyone*

*agreed that it would be too overwhelming for each of the 160 students, on our team, to hold their own fundraiser. So it was finally agreed that as a sixth grade team, we would hold the First Annual 'Make a Difference' Fair at our middle school.*

*It was decided, by the group, that the purpose of the fair would be to educate others on how to make a difference in the world. The event would be similar to a science fair. As fair goers walked around, students would share the information they had learned through their research while also trying to persuade their listeners to, 'Make a Difference.' Of course, they couldn't stop there.*

*'But what if they WANT to donate money to the organization?' Greta asked, 'Can't we take donations too? Please.'*

*Mr. Paulson rolled his eyes realizing that there was no way we were going to be able to say, 'No,' to her. But also realizing the amount of work it was going to take to make this fly. And, of course, we decided to do it.*

*We started by holding a team meeting to organize the 160 students into groups supporting the same organizations. In bright green and blue Expo markers, we scribbled student names and organizations all over the white board, in the pod, until we eventually came up with groups representing 44 different organizations from around the community, as well as the world. The students were then given time to meet in their new groups to get to know each other better and begin thinking about what they wanted to accomplish together as a team.*

*Group work started the next day as students, of all learning levels, collaborated to begin working on their 'booth' aka their table and tri-fold. Individual strengths and talents started to emerge almost immediately. Artists began working on display boards while the writers began planning a flyer to hand out to fair participants. Students with technology expertise created PowerPoints and iMovies to include in their booths and many groups also came up with creative gifts to hand out that would help fair goers remember their cause when they walked up to the donation table.*

*Speaking and presentation are other of the objectives taught in sixth grade. We felt since students would be sharing information*

*with others at the 'Make a Difference' Fair, it would be the perfect opportunity to review speaking skills with the students. Students reviewed how to use notecards, the importance of eye contact and speaking slowly and clearly. They practiced what they would say with their groups and offered feedback and assistance to each other. Groups also discussed what they would wear, the night of the fair, to look professional. It was hard to keep from smiling as I walked around eavesdropping on their passionate conversations.*

*Students quickly realized that in order to raise money, they were going to have to get people to their 'Make a Difference' Fair. The more people they got to attend, the more money they would collect for their causes. Some of the students put together a flyer that we could all distribute to friends, family, and neighbors. We were interviewed by the District media person about our project which ended up on the front page of the District's website! Three of our students even made a trip to one of the local radio stations to share the event with local listeners! It was amazing how resourceful the students were when it came to getting the word out about our event!*

*As the event got closer the tensions started to rise, mostly in the teachers! How many tables would we need? Where would we keep the donations? How many people would actually show up? What on earth were we thinking when we agreed to this? These were just a few of the many questions that started to flood our minds. The night of the hour long 'Make a Difference' Fair finally came. With the help of the custodians, we arranged the tables in the cafeteria. We designated a special table in the front, decorated with balloons and streamers, for the donations.*

*Students arrived 30 minutes early to begin to set up; flyers were placed on the tables, iMovies were ready to go on the computers, and the tri-fold displays were bright and colorful hoping to attract possible donors. The students were excited and dressed in their best clothes, big smiles decorating their faces. Of course, people started to arrive ten minutes before the start time, but we were ready to go. What happened was amazing as the students all went into professional mode. The teachers were able to take a back seat and just watch; our job was over, this night belonged to the students.*

*The room was packed! In fact, there were so many people in the room, it was difficult to walk around. The students had achieved what they had hoped for...a full house. Students delivered the information with maturity and clarity, and the participants were blown away by the passion and enthusiasm that filled the room. These students truly cared about their organizations, and the work they had done. Volunteers from some of the local charities even came to support the students. It was truly an amazing event filled with not only lots of learning, but also lots of love.*

*We had hopes of raising a few hundred dollars, during the hour, to help our charities. But we discovered that we were a bit off on our estimations. When we began to count the money, we were astonished to find out that we hadn't raised a few hundred dollars--we had raised over 2600 dollars! The kids beamed when they heard the news understanding that every penny would go to help organizations they had researched. The event was a HUGE success! In the subsequent years following, we have raised \$8000, and \$9500! Ninety-five hundred dollars during a one-hour-and-a-half hour 'Make A Difference' Fair! This past year, we had someone from the community walk in and write a \$2000 check just because he heard about what the kids were doing, and he wanted to support them. Every penny we make goes right back to the organizations.*

*As teachers, we learned a lot from this project. Yes, there is learning that needs to take place in school, objectives that must be met, but that doesn't mean they have to be met doing worksheets and reading text books. These objectives can be met by involving kids in projects that help them to become active, contributing members of their communities. Our students didn't just learn how to write a research paper and persuasive essay, they learned that they can make a difference in the lives of others...and that is a life lesson!*

(Interview: May 20, 2014)



The 'Make a Difference' project invited students to have a voice in their curriculum. Students were able to choose a topic they were interested in, research it, bring community awareness to it, and assist a non-profit organization through fundraising. Gwen credits Rick Meyer, a former language arts college professor, for introducing her to the concept of project-based learning, which was the foundation for the 'Make a Difference' project. The roots of project-based learning (PBL) extend back over a hundred years, to the work of educator and philosopher John Dewey, whose Laboratory School at the University of Chicago was based on the process of inquiry. Dewey argued that students would develop personal investment in the material if they engage in real, meaningful tasks and problems that emulate what experts do in real-world situations (Krajcik & Blumenfeld, 2006). According to Gwen, PBL is viewed as a model for classroom activity that shifts away from teacher-centered instruction and emphasizes student-centered projects. This model helps make learning relevant to students

by establishing connections to life outside the classroom and by addressing real world issues. In the classroom, PBL gives teachers an opportunity to build relationships with students by acting as their coach, facilitator, and co-learner.

Although Gwen credits Rick Meyer with introducing her to PBL, she is the one who had a vision for a curriculum that would go above and beyond the prescribed curriculum and, more importantly, be meaningful to her students. She understood that the research and persuasive papers they had written in the past were “lackluster and almost painful” to read. As a teacher, and as a parent, she wanted something better for her students. She intentionally worked to find a way to make the prescribed curriculum meaningful to her students by letting them have a voice in it. Specifically, allowing them to choose and research a topic that had a personal connection to them. As a result, they became emotionally connected to their research, and decided they wanted to do something with their research—naturally the persuasive writing followed. The sixth graders wanted to persuade others in the community to care about their research topics and the causes they were championing. It was the students, as evidenced in Gwen’s narrative, who had the wonderful idea to raise money for the various non-profit organizations they had researched. Eleanor Duckworth (2006) calls the “having of wonderful ideas” the “essence of intellectual development” and characterizes teaching as the needed attention to student’s wonderful ideas (pp. 1-14). Gwen, and her teaching colleagues, honored their students’ wonderful ideas by attending to their learning and intentionally seeking ways to relate and connect curriculum among students, teachers, and community.

Not only did the sixth graders have a voice in their curriculum, they co-created it alongside Gwen and their other teachers. Thus, the 'Make a Difference' project became generative in nature. The relationships among writing, research, persuasion, thinking, caring, and fundraising were encountered and negotiated by students, teachers, administrators, and the community. As a result, needs for a variety of organizations were made visible and assistance became tangible. Making others aware of needs within the community empowered students to understand that, through their writing and research, they could make a difference to others in a way that mattered.

Through creating and developing the 'Make a Difference' project Gwen combined her teacher knowledge with her parent knowledge to make meaning of what teaching and learning ought to entail. She knew her students, and her own children, had written research reports in the past that had been void of meaning and "painful" to write and read. She drew on her past experiences as a mom, and as a teacher, taking into account each student's individuality and interests in order to engage them with their research. Gwen understood that a teacher cannot guide learning without attending to what students bring to situations and how these relational complexities might intersect to promote learning. Each student brings something different, and it is a teacher's responsibility to take what is given and see possibility and potential. It is through these differences that teachers, like parents, can "enhance what is unique," (Van Manen, 1991) in children to sponsor personal growth and learning.

By taking into account what is personal and what is meaningful to each of her students, Gwen has shown a responsiveness to her students' learning experiences. She understood that learning is an individual affair, and thoughtful teachers, like thoughtful parents, understand what is pedagogically good for children. The one-size-fits-all curriculum did not take account individual student differences, or what was good for children. As a result, Gwen has tailored her everyday lessons, like the simile lesson with the song lyrics, 'You Lie,' to large curriculum projects like the 'Make a Difference' project with her students in mind. She has purposefully sought ways to build relationships and make connections with her students.

In addition, Gwen has created a physical classroom environment that fosters reading and writing through creating reading nooks, having plenty of books available, and a variety of chairs available for students to comfortably sit to read or write. She has also established a welcoming atmosphere through the use of table and floor lamps, bright colors, her table arrangements, the soothing sounds of the fish tank, and the variety of chairs and balls upon which to sit. All of these elements, from curricular to the physical atmosphere, have been done with students best interests and needs in mind—much like a parent thinks about and enacts what is best for her own child. Through exploration, adaptation, and attention, Gwen sought authentic ways to help her students build relationships among self, subject matter, and community. Thayer-Bacon (2004) explains that such a “relational approach to education insists that [teachers] must focus on the process of learning and consider very deeply how we can help students, as



social beings in relations with others, become knowers” (p. 168). The curricular undertaking, then, is to attend to the relational givenness of all educative situations. Gwen has modeled this through the ‘Make a Difference’ project, her everyday lessons, and her classroom environment by providing concrete examples of relational givenness and the impact it can make on students. Furthermore, through each of these avenues, Gwen has created an example of what we can gain from teacher knowledge of students, as well as how a curriculum created for and on behalf of students, can enrich our understanding of teaching and learning.

## CHAPTER 6

### Kara Peterson

#### “A Wasted Year”

*‘It was a wasted year of learning,’ sighed Kara Peterson. ‘It really was. If I had to do it over again, I would have requested a different teacher for Hannah for fourth grade. But, up until fourth grade, she had experienced wonderful teachers. Teachers who challenged her...Teachers who helped her grow as a learner. I wasn’t prepared for her to experience anything different...’*

(Interview: January 30, 2014)

Kara Peterson, a sixth grade teacher at Conner Middle School, is referring to her oldest child, Hannah, in the opening statement. Kara describes Hannah as a very bright student, who has been identified as a gifted learner. As a gifted learner, Hannah meets the criteria to be placed in differentiated math and reading classes at her elementary school. In addition, Kara describes Hannah as a child who “wants to do, and be in everything.” For example, Hannah plays the piano and the violin. She is an avid soccer player who plays defense on an elite team, meaning she has three soccer practices a week in addition to competitive soccer meets on the weekends. She is also a dedicated dancer who takes ballet, jazz, and modern dance classes every week. As a result, her parents have had to encourage her to select her activities carefully because, “although she would like to--she can’t do it all”.

Kara shared that last year, as a fourth grader, Hannah had Ms. R as her homeroom and math teacher. The school year began without any glitches. However, after four weeks, Hannah had not done any differentiated math

curriculum. She noticed that she was doing the same curriculum and same math assignments as her friends who were in the regular fourth grade math class.

Hannah was concerned about this and shared her concerns with Kara.

Kara explained to me that at first she questioned Hannah—asking her if she was sure. Hannah insisted that she was not doing the differentiated math curriculum. She told Kara her math assignments were the same assignments as her friends who were in regular fourth grade math. She also complained to Kara that she was bored. This math was too easy, and she wasn't learning anything new. As a result, Kara brought up Hannah's thoughts and concerns during the October parent/teacher conferences. Below are Kara's words as she retells this story.

*I think I really made Hannah's teacher mad at the beginning of the year at that first parent/teacher conference. I asked her about math because Hannah had been saying, 'We're really not learning anything new in math, and I'm bored.'*

*And so during our conference, I asked, 'Now you teach the differentiated math curriculum, right?'*

*And she said, 'Yes.'*

*I said, 'So, tell me about that. Tell me what kinds of things you've been doing.'*

*And she said, 'Well, Hannah doesn't really need me. She can just teach herself. She could teach the rest of the class.'*

*That's not what my child needed. She needed somebody to push her, and she wasn't being pushed. Hannah pushes herself, but she really needs someone to challenge her.*

*Then she said to me, 'Why do you ask? Is Hannah bored?'*

*And I replied, 'Yes. She is bored. She's a kid that really likes math, and she likes to be challenged.'*

*And she said, 'We haven't really started the differentiated curriculum yet. We really haven't done anything yet.'*

*And this was October! School had started in mid-August! And here it was October, and she hadn't started the differentiated math curriculum yet?*

*'Why not?' I asked. 'When do you think you will start?'*

*And then, I could tell I had upset her because she said, 'Well I've been doing this a long time, and I know what I'm doing!'*

*And I said, 'I'm not questioning your teaching ability. I'm just questioning when you're going to start differentiated math.'*

*So that was very difficult. And, I was very concerned because I also know that sometimes teachers—if you rub them the wrong way—they will take that out on your kid. I've just been around, and I've seen that. And it may not necessarily be intentional...but it happens. And I didn't want that to happen to Hannah.*

*Thank goodness we found out there was a relationship there between my stepmom and her. Years ago, Hannah's teacher (Ms. R) had been my stepmom's student teacher. And, I believe, because there was a connection, that relationship, she did not take my conversation with her out on Hannah. Things were a little better after that. But, I don't think Hannah was ever truly challenged in math last year.*

*And that is one of the reasons I am teaching my daughters how to advocate for themselves. It's a skill they will need in life.*

*(Interview: January 30, 2014)*

Kara's experience with Hannah's teacher, Ms. R, is an example of how being an educator/parent can create a tension-filled space. As a parent, Kara felt the need to advocate for her daughter's math learning experience. Hannah had

shared with Kara that she was bored, and not being challenged in math. Kara, like any parent, wanted the best for her child. As a result, she advocated for Hannah by inquiring about the differentiated math curriculum during the parent/teacher conference.

She questioned Ms. R by asking, “What kinds of things have you been doing [in differentiated math]?” She questioned Ms. R again by asking, “When do you think you will start [teaching the differentiated math curriculum]?” These may be logical questions that any parent would ask given a similar situation.

However, because Kara is also a teacher, she believed she was in an awkward position for questioning another teacher’s decision-making and practice. Kara speaks to that tension below.

*Because I am a teacher, I know the school system, and I know what’s expected of students. But I think the hardest thing for me was when Hannah started kindergarten, and I didn’t want to be thought of as, ‘Oh, she’s a teacher. She thinks she knows everything.’ I didn’t want to be one of those parents.*

*As a teacher, I’ve had those parents. I don’t want to be one of them. And I have to work really hard—especially with Hannah because she is very smart. I have to figure out how to advocate for her, but not be that parent. That parent who is a teacher, and thinks that she knows everything.*

*It’s a fine line. And I don’t know that I’ve figured it out yet. I’ve worked with Hannah—trying to help her be an advocate for herself. And I’m starting that with Addison. I think that’s one of the most important things. It’s not necessarily having me come to the rescue, but having my kid speak up.*

(Interview: January 30, 2014)

Kara speaks to the difficulty of negotiating the tension-filled spaces of being a parent and a teacher. She stated that she does not want to be thought of as “someone who knows everything because she’s a teacher.” In the past, she has had negative experiences with educator/parents who have approached her with a know-it-all attitude. She did not like being on the receiving end of those conversations. As a result, she does not want to come across as one of “those parents.”

Yet, she feared that was exactly what happened when she met with Hannah’s teacher during the October parent/teacher conference. Ms. R became defensive during their conversation as evidenced in her statement, “Well, I’ve been doing this a long time. And I know what I’m doing.”

Kara became fearful for Hannah after that parent/teacher conference. She worried that she may have ruined the opportunity for Hannah to have a pleasant relationship with Ms. R. Kara stated that she knew sometimes teachers “take out” hard feelings on that parent’s child. Meaning that the teacher may not be as patient, or warm, or understanding toward a student due to a negative interaction the teacher had with that student’s parent. Furthermore, Kara understood that if Hannah perceived that Ms. R didn’t like her, it could have a negative impact on her learning. Luckily, that did not happen.

Through additional conversation, Kara and Ms. R discovered that they had a connection in common. Years ago, Ms. R had been Kara’s stepmom’s student teacher. In addition, Ms. R had been the person who introduced Kara’s dad to

her stepmom. So the connection between Kara, Hannah, and Ms. R became personal—especially because Kara’s stepmom and Ms. R still keep in touch. Kara’s believes that personal connection was the reason Hannah was able to have a pleasant experience with Ms. R despite this tense interaction. Unfortunately, Kara believes that Hannah was not challenged in math, nor did she gain many new skills during fourth grade, characterizing it as a “wasted year.”

Listening to Kara share her experience with Hannah’s teacher represents a different example of relational complexities coming into play between students, teachers, and families. Kara believed Hannah did not suffer repercussions from the parent/teacher conference conversation because there was a relationship between Ms. R and her stepmom. However, instead of enhancing learning, the relationship between Kara’s stepmom and Ms. R served as a type of protection for Hannah. The relational connection protected Hannah from possible harm that Ms. R could have displayed toward her. Kara believes that Ms. R and Hannah had a cordial relationship because Hannah never complained that Ms. R didn’t like her. According to Kara, Hannah’s only complaint—albeit a sizeable one—was she didn’t really learn anything new from her during fourth grade.

Conversely, the relationship Ms. R had with Kara’s stepmom may have also protected Ms. R herself. For example, Kara could have requested Hannah be moved to another teacher’s classroom for the remainder of fourth grade. She could have pursued her inquiry into Ms. R’s teaching and learning of the differentiated math curriculum by following up with additional meetings. Or, she

could have contacted the school administration about her concerns regarding Hannah's perceived lack of learning in differentiated math. However, once Kara learned of the relationship, she decided to let things be, which also served as a type of protection for Ms. R.

While Ms. R and Hannah may have gained a sense of protection from the relational connection they shared, that connection might have caused Kara to become a less involved parent. Kara decided to "let things be" and not pursue Ms. R further about the differentiated math curriculum. Instead, she withdrew as an advocate for Hannah and decided to teach Hannah to begin advocating for herself as a learner—which is a beneficial skill. However, the impetus for doing so may not have been ideal.

These differing perspectives on relational connections highlight the complexities within educator/parent relationships. Specifically, relationships that serve as a form of protection for a student, a teacher, and/or a parent, add another layer of complexity worthy of examination. Yet, an unintended outcome in this situation was a parent became less involved in her daughter's schooling. Thus positioning parent knowledge into the margins while reinforcing the traditional position of educator knowledge in the center of the landscape. Although a sense of protection had been gained for both Ms. R and Hannah, I wonder what richness was lost from the less-than-ideal educator and parent relationship in this particular situation? I wonder how Ms. R and Kara could have put their combined knowledge together to make informed decisions about Hannah and her teaching and learning? Finally, I wonder what was lost in the



absence of a meaningful learning experience for Hannah during that “wasted year”?

### **Using Communication to Navigate the Educator/Parent Landscape**

Although the preceding narrative was about Kara’s oldest daughter, Hannah, it is important to know that Kara, with her husband, Mark, have a younger daughter, Addison, who is in first grade. In addition to being an educator and a parent, Kara has continued to grow as a learner herself. She has pursued her education earning a Master’s Degree in K-12 Reading as well as her ELL Certification. She has over 14 years of teaching experience; most of her teaching has been in Nebraska, with the exception of the two years she taught at an inner-city magnet school in Florida.

When Kara agreed to be a participant in my study, I was interested to know if being a parent had influenced her teaching. Below she describes how she believes it has.

*I don’t necessarily think I’m a better teacher after having kids because there are some things that I no longer do because I’m a parent. I think back to the things I used to do before having kids that I can’t do anymore because I don’t have time. I think maybe I’m more intuitive now. For example, before I say things to kids, I think about how I would like a teacher to talk to my child. Or if I send an email, I think about how I would feel if I was the parent getting this.*

*I also do a lot of thinking of, ‘How would I want that handled as a parent?’ One of my former team leaders, who retired this year, was amazing about that. She would say to me, ‘If you were this student’s parent, what would you want to happen?’ That was always her first question. Always. And so I think that is always in the back of my mind. Having colleagues like that reminds you that*

*this is somebody's child. People are giving you their kids for the day. And that is their most precious asset they have. You have to be mindful of how you treat them.*

(Interview: January 24, 2015)

In the above excerpt, Kara emphasizes how she imagines herself in another parent's shoes. She asks herself, "How would I want that handled as a parent?" Then, with that in mind, she proceeds with good intentions treating her student the way she would wish for her child to be treated.

One of the things that became a priority to Kara, after becoming a parent, is communication with her students' parents. Regular emails helped her to bridge the gap between home and middle school. In doing so, she was able to establish a relationship among the families of her students. Below she describes to me how frequently she communicates with parents and her rationale for doing so.

*I think my communication has increased tremendously since becoming a parent. And email has changed the game, too. I do lots and lots of emails. My math parents get an email from me every single day that has the homework attached, and a link to my website where I have additional math problems and instructional videos if their child needs extra help.*

*Some parents may think just because their child is in sixth grade, they can back off. I don't think so. I think in sixth grade, you need to be hands-on. You need to know what's going on all the time to guide kids through the first part of middle school to help them to set up good habits. And then you can pull back. I want parents to know what their kids are learning every day. I want them to know what their homework is. I want them to see what the syllabus is like, what their schedule is. I want to give them resources to help—especially in math.*

*For example, I have a website, and on my website, I have a calendar of what we do in math every day. I also attach videos and PowerPoint's so kids and parents can watch them when they're at home. Then, parents can know how to help their kids with math homework. I want them to know what's going on. I don't want them to be surprised when there's a test. Because, as a parent, I don't like being surprised when there's a test.*

*Maybe it's overdoing it... But as a parent, that's what I would like from my kids' teachers. I look at it like, what would the perfect situation be from Hannah's or Addison's teachers? I don't want to be critical of other teachers... And I can't say that's what I expect from them because I know how much work it is. And I can't expect that. But, that is something I would like. I don't have that kind of communication from my own kids' teachers, and I would LOVE it. It would be nice—because I never know when Hannah or Addison has a test. I would love to know what's going on in my kids' academic life. Even if I'm not going to do anything with it, at least it's there and I would know.*

(Interview: January 24, 2015)

The excerpt above highlights an example of how being a parent transferred into a teaching/learning practice in Kara's classroom. According to Kara, communication between her and her students' families became more important after she became a parent. In her daily communications, she tries to make sure that the parents know what their child is learning in math, and where they can locate additional resources via her website, PowerPoint's and videos. She acknowledges that the frequent communication and organization of resources takes extra time. However, because she believes that parents need to know what their children are doing in her class, she makes the time to do it. In fact, she stated that she wished her children's teachers would communicate on a

daily basis with her because she wants to know what her daughters are doing in school.

I asked Kara if her daily communication with parents made extra work for her in the evenings. For example, does she get a lot of emails from parents and students asking for help with the math homework? If so, does she feel pressure to respond right away? Or, does she feel like she's on call twenty-four hours a day?

*I don't get a lot of parent emails back to me about things. But when I do talk to them at conferences, or when I do have conversations, or when they have questions about something—a lot of times it doesn't have anything to do with what I teach. They just feel comfortable with me because I've established a line of communication. So, I think opening up that line of communication from Day 1, has really made my life easier. I can never have a parent, or a kid, say they didn't know about something because I tell them almost everything.*

*However, I also know that I have to be really careful because kids also need grace. And, parents don't have to know every single little thing. And that's hard, because as a parent myself, I kind of do want to know every single little thing!*

*I had a student recently who hadn't been getting his homework done, and I told him, 'I'm going to give you a couple of more days to get it together before I contact your parents. If you can do it, I won't.'*

*So I warned him, and he did it. And whenever I email a parent about a student, I always show the student my email. I want kids to know that it's not me against them. I'm not trying to set them up, or get them in trouble. And I also want to make sure that they have a chance to tell me if they disagree about something in the email. Or, if they think something isn't true—then they know what they're going to go home to. It's not a surprise. And I don't want to surprise them!*

*I don't feel like it's my job to set kids up for failure. It's my job to help them find success. And blindsiding them is not going to get them there. I think it also helps them with what they're going to say to their parents. It gives them some time to figure out how they're going to deal with it. I think that kids need that grace.*

(Interview: January 24, 2015)

After listening to Kara talk about her frequent communications home with parents, as well as holding her students accountable for their homework, I asked her to elaborate on other ways she helps her students be accountable. She then described how she works with her students and some of their behaviors. Her school utilizes BIST (Behavior Intervention Support Team) to help students be successful. Below she elaborates more on that topic.

*If I send a student to a Buddy Room, or they've had to leave my room for any reason, they make the phone call to their parents. And then I talk to their parents afterward—because it wasn't my behavior that did it. Kids hate that, and it's hard. It's hard for me to see them like that. But I always coach them before we make the phone call. We always role play. And I always tell them, 'I'm not trying to be mean. But it is your behavior. This is yours. This is not mine.'*

*And it's not a surprise. They hear it at the beginning of the year. It's part of my procedures. If you're having problems getting homework done, then you're going to call your parents and you're going to talk to them about that. I'll follow up with a phone call and an email, but that's your responsibility—not mine.*

*It's tough love. That's right. And that doesn't happen very much at Conner Middle School. But, when I was at Duncan Middle School, there was a line of kids calling home every day, letting parents know they didn't do their homework. And part of me wondered about stopping it. But then I thought, heck no! Because*

*this is some accountability. And parents could never say to me, 'I didn't know.'*

*But, I believe you have to develop a relationship with kids before you can do that- because if you're doing that on Day 1, they're going to think that you're mean. They have to know that you care about them and that you have their best interests at heart.*

(Interview: January 24, 2015)

This excerpt speaks to the importance of building relationships with students while holding them accountable for their actions. Teaching and learning is more than making sure the objectives are taught and the curriculum is covered. Teaching and learning, no matter the subject matter, involves helping children foster their identities and grow into their potential. As Kara stated above, sometimes that involves tough love. In addition, Kara has stated that she would like to know what goes on in her own children's school lives—including when the communication may be perceived as negative. As a result, she values the frequent communication between home and school and continues to maintain contact with student's families.

### **Addison and The Kindergarten Readiness Policy**

Kara and her husband, Mark, have another daughter, Addison, who is four years younger than Hannah. Addison is a talented dancer and gymnast who loves to tumble and jump on the trampoline. She is very flexible and can do the splits, which makes her older sister, Hannah, angry because she cannot do them. According to Kara, what *really* makes Hannah angry, is that her little sister is *better* than her at something. Kara has stated that she is glad that Addison is

better than Hannah at dance and gymnastics because everything else has come easily to Hannah from academics, to music, to sports.

When Addison was ready to start kindergarten, a new state policy regarding kindergarten readiness had been adopted. The policy states:

The Nebraska Legislature has changed the law governing when children begin kindergarten in public schools. Starting in the 2012-2013 school year, students may enter kindergarten if they turn five years of age on or before July 31, a date that was previously October 15. However, if your child was born between August 1 and October 15, he or she is eligible to participate in an assessment conducted by the school district to determine possible early entrance to kindergarten. (Lincoln Public Schools, 2012)

Kara and Mark knew this policy would affect Addison because her birthdate is August 29<sup>th</sup>. However, they believed Addison was ready for kindergarten. Kara was familiar with the kindergarten routine and curriculum because Hannah had recently completed kindergarten. Kara also recognized that Hannah and Addison were very different learners. However, Kara knew her daughter; she was confident that Addison was ready to begin kindergarten. In the excerpt below, Kara describes how she believed Addison was ready for kindergarten.

*Addison, like Hannah, is a young child in school. She had to be tested when she went into kindergarten because of the age cut-off. Her birthday is August 29<sup>th</sup>, and the cut-off is July 31<sup>st</sup>. According to our school district's policy, kids need to be five-years-old by July 31<sup>st</sup> in order to attend kindergarten.*

*We knew going in that she was not as academically gifted as Hannah. And, since Hannah had recently been through*

*kindergarten, I had an idea where kids are supposed to be developmentally. She was not her sister, but she was ready. She was ready for kindergarten. And I wouldn't have taken her in to take that readiness test if I didn't believe she was ready. Or, if I didn't believe she was going to pass.*

(Interview: February 13, 2014)

In the above excerpt, Kara talks about a kindergarten readiness test. I was not familiar with what kind of a test the school district administered to a child who could not yet read or write. So, I asked Kara to provide more details about it.

*I don't even know what kind of test it was because they don't tell you! I think it was developed by Scholastic. It was a standardized test—like a readiness test, and there were different parts. It was a one-on-one test. It was scored on a rubric, so a lot of it was open to teacher interpretation. A retired kindergarten teacher at the district office administered the test.*

*The day we took her in was during spring break. She was sick. I had just taken her to the doctor. I didn't cancel her appointment because she said, 'I'm fine, mommy.' As a parent who is a teacher, I should have known better. You don't test well when you're sick. But, I took her anyway because it was going to be inconvenient to reschedule.*

*So I took Addison in, and she had no relationship with the person administering the test. She had never seen her before in her life. She took the test. And a couple of weeks later, we got a form letter in the mail that stating: 'Based on the results of the assessment, your child does not qualify to enter kindergarten this year.' That was it.*

*No scores, no feedback. Nothing. Nothing!*

*The test took one hour. In one hour they decided she wasn't ready. So my husband and I are both through the roof! Through the roof! As a teacher, I am through the roof! Because as a teacher, I know this is NOT the way you communicate with parents.*



*As a teacher, I would never send a form letter to a parent that says, 'I'm sorry, your student isn't going to go into pre-algebra next year because they didn't score high enough on a test in 6<sup>th</sup> grade.' No! I'm going to have that conversation with that parent. I'm going to call them. I'm going to send an email. I'm going to set up a meeting because parents deserve an explanation of what's going on. You do not send a form letter.*

*I was really disappointed in our school district. Really disappointed that they would do something like that to parents. Part of me was like, maybe it's because I am a teacher. That's why I'm reacting this way...*

*I was mad because I wasn't getting any information. So, we called the person in charge of student services. He doesn't have any background information about our specific situation with Addison. He's just in charge. And, he's getting the phone calls and the complaints from everyone.*

*We had a phone conversation with him. He said, 'This is the way it is. There's nothing we can do. We don't have another review committee.' My husband, Mark, talked to him first. And Mark is a pretty even-keel person. But, he was MAD! I could hear it in his voice. And I was on the other end saying things, and then he would say them. Finally, he said, 'I'm going to let you talk to my wife.'*

*I got on the phone, and he started giving me the education speech we give to parents all the time. I stopped him in the middle of his spiel, and I said, 'I am a teacher. I understand what a kid needs to know before she goes into kindergarten. I am a parent of a child that has already been through kindergarten. My child is ready. And you are telling me that a 60-minute test is going to keep her out?'*

*He replied, 'Yes.'*

*'And there's nothing else you have available?' I asked.*

*'No,' he said.*

*I said, 'Help me understand this. In this district, if a child takes a test for the gifted program, and she doesn't qualify, there*

*are other ways she can get into the gifted program. You are telling me that you have no alternative test for kindergarten readiness?’*

*‘Yes,’ he replied. ‘There are no other tests.’*

*Then I said, ‘I believe you need to re-think this policy.’*

*I was upset, and I know that it’s not his fault. But, I told him, ‘You [the school district] really did not think this through before implementing this test. I understand it’s a state law. And, I understand that it’s tied to funding. But this is really not well thought out.’*

*And he said, ‘Here’s what I’m going to do. I can’t promise you anything, but we will review this and see what we can do. And I will get back to you.’*

*I told him that my child is going to miss out on a whole year of kindergarten, and she’s going to be a whole year behind because of this decision.*

*I was upset. And I called my dad, who is an attorney, because I was ready to fight it. I knew I had to be careful because I work for this school district, but this was not right. I asked my dad what I needed to do.*

*He told me that he needed to think about it. He also wanted to talk to Mary, my stepmom, who used to work for the educational committee at the legislature. So they were going to have a conversation.*

*In the meantime, I started searching online for a private educational psychologist. She was young, and I thought she would be able to establish a relationship with Addison. Those were the things I was looking for.*

*Anyway, she contacted the district, and the district explained to her that they don’t accept any other testing results.*

*I told her that I understood that, but I wanted her to take Addison through some readiness tests. I wanted to compare her results to what the school district said about her. I told her that at the end of our sessions, if she found that Addison was not ready,*

*then we would be done. She would not go to kindergarten. We would wait a year.*

*Part of me was really scared. I thought to myself, what if I don't know my kid like I think I know her? But, we took Addison in for three sessions. The first half of the session she talked to us and gathered some background information. And then for the other half of the session, she actually took Addison through some regular testing. I believe she might have even done an intelligence test. She got a hold of some of our school district's first quarter assessments for kindergarten and gave those to her. So, by the end of the three sessions, we had a variety of data and her report.*

*In the meantime, while we were going through all this stuff, the school district called. They told us they were scheduling a review board so we could come in and present our case. They told us to be prepared to bring in some work that Addison had done - anything we wanted to support our case. Bring it in.*

*Her preschool teacher, whom I loved, was not of the belief that I should be sending an almost 5-year-old to kindergarten. She really thought we should wait until Addison was six. She thought academically she was ready, and she wrote a letter explaining what Addison could do academically. She explained the curriculum Addison had been through in preschool. She did not say that she supported Addison going to kindergarten. And that wasn't what I wanted.*

*In the meantime, we got the psychologist's results back. Addison had passed. In fact, her scores were beyond what was expected in the first quarter of kindergarten. Her scores for the second quarter of kindergarten assessments were okay - not as high, but okay. Everything else came back that she was ready. Ready to go to kindergarten. So we had all this to present to the review board.*

*The review board consisted of: the director of curriculum and instruction, a principal, a kindergarten team leader, and someone in charge of data for the school district. We came into the meeting, talked about Addison, shared the psychologist's results, shared the letter from her preschool teacher, and some work samples.*

*Here's the thing, they could not argue with the psychologist's findings. Had we not gone out and done that, I'm sure they would have said, 'No!' and Addison would have had to wait a year.*

*If you go back and search in the local newspaper, there's family with exactly the same story as us –and, their child didn't get in. However, they didn't go see a private psychologist.*

*I reacted the way that I did because I'm a teacher. I think that had a huge impact on that whole situation. And, I just know my child. I knew that Addison was ready to go to kindergarten. And the sad thing was it really caused me to question how well I knew my child—because of a test! How terrible is that? That you start questioning how well you know your child because of one 60-minute test! It's ridiculous!*

*In hindsight, it was an intimidating process. I'm sure the majority of parents that received letters stating their child wasn't ready for kindergarten simply accepted the news. There weren't a ton of people who went in front of that review board. Mark could tell you the numbers. And, there were only a few that got the "okay" to go to kindergarten.*

*I'm glad we fought it. I'm glad we paid for private testing because it was my child. It was my child! And her needs came first. And that's what we felt was right for her. And when you're a parent, you go to battle for your kids. That's my first job.*

(Interview: February 13, 2014)

There are many things to consider in Kara's narrative above: Addison had no relationship with the retired kindergarten teacher who administered the district's kindergarten readiness test; the communication between the district and Kara was poorly done; the district had no other options for testing kindergarten readiness; this outcome might have been different for Addison if Kara had not been an educator and pursued alternative testing; and, this situation caused Kara to question her parent knowledge.

On the day Addison took the district's kindergarten readiness test, she had been sick. She had just come from the doctor's office to the school district's office building—a place with which she was not familiar. Then, she was introduced to a woman she had never seen before and told to go with her for an hour of testing. This situation was likely not an ideal one for Addison; due to all of these factors, it was not surprising she failed the test.

Kara was surprised, however, by how the results of Addison's test were communicated with her. A brief form letter was all that she received. It did not communicate any information to her about her daughter, or the test, or how she scored on any parts of the test. All that the letter said was, *Based on the results of the assessment, your child does not qualify to enter kindergarten this year.* This type of communication was completely unacceptable to Kara, an educator/parent who strongly values thorough communication with her students' parents. As a result, she was angry and contacted the director of student services for more information. She became even more upset when she learned there were no alternative tests or ways a young student could qualify for kindergarten. She understood the state law could not be changed; however, she did not understand why her school district did not have a better way to implement the policy than providing a singular test.

By the same token, Kara had an unnecessary burden placed on her when she learned there was nothing the school district could offer Addison in terms of an alternative kindergarten readiness assessment. The only thing she was offered was the possibility of having her daughter's result reviewed again. As a

result, she chose to pursue an alternative assessment through a private psychologist. As she stated in her narrative, had she not been an educator, she probably would not have thought to challenge the district's recommendation. In fact, a family that had a similar outcome as Addison did not pursue an alternative assessment, and their child needed to wait a year until she was admitted to kindergarten.

Perhaps the most unsettling part of Kara's narrative was that one 60-minute assessment caused her to question her parent knowledge—knowledge that had been built upon years of nurturing and caring for her child. Kara recognized that Addison was ready for kindergarten, and she understood that Addison would be able to navigate the kindergarten curriculum. She believed an arbitrary date on the calendar did not dictate whether or not her child would be successful in kindergarten. Most importantly, she knew her child—intimately as only a parent can know her child—but an externally decided assessment caused her to question what she knew about guiding her child's academic journey.

Among the criticisms of ubiquitous assessments are that they hold excessive power over students, parents, teachers, administrators, and schools. In this situation, it could be interpreted that Addison, and the other students who were taking the kindergarten readiness test, were set up for failure. On that same note, I wonder what the results would yield if every future kindergarten student was required to take a readiness assessment? Given that every student, every situation, every context is different. It is obvious that one-size cannot fit all.

I wonder what might have been lost had Kara not pursued the alternative testing? What good would have come out of this experience, for Kara and Addison, had she just accepted the district's assessment of her child? More importantly, what are the consequences for students when policies that are enforced do not take into account the individuality of each child?

## CHAPTER 7

### Rebecca Roberts

#### **Rewards and Tensions: Teaching at the Same School Your Children Attend**

Teachers and parents utilize their personal knowledge when they engage in the particulars of their worlds with children, when they determine who they are and who they will be in these adult-child relationships, when they decide what is important to them and why. Teachers and parents utilize practical knowledge, sense-making knowledge, as they live within situational contexts with children, responding in the moment, drawing on their conscious or unconscious rules of practice, as they work to build coherent experiences, coherent lives. Teacher knowledge and parent knowledge have much in common as both are comprised of personal, practical knowledge, (Connelly & Clandinin, 1985) and both teachers and parents have knowledge from which the other could benefit. It would seem ideal if we could be in a position from which to draw from both funds of knowledge. In this chapter, I explore an example of this kind of situation through the experiences of my final educator/parent participant, Rebecca Roberts.

Rebecca has been an elementary teacher for over twenty years. During that time, she has taught kindergarten, first grade, and currently teaches fourth grade at Autumn Hill Elementary School. Rebecca is married to Sam and they have three children: Thomas who is a sophomore in high school, Morgan who is in eighth grade, and Henry who is a fifth grader. For Rebecca, one of the unique features of teaching at Autumn Hill is that it is the same elementary school that



all three of her children attended. Rebecca explained to me that as a teacher at Autumn Hill, she had the choice of whether or not she wanted her children to attend the school. She told me that it was an easy decision for her and her husband to make. She loved the feel of the school, the administration, her fellow teachers, and the students that she taught. As a result, she believed it would be a good decision to have her own children “go to work with her,” but not necessarily be in her classes. She elaborates upon this below.

*I never wanted to have my kids in my homeroom. I never wanted that. I just felt like that wouldn't be good for anybody. But, it has been nice for me, as a parent who had to send her kids to daycare, to get a little bit of them back every day—to see them every day.*

*I was able to see them all at recess every day playing. Sometimes it was really good, and I tried to really stand back and not do much. Sometimes it's great, and you see them out playing. But those times when you see your kid walking by themselves at recess...I mean, I think every kid at some time or another is in that position. And you're like, oh my kid is just out walking by themselves and no one is playing with them! (Laughs) When that happens, I kind of just bite my tongue.*

*But that is the one thing I always ask my own students, my own kids, what did you do at recess today? Because I feel like that gives me a little bit of a barometer of how things are going socially for them. Morgan walked by herself a lot at recess. And I don't think it bothered her. I think she kind of liked it.*

*But, I loved seeing them in the hallways and being able to go and take a quick picture during Valentine's Day parties. Autumn Hill is so great with all of the parent volunteers that I could slip out of my classroom for just a minute to go and get a picture of the Sock Hop or whatever—just to say I was there. It was sweet.*

*And I got to teach Henry, my youngest child. He was the only one that was in one of my classes. I had him for Unit Studies,*

*which is like social studies, every other day during 4<sup>th</sup> grade. And I **loved** that! I loved seeing him as a student for 40 minutes every other day. I didn't get that opportunity with my other two.*

*Parents have come up to me and said, 'This is your last year!' Not my last year—but Henry's. He's a fifth grader this year. It has been really nice, and I haven't been super duper sad about him going off to middle school. I don't know. I am nostalgic. I really am a sentimental person, but I think he's ready to move on to the next thing—and I think it's time. But, it will be really weird not having anyone here.*

(Interview: June 23, 2014)

In the above excerpt, Rebecca describes what it is like to have her own children attend the same elementary school she in which she teaches. She spoke about how, overall, it has been a positive experience, especially since all three of her children attended day care while she went back to work. She felt like she was privileged to have a “piece of them” back with her by having them in the same building as her. She expressed how much she enjoyed having her youngest son, Henry, for Unit Studies for 40-minutes every other day during his fourth grade year. Not very many parents have the opportunity to observe their children in the role of student on a regular basis, and having him in her class gave her a glimpse of what he was like as a “student” during the day.

Rebecca also spoke about how much she appreciated that Autumn Hill had such a large parent volunteer group for the various classroom celebrations that were held throughout the school year. As a result, she was able to briefly leave her classroom, while the other parents were there in supervisory roles, to get a picture or two of her own children during their classroom celebrations.

Although Rebecca spoke about enjoying immensely this experience of having her children in the school building where she worked, being able to observe her own children in social situations at school, she also clarified that she did not want to have her own children in her own kindergarten, first, or fourth grade classrooms. She did not think it would be a good fit for either her or her children, elaborating that she did not think it would possible for her to separate her mom-self from her teacher-self. She wondered would her own children behave and pay attention if she was their classroom teacher? Would she treat them differently than her other students? Would she expect more from them since they were her children? And, would that be fair to them, or the other students, or her? As a result, Rebecca believed that although it had been a positive experience overall, it was in everyone's best interests that her own children were not in her homeroom class.

Rebecca admitted there were also other drawbacks as well. Below she speaks about some of those tensions.

*There are some downsides to having your own kids in your workplace, too. Different teachers have told me, with all three of them over the years, 'They need to re-do this,' or 'They didn't turn this in.'*

*They would catch me in the hallway or whenever, but I'm thinking they're telling me this at work—so I've got to get it done! There's a little bit of that...*

*And we do instructional conferences every quarter. Every grade level does. When my own children were in first grade, and if they were having trouble, I more than anyone felt awkward for their teacher having to say, 'Henry needs to work on fluency—or whatever.'*

*None of my kids had huge problems. But if ever there was a time their teacher had to say one of my kids didn't do well on something, and I was there—it was a little awkward. And more for them, because I just **knew** they felt bad--like they didn't want to have to say it.*

(Interview: June 23, 2014)

Rebecca discusses how it felt awkward for her to be told by one of her children's teachers—her colleague—that her child had not completed, or needed to revise a homework assignment. Such comments were made to her because she had “run into” one of her children's teachers in the hallway at school. She acknowledges how such a conversation would probably not have taken place had she not been working in the same building where her children attended school. When these situations developed, she often felt pressured to take care of the situation as soon as possible.

These feelings of tension were multifaceted. On one hand, Rebecca felt a professional obligation to her colleague(s); if one of her colleagues took the time to seek her out and let her know that one of her children had a missing assignment, then she felt that she needed to remedy the situation as soon as possible. On another hand, it felt off-putting to her that a colleague expected her to remedy her child's missing assignment situation while she was at work. She was busy during the school day with her students and had a myriad of other responsibilities. Taking care of her child's missing assignment seemed like a minor detail, especially since it rarely happened. Rebecca understood children sometimes did not complete their homework. She wondered, were her children expected to always have their homework completed and turned in on time

because she was a teacher at their school? If she were simply another parent, would the expectation from her colleague(s) be different? The dual role of being a parent and teacher in the same building where her children attended school brought these tensions to the forefront.

Another complication to having her children attend the school where she taught was that Rebecca sometimes needed to participate in routine instructional conferences when her children were brought up for discussion. She acknowledged how it might have been awkward for her child's teacher to talk freely about her child's progress while she was participating in the meeting as a colleague. Such conversations routinely happen among teachers and administrators, and parents are not usually in attendance for these conferences. However, because Rebecca was also a teacher at the school her children attended, she was required to attend the conferences as a teacher—not as a parent. Attempting to separate these roles was sometimes a challenge for Rebecca, and she recognized the tensions between her children's teachers and herself.

More specifically, there were various complexities at play for Rebecca as an educator/parent when her own children were brought up for discussion at the instructional conferences. It seemed to her that her colleagues might not have been as forthcoming about discussing her children's academic progress because she was present. Had it been any other child, for example, they might have felt more at ease to state their thoughts or concerns about the child as a learner in further depth. However because Rebecca was present as their colleague, as well

as the parent of the student, the conversation seemed abrupt and they moved on to the next child up for discussion more quickly. Whenever one of Rebecca's children came up for discussion, for example, it seemed to Rebecca that her colleagues needed to choose their words carefully because they did not want to offend her. She could sense these feelings from her coworkers, some of whom were her friends, and she stated that she felt badly for them because she knew that they didn't want to say anything negative about her children's academic progress. As a result, it seemed these instructional conferences caused more tensions for Rebecca's colleagues than for her. Knowing this, I wonder if Rebecca ever considered leaving the room when one of her children came up for discussion? This seemed like a plausible solution that may have alleviated tensions for both Rebecca and her fellow teachers. Nevertheless, these interactions raised tensions for Rebecca that she did not anticipate when she chose to have her children attend the same school in which she worked.

These tensions highlighted the potential for challenges associated with balancing her parent and educator roles in her work context, and the importance of learning how to separate those roles when necessary. Both teacher knowledge and parent knowledge are personal and particular, situational and contextual, and cannot be generalized (Pushor, 2015). The complexities inherent in attending to the personal, practical and professional knowledge held and used by educator/parents are illuminated through Rebecca's experiences on both the home and school landscapes.

For Rebecca, learning what was permitted, and how to act, when her teacher-role intersected with her parent-role were among the complexities involved in her work. These roles shift and change depending on the context of the situation. It seemed that the role that parents play in the schooling of their children is defined very differently than the role played by teachers. Traditionally, teachers are the holders of knowledge on the school landscape, while parents are expected to support their children's learning in the home. Elbaz (1981) conceptualized practical knowledge as knowledge which is "directed toward making sense of, and responding to, the various situations" (p. 49) of a particular role. While Elbaz examined in her research the practical knowledge of teachers, one can see how practical knowledge is held and used by those in any particular role, teacher or parent.

Yet, parents hold knowledge of children that could potentially inform various situations upon the school landscape. Parents know their children differently than anyone else in the world because of the uniqueness of their relationship. Pushor, (2015) describes parent knowledge in the following ways: 1) relational, "inextricably intertwined, in physical and emotional ways;" 2) bodied, "as the materiality of their bodies – theirs and their children's – interact in a home and family environment;" 3) embodied, "all knowledge is tied to our bodily orientations;" 4) intuitive, "knowledge that is transcendent, which moves beyond what is perceptible to the senses;" 5) intimate, "knowledge that is constructed, held, and used in some of the most private places of our lives with people whom we share some of our most personal and vulnerable moments;" and, 6)

uncertain, “knowledge that reflects the best of what a parent knows at any point in time” (pp. 15-19). Parent knowledge acknowledges the particular knowledge held and used by a parent who nurtures children in the complex act of raising children within all the intricacies of home and family life.

Although parents receive the message that children are more successful in school when teachers and parents work together, from the perspective of many parents, it may seem that teachers are the holders of knowledge when it comes to schooling. The teacher, for example, dictates the parameters of the teacher-parent partnerships. More specifically, it may seem that the teacher’s role is to provide the agenda, and the parent’s role is to provide support: for their children, for the educators, for the goals of the educators, and for the plans the educators have outlined to achieve those goals (Pushor, 2001). In other words, a successful teacher-parent partnership happens when parents work in a supporting role to advance the school’s mission. It seems that these socially and institutionally constructed roles have been in effect for generations and have been, for the most part, faithfully executed by parents wanting their children to succeed. As a result, these roles have become a normal and taken-for-granted fact of daily school functioning (Smrekar & Cohen-Vogel, 2001). For Rebecca, negotiating the complexities of both of these roles—especially when they collided within her place of work—caused tensions for her.

### **Not Wanting to Step on Toes**



For years, Rebecca had been fulfilling her “teacher-role” upon the school landscape—promoting the school’s agenda while counting on parents to play the supporting role. She had a certain expectation for the parents of her students and their involvement in their child’s schooling. Parents who maintain and support the school’s agenda in both curricular and extracurricular ways are perceived as caring more about their child’s education. Parents who do not participate in school-sponsored activities may be viewed as not as caring, or perhaps unsupportive of the school’s efforts to educate their child (Goodwin & King, 2002). Aware of these expectations, Rebecca was prepared to play the traditional supporting parent role when her children entered school in an effort to appear supportive of the teacher’s efforts. The pressure to behave according to these expectations was so strong that she felt compelled to conform even when she did not believe they were in the best interests of her own child.

Rebecca elaborates upon one of these times when her youngest child, Henry, had been identified as a high-achieving learner. His classroom teacher had recognized his talents and high abilities and suggested to Rebecca that he be tested for gifted identification. Rebecca trusted her colleague’s judgment and agreed to the testing, but Henry did not meet the qualifications to be identified as a “gifted learner.” Rebecca accepted the information and did not pursue the “gifted learner” identification any farther. She recounts this experience below.

*I guess I just didn’t want to step on toes. An example of that is Henry with the whole gifted thing. Henry did the whole battery of IQ testing—the cognitive test piece of that. He scored in that very high average category, but did not get in that 130-range, the score*

*needed to be labeled gifted. And I see other kids, who have a full scale of 120, and my kid scored higher than that, but the parents pushed for the data gathering. Even though they've gone through the whole battery of testing and didn't qualify, they then pushed for the data gathering in order to get their kid that gifted label.*

*And part of me thinks, should I have done that? I didn't do that for him, and I probably should have. But it felt awkward to question the teachers I work with every day in that capacity if they weren't bringing it up, or they weren't seeing it. Where it's easier for other parents to do that. It's easier to be pushy. Especially when they're not eating lunch with their child's teacher every day. And some people are really, really pushy about that. So that's one example of how working with colleagues who teach your child can be challenging. I didn't push on that, and I probably should have.*

(Interview: June 23, 2014)

Rebecca described how, in her district, a teacher has the option of contacting parents about gifted testing if (s)he observes a student working above and beyond the regular academic curriculum. Parents can then choose if they want to have their child: 1) take an intelligence test, such as the Wechsler Intelligence Scale for Children – Fourth Edition, (WISC-IV), (Wechsler, 2003) that was used in Rebecca's school district; or, 2) have the teacher gather student data. If parents choose the intelligence test, the child must score 130 or above for gifted status, and 145 or above for highly gifted status. If parents do not want their child to take an intelligence test, they can choose to have the classroom teacher gather data. The teacher then organizes work samples from the child in various academic areas that demonstrate the child's ability to do work that is above and beyond the grade level curriculum.

Rebecca chose to have Henry take the intelligence test, and he did not score in the 130-range. As a result, he did not qualify for gifted services. Rebecca could have then pursued the data-gathering route for Henry in order for him to have the gifted identification. However, Rebecca did not push for data-gathering because she did not want to question her colleagues' judgment of her son's educational ability. In addition, if Rebecca had chosen to pursue the data-gathering method, Henry's classroom teacher would have needed to spend extra time and effort collecting data and evidence to demonstrate Henry's "giftedness." Although several parents at Henry's school push for their child to have a gifted label—the Autumn Hill school community had over 24% of its students labeled as gifted—she did not want to come across as a "pushy mom" seeking a gifted label for her son. In hindsight, Rebecca questions her decision and wonders if she should have advocated for Henry to be identified as gifted.

Rebecca explained the advantages of having a "gifted" label included being placed in higher level learning groups for elementary reading and math. In addition, the "gifted label" would follow the student to middle school. As a result, the students who were identified as gifted learners had differentiated language arts and differentiated math classes together as sixth graders. Then, as seventh graders, they were also placed in differentiated science and differentiated social studies classes. In essence, having a gifted label ensured that these students would be homogenously grouped for their core classes throughout middle school. For many parents, it was comforting to know their child would be surrounded by

familiar faces in their differentiated classes upon transitioning from an elementary school with approximately 470 students to middle school with over 800 students.

As a teacher, and as a parent, Rebecca understood the significance of sending her child into the general population of students at middle school. She questioned her decision to not pursue the gifted label for Henry. She wondered if he would be safe, and/or if he would be bored in regular education classes? Consequently, she questioned her decision to not pursue the gifted label for Henry, and whether she had made the right decision.

### **Learning How to Be a Parent Upon the School Landscape**

Rebecca had been a teacher for several years before becoming a parent. She stated that she believed that being a teacher benefitted her parenting skills because she had a variety of experiences with different kids, adequate behavior management skills, and was able to provide structure and support for children. In summary, her teacher knowledge informed her parent knowledge; she had gained a plethora of skills from being a teacher, and these skills informed her work as a parent. However, when her oldest child started school, she stated that she needed to learn how to do school as a parent; despite an expansive body of knowledge as a teacher, she found she still needed to develop skills as a parent that were different from those she used as a teacher. Her role as both teacher and as parent highlighted the intersections of these sometimes overlapping, other times distinct, kinds of knowledge needed for both roles. Her teacher

knowledge of school was different than what she would learn about her parent knowledge of school. She speaks to that below.

*Looking back with Thomas, I think I should have been doing this and this as a parent, but I didn't know that. Not until I got used to the system. First-year parents don't know. It's almost like I am teaching them school, just like the kids.*

*One year I had a student whose parents were both teachers, and they just weren't getting it. And my principal said, 'Rebecca they know school as teachers. Now you have to teach them school as a parent.'*

*And I was like, 'Yep. You're right. I do. Yep.'*

(Interview: March 21, 2014)

In the narrative excerpt above, Rebecca's principal remarked that she had to teach a couple of educators—who were first-time parents—how to “do school as parents.” Rebecca shared with me that these educator/parents had a kindergarten son who was having some behavior issues in her classroom when she had been a kindergarten teacher. Their son did not like boundaries, or following rules, and preferred to do tasks alone. Instead of acknowledging their son could benefit from some behavior strategies to support his success in kindergarten, they told Rebecca that she needed to let him do things his way.

Rebecca believed teaching students how to manage their behavior was just as important as learning academics. In order to have a safe learning environment, students need boundaries and rules, and it is the classroom teacher's responsibility to maintain an environment conducive for learning.

For better or for worse, part of learning how to be a student in a public school involves a certain amount of conformity. Students who cannot, or will not, conform to school and teacher expectations/rules often have a difficult time managing their behavior, which often hinders their academic success.

Rebecca found herself in a tension-filled situation because the educator/parents did not expect their child to conform to school/classroom expectations and rules. When her administrator stated that they needed to “learn how to do school as parents,” she was implying first that the role of parents differed from that of teachers, and that as parents, they were expected to support the goals of their child’s teacher to shape his behavior in ways to enhance his learning in school. The administrator was also implying that by not support their child’s teacher’s goals, that they were not fulfilling expectations from their child’s teacher to support her goals for their child. Rebecca realized helping these educator/parents “learn how to do school as parents” was going to be challenging, and she wondered how she could help them re-imagine their parent-role upon the school landscape.

### **Being a Parent Puts a Different Perspective on School**

Conversely, Rebecca spoke to me about how being a teacher has also impacted her parenting. Being a teacher has enabled her to put school and school happenings in perspective to life and life events. She understands that sometimes a student needs to miss school due to something happening in that

student's life, and that is okay. However, not all teachers have that perspective.

Below she details some of her thoughts on that topic.

*Well, I think I've definitely grown because it gives you a whole new insight. I look at things from a parent's perspective--all the time. Whether it's field day, or the growth and development videos, or even pulling kids out of school to go see grandparents.*

*I work with teachers who think that is horrific, that kids should never be pulled out of school for **anything**. And, I've had discussions with people who don't have kids. They don't understand that these are things that are memory makers. These are things a child can't get back. Yes, school is important. But, really at the end of the day, some things are **more** important.*

(Interview: May 3, 2014)

In the above excerpt, Rebecca is emphasizing how being an educator/parent has benefitted her as a teacher, and as a parent. She acknowledges how sometimes it is necessary to take children out of school because some life experiences are more important. Specifically, she was referring to a time when she took all three of her children out of school because their grandfather was very sick. Rebecca knew that their grandfather was nearing the end of his life, and she wanted her children to have the opportunity to say "goodbye" to him. To her, this was a "memory maker," and she believed spending time with their grandfather was more important than attending school. Because of experiences like this, as a classroom teacher, she can support a family's decision to have a child miss school.

However, not all teachers share this belief. Her son Thomas' high school English teacher did not believe his absence of visiting his grandfather was excusable. As a result, he was not able make-up a quiz he missed due to his absence, and the score of "0" brought his grade from an "A" down to a "C+" in the class. Knowing that a grade of a C+ was going on Thomas's permanent high record upset Rebecca who contacted the teacher to explain why Thomas had missed school. Although Rebecca advocated for Thomas by having a conversation with his teacher, the teacher held firm to her decision. There was nothing Thomas or Rebecca could do, and the "C+" grade went on his permanent record. Rebecca commented that had his teacher been a parent herself, perhaps she would have been more understanding.

The nuances of being a parent and a teacher intersect on the school landscape for Rebecca frequently. She had expressed to me how she enjoys getting to know her students, getting to know their personalities, and their quirks, and their hope and dreams. She had explained that spending nearly seven hours a day, five days a week together, allows for some very special relationships to form. As a result, she views her class as more than a group of students, but more like a family. As the head of that "family," Rebecca spoke about how she would do anything for the safety and well-being of her students.

*It is an interesting thing to be a parent and a teacher. I have to say, I was kind of thinking about this when Sandy Hook happened last year. I told my husband, this has **really** rocked me...because...one as a parent—that's a given. But then I look at my classroom, and I think **all** of them gone? All of them? I just*



could **not** imagine...because they are **my** kids! It's kind of like your own family. Teachers love their kids.

And I think it's interesting how people say, 'Wow! Those teachers were brave!'

And they were! But, that it is **surprising!** It's **not** surprising! And I think most people would do the exact same thing in our society with children. Because that's who you spend **every** day with.

Teachers have been doing brave things like that on behalf of their students since the beginning of time. For example, there's that mosaic in our State Capitol Building of the Blizzard of 1888. The blizzard was totally unexpected, and the teacher had run out of heating fuel in her one-room schoolhouse. So, she tied a rope around her 13 students so they wouldn't get lost, and she led them from the school to her home like a half of a mile away--and saved their lives. Teachers do those sorts of things for their students all the time...It's not surprising!

...The one time I was really upset with my son's middle school happened shortly after that boy in Millard shot and killed the assistant principal, and also shot the principal—remember? Well, I was taking my son, Thomas, to get his haircut after school that day, and we were talking about it.

And he goes, 'Do you know what you would do?'

And I go, 'Yeah, Thomas, I do. I would do **anything** for those kids. You have to know I would.' (Rebecca then gets visibly teary-eyed)

Well the very next day, the **very** next day, Thomas came home from school and said, 'Well you know what Mom? We had a practice Code Red Safety Drill today, and our English teacher didn't participate.'

I said, 'Well you know, Honey, there are different levels of Code Red. And your teachers are supposed to do different things depending on what level it is. You know if the intruder isn't in the building, you do different things...'

*And Thomas goes, ‘Oh no. The principal was on the intercom saying we should have the door locked and be away from the door and windows. And she didn’t do **any** of those things!’*

*And later that day, I said to my husband, ‘Dang it! I know our kids are going to have teachers that we think aren’t doing a good job or that we don’t like. But they’d **better** protect my kid! And teach them how to be **safe** during any kind of drill—fire drill, tornado drill, and especially a Code Red drill!’*

*School terrorism is a real thing in our society today! And I was immediately on the phone with my son’s middle school principal, and he was like, ‘I’ve already had several calls about this teacher. I am taking care of it. It is unacceptable.’*

*And I said, ‘It is! This is serious.’*

*I don’t even understand why you wouldn’t want to practice that? We practice fire drills, tornado drills—and how often do those things happen? Ugh! It was so frustrating! (Rebecca sighs and wipes her eyes.)*

(Interview: March 22, 2014)

In the conversation above, Rebecca became emotional as she reflected on the school shooting that happened in Sandy Hook, Connecticut, in December of 2012 where 20 elementary students and six adult staff members were fatally shot. Rebecca had thought about what she would do if she were ever in a similar situation. When her son, Thomas, asked her about it, she replied without hesitation that she “would do anything for those kids.” Meaning that if a gunman stormed into her school, she would do anything, even lay down her life, to protect her students. Knowing that about herself contributed to her to becoming emotional as she relived that conversation with Thomas.

According to Rebecca's school district's *Classified Employee Handbook*, (Lincoln Public Schools, 2012) a Code Red is declared when, in the opinion of the Administrator-in-Charge, a situation exists that threatens the safety of students and staff and requires that they remain in their classrooms. There are two kinds of Code Red:

- 1) 'Code Red – Respond' means that a designated emergency management team responds to a designated center.
- 2) 'Code Red – No Response' means that no one moves. The situation is unstable, and the risks are too great to have anyone moving about the school until the police arrive and assist in the assessment of the incident (p. 15).

In Rebecca's school district, all teachers are expected to be familiar with and to comply with the Code Red – General Procedures (Lincoln Public Schools, 2012).

However, when her son, Thomas told her about his English teacher not participating in the Code Red Safety Drill at his school, Rebecca's first reaction was that Thomas must have been confused. Knowing that all teachers were expected to practice the Code Red Safety Drills, Rebecca explained to Thomas that there were different levels of Code Red Drills and that perhaps his teacher was not required to do anything.

After listening to her son describe his teacher's response to the Code Red Drill; it seemed to her that his teacher did not take the Code Red Drills seriously. One of the expectations of all teachers in Rebecca's school district was to ensure the safety of their students. All teachers were required to participate in specific

drills such as Fire and Tornado Drills, and Code Red Drills so they would know what actions to take in various emergency situations. In addition, school administrators were required review these safety precautions every year and enact frequent drills as practice for teachers and students.

When Thomas insisted that it was a Code Red Drill that required actions to be taken by his teacher, and his teacher did not take any action, Rebecca became very upset. Rebecca took issue with Thomas's teacher's lack of participation because it implied that she did not think her students' safety was important. She called Thomas's middle school principal to report his English teacher's lack of action and unwillingness to follow protocol during a Code Red Drill. Rebecca was very clear on her understanding of the extent to which she would protect her own students from danger and, she expected her child's teacher to have a comparable level of commitment to protecting her children from danger.

This excerpt illuminates how Rebecca's educator knowledge is a culmination of all of her life's experiences. Rebecca had an authentic role as her students' protector and a vested interest in their safety. She had built relationships with her students that went beyond classroom walls and a seven-hour school day. The level of care and concern she displayed toward her students was evident in her words and actions. She did not take the Code Red Drills lightly. She felt a moral and ethical obligation to protect her students in a potentially dangerous, even life-threatening, situation. As a mother, Rebecca would do anything to protect her children from harm; and, as an educator, she

would do the same for her students. In this instance, Rebecca's parent role was not perceived any differently from her educator role. Her personal, practical, professional knowledge carried beyond her teacher role allowing her to act as a secondary parent to her students.

### **A Guiding Principle: How Would I Want my Child Treated?**

As a teacher and a parent, Rebecca often thinks about how both roles intersect to shape her teaching and learning with her students. She sees teaching as an inherently caring profession and is a teacher who openly cares about her students. She doesn't hesitate to call home and talk to a student's parent. She has told me, "If I was that student's mom, I would want to know." Using that statement as a barometer, Rebecca elaborates below on being a parent in the classroom.

*When I'm in the classroom, I always think about—and maybe it's because I'm a mom—I think about: 1) how I would want somebody treating my kids; and, 2) the expectations I want for my own children. I feel I have the same expectations for my students as I would for my own children.*

*Sometimes they're with me longer than they are with their parents on some days. And they need to know that I care about them. Sometimes they just need those hugs. And I want parents to know that I'm going to take care of them just as well as if they were with them. And I'm going to comfort them if they're sad.*

*I remember Morgan's kindergarten teacher, Ms. Sawyer, came up to me one day after school and said, 'Morgan was really sad today. I just want you to know we did lots of hugs today.'*

*As a mom, that comforted me to know that when Morgan was sad at school that Miss Sawyer was going to give her those hugs that she would need—the hugs that I would have given her if I*

*were with her. So I want the moms of my students to have that comfort knowing that I would do that if their child needed that.*

(Interview: March 22, 2014)

In the above excerpt, Rebecca speaks about how she is in a position to view her students both as a teacher and as a parent. In the classroom, her role is to assist students with learning, and she uses her personal practical knowledge to navigate teaching/learning relationships with her students. However, because she is also a parent, her parental knowledge and experience cannot be separated or isolated from her teacher identity. Her parent knowledge intersects with her teacher knowledge and is often a guiding principal in how she interacts with her students.

For Rebecca, caring is an integral part of her teaching. She was appreciative when Ms. Sawyer, her daughter's kindergarten teacher, gave her daughter, Morgan, some extra hugs when she was having a hard day. She was appreciative because that was what she would have done, and she approved of Ms. Sawyer providing those extra hugs to Morgan. In turn, Rebecca wants her students to know she cares about them, and she believes that sometimes they need hugs—just like they would need a hug from a parent. As a parent, Rebecca knew the benefit of extra reassurance, in the form of hugs, for her daughter; she transferred this knowledge to her work with her own students and believed in the possible benefit of extra hugs and attention for some of her students who might benefit as well. She was aware that some parents may feel similarly and appreciate their child receiving hugs from the teacher if this would help the child

feel supported in school. She was also aware that public schools are often expected to operate with some “distance” from children, and that some parents may not want a teacher hugging their children, even if the intent was well-meaning.

Differing perspectives on caring and physical contact associated with teaching may cause tensions among teachers and parents. It is important to recognize these tensions because both parenting and teaching are shaped by the beliefs of those involved. One teacher’s well-meaning hug toward a child who is having a bad day may not resonate with well with that child’s parent and thus contribute to creating more of a disconnect in a teacher/parent relationship. Knowing the child, as well as the child’s family, would help to alleviate possible tensions in such a situation. In addition, teachers frequently give, and get hugs, in elementary school—especially in the early grades. Nevertheless, such misunderstandings need to be communicated and understood if the goal is for parents and educators to partner and serve children’s best interests on the school landscape.

### **Insights on Curriculum**

Curriculum is another area where Rebecca’s teacher practical knowledge sometimes intersects with her parent personal knowledge. As I mentioned earlier, Rebecca has been a teacher for over twenty years in her school district. During that time, she has taught kindergarten, first grade, and fourth grade. In

addition, she has taught a variety of curricula as well as gone through several curriculum cycles.

This past year has been a challenging year curriculum-wise because all fourth grade teachers had three new curricula to implement: reading, social studies, and math. The math curriculum was unique because teachers had a newly rewritten math curriculum, but they were required to use the old math textbooks. In order to make-up for any gaps between the new curriculum and the old math books, fourth grade teachers were given math lesson treatments to implement. Below Rebecca elaborates on the challenges of implementing the math lesson treatments.

*This is what the district did. They bought that math program for grades K-2, and then, of course, there was no money for the additional grades. So, math was all different when they got to third grade. So, what the district people did last year was re-write the curriculum to match this new program. Those kids had experienced a year of it. The kids I have now started in second grade. So last year, in third grade, it was the re-written curriculum. The District people re-wrote it. This year, they did that to fourth grade. So fourth grade this year, we have the newly rewritten math curriculum, but we have to use the old math textbook.*

*So every day we get these, we have these lesson—they call them lesson treatments. They're basically lesson plans. I don't know why they're called lesson treatments.*

*So the beginning of the year was so overwhelming because we had to study these lesson treatments every day—on top of learning and implementing a new reading curriculum and a new social studies curriculum! And I said to our building principal, this is a bit much! And the District needs to keep these things in mind in the future.*



*Well, she shared that with district math curriculum supervisor, and he said, 'Why are those teachers complaining? They get their lesson plans done for them every day?'*

*I told our principal, 'How about I give him a script and tell him for an hour-and-a-half he's going to have to follow it. Even though he's never taught math that way before, he's going to have to study it and follow it!'*

*And, it's gotten easier. And, we've kind of learned to pick and choose...but at first, you really feel like you have to follow it to the letter. And some of it is good. Some of it is really good. Like wow! That's probably the way to do it.*

*But, some of it was really bad. For example, the way the district people wanted us to teach division was really bad. Yeeow! We had to re-teach division because it wasn't working the way the lesson treatments were prescribed. It was **very** confusing to the students. And I don't know if it's Common Core influence—it probably is, but that was bad.*

(Interview: May 3, 2014)

Rebecca had a challenging fourth grade year because there were three new curricula in reading, math, and social studies that she needed to learn and teach. Anyone who has taught new material understands that learning one new curriculum can be overwhelming, let alone three.

In the above excerpt, Rebecca describes the struggles she had while working with the daily math “lesson treatments.” Each morning, the fourth grade teachers received a lesson treatment from the district math curriculum specialists. According to Rebecca, these treatments were basically math lesson plans that needed to be carefully followed. It seemed to Rebecca that even the

words, “lesson treatment,” implied that the existing math curriculum was ill and in need of help.

Some of the lesson treatments caused confusion for her students. For Rebecca, an experienced teacher, it was troubling to her because she had developed a repertoire of materials and approaches that would support her students’ learning of the material in effective ways. She struggled with her professional obligation to follow district guidelines to cover the curriculum material that she believed could be presented more effectively using approaches she had used previously, and ultimately felt she needed to go back and re-teach certain math concepts so her students could understand them better than what had been achieved using current district guidelines. As Eisner (2004) states, “...the dynamic and complex process of instruction yield outcomes far too numerous to be specified in behavioral and content terms in advance” (p.87). Time and again, these scripted lesson treatments were disempowering to Rebecca and often diminished student learning. As a result, she became frustrated with the district’s math lesson treatments and voiced her concern to her building principal.

When her principal shared her concerns with the district math curriculum director, his response was the teachers should not be complaining because they were receiving a completed lesson plan each day—like a gift! All they had to do was implement it. This practice did not seem to recognize the teachers’ personal practical knowledge or past experiences. There did not seem to be regard for student differences or past experiences. Instead, the message conveyed through

this practice was that the one-sized, pre-made lesson treatment would fit all students. Such disregard for teacher knowledge and expertise was troubling to Rebecca. More importantly, a scripted curriculum did not take into account teacher responsiveness to individual students, and she wondered who was benefitting from these treatments?

With so much attention being given to the rigor in the new curricula, Rebecca spoke with me about some of the detriments students may be experiencing as a result. One of her concerns was whether policymakers had considered if the new curricula and additional testing were developmentally appropriate for elementary-aged students. Rebecca shared her insights below.

*They're little...Do they have to start doing all this testing this now? And maybe they do. I don't know what the right answer is there. So sometimes I think there's that conflict within myself where I question, should we be doing these things at this level? Because I don't feel like we talk about developmentally appropriate **ever**—anymore. And so, I don't know.*

*The language associated with developmentally appropriate isn't even on the radar—it's just not part of the conversation anymore! Do you know what I mean? During my college education, in Teacher's College, we talked about it all the time. Is this appropriate? And, no one even thinks to **ask** that question anymore! Is this developmentally appropriate? It's a lost word. A lost phrase...So, I don't know. It's a bummer.*

(Interview: May 3, 2014)

Rebecca explored an interesting topic with the phrase, “developmentally appropriate.” According to her, those words were no longer prevalent in the

curricular conversations taking place in her school district. Much of the focus had been on testing student knowledge and the data-gathering associated with it.

It seems this desire for early achievement is not new. The Swiss psychologist Piaget, who died in 1980, mapped the stages of cognitive development in childhood. According to Zigler and Gilman (1998), Piaget frequently ran into what he called “the American question:” How can we speed up the developmental process? That question seems ridiculous, yet that is exactly what is happening in American schools today. The pushing down of the elementary school curriculum into early childhood has reached a new peak with the adoption by almost every state of the Common Core Standards. These standards call for kindergartners to master more than 90 skills related to literacy and math, many intended to get children reading in kindergarten. Yet there is no research showing that children who read at age five do better in the long run than those who learn to read at ages six or seven.

Rebecca stated that she believed that no one had thought to question whether or not the testing was developmentally appropriate for elementary students, and that caused her to feel conflicted as well as disappointed. She goes on to elaborate on these feelings below.

*And part of me is like, yes. We can teach them. And most of them can take the test and pass it. But, the other part of me is asking, should they be doing this now? And are they going to remember it? Is that relevant to their life and their learning right now? Especially in kindergarten? Do they really need to know that for the skills they're **actually** using? I don't know. Just because they **can** do it, doesn't mean they **should** be doing it! And in a*

*school like Autumn Hill, you can get away with it. I can't imagine it in a Title 1 school.*

*And kindergarten is no longer kindergarten. Years ago, when I taught kindergarten, and a parent came in with their child on Open House Night and said, 'He doesn't know his letters yet.'*

*I would say, 'That's okay. That is what we're here for—to teach them those things'.*

*In today's world, they are supposed to come to school with quite a bit of knowledge in order to be able to perform well! I mean if they're going to be able to read by a Level 4 on those District Reading Assessments (DRA's) by the end of kindergarten. They're going to need to know their letters before you come to kindergarten. In order to be successful, students are expected to know a lot when they come to kindergarten.*

(Interview: May 3, 2014)

When I asked Rebecca to elaborate on her statement, "Kindergarten is no longer kindergarten," she went into some detail describing the Developmental Reading Assessment expectations and goals. The Developmental Reading Assessment (DRA) is a standardized reading test used to determine a student's instructional level in reading. The DRA is administered individually to students by teachers and/or reading specialists. Students read a selection, or selections, and then retell what they have read to the examiner. As the levels increase, so does the difficulty level for each selection.

The DRA is administered to all students in kindergarten through grade three during a testing window in September, mid-year, and again in May so that teachers can track student progress. The DRA level indicated on a student's report card shows the score attained during the various testing windows. The

levels can show a student's current reading level according to a Developmental Reading Continuum along with grade level benchmarks for the beginning and end of grades kindergarten through grade three.

Teachers use DRA results, along with the results of other assessments, to determine whether students are reading on, above, or below grade level. By knowing student DRA levels, teachers can plan for small group, guided reading instruction, including targeted interventions and supplemental support. Teachers select materials that match students' instructional levels and provide appropriate instruction to challenge them.

According to the Developmental Reading Continuum, a DRA of a Level 4 is indicative of reading at the beginning of first grade. In Rebecca's school district, the goal is for all kindergarten students to be reading at a Level 4 DRA by the end of kindergarten, putting them ahead of grade level. As a result, the kindergarten curriculum in Rebecca's school district is more rigorous than it had been in the past, and she elaborates further below.

*I think in some ways, especially at the kindergarten level, I think that we're pushing them too hard. Like we're talking about nouns, verbs, adjectives, and prepositions. And kindergarteners don't understand prepositions! They're like, 'Yeah. OK, whatever.' I mean I know that they're not **getting** it!*

*In addition, there's not as much opportunity for kids to express their different learning styles. So much time spent on the test: teaching, preparing for the test, and taking the tests. There's not as much time for kids to show you how they learn in different ways. We're getting away from that.*

*Kindergarten is more rigorous than in the past. We are on the go. No time to relax. Now it's time to move on to this, and move on to that. There is a lot more stress put on the kids. They're just little people. And with the time being so rushed, moving from one curricular topic to the next that is difficult to see those differences, or seek out those differences, or to get to know them as well.*

*It's going to be interesting to me to see where this goes. Because I do worry about the stress it's causing. I mean we talk about stress in adults and what that does to us—physically and emotionally. It's serious! Some people have heart attacks from stress! But, yet, we just kind of brush that aside for kids. Like they shouldn't be stressed. Or why would they be stressed?*

(Interview: May 3, 2014)

Rebecca raises some interesting points. First, she mentions how she believes kindergartners are being pushed too hard to learn curricular material that is too abstract for them to grasp. Parts of speech like nouns, verbs, adjectives, and prepositions do not seem like kindergarten appropriate curriculum. It reminds me of what Rebecca said about the words developmentally appropriate being absent from the curricular conversations. Rebecca questioned, and I agree, how learning parts of speech in kindergarten is developmentally appropriate?

For many children the outcomes of this hurried curriculum are unhealthy. Educators and pediatricians report increasing incidents of extreme and aggressive behavior in preschools and kindergartens and link these to the stress children experience in school (Burgard, 2007; Gray, 2011). Children are happier when they are provided opportunities for play. Gray (2011) states,

Perhaps the most straightforward explanation for the rise of depression and anxiety in children and adolescents is that, as a society, we have increasingly forced them into settings that make them unhappy and anxious and have deprived them of the activities that make them happy (pp. 457-458).

Understanding that the rates of mental illness and/or aggressive behaviors among young children have increased, it is critically important that early education practices promote physical and emotional health and not exacerbate illness. However, too many schools today are placing a double burden on young children: First, they heighten stress levels by demanding they master material that is often beyond their developmental level. Then, they deprive children of their ability to deal with that stress by eliminating space for creative play.

### **Lingering Questions**

As a parent, and as a teacher, Rebecca has illuminated how teacher knowledge and parent knowledge are both distinct, yet they also have much in common. Being a teacher and a parent upon her children's school landscape allowed for Rebecca's personal parent knowledge to intermingle with her practical, professional educator knowledge. Situation, context, and the other were constantly at play as Rebecca's varying funds of knowledge were called upon. For Rebecca teaching at the same school her children attended was a unique experience filled with gifts and tensions. Some of the highlights included being able to see her children during the day, knowing where they were and what they were doing, observing them in social situations, and being able to teach and observe her son, Henry, as a student in her unit studies class. However, there



were also moments of tension that Rebecca experienced because she was a teacher at her children's school. One of the tensions Rebecca wasn't prepared for included hearing her colleagues speak about her children's academic progress during instructional conference meetings. Rebecca could sense they were uncomfortable stating that her child needed extra support in reading which left her wondering what else may have been left unsaid.

Similarly, Rebecca wasn't prepared for the tensions and complexities that accompanied being a parent on the school landscape. Rebecca learned that being a "good" parent meant not stepping on colleague's toes and following the classroom teacher's agenda. One example of this was when Rebecca's child did not have his homework completed. The classroom teacher stopped Rebecca in the hallway to let her know about the missing work with the expectation that she would remedy the situation a timely manner. Another example was not pursuing a gifted label for Henry. After his test score did not qualify him for gifted services, Henry's teacher did not offer to collect the work samples that would be needed for the data-gathering process necessary for a gifted label. Because she did not offer, Rebecca felt awkward asking her colleague to do extra work on behalf of her son. These situations provide glimpses of how parents' voices can be silenced in school—even when that parent is also a teacher at that school.

In some ways, being a teacher at the same school may have made these situations more fraught for Rebecca because some of her children's teachers were also her friends. As Rebecca stated, "Some parents can be really pushy because they're not eating lunch with their child's teacher every day." Not

wanting to damage friendships with her colleagues also played into Rebecca's silencing as a parent. Offending her child's teacher may have had farther-reaching effects for Rebecca because, in turn, she could be harming a friendship—which would also make for an awkward situation for her at work. All of these situations left Rebecca feeling conflicted and illuminated some of the complexities of being a parent who teaches at her children's school.

Another tension for Rebecca during this chapter was having her teacher knowledge regarding curriculum be dismissed. David Hansen (2001) stated, "Serious-minded teachers literally 'mind' what they do in the classroom," (p. 26). Rebecca was mindful of her teaching and often questioned the appropriateness of the various curricula she was required to implement. For example, the scripted math lesson treatments she received on a daily basis did not take into account Rebecca's past teaching knowledge and experience with math. The scripted math lesson treatments did not take into account Rebecca's students and their diverse needs as learners. The scripted math lesson treatments disregarded teacher differences and student differences resulting in a narrowing of teaching/learning absent of relationship that often did more harm than good.

On another note, Rebecca experienced an unforeseen situation when she was the classroom teacher working with educator/parents whose son was experiencing some behavior problems in her class. One of the differences in this situation was that the educator/parents chose not to support Rebecca's suggestion that they partner on a behavior plan for their son. Instead of deferring to the classroom teacher—the perceived expert upon the school landscape—the

educator/parents requested that Rebecca “let their son be.” One cannot help but wonder what was lost in this situation. With so much teacher knowledge and experience among them, couldn’t they have agreed upon a reasonable compromise for the boy’s behavior? In addition, they all possessed parent knowledge. I wonder how their conversation could be re-imagined speaking to each other as parents who want the best for their children. Perhaps if the educator/parents would have shared some personal stories of their son with Rebecca, she could have come to know him better and understood why the educator/parents rejected her suggested behavior plan. Or, perhaps if Rebecca had asked the educator/parents what their vision or goal was for their son’s school experience, she could have gained a better grasp of their ideals. Perhaps then, some sort of compromise could have been agreed upon. However, for whatever reasons, opportunities to engage parents, learn from their knowledge and experiences, and build relationships were lost in this instance.

Being a teacher and a parent upon her children’s school landscape challenged Rebecca in ways that were unexpected, unique and, at times, positioned her in tension-filled moments. Rebecca’s funds of knowledge, personal, practical, and professional came in and out of play depending on situation and context. Often her practical, professional knowledge informed her personal knowledge while at other times her personal knowledge informed her practical, professional knowledge. Her funds of knowledge were interwoven upon the school landscape; her home and in her community, and I was able to glimpse some of the experiences that shaped her knowledge. The complexities inherent

in educator/parents funds of knowledge leave me with several unanswered questions. What more can we learn from teachers who possess teacher knowledge combined with parent knowledge? How can this added layer of parental knowledge be beneficial in teaching/learning situations? How can educator/parent knowledge impact developmental appropriate curricula and benefit learners with differences? Finally, how can educator/parent knowledge shape relational complexities upon school, home, and community landscapes?

## CHAPTER 8

### Discussion: “Tensions and Disregarded Voices”

*I think more than anything I've grown, and they go hand in hand. I think I'm a better parent because I've had the experience of teaching. And, being a parent, I think, benefits me as a teacher.*

*I hope that I'm thoughtful of my students as human beings—as individuals. And I want people to see my children for **everything** they are. Not just that they might be an 'A' student, or a really good writer, or those kind of things—because they're more than that, to me. So I hope that I do that as much as I can with my 23 little babies [students].*

(Rebecca Roberts, Interview: May 3, 2014)

This conversational snippet from Rebecca Roberts captures the essence of educator/parent knowledge upon the school landscape from the perspective of my educator/parent participants. Rebecca's words suggest that her sense of her embodied personal, professional and practical knowledge has been enlarged after becoming a parent; concomitantly she perceived herself as a better parent due to her personal, professional and practical educator knowledge. Her funds of knowledge and experience go hand in hand as she travels from home to school, and the places in between. Rebecca believes she has gained a rich and important body of knowledge from her dual role as both a parent and a teacher; she is better able to see each of her students as a whole person, an identity in the making, an identity that went beyond their roles as students in school. She recognizes that they have gifts beyond what she sees in the classroom. She may have a student who is a gifted writer; however, she can also appreciate that the

same student is a talented soccer player, for example. She states that her students are much more than who they are academically, and she appreciates that about them. In turn, she hopes that her children's teachers can see them for "everything they are," not just what is observable in school—from her perspective as their mother she has the opportunity to see them as so much more than that.

I also highlighted Rebecca's conversation because she speaks to how her dual knowledge empowers her as a teacher and as a parent in how she "sees" children. As a mother, Rebecca is able to see her children as living, breathing, growing, moving, messy, quirky children with all of their faults and gifts. As their mother, she especially loves what makes them different from one another, and she sees each of them as a precious, beautiful gift. That heightened sense of "seeing" her own children, she believes, transfers into her teaching. As a teacher, Rebecca strives to see her students in all of their living, growing, messy, unique and awesome splendor. As a parent, and as a teacher, seeing each child is challenging because children are constantly changing. They are bodies and minds in motion, and we must look again, more deeply, to truly see them.

The educator/parents in this study wanted to know more about their students. They wanted to understand what motivated them and what made them tick, what engaged them and interested them. They wanted to use what they learned about their students to be more effective in their classrooms, to maximize teaching and learning opportunities for their students. And, while they have become accustomed to test scores, grades, and other ways of measuring the

perceived ability of their students, they continued to search for ways to learn more about their students as human beings.

This search became challenging for each of my educator/parent participants because they each viewed today's academic climate as one that constrains teaching and learning into a narrow view of those who are academically proficient, and those who are not. This perceived division of the academic haves and have-nots may be reinforced by current educational policies that contribute to shaping curriculum development, implementation, and assessment across all subject areas and all grade levels. Such policies do not take into account individual student differences, and from the accounts of the educator/parents featured in this dissertation, nor do they take into account teacher knowledge of teaching, learning, self (teacher) and others (students, subject matter, context.) Permeating throughout these educator/parent narratives were examples of the tensions the participants experienced as a result of educational policies that did not seem to take into account these educator/parents' funds of knowledge. The participants' voices illustrated time and again, ways in which they believed they were silenced, marginalized, or ignored; these incidents, in turn, contributed to feelings of frustration and disempowerment.

To illustrate the intersection of educator/parent knowledge and high-stakes educational policy, I present below an excerpt from a conversation I witnessed when three of the educator/parent participants joined me for a focus group discussion. Following completion of classroom observations and interviews

conducted with individual participants, I examined the interview data in detail. Common themes were revealed, and a focus group interview with all of the participants together to share their ideas seemed appropriate. The focus group discussion revolved around three interview questions centered on the common themes they each spoke about individually. More specifically, among the most commonly talked about topics were: 1) the challenges of implementing developmentally appropriate curriculum in relation to high-stakes standardized testing; 2) the tensions experienced surrounding school and district policy; and, 3) the challenges of navigating relational complexities within the current climate high-stakes standardized testing. I address here each of these issues as they were discussed together in the focus group interview, after they were first raised separately in individual interactions with the participants in their classrooms and schools.

The educator/parents, who had never met each other until this July day, elaborate upon each of these issues beginning with the challenges of teaching curricula that they believed were not developmentally appropriate for their students. More specifically, the educator/parents described a developmentally appropriate curriculum as one that: 1) would meet children where they are in their learning; and, 2) a curriculum that would support each child in attaining challenging and achievable goals that would contribute to his/her ongoing development and learning. However, they believed the current curricula they were teaching, regardless of grade level and subject areas, did not meet these criteria, and they elaborated upon that in the conversation below.



## Developmentally Appropriate Curriculum/Too Much Testing

**Jennifer Nelson:** *I've been going over the transcripts of our interviews, and there are some common themes that have emerged. Several of you, for example, have stated that, in many ways, the current curricula you are teaching are not 'developmentally appropriate for many children.' And that 'developmentally appropriate' is a word that is not being used very much when thinking about curriculum and children. I would love to hear you talk more about that.*

**Rebecca Roberts:** *I think I said that.*

**Meredith Michaels:** *Me, too.*

**Kara Roberts:** *I said that, too.*

**Rebecca Roberts:** *It's all about the test scores, and the test scores when they get into third grade. The reading test and the writing test...*

**Meredith Michaels:** *But, it's deeper than that because the things that are important on the test are not the things I think are important to learn. I don't think it's important for a third grader to know—to be able to distinguish—onamnapia from alliteration, or whatever.*

*I think it's important for a third grader to be reading Shel Silverstein poetry that's filled with onamnapia, or alliteration, or whatever. I don't think it's important that you label them.*

**Rebecca Roberts:** *In fourth grade, we started the year with subordinating conjunctions.*

**Kara Peterson:** *I think that's crazy.*

**Rebecca Roberts:** *And I was like let me Google that! (Lots of laughter) Cause, I mean, I had forgotten what they were! Not that it's not an important skill, but is that something that they're going to apply to their lives at this time?*

**Meredith Michaels:** *Right!*

**Kara Peterson:** *Or, is that going to make them a better writer?*

**Meredith Michaels:** *Right! You know, it's not that there's not value in teaching good grammar skills, and writing—but the things they're picking...they're picking them because they'll show up on the test.*

**Kara Peterson:** *And they're isolating them.*

**Meredith Michaels:** *And they'll show up on the test because they're easy to measure. But that doesn't say whether or not you can read a book all the way through...I mean that's one of the things I really fear that we're losing. Reading [according to the test] has to be in a passage 'this big', and it has to be followed by **five** (Rebecca chimes in **five**) different questions. And one of them has to be 'Author's Purpose', and one of them has to be 'Literary Device' ... instead of reading a **whole** book. Can a kid sit down and read a **whole** book?*

**Rebecca Roberts:** *Can they discuss the different purposes of the book?*

**Meredith Michaels:** *Right!*

**Rebecca Roberts:** *And what was your interpretation of it?*

**Meredith Michaels:** *Right! What did the character learn? Or, how would you have handled that situation?*

**Rebecca Roberts:** *Yes! Not, reading something that can be easily measured on a test.*

**Meredith Michaels:** *The kindergarten teacher across the hall from me came over and asked me if I had any stuff left over from when I was a seventh grade English teacher about how to teach prepositions. And I was like, why? And she replied, 'Because we're supposed to start working on that.'*

**Rebecca Roberts:** *Yes, they are—and they do!*

**Meredith Michaels:** *Kindergarten! Why?! Who decided that was something kindergartners needed to learn?*

**Rebecca Roberts:** *Well, I think that's what they've done. I think they believe if we ramp up the rigor, then that's what you're achieving. Then, you can compete!*

*And, **some** kids can do it at that age, at that level. But, should we try to make **everybody** do it at that level? I worry about the kids and what all this testing does to them over time. By the time they get into middle school or high school, I mean, are they even going to care?*

*Really, a lot of it doesn't even matter. And, we do teach to the test. And there's some phrase we're supposed to know...*

**Meredith Michaels:** *Teaching to the **text**.*

**Rebecca Roberts:** *Yes! It's just such a joke because we just teach to the test!*

**Kara Peterson:** *Let's have some standards, but let's have some flexibility. Let's take kids where they're at, not where someone else thinks they should be.*

(Focus Group Interview: July 26, 2014)

As their conversation evidences, the educator/parent participants were passionate about the lack of developmentally appropriate curriculum coupled with mandatory high-stakes standardized testing. This topic affected each of them in similar ways regardless of subject or grade level. They were in agreement concerning the content of the tests, stating that it was not developmentally appropriate nor relevant, and that it was isolated from what they identified as deeper learning that involved tasks important to students' current stage of development. These tests did not show how well their students demonstrated an in-depth understanding of a given subject—or the way students might construct and use knowledge. They agreed that testing was being given priority over meaningful learning such as reading a whole book in its entirety for purpose, meaning, character development, problem solving, and pleasure.

According to these educator/parents, reading has become reduced to something that meets a length/word requirement, and that can be measured according to five different test questions. They expressed difficulties supporting notions about how current curriculum guidelines seem to suggest that teaching children how to read a book for pleasure, may be pushed aside in place of something that can be measured on a standardized test.

As demonstrated by the educator/parent participants, teachers expressed how they felt pressured to prepare students to do well on high-stakes state-administered standardized tests. They feel they are required to teach to the tests—although they have been instructed to say they are teaching to the **text**. They are required to “cover the content” because the tests are seen as a measure of their teaching and their students’ learning. Furthermore, these experienced, knowledgeable teachers suggest ways in which the emphasis on high stakes testing has changed the way they teach.

According to the participants, the powers-that-be (policymakers, politicians, senior administrators) hold teachers accountable for teaching lessons that are often scripted, and not developmentally appropriate, with the intent of teaching to the high-stakes test. The educator/parent participants spoke about their frustrations of this unsound practice, which they believe, makes assumptions about their pedagogical competence and their ability to make their own professional decisions regarding teaching, learning and curriculum. Au’s (2012) work offers support of this perception among teachers, describing this understanding as reflecting a “system that encourages teachers’ submission

instead of engagement, and pedagogic alienation instead of responsibility and connection to what happens in classrooms” (p. 104). In these contexts, the educator/parent participants may have felt they were stripped of their authority and judgment, yet they were, nonetheless, held accountable for their students’ test scores. This contradiction left the participants in this study, feeling defeated, marginalized, and paralyzed within their area(s) of knowledge, content, and expertise.

It is obvious from these findings that, high-stakes standardized testing—where a single multiple-choice test administered out of the context of developmentally appropriate curriculum is often used to ascertain both students learning and teacher effectiveness—affects much more than the way student academic performance is assessed. Educator/parents described how they believed it also threatens to define the ways in which teachers teach. In a world enriched with difference, the hidden curriculum of much of this educational reform appears to be singularity, sameness, and compliance. In many ways this conclusion should not be surprising to educational researchers and teachers, since there has also been research (Armstrong, 2007; Au, 2007; Wohwend, 2009) that describes these systems of educational accountability centered around high-stakes, standardized tests as intended to increase control over what takes place in schools and classrooms.

### **Educational Policy Influences on Curricula**

As teachers negotiate high-stakes testing in educational environments, the

tests have the predominant effect of narrowing curricular content to those subjects included in the tests themselves. As a result, teachers often felt pushed to use more lecture-based, teacher-centered pedagogies. Au (2011) argues these practices contribute to the New Taylorism in teaching and learning “through the inherent decontextualization and commoditization that such testing requires” (p 38). Noted US education policy conservative Moe (2003) explains the rationale behind teaching in the New Taylorism when he states:

The movement for school accountability is essentially a movement for more effective top-down control of the schools. The idea is that, if public authorities want to promote student achievement, they need to adopt organized control mechanisms—tests, school report cards, rewards and sanctions, and the like—designed to get district officials, principals, teachers, and students to change their behavior...Virtually all organizations need to engage in top-down control because the people at the top have goals they want the people at the bottom to pursue, and something has to be done to bring about the desired behaviors. The public school system is just like other organizations in this respect. (p. 81)

The intentions of promoters of high-stakes, test-based educational reforms are thus apparent in the policy designs, which seem to be constructed to negate “asymmetries” (Wofsmann, 2003) between classroom practice and the policy of goals of those with political and bureaucratic power. However, uncovering the power relations beneath the conflict between high-stakes, test-based educational environments versus what is developmentally appropriate for children reveals how educators not only face marginalization within institutional systems, but “how they participate in reproducing the system as institutional subjects” (Wohlwend, 2009, p. 14). These demands on teachers put them in a tension-filled position

causing them to search for solutions (Erwin & Delair, 2004) within their control: “squeezing in time for play, getting permission to make curricular decisions in their classrooms, juggling the paperwork generated by the need to document their compliance, and generating a range of compromise strategies to find more time for developmentally appropriate practices” (p. 38). However, by recognizing these tensions and giving voice to them, teachers can begin to reclaim authority within their practice allowing them to affirm their professional knowledge.

Research and media reports (Adler, 2008; Hemphill, 2006; Henig, 2008) provide fresh evidence that conflicts over the relationship among play, work, and learning remain unresolved in the United States. In schools, legislation such as No Child Left Behind (U.S. Department of Education, 2002) recognizes discrete reading, math, and science skills, as measured by standardized tests, and establishes a particular knowledge and skill set as the official work of schoolchildren. Classroom teachers face unrelenting demands to produce “annual yearly progress” in testing scores under NCLB policies that continually challenge them to do more—or else face repercussions. The result is an increasingly standardized prepackaged academic curriculum.

...if experience with the federal Reading First initiative is prognostic [for Early Reading First], the administration may promote rigidly paced, curriculum-driven, scripted instruction that is not developmentally appropriate...Effective teaching cannot be delivered through a one-size-fits-all or scripted instructional program. Good teachers know well what each child knows and understands, and they use that knowledge to plan appropriate and varied learning opportunities that are embedded in contexts and activities that make sense to young children.

(Stipek, 2005, paragraph 14)

In this educational climate, early childhood education teachers, in particular, find themselves caught between “a rock and a hard place” (Goldstein, 1997, 2007), bound by dual obligations. Teachers are expected to be good colleagues and team players who contribute to achievement goals. Worried about the possibility of school failure, teachers accept pushed-down curricular goals so the kindergarten becomes pre-first grade, first grade becomes second grade, and so on up the grades. However, as Stipek (2005) notes, educators are also expected to nurture children, respond to individual developmental needs, and heed warnings about the dangers of hurrying children into formal schooling (Elkind, 1981). They highlight, for example, the importance of play as both necessary and appropriate for their students, in the face of increasing pressure to raise achievement scores.

The educator/parent participants each voiced how they find time for play during our interviews. The elementary school participants each shared with me how they believe recess is important for their students. Both Rebecca and Meredith’s elementary schools offer only two 15-minute recesses to students. During our focus group conversation, Meredith shared that students at her school had been rushing through lunch, or barely eating their lunches, so they could go outside and play. Consequently, teachers at her school convinced administrators to schedule the lunch recess before students eat so they could play first and then come inside and take their time to eat lunch. Rebecca shared how students at her school did the same thing—they hurried to eat lunch, or hardly ate any lunch



so they could rush outside and play. After listening to Meredith and learning how her school scheduled lunch recess first and then had students eat, she stated that she was going to share that idea with her administrators.

Unfortunately, middle school students are only allowed a brief 10 or 15-minute lunch recess as their only form of daily physical activity. So, middle school teachers must purposefully find ways to help their students refocus their attention after sitting for long periods of time. Gwen Franklin utilized exercise balls, in addition to regular classroom chairs, for students who needed extra movement. And, Kara and Gwen shared how they purposefully take “brain breaks” with their students on a daily basis. Kara explained that a brain break is a non-curricular one to five-minute physical activity that gets kids up and out of their chairs to get the blood flowing to increase oxygen to their brains, which helps them recharge and be ready to engage in learning.

Caught between two compelling educational demands, the teachers featured in this study struggled to reconcile what they believe children need and what their administrators expect, squeezing in time for play, or recess, or brain breaks in a school day crammed with increased workload and skill practice (Ohanian, 2002). They could be interpreted as having been put in a double bind, trying to satisfy contradictory expectations established by opposing discourses of good teacher practice: nurturing developmental needs, and opportunities for meaningful learning versus compliant work to satisfy the demands of the high-stakes testing environment.

## **Tensions Surrounding School District Policies**

Another area in which the educator/parent participants felt their voices were silenced pertained to some of the policies unique to their school district. I am reminded of Meredith Michaels narrative about her new fifth grade student, Tabark, from Iraq. There was no educational benefit to the child, her family, the teachers, the school, or the school district by having Tabark participate in the NeSA. To add injury to insult, her failing test scores were going to bring Capitol City School's overall NeSA's scores down which reflect on Meredith, the fifth grade teachers, the ELL population, and the school.

Meredith, a teacher with 26 years of teaching experience, understood all of these ramifications. As a result, her professional knowledge was disregarded causing her to be frustrated and angry about a policy that did not seem to have the best intentions for children in mind. In addition, she did not have a voice in the circumstance. She had to follow the District guidelines knowing that she was putting Tabark in what could be classified as a mis-educative (Dewey, 1938) situation.

Meredith's situation with Tabark was not the only example of how educator/parent knowledge was dismissed in this study. Kara Peterson also experienced unforeseen tensions when she bumped up against her school district's policy regarding kindergarten readiness.

Kara spoke about how disappointed she was in herself for questioning her personal, practical, parent knowledge of her child. As Addison's mother and

caregiver, her knowledge of Addison was privileged and unique. Given the particular nature of the connectedness within this caregiver-care receiver relationship (Pushor, 2015) there are elements to parent knowledge, aspects of it, which are held and used in intimate ways. Intimate because homes are very private places, often the only place in the world where individuals are their most authentic with one another. Given the caregiver-care receiver relationship, and the raw emotions experienced between parents and children—from the intensity of love and joy, to the power of anger and disappointment—Kara knew the intricate aspects of Addison’s identity in the making, and could see her potential and possibility due to this personal, practical, parental knowledge of her child.

Understanding the personal, practical, parent knowledge that Kara possessed, it is no wonder she was disappointed in herself for allowing a singular high-stakes test to cause her to doubt Addison’s readiness for kindergarten. However, this example evidences how high-stakes tests hold power over people—even people who believe “they should know better.” As a mother, Kara knew her child deeply in many different ways, including ways in which only a parent could. Concomitantly, as a teacher, she knew that high-stakes tests were not the defining elements of her students, their learning or her teaching. Yet, had she not sought alternative assessment measures for Addison, since she did not agree with the results of a singular high-stakes test, her entrance into kindergarten could have been delayed by a year. More importantly, this example portrays how educator/parents’ dual knowledge can be easily dismissed due to standardized educational policies that can be misleading and mis-educational.

The unforeseen tensions regarding educational policies coupled with the dismissal of their personal, practical and professional knowledge were not the only source of frustration for the participants in this study. The challenge of navigating relational complexities within the current climate high-stakes standardized testing was also a source of tension for Meredith, Gwen, Kara, and Rebecca. Particularly problematic was the ability to “see” (Ayers, 1993) one child at a time within an educational environment that the educator/parents perceived as promoting regulated, disconnected, and monolithic learning.

### **Challenges of Navigating Relational Complexities**

Seeing with potential in self, others, and learning situations is necessary as an educator and as a parent. This entails the ability to know what learning has happened in the past, what learning is taking place in the present, with the potential to envision future learning. Educators cannot guide learning without attending to what students bring to situations and how these relational complexities might intersect to promote learning. Educators cannot say that what a student brings is not enough; nor too unfamiliar to work with; nor what he/she might or might not prefer. The place an educator/parent must begin is with what each student brings—“what is given” (Macintye Latta, 2013). Furthermore, what each student brings, what is given in teaching and learning situations, ought to be seen as a gift. Just as parents can see the different gifts and talents each of their children possess, so must educators see the different gifts and talents their students possess. However, as storied in the educator/parent narratives, it is often challenging to see the gifts of our students when it feels that the focus of

education has been removed from decision-making based on observation and careful assessment of individual students' ability and replaced with the outcomes of the high-stakes tests.

Like the educator/parent participants in this research study, I am concerned about the consequences of high-stakes standardized testing policies and how they impact teaching, learning, and the building of relationships between students and curriculum. The educator/parent participants and I have witnessed what happens when schools consistently do not meet their Annual Yearly Progress (AYP) goals. In 2009, one of the elementary schools in our school district did not meet their AYP goals for three consecutive years. As a result, the building principal was removed from that school and re-assigned to another elementary school. The pressures to meet the high-stakes testing outcomes are real, and even though our school district is highly regarded, I do not want to downplay these pressures.

Nevertheless, by honoring their personal, practical and professional knowledge in various learning situations, the educator/parent participants took risks within their schools and classrooms. Each of educator/parent participants in this research study used her personal, practical and professional knowledge to circumvent the prescribed, uniform, and often developmentally inappropriate, content area curricula. Furthermore, through their creativity and persistence, they found meaningful ways to connect curriculum to their students' lives. For example, Gwen Franklin's 'Make a Difference' Project helped her students not only learn how to research a topic, but allowed them to become passionately

involved in taking on a cause, raising awareness about it, and persuading others to donate money to that cause. Meredith Michaels took her ELL curriculum beyond her classroom walls and into her students' community. She used her knowledge to help educate her students' families about American culture, norms, and practices. She educated her students beyond that of learning English and navigating their communities. She provided opportunities for them that they would not have otherwise experienced, like attending summer enrichment programs/camps, had she not been their classroom teacher. Kara Peterson considered her sixth grade daughter when she led the planning of her school district's sixth grade social studies curriculum. As she mapped the curriculum and designed the corresponding learning activities she asked herself, "Would Hannah like doing this activity? Is it developmentally appropriate for a sixth grader? How could I make it more relevant, or meaningful, for her?" She used those questions as a barometer in her curricular development and design. If she believed her daughter would enjoy learning about the social studies curricular objectives and participating in the accompanying activities, then she anticipated that many other sixth graders would as well. Rebecca Roberts took her parent knowledge and combined it with her personal, practical professional knowledge on a daily basis as she purposefully tried to see her 23 students for "**everything** they are," not just how they performed in school on various tasks. Using that knowledge of her students, she then tried to connect curricula to them on a meaningful level—even if that meant discarding the scripted "lesson treatments" her district math supervisor expected her to use. Rebecca inherently understood that teaching to

a script does not naturally allow for differences, a genuine inquiry into what is worth knowing, or the creation of adapting, changing, and building meaning together.

Below is a snippet of a conversation my educator/parent participants had during our focus interview. In the conversation, they are speaking to how the high-stakes standardized test scores have been given too much importance. In addition, they recognize how the emphasis on the student's high-stakes test scores often overshadows their gifts and talents—which is so much more important than a test score.

**Meredith Michaels:** *Did any of you see on Facebook the teacher who sent home the letter with the student's test scores?*

**Rebecca Roberts:** *Yes! It was like a disclaimer!*

**Meredith Michaels:** *Right! 'This test score represents only tiny bit of who you are...it doesn't let the world know what a wonderful artist you are, or how awesome you are at dance, or how helpful you are'...And I thought that ought to go home with **every single thing!***

**Rebecca Roberts:** *Because that's where I think, as a parent, you love all those little things about your kid. You might remember, once in a while, a time when he rocked a test. But, for the most part, it's those things that you get a lot of joy out of. The silly things they do, or when they create something and you think, 'Wow! That's awesome!' But education has just lost that—*

**Kara Peterson:** *That personal touch?*

**Rebecca Roberts:** *Yes.*

(Focus Group Interview: July 26, 2014)

To better illustrate the context of the above conversation, I have included

a copy of the letter to which they referred. I learned the following letter was sent to students at Barrowford Primary School in Lancashire, England, and was signed by head teachers Rachel Tomlinson and Amy Birkett. According to Rebecca Klein (2014), the letter was likely inspired by a principal at an unnamed school in the United States that sent out a similar letter in 2013. However, the British version is the one that went viral in July 2014. It is also the letter my educator/parent participants referred to in our focus group interview.

Please find enclosed your end of KS2 test results. We are very proud of you as you demonstrated huge amounts of commitment and tried your very best during this tricky week.

However, we are concerned that these tests do not always assess all of what it is that make each of you special and unique. The people who create these tests and score them do not know each of you--the way your teachers do, the way I hope to, and certainly not the way your families do.

They do not know that many of you speak two languages. They do not know that you can play a musical instrument or that you can dance or paint a picture. They do not know that your friends count on you to be there for them, or that your laughter can brighten the dreariest day.

They do not know that you write poetry or songs, play or participate in sports, wonder about the future, or that sometimes you take care of your little brother or sister after school.

They do not know that you have travelled to a really neat place, or that you know how to tell a great story, or that you really love spending time with special family members and friends.

They do not know that you can be trustworthy, kind or thoughtful, and that you try, every day, to be your very best...the scores you get will tell you something, but they will not tell you everything.

So enjoy your results and be very proud of these, but



remember there are many ways of being smart.

There are many ways of being intelligent. Shouldn't that be obvious to our students? Sadly, this often seems to be overlooked in our current educational climate where test scores are often seen as proxies for intelligence. The statement Meredith made about such a letter being included in everything that is sent home with students speaks to how dysfunctional our educational system has become as a result of the high-stakes testing environment that currently permeates our school landscapes. The above letter serves as a wonderful reminder that there are different ways of being smart; however, we should communicate that daily to our students. They deserve nothing less.

### **Reflections on Teacher Conversations**

As I reflect back on that day when I met my participants to conduct the focus group conversation, I realized the extent of which there are not many opportunities for teachers to talk, which in turn contributes to missed opportunities to draw upon an important body of knowledge that could inform education in practical, and powerful, ways. For example, after our focus group meeting, I learned that Rebecca talked to her building administration about changing Autumn Hill's lunch recess procedure. She shared how Meredith's school, Capital City Elementary, implemented lunch recess before having students eat lunch. After discussion among administration and teachers, this practice was then implemented at Rebecca's building, on a temporary basis. This practice has proven successful (and is no longer temporary, but permanent) in

allowing students to have some time for play, while allowing them the necessary time to eat their entire lunch without rushing, or avoiding eating altogether. Furthermore, Autumn Hill teachers and parents have shared with me that they love having recess before lunch because children have time to play and time to eat. This may not seem like a highly significant change in school procedure; however, it was a change that affected each and every student at Autumn Hill Elementary. And, it was a change that was facilitated by the three educator/parents coming together in conversation on a summer day in July to share their knowledge, ideas, and insights about education.

This simple, yet effective, shared idea caused me to ponder the potential of generative conversations, such as the focus group conversations from this study, pertaining to issues in education of importance to the teachers involved. As an educator/parent myself, I know that I would welcome the opportunity to talk with other teachers about practice, theory, curricula, formative and summative assessment, educational policy, and other issues pertaining to education. Teachers have a rich, extensive body of knowledge concerning all aspects of education from which we could benefit. These opportunities for conversation among educators, however, are rare and sporadic.

This focus group interview offered my participants an opportunity to interact with one another and to share their teacher knowledge with other educator/parents. The participants seemed to relish this opportunity, thus further highlighting for me the potential to build and to grow the body of teacher knowledge through opportunities to share professional knowledge. Equally rare

are opportunities for us to learn from each other “in action,” in other words, opportunities for us to observe each other in teaching and learning situations. Teaching can be an isolating experience due to how schools and classrooms are organized, but opportunities to observe colleagues work with their students helps to alleviate this isolation. Unfortunately, there are not opportunities built into the school day for teachers to converse about their practice, nor observe each other in action. I cannot help but wonder what is being lost by not providing such opportunities for educators.

### **Defining Moments**

Each of the educator/parent participants in this study experienced moments that pulled them in different directions as teachers and/or as parents. These tension-filled moments were the ones that involved decisions and actions that affected their identity construction as an educator/parent, and revealed the crux of what it is to be an educator/parent simultaneously. For example, Rebecca acquiesced to the results of her son’s IQ testing and did not pursue a gifted label for him since she did not want to create tensions in her relationships with her son’s teachers who were also her colleagues at work. Her decision left her with lingering doubts that she continued to question years later. Meredith provided another example of this complicated dual role being enacted when she complied with her school district’s policy and had Tabark, a newly arrived ELL student with little to no fluency in English, participate in the NeSA exams. Although I happened to be at her school during this incident and witnessed how upsetting it

was for her, she continued to harbor feelings of discontent months later when she talked about it during our focus group discussion.

Similarly, Kara's experience with her daughter's fourth grade teacher, who did not provide differentiated math instruction for Hannah, demonstrated another example of such tensions. Kara know that she could have chosen to follow-up with Ms. R about Hannah's continued boredom with the math curriculum, or spoken to the building principal about her concerns. Understanding that teachers sometimes project feelings of anger they have toward parents onto the child, Kara decided to resist pursuing additional actions; nonetheless, tensions lingered, and Kara characterized the time as a "wasted year" for her daughter, Hannah. Gwen's experience with a scripted, lack-luster language arts curriculum, on the other hand, prompted her to create the "Make a Difference" Project as a way of engaging students. As an educator/parent, she originally envisioned a language arts curriculum that would engage her own child and used this stance as a starting point for establishing a unique project-based curriculum that engaged all students by allowing them to have a voice and a choice in their research project.

Each of the educator/parent decisions during these critical incidents offered a glimpse of the tensions they experience at the intersections of their educator and parent identity at that given moment in time and revealed how their lives were affected by their decisions and actions. These concrete examples demonstrate how the dual roles of being both a parent and a teacher intersect and provide new insights with some of the tensions and responsibilities

educator/parents experience. These narratives, in turn, reveal complexities into how teacher identity and teacher knowledge may be shaped by experiences within the classroom and beyond.

The educator/parent participants in this study have demonstrated there is much to be gained from listening to their various stories of experience. Each of the participant's personal, practical, and professional knowledge was enlarged from their dual roles of being an educator and a parent, and they used that dual knowledge upon the school landscape when working with their students. At various times, they asked themselves, "How would I want this situation handled if it were my child?" That singular question guided each of them as they navigated the complexities of teaching, learning, self and other within their classrooms. Additionally, that dual knowledge helped each of them to "see" their students as more than successful or unsuccessful learners of a curriculum. Using their dual knowledge allowed them additional insight into the complicated and ongoing process of seeing difference, gifts, and potential in others' children. And, is that not what every parent would want for their child?

## CONCLUDING THOUGHTS

What the best and wisest parent wants for his own child, that must the community want for all of its children. Any other ideal for our schools is narrow and unlovely; acted upon, it destroys our democracy (Dewey, 1943/1990, p.7).

This quotation by John Dewey from *The School and Society* speaks to me about what I know about teaching and learning through multiple lenses—as a parent, as a teacher, and as an educational researcher. As a parent, I understand teaching and learning as it relates to my children. I am their first teacher, and everything I do with them centers around this caring relationship—from teaching them right from wrong, to keeping them safe, to learning social skills, and how to think for themselves. Ultimately, I am guiding them toward helping them discover their true sense of self, who they are meant to be. As a sixth grade teacher, I understand teaching and learning as it relates to my students. I create opportunities for them to learn math and science, while at the same time, taking into consideration who they are as unique individuals—as identities in the making, more than simply learners in my classroom. As an educational researcher, I continually re-evaluate my teaching and learning—understanding that by being in inquiry, I can learn and grow with the goal of contributing to the research field, as well as improving my practice.

I began this narrative inquiry study with wonderings about what it is like to be an educator/parent negotiating relational complexities upon the school landscape. Because I had been a classroom teacher for twelve years before

becoming a parent, I had certain ideas about teaching, learning, curriculum, assessment, students, and families. I had an insider's knowledge of school and considered myself a bit of an expert on how school was done. However, once I became a parent and my own children entered school, I found myself in a tension-filled space feeling like an outsider upon their school landscape. I wondered where, and how, I fit into my children's story of school? I wondered how—or if—there was an opportunity to for me to share my parent knowledge of my children with their teachers? Would my parent voice be welcome—or listened to—in their educational journey? I also wondered if there were other educator/parents who experienced tensions as they bumped up against their own children's educational journeys? And, after becoming a parent did they experience teaching, learning, curriculum, self and other (curriculum, students, context) differently?

In this dissertation, I examined four educator/parent lived stories across time, situation, and experience. Educators who are also parents have a unique position within education. They have a personal, practical, professional knowledge of schools—and a personal, practical knowledge of their children. It is the personalized stories that often bring silenced voices to the forefront. Thus, I utilized narrative inquiry as a means for the participants to reveal the tensions and complexities they experienced negotiating the dual roles of being both a parent and a teacher upon the school landscape. In the process of juxtaposing these parent stories of teaching and learning with their own child(ren) alongside

their teacher stories of teaching and learning with their students, various curricular practices and educational policies were called into question.

The educator/parent narratives featured here revealed common themes of tension concerning: 1) challenges of implementing developmentally appropriate curriculum in relation to high-stakes standardized testing; 2) tensions experienced surrounding school and district policy; and, 3) challenges of navigating relational complexities within the current climate high-stakes standardized testing. Permeating throughout these educator/parent narratives were examples of the tensions my participants experienced as a result of educational policies that they did not believe take into account these educator/parents' funds of knowledge. Furthermore, I explored the tensions that unfolded as these educator parents sought to establish a place for themselves on their children's school landscape. I explored the conflict of their lived experiences as both parents, and teachers, as they questioned their personal role in their children's education, as well as their professional role to their students.

### **Being Pulled Up Short**

The educator/parents featured in this study, Meredith, Gwen, Kara, Rebecca, (and myself) experienced feelings of tension, confusion, silencing and limitations as our narratives unfolded. The expectations/assumptions we had regarding the relational complexities embedded within curriculum, teaching, and learning, combined with a high-stakes testing environment influenced by various educational policies, caused feelings of frustration as our dual educator/parent



knowledge was challenged, dismissed, or ignored. This narrative inquiry has brought the educator/parent participant's voices to the forefront, and it seems fitting for their voices to be included this final section of my dissertation.

This excerpt reveals the last words spoken as the focus group interview came to a close after almost an hour-and-a-half of non-stop, provocative conversation.

**Rebecca Roberts:** At the end of the day, I truly love my job. I do! It may not have sounded like that at times today...It's just that it's people who aren't teachers are making the important educational decisions—and that is what makes it **so** frustrating.

**Kara Peterson:** And, at the end of the day, aren't you just too tired to fight?

**Meredith Michaels:** And how do you fight?

**Kara Peterson:** Without stepping on toes, or getting into trouble?

(Focus Group Interview: July 26, 2014)

The final snippet of conversation and accompanying questions from these participants reflect their frustration of how their educator/parent's dual knowledge felt overlooked and dismissed in the big picture of education. How would this professional community look if educators were permitted to make "the important educational decisions" pertaining to curriculum, assessment, and educational policy? How might these decisions be different if we recognized the knowledge of these educators, who might also be drawing upon their knowledge as parents, to inform these decisions? How might some of these professional tensions be

resolved if we attended to these teaching and learning, curriculum, policy and relational complexities on our school landscapes?

As I reflect on these educator/parent participant voices and how our dual knowledge was overlooked, dismissed, or ignored, I am reminded of how we had all been “pulled up short” (Kerdeman, 2003) at various times either within our own classrooms or upon our children’s school landscapes. Kerdeman (2003) unpacks it as the “proclivity for self-questioning and doubt” (p. 294), which all of us experienced at various times with our students and with our own children.

Kerdeman elaborates further upon this unexpected tension:

While the difference between the world and us can be experienced when unforeseen happiness comes our way, more significant disclosures of difference occur whenever our assumptions, expectations, and desires fail to materialize, are thwarted, or reversed. Such disappointments of expectation Gadamer calls ‘being pulled up short’ (Gadamer, 1993, p. 268 as cited in Kerdeman).

Being pulled up short caused us to question various aspects of education such as age-appropriate curricula, high-stakes standardized testing and questionable educational policies. It seems that policymakers believe they are supporting teachers by implementing the various policies that teachers are expected to uphold and implement. In theory, many of the policies seem like they may be in the best interests of students, teachers, and school districts. However, when examined in further detail, the teachers’ perception is that policymakers do not know about the complexities of student lives in school (and beyond) in the

way that teachers know their students. Nor do policymakers know children the way that parents know their children. And, since many of the policies pertaining to curriculum and testing do not seem to take into account the complexities at the heart of teaching and learning, teachers believed that abiding by these policies was not in the best interest of some of the students with whom they work on a daily basis; in fact, some of these policies might even be described as being harmful to children, teachers, and schools.

Teachers have knowledge of their students, and parents have knowledge of their children. Yet, as the educator/parent participant's narratives highlight, their knowledge of their students and their children that is informed by this dual role seemed to be unwelcome, even thwarted at times while their personal, practical, and professional judgment seemed questioned more often than it was invited.

Being pulled up short contributed to the participants in this study, including myself, to seek alternative solutions to problems we encountered as teachers and as parents. At times we were uncertain about how to proceed—not wanting to perpetuate mis-educative situations, but knowing we were obligated to follow mandates. Not wanting to step on our professional colleagues' toes, yet at the same time, wanting to advocate for our children's unique learning situations.

Being pulled up short contributed to us questioning whether or not our curricula were developmentally appropriate in a perceived high-stakes standardized testing climate. We understood that teachers/schools are under

scrutiny when it comes to students' performance and achievement outcomes. However, we also understood that teachers/schools have a choice in how we choose to proceed in teaching/learning situations. As Noddings (2003) states, "The student is infinitely more important than the subject matter," (p. 176). In other words, there is a moral and ethical responsibility to attend to the development of each individual child's well-being in relation to the curriculum.

According to Kerdeman (2003) there is no way to know when one is going to be pulled up short. Such occurrences "interrupt our lives and challenge our self-understanding in ways that are painful but transforming" (p. 294). Being pulled up short challenged educator/parents' personal, practical, and professional knowledge by causing us to question our personal role in our children's education, as well as our professional role to our students. In addition, being pulled up short may be viewed as transformational in how we approach new narratives in the future with our children, as well as our students and their families. Being pulled up short motivated us to question and rethink how teachers/schools (including ourselves) could interact with children and parents on the school landscape. How might we offer opportunities for parental engagement where parents' knowledge of their children is sought after and welcomed? How might we facilitate learning opportunities centered on the development of the whole child and discover meaningful ways to connect curriculum to students' lives?

### **Tensions, Silencing, and Lived Consequences**

Unique to this research was the emphasis on the educator/parent's voices. In listening to their multidimensional narratives, I realized that in many instances they believed that their parent voices, as well as their educator voices, were marginalized, silenced and/or ignored. As a narrative inquirer, as well as someone who has experienced similar silencing upon the school landscape, I wanted to illuminate these voices as a way of interrupting this existing story of school. The educator/parents featured in this study have rich experiences and deep funds of knowledge from which to draw upon. Listening to their stories offered us insight into their unique perspective of education. More specifically, being both a parent and an educator has enlarged their understanding of themselves, their children, their students, and their curricula. At the same time, knowledge in this dual role contributed to tensions within the areas of relational complexities embedded within curriculum, teaching, and learning, coupled with a high-stakes testing environment influenced by various educational policies. These unresolved tensions were a source of frustration, anger, and angst for each of the research participants

The educator/parents in this narrative inquiry experienced tensions as they endeavored to find a balance between their educator role and their parent role. The educator/parents had an insider's knowledge of their school district's curriculum, assessments, and policies. This knowledge, while rich and nuanced, also represented a source of frustration when they perceived their own children being treated marginally in school situations. Kara spoke about the frustration of her daughter not receiving differentiated instruction in math when her education

plan included confirmation that it was appropriate to her academic skills; Rebecca spoke about not receiving additional/alternative support in the process of having her son identified for gifted identification procedures although others with comparable skills might receive them; Rebecca also spoke about not being able to have the reassurance of participation in Code Red safety drills when they were being practiced in school; Meredith spoke about her daughter's frustration of being told to remain in a particular place in a seating chart when another place would have been more appropriate or socially desirable; and, Kara referred to tensions of not receiving options for additional/alternative assessments to measure for kindergarten readiness when her child was believed to have been ready.

In these kinds of situations, the educator/parents featured in this study believed that others in a comparable situation would advocate for their children. They sometimes found themselves in a double bind if they chose to advocate for their own children in those situations. More specifically, they were concerned about being perceived as a "pushy" parent, or "one-of-those" parents, or a "know-it-all" teacher/parent when faced with the perceived possibility of having their own child suffer repercussion for their advocacy. If they chose to be silent, then they questioned themselves wondering if they had done right on behalf of their child, which often left them with lingering doubts. This dual educator/parent knowledge inherently involved tensions that may not have been revealed without the participants' narratives.

As teachers in their own classrooms, the educator/parents in this study

also experienced tensions as they attempted to advocate on behalf of their students in the areas of relational complexities, curriculum, and assessment. Each of the participants found themselves asking, “How would I want this situation handled if it were my child?” This question became a barometer for guiding their decision-making in circumstances when handling delicate matters between/among children, creating curricula, determining how to communicate with parents, and responding to students’ inquiries regarding assessments and grade reports.

In addition, the participants believed that because they were also parents themselves, they deeply appreciated the out-of-school lives of their students, and recognized the importance of seeing their students as more than their academic selves. Each of the participants spoke about the curricula they were required to teach in order to prepare students for the high-stakes tests, as fragmented, limiting, and not developmentally appropriate for their students. Furthermore, they elaborated upon how the perceived high-stakes testing climate resulted in outcomes that were either pass or fail instead of documenting growth and learning. Such a climate did not adequately take into account student differences, individual progress, or an appreciation for “what was given,” (Macintyre-Latta, 2013) or what each student brought to various learning situations/contexts.

The educator/parents featured in this study recognized the importance of their moral and ethical responsibilities to their students, and elaborated upon why they were uneasy about teaching curricula they believed were not developmentally appropriate. More specifically, Meredith was upset about Tabark

taking the full battery of NeSA exams upon her arrival at a new school because she believed strongly that participating in this testing was not academically, or ethically, appropriate for a newly-arrived ELL student. Kara created a website for her students and their families to inform them of assignments and additional resources. She believed strongly in the importance of daily communication with her math students' parents/families about objectives and examination dates. Gwen's strong belief in the importance of engagement in the language arts curriculum lead her to the development of her unique and relevant learning experience for her sixth graders, the 'Make a Difference' Project. Rebecca was committed to developing alternative math lessons and curriculum for her students since she was not comfortable using the scripted lesson treatments in her math teaching. Attempting to reconcile developmentally inappropriate curricula, with educational policies that did not take into account individual differences, created additional tensions for each of my research participants because they knew they could not consistently uphold their moral and ethical responsibilities with their professional responsibility to their students. Instead, they sought ways in which they could fulfill their professional responsibilities while taking into consideration the knowledge they had of their students. Knowledge gained from their experiences of learning about them from daily interactions and observations of them within various places upon the school landscape.

As I documented earlier, there is a growing body of research on parent/family engagement in their children's schooling (Pushor & Murphy, 2004; Pushor 2007, 2015; Marsh & Turner-Vorbeck, 2010). These studies focus on



such topics as parent marginalization within schools, parent knowledge, and reinventing home-school relations. But, other than narratives of personal experience (Ayers, 1993; Block, 2001; Pushor, 2001) in which the authors share their children's stories of school, there is not as much literature on educators who are also parents.

This research study contributes to the field by providing a glimpse into educator/parent knowledge upon school landscapes to inform our understanding of teacher knowledge. By studying and giving voice to educator/parent stories to live by (Connelly & Clandinin, 1999) I highlighted examples of how educator/parent knowledge is comprised of many different influences including funds of knowledge (Gonzalez, Moll & Amanti, 2005) as personal, practical, professional, and craft. Each of these funds of knowledge is a reflection of the educator/parent's past experience, while in her present mind and body, and in her future plans and actions (Connelly & Clandinin, 1988). In teaching and learning situations these funds of knowledge were utilized as educator/parents engaged in the particulars of their worlds with children. The funds of knowledge that the educators/parents possessed were multifaceted, interconnected, and complex. Recognition of the value and importance of the unique qualities of educator/parent narratives highlights their potential to inform our understanding of the complex body of knowledge held by teachers. Drawing from the experiences of educators who are also parents enhances our understanding of the complexities of this educator/parent knowledge and identity that have been previously unexamined in the research literature.

As documented in this study, when one is an educator and a parent, both roles intersected at school, at home, and all the in-between places creating tensions and complexities. Navigating these dual roles within a school landscape where educational policies were made and enacted challenged these participants' funds of knowledge as they sought to establish relationships between teaching, learning, self, and other. Time and again, the educator/parents' professional judgment was questioned, ignored, or dismissed making it difficult for them to do what was in the best interests of their students, and/or their own children. The educator/parents in this study continue to live on uneasy school landscapes, where they feel their pedagogical competence is undermined, and their voice and agency is often thwarted in this high stakes-testing, policy driven climate. It is my hope that by living, telling, and reliving, and retelling their stories, the educator/parent participants have provided us a way to acknowledge and validate the educational potential and possibilities inherent in their reflective and relational narratives.

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## Appendix A

### Potential Questions for Educator/Parent Participants

#### Teaching and Learning through Multiple Lenses: Educator/Parent Narratives of Experience

Interviews will be semi-structured to allow for generative conversations, avoiding imposition and allowing participants to share their motivation, ideas, and rationale for engaging in the inquiry. In addition, I will be asking educator/parents for descriptions of critical stories or incidents that portray the significances they describe as important to their teaching/learning lives, their students' lives as well as their children's lives. I will use echoing and probing questions to delve into the qualities inherent to these incidents.

When I speak of critical stories/incidents of importance, I'm specifically referring to incidents in which the educator/parents recall events that supported and fostered learning with their students--or deterred learning progress. Additionally, critical incidents that happened to their own child(ren) that supported and fostered learning, or deterred learning will be explored. Educator/parents will be asked to talk about the consequences for their students, child(ren) and themselves. Topics raised by educator/parents that are not directly related to experiences educator/parents see and hear in their child at home, and that the parent perceives as fostering or deterring their child's learning, will be responded to by redirecting the parent to contact the teacher and/or school and/or school district office directly.

Below are samples of the questions that will be asked in the 3 interviews:

#### Theme 1: Teaching Philosophy & Beliefs about Teaching (with a few Parent Questions)

1. How did you decide to become a teacher? How long have you been a teacher? What subjects/grades have you taught (do you teach)?
2. What kinds of influences/experiences have shaped your teaching?
3. I know you're also a parent. In what ways has being a parent shaped your teaching?
4. Some researchers talk about being more aware of a situation, environment, or experience as being "*wakeful*" to it. Do you think that being a parent has allowed you to be more wakeful in your teaching? If so, how?
5. How has being more wakeful impacted/affected your teaching practice?
6. Conversely, has being a teacher made you more wakeful as a parent? If so, how?
7. How do you think your teaching practices have changed after being a parent?

8. What have you learned about yourself as a teacher after becoming a parent?
9. Have there been things that transfer from being a parent to a teacher and vice versa? I heard you use the word(s) "\_\_\_\_\_". Tell me more about that.
10. What kinds of hopes do you have for your students' education? What kinds of experiences / knowledge do you want your students to have?
11. What kinds of hopes do your students' parents have for their education? How are these hopes similar? How are they different? Do these similarities and/or differences matter? Why?
12. Are there some critical incidents that have highlighted challenges you have experienced as a teacher in working with differences within your classroom?

**Theme 2: The role of parent as a shaping influence into an educator's professional development/growth & Students in the curricular environment**

1. Tell me about your children. (i.e., names, ages, grade in school, interests/hobbies/talents)
2. Tell me how your children are different from one another?
3. Can you talk a little bit about how you think your children's differences shape their schooling/learning differently?
4. How is school going for your child this year? Have there been any surprises?
5. How do you recognize differences in your students?
6. How do you think today's academic climate supports or hinders differences in students? (differences in ability, interests, talents...)
7. How do you negotiate the external parameters of prescribed curricula, standardized testing and achievement agendas while remaining cognizant of individual students interests, strengths and talents?
8. Do you think it's possible that these external parameters separate kids into educational proficient groups and educational deficient groups? If so, how?
9. Do see these groups as limiting? If so, how?
10. In what ways do you build relationships with your students? With their parents?
11. Do you talk to your student's parents differently after becoming a parent yourself? If so, how?

12. What have you learned about yourself as a teacher after becoming a parent?
13. What have you learned about yourself as a parent via your own children? I heard you use the word(s) "\_\_\_\_\_". Tell me more about that.

### **Theme 3: Beyond the Classroom: Examining the Big Picture of Curriculum**

1. As a parent, I have noticed that various aspects of public schooling are dehumanizing to children. For example, report cards. The information I receive about my child on the report card is generic and limiting. It does not provide a true picture of my child as a learner. After becoming a parent, have you observed other aspects of schooling that are dehumanizing to children? If so, can you tell me about them?
2. When conversing with teachers, what do you hear that lets you know a teacher knows or understands your child? Have there been times/instances when you felt like a teacher didn't know or understand your child? Can you tell me more about that?
3. What have you learned about your child after talking with your child's teachers? Were there aspects that were surprising to you? If so, how?
4. What have you learned about your child's school experiences from your child? I heard you use the word(s) "\_\_\_\_\_". Tell me more about that.
5. Can you talk about some of the highlights of your child's schooling experience thus far? What are some of the disappointments of your child's schooling thus far?
6. What does your child say about the curriculum/specific subjects? Playground? Activities? Schedule? Length of the day? Does he/she wish he/she had more time for certain activities, or wish they did more of \_\_\_\_? Field trips? How about the structure and organization of the school system?
7. What do your students say about the curriculum/specific subjects? Playground? Activities? Schedule? Length of the day? Does he/she wish he/she had more time for certain activities, or wish they did more of \_\_\_\_? Field trips? How about the structure and organization of the school system?
8. Describe a critical story or incident in your child's schooling experience? How has this story/incident been important to you and your child's life?
9. Describe a critical story or incident in your students' schooling experience? How has this story/incident been important to you and your professional life?
10. What are the hopes you have for your child's education?



11. What are the hopes your child's teacher has for his/her education? How are these hopes similar? How are they different? Do these similarities and/or differences matter? Why?

12. Can you think of ways in which teachers can make schooling experiences more humanizing for ALL children?

A spiral questioning technique will facilitate the process of returning to questions at follow-up interviews to ascertain changing perspectives.

## **Appendix B**

### **Focus Group Interview Questions**

- 1) How has being a parent enlarged your vision of teaching and learning?
- 2) I've been going over transcripts, and there have been some themes that have emerged. Several of you have stated that, in many ways, the current curricula you are teaching are not "developmentally appropriate for many children." And "developmentally appropriate" is a word that is not being used very much when thinking about curriculum and children. I would love to hear you talk more about that.
- 3) All of you talked about the current climate of the high stakes testing, and how it is: 1) impeding meaningful learning, 2) stifling creativity, and 3) prohibiting others from seeing the whole child. Tell me more about that.