

DIALOGUES OF A TEACHER:

A Concept of Teacher as Researcher

BY

ZOË PHYLLIS THOMPSON

A Thesis

**Submitted to the Faculty of Graduate Studies
in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements
for the degree of**

MASTER OF EDUCATION

**Department of Educational Administration and Foundations
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ABSTRACT

In this thesis, the author, a middle school teacher, uses her writings over a five year period to explore herself as a learner. In particular, she examines her practice within her growing understanding of the concept of teacher as researcher by using stories from the classroom. The author also looks at how writing helps her make meaning of the experience allowing her to see new patterns and new meanings with the expressed goal of improving the quality of education for students. Through reflection, beliefs and values are uncovered. This is a self-conscious effort to ground the norms of her practice. This thesis is a "recommendation by demonstration" for educating as inquiry as an important research methodology.

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PROLOGUE

A New Image of Schooling

I stood outside the classroom surveying the chaotic aftermath of a fairly typical school day. All was silent . I glanced out the window and saw, rather than heard, the trees being tossed by a warm spring wind. I felt the sun on my shoulder. "What is going on? What am I trying to accomplish here ?" I asked.

I woke up in the late 80's. It became of great interest to me to find out how the notion of teacher as researcher (Stenhouse, 1975) could enable me to systematically study my own practice so that practice would become meaningful. Was this key to how I could make sense out of daily life in the classroom?

The stories that follow have shown me a method and a manner for the reconstruction of my development as a teacher so that I could uncover my beliefs and values that are a part of my philosophy of teaching. The notion of teacher as researcher has allowed me to become a student of my own practices and beliefs. Inquiry and reform are now intrinsic to my teaching and to my learning about teaching. What I think is valuable about the work of Cochran-Smith and Lytle (1993) is the visibility it gives to teacher work in

classrooms, teacher understandings, and mine that evolve from making a connection to such experience. "[T]eacher research makes visible the way that teachers and student [and parent] co-construct knowledge and curriculum..." (Cochran-Smith & Lytle, 1993, xiv).

Standing there in the window's warmth, looking back at the 'mess' in the classroom with its accompanying frustrations, I resolved to do something. Things were a mess, literally and metaphorical. How could I make things better?

Somehow this question related to the purposes of teaching and how best those purposes are to be carried out. I read a piece by Peter S. Hlebowitsh (1990) that alerted me to the purposes of teaching. Possibly, the part missing for me was a systematic way in which to develop a "...reflective consideration of the moral and pedagogical implications of teaching" (p.155). I set out to fully explore the following two questions. How does one go about 'being a teacher' ? What are the implications of this new knowledge?

This story is more than a description of what I do. It is an attempt to articulate what it means for me to teach as I am being informed by the experience I am describing. This synthesis is an attempt to articulate what it is I am

teaching, why, and how it could be done better, to clarify for myself my theory of praxis-oriented research. What I think I now know is that my practice has improved, is better, because of the examination I have carried through. I am more wide-awake, conscious (Greene, 1978). When I stood in the warmth of the classroom window surveying the chaos of the school day and questioned my presence there, I knew that things had to get "better" or I would leave teaching. What I now think is that "better" practice for one group of students might not necessarily be the same for a different group of students at a different time. "Better" is not a place or destination; what I now think is that it means constant refinement of practice. My understanding of teaching has changed because of the understanding I have developed of the methodology and philosophy of the concept teacher as researcher. I have developed a new image of schooling nested with the concepts of caring, collaboration, and community from stories from my classroom.

The narrative as a research methodology is consonant with my experience. My experience is that narrative holds a significant place in my family life and in school language. Like an observer of trees and not the forest, I choose to embrace the significance of this story in organizing my experience of teacher as researcher and use it as a base upon which to learn (Robertson, in Chorny, 1988, p. 57). Narrative also attempts to explain the experience

with the many voices needed to construct that knowledge from experience. I am referring to teacher knowledge as what I have learned as a teacher in this story as it unfolds; an uncovering of my beliefs and values and also a greater understanding of some technical aspects of teaching. Gadamer (1976, cited in Fleischer, 1994, pp. 105-106) refers to the dialogical nature of understanding and with his notion of "fusion of horizons", implies meaning is created by mediation and interpretation. Meaning is socially constructed; understanding becomes an event arrived at by all of those present, students, teacher, parents, colleagues, other researchers. My learning has become visible for me from this context.

Writing, reflecting, talking to others "...has emerged from the dialectic of [my] experiences as both [practitioner] and [researcher] and from [my] unwillingness to privilege one role over the other" (Cochran-Smith, Lytle, 1993). Both reflection in and on action (Schön, 1983) does not develop in isolation. Classroom research is a methodology and a philosophy that helps classroom teachers develop observation skills and a critical spirit and is a collaborative process that does much to break the isolation Lortie (1975) identifies. When Lortie writes "... the ablest people in the occupation are not expected to add to the shared knowledge of the group. There is, in short, no tradition ... " (p.241) ... I gasp, and know this

need not be. In addition to a community of inquiry with other adults, a learning community is fostered in the classroom with students gaining increasing confidence in themselves as producers of knowledge.

What I mean by a critical spirit is bound to the notion of educating as inquiry. Greene's (1978) wide-awakeness, Schön's (1987) "[e]verything is practicum (p.16), Dewey's (1938) "community group" (p.65), Noddings (1984) "special relatedness of caring" (p.173), Coulter's (1994) "dialogism", John Mayher's (1990) "uncommon sense", Newman's (1991) "questions about teaching these insights raise" (p. 318) are notions that have stimulated my thinking in such a way that my work as a teacher has become more coherent for me. I have learned to systematically examine my practice to uncover "defensible practical principles" (Smyth, 1992, p. 298). The inquiry stance has led me to confront frustrations and difficulties of the complexity of teaching, Levin and Young's (1994) "habits of experience" (p. 261), analytically and critically. It is a stance that invigorates.

The constraints and tensions in the process are here as a part of these stories; the greatest is habit of mind. There is a sense here of teacher as powerful, yes, but not as all-powerful. Empowerment is enabled within and because of a connectedness to others and the learning from and along

with, others. It is my intent to show that the stories and the context in which they are nested challenge old habits and experience.

Learning can be enabled. There is a climate, a culture, a system of supports, both technical and intellectual. There is a conscious effort to connect values and beliefs with actions to enrich the learning opportunities of all schoolpeople. I use the metaphor community to put some order into the messiness of teaching. I find myself in a particular context in a new school division. As I look back, I am challenged to wonder whether I would be where I know I am now with my thinking, had I not had the intellectual supports from this particular school division. What I do know is that I started to teach differently. This led to an unpacking of notions related to pedagogy, curriculum, assessment, and the moral dimensions of teaching. The stories will show how I came to know this.

"Do we get Math now?" is the type of often-asked student question that makes me smile and drives me wild. Makes me smile because I sometimes reply with "What would you like to get now?" when I probably mean, "What would you like to get now?" And drives me wild because my primary goal is to make them independent and this seems to be such a dependent question. Generally, students have learned they are at school to be recipients of knowledge and they may not

accept any responsibility for their own learning. John Mayher (1990) illustrates the metaphors of "empty vessel", "sponge", and "maze runner" to show how this idea of being transmitted to is part of a 'common' vocabulary about teaching.

Perhaps it was a "problem of elsewhereeness, [something that has made] it easy ... for teachers to leave deliberate learning behind, to become dispensers of learning rather than its practitioners" (Boomer, in Goswami & Stillman, 1987, p. 4). I suspect teachers and parents have usually thought much the same. What exactly is a practitioner of learning? What does that look like?

On that question, Dewey (1931) makes me radical. I become relentless to pursue the meaning of those words. When Dewey describes intelligence as a 'habit of mind', I begin to believe that I can use my intelligence, my learning, to achieve "... freedom from control by routine, prejudice, dogma, unexamined tradition ... " and that this action can become the "will to inquire, to examine, to discriminate, to draw conclusions on the basis of evidence after taking pains to gather all the available evidence" (Dewey, 1931, in Webb & Sherman, 1989, p. 25).

I am inspired and emancipated by Dewey's (1930) words on experience and thinking. I experienced a freedom to

explore educational ideas. Along the way I learned about constraints too, but at the time, on this matter, Dewey gives hope to dispell alienation. Now I can choose to leave behind the arbitrariness of the isolation of action and consequences, so that " ... [t]heir isolation, and consequently their purely arbitrary going together, is cancelled; a unified developing situation takes its place" (p.171).

A new image of schooling

To me, Stenhouse's beliefs are rooted in the key concept of personal professional development, that through theory and reflective practice I can gain control of that practice and become a practitioner of learning:

...the concept focuses our attention on the notion of research as an activity which is educative and developmental for the individual teacher-researcher, as well as (or even rather than) informative for the world at large (Cameron-Jones, 1983, p. 4).

This suggests an alternative way to think about personal, professional development. In an important way, the teacher as researcher experience has allowed me to become a student of my own profession, a way to learn about learning and to practice that, and has stimulated me to rethink teaching/learning. It has also meant that the

learner cannot give up all responsibility for learning, as kids do when they say, "What do we get now?" This helps to reconceive my own understanding and therefore to teach differently.

This new image of schooling looks like and feels like a community. There is collaboration. There is continuity with the notion of professional development being on-going. There is communication, dialogue, connections being made for me with ideas, and above all - critique. I am reminded of Dewey's idea of individual and social intelligence (Dewey, in Webb & Sherman, p. 26). Within the teacher research group that was formed because of initiatives in the division, there was community. We had separate and interconnected projects, but we met for a common purpose - to discuss teacher work. We joined because we were committed to investigating practice. We were given time, a place to meet, financial and technical support, and recognition by the School Board for work that was valued. We were trusted that the decisions we made and that the projects we were interested in were somehow crucial to our own professional and personal development.

Learning for me as a teacher, as well as for students, and indeed the parents in the educational community, is more than just the accumulation of facts; it is reflection and also thinking and acting on that reflective process. The

action part is so important because it is in the doing that circumstances change. It is important for me now to be more systematic and orderly and to respect inquiry as inherent in all that I do. As a teacher, I make hundreds of decisions a day. Making a conscious effort to connect judgment with the decisions and choices I make is an aspect of this reflective process. This is Schön's (1983) contention about the reflective practitioner, reflecting in- and on- action.

I have always been a reflective practitioner in the sense that I evaluate and question my work as it unfolds. Learning how to put these reflections into productive practice becomes what the term "teacher research" or "action research" now means to me. It is also a method and manner (Fenstermacher, 1992). This was my classroom work that I would examine through a reflective process "for the express purpose of improving the quality of educational life in that classroom" (Hopkins, 1985, p.25), or in other words, I was learning to view my work in the classroom as "...autonomous professional self development through systematic self study, through the study of the work of other teachers and through the testing of ideas by classroom research procedures" (Stenhouse, 1975, p. 144).

The improvement of teaching is a process of development. I mean by this: first, that it is not to be achieved by a

change of heart but by the thoughtful refinement of professional skill ...(p. 13).

Community

This process approach to the improvement of practice evolved partially through meeting regularly with a group of teacher researchers to talk about our work. We met monthly, talked about frustrations and progress, even published some writing, and spoke to the Board of Trustees. I experienced emancipation and collaboration; teacher work and teacher's perspective was valued! This fascinated me and committed me to the development of teacher knowledge and understanding in a way I had never thought of before.

Community is the metaphor I will use to describe how my thinking was influenced. These communities of learning are part of a spiral of events but I will describe experiences with each as separate and then attempt to interweave them by explicating the issues that bind them. Three community influences have been my activities with two formal teacher as researcher groups, membership in a community of inquirers at the University, and less formal but equally rewarding collaborative relationships with colleagues in my school. Describing these encounters is a way of helping me define myself in terms of the community efforts and outcomes. I made a conscious effort during this time period

to connect what it was I was doing within these teacher groups to my development toward improving the quality of educational life in the classroom. Now you might think this is a great leap; however, it was not. I wanted to connect action with beliefs and I had to undergo educational work in these communities in order to understand better what it was that I believed.

There is a strong emphasis here on the process of reflection in the systematic study of one's own teaching. Reflection on practice and the action taken to improve that practice is central. The reflective process comes in many forms.

Reflection for me came in the form of writing, during and after class or meetings; reflection also took the form of teacher talk with other teachers. Teacher talk about an issue also became a mirror for thought. I learned that only through reflection could structures of practice be transformed. It was as if it was a way to see what I had thought. When I talked about what I was trying to accomplish, the teacher talk that followed was often helpful as it provided a mirror but it was also energizing in that once I had talked about what I was doing, I had more courage and motivation to act upon it. The group provided an accountability and a responsibility. The transformation or

change, including the reflective action, hopefully in favour of improvement, is one outcome.

Written reflections can be found in my journals, field notes, etc. Reflection often goes on during conversation when, during the talk, the ideas become clearer. In head or on paper, reflections often follow dialogue and even newer ideas are created. Reflection accompanies reading as well.

Teacher work is viable. It can take many forms. Think of the metaphor of planting of seeds. Is a thesis, an inquiry poised, living, developing, germinating? People in the educational communities whose ideas have ignited my own are people who have planted many seeds and ideas -- some grew and some did not. These many good ideas are common property in the community group and I have taken a few special ideas, planted them, and cared for them myself. Planting and caring for is part of the image of my classroom research as I look back on it. Reflecting in writing and conversation has allowed me to work with ideas -- those of others and my own. For some ideas I have had to dig deep to be able to make them clearer to myself and for others.

I think Stenhouse (1975), Hopkins (1985), Barth (1991), Sizer (1984,1992), Mayher (1990), Dewey (1930, 1938, 1963), Newman (1991,1993), Coulter (1989,1994), have gone planting educational ideas and invited others along. They

have offered the metaphor of educating as inquiry, transaction as opposed to transmission, no prescriptions of course, and the image of "community" is an important part of this understanding.

Hopkins (1987) is also very clear about an inquiry framework in which to theorize, reflect, to understand the classroom experience, and "to create meaning out of that understanding" (p. 112). Kemmis and McTaggart (1988) propose how action research in the classroom can be planned and carried out. Such framework is at all times however, subject to the teacher's interpretation. The central question for me being, what am I trying to do, to change, and what is involved in changing it? In this view, I am to be cast as "... the developer not in the role of the creator or man [woman] with a mission, but in that of the investigator" (Stenhouse, 1975, p. 125).

I feel very much an investigator and also a "facilitator" (Rogers, 1969). In Webb and Sherman (1989), Rogers is described as a person "not interested in teaching anybody anything but is rather concerned with helping individuals learn what they want to know" (p.23). These efforts are facilitated by individual and group efforts.

And so I find myself within a viable community. The community of learners metaphor suggests a conscious effort

made by all learners to be actively involved in the making of meaning, in the communication of goals and accomplishments. The teacher research group I was a part of provided this opportunity. It was up to us as individuals and as a group to provide the richest and most fertile opportunity to learn from and with each other.

Caring

Stenhouse made the connection between teacher development and curriculum development. In this reading I found an ethic of respect in the development of self as a teacher and the relationships to those being taught. It is this point in the communication of ideas that interests me. Some seeds have started to grow for me. In addition to looking at my "activity" in the classroom differently, (I was beginning to talk about "my work"), I started to make some connections between the notion of curriculum and the whys and hows of decisions I was making for kids. The notion of caring involves words like trust, respect, freedom to explore ideas, expectations to reflect, synthesis, think through carefully, and articulate what has been learned. Caring also means a trust in and respect for where the other learner, a student, another colleague, is coming from. What is going on in the lives of my students creates for them their ways of knowing and they bring that to the

relationship that we develop in the classroom. Caring means a respect for relationships and an acknowledgement of the importance of relationships in the learning process in the classroom.

Curriculum takes on a different meaning - something separate but connected to what is in the student or teacher text books. Stenhouse makes a distinction between the intended curriculum as a guide with images, the what and how, and the actual curriculum or what actually goes on between teachers and students, which is the context. The what and how are my decisions. The context is how the what and how play out in the course of the teaching-learning relationship for each student and myself. Students are expected to respond, reflect, and be conscious of their own learning for, in that, their "activity" becomes conscious learning for them. Curriculum becomes the creation of individual meaning within a context. In defining the curriculum problem Stenhouse emphasizes,

The gap between aspiration and practice is a real and frustrating one... [which] can be closed only by adopting a research development approach to one's own teaching, whether alone or in a group of co-operating teachers (1975, p.3).

Curriculum development rested on my development as a teacher where I could put "ideas into classroom practicalities" (p.25) and strengthen my practice systematically and thoughtfully by testing ideas. I was trying to involve students in this way of thinking about "their work" too. It seems that our development as learners in the classroom depended on this understanding. It was important for me that students had an opportunity to be encouraged to become wide-awake, to be free to see choices.

Stenhouse was committed to the 'emancipation' of students and teachers in the Humanities Curriculum Project. There was a movement away from the teacher-dominated classroom to teacher as facilitator. The term "teacher as researcher" was intended to liberate the teacher as well from hierarchical bureaucratic control to encourage initiative and to have teachers take increased responsibility for work that they do. This shift from a hierarchical notion to a notion of equality was one I was making and experiencing. In my view, he believes in the idea of teacher's research into her own teaching situation and is concerned with the development of a sensitive, self-critical, subjective perspective (pp. 157-158). As part of this teacher research "community" I felt a sense of equality. We teachers were in conversation monthly with the assistant superintendent, who in the "hierarchy" was the one who showed the utmost respect, as does Stenhouse, for

teacher work. The school Board of Trustees was also acting as if this was a partnership. They had committed funds to the group.

Collaboration

I had often felt alone and struggling with teaching ideas and sometimes found it hard to be taken seriously when I wanted to talk about aspects of practice I felt were problematic. There is a sense of caring, but no tradition of acting. The problem was, how to make reflective action fruitful? In his book, Dan Lortie (1975) describes teaching as an isolated profession in which an outstanding career can exist "without being thought to have made a single contribution to the knowledge of teaching in general; the ablest people are not expected to add to the knowledge of the group" (p.241). This was not only depressing for me, but made me think about all those other teachers who were also needing to communicate with other teachers. How rare and wonderful to have time to talk about teacher work when not in a rush over lunch or on hall duty with its interruptions!

In his writing, Garth Boomer (1987) also speaks of this alienation. Boomer speaks of "big R Research" as opposed to "action research" which he sees as something

keeping theory and practice as separate entities; but, as ideas germinate, as something that need not always be so. He writes: "Three tiers of education have progressively alienated many teachers from their own craft, the craft of teaching and learning" (p.6)

I was beginning to be active and conscious about what I was learning in this process and how that learning could inform my practice, help me to make systematic alterations, in order to 'improve', at least from my perspective, what it was I thought I was trying to accomplish.

Boomer continues: " It is as if the medium in and through which they work is invisible to them and therefore inaccessible to theorizing"(p.6).

I was beginning to see the classroom picture as if it were a photograph in which I was able to step in and out. To become a part of the learning when stepping inside the frame, and an observer of the activity as I stepped out.

He continues to say: "The established acts of education have become taken for granted" (p.6).

There was much about teaching that I was simply accepting and not challenging. Why had I continued for years to struggle with those things that were niggling at me

without a way to work with them productively? Then I was not challenging notions.

And also in the same paragraph : "Such teachers tend also to have been alienated from their own heads, having been so constantly challenged in their schooling to accommodate other people's heads" (p.6).

It is depressing and scary to think that all we do as teachers is to teach what we have been taught in the way we have been taught, especially if that has been a style that does not challenge. As a preservice teacher I had been depressed by the joke 'Those who can do, those who can't teach'. How dare anyone 'joke' about the profession I held in such high regard. It was a long time before I heard the educational leader in my community say, "those who can, do; those who understand, teach".

"They are, therefore, chronically prone to teach alienation" (p. 6).

I was no longer alone.

But let me go back.

CHAPTER ONE

The Classroom as A Community

It is first thing after lunch. I am reading a novel to this class. I've chosen it because Nathan has asked me to. He came in the other day, excited, his face lit up, full of words, although he rarely talks, clearly excited about the story.

"Mrs. Thompson, you have to read this book to the class."

"Why ?" I asked him.

"Because it is just like us," he replied.

So I'm standing here reading to this sixth grade class that's driving me crazy. As I begin, they settle down, in a very uncharacteristic way. That surprises me. Anna, usually unable to stay still for a minute, is sitting with her chin in her hands, her eyes fixed firmly on me, attentive and quiet. David, the high strung, argumentative, logical lawyer, is lounging silently, but watchful at his table. There's Mark, fidgeting, tapping his feet, fiddling nervously with a pencil, but he is the only one of the lot and I am simply amazed.

This class is usually so rambunctious, constantly arguing with each other and with me. I can't seem to get anything going that doesn't erupt into controversy. And here they are. Engaged. Focussed on the story.

I'm at my wits end. I marvel at their rapt attention for they have taught me that I am sitting on a powder keg, on the edge of a volcano and any minute now things are going to erupt in a squabble, yet another classic battle of wills. I feel like the cobra being mesmerized and mesmerizing the audience. What is going on here? To further compound my tension, I see the principal looking into the opening of this open area classroom. He stands quietly for a few minutes and I am not sure whether he is listening to the story, is in a trance due to shock over the quiet and control he sees, or if he genuinely wants my attention. I panic, and keeping the panic out of my voice is no small task, because I don't want to break the spell. I continue to read and the children continue to listen.

This is not the first battle of wills. My first year as a teacher was a battle with unruly, bright, challenging kids who were eager to question, to argue, to squabble, to struggle with who they were. And they were all in motion, in front of my face, all day long, with no chance for me to come up for air to give one thought about who I was and what I was trying to accomplish there. The tremendous struggle

with books and lesson plans, equipment, classroom supplies, not to mention challenges from other teachers who thought I wasn't "doing it right" was almost more than I could bear. I was surprised by some tremendously supportive parents of the brightest students who seemed to understand more than other teachers did. They did a lot of smiling and nodding and sighing.

What really took the cake that first year was a year-end comment, naturally, from a more experienced teacher who said, "Well, we will all be glad to see the ass end of that class." I stared. She lounged with her cigarette, an arm loosely flung over her chair back, like some grey-haired Joan Crawford.

"What?" I said, my incredulous jaw hanging.

"Oh, yeah! That class is the worst class to come through this school. We have all had them and can't wait for them to be gone."

SHE knew. THEY knew. The entire time. And at no time did they lend support. There was lots of criticism, yes, lots of what I wasn't doing right. But no one, not one of those experienced teachers had stopped to say, "Here, this is what works for me."

I was ready to quit. It wasn't the kids, although they were difficult enough. It was the other adults who showed me that I was on my own, sink or swim.

The next year, things were better. I had overheard the odd comment that my work was "improving". I was sharing a classroom with another new teacher again that year. Sharing meant that when I was with the class, he was teaching elsewhere. Someone said the term "team teaching" but that was a quizzical remark. One day, the principal requested a meeting with me and my teaching partner. We were told that the classroom "was less messy". Did he mean that what was happening for me as a teacher must be coming more coherent for me because it was for him, or did he mean that the kids were putting away their things now?

I looked at my partner and wondered how we had accomplished a tidier room. I wasn't consciously aware that that was one of things we were trying to accomplish. As a matter of fact, I was struck by the fact that we seldom discussed anything. The principal also commented that I took criticism well and that I learned from advice. I guess that was how to "improve". I learned to survive on such crumbs.

Things didn't really get better. My next class was an equally unruly bunch at a new school and the battle started all over again. Then there was Greg.

He was explosive. I was constantly on edge wondering when he would hurl the next object, in whose back he would land the next punch, and what new combination of obscenities he would gush out. He was tall, muscular, and had pale blue eyes that cut through me. What made him hate so much?

I was coming into the school for my afternoon class with him and was taking a short cut through the back hall that led to the gym. I noticed the quiet as I opened the door to the dark gym with only the dim stage lights glowing. I started through. The stage door, partially hidden by the stage curtains, burst open, slammed against the wall. A tall, lanky figure rushed onto the stage. He stopped still at the edge.

"Fuck You!" he wailed, head thrown to the roof, face half-lit by the soft lights, his body twisted in agony.

I froze.

Just as quickly as he had burst onto stage, he wheeled and he left silently. The door shut with a swish and whisper. Yes, it was Greg.

I came unstuck. My body moved me forward. I entered the bustle and light of the central portion of the school filled with colours and bodies and talk and laughter. He was nowhere to be seen.

My mind was whirling as I propelled myself forward to the staffroom. What had I witnessed? What was going on for him? Something was happening I had no idea about. I didn't know what his life was like. I didn't know the community, nor the parents very well. Whatever was happening in the classroom between Greg and me, this battle was larger than both of us.

What was I going to do?

* * *

I met Joanne seven years ago. Then she was an educational consultant from the Department of Education and now she is retired, probably without the knowledge that she changed how I think about my work forever.

I listened to every word she spoke to our Language Arts Study Group about kids and how it was possible to organize for learning for and with them. I heard her talk about a notion of examining our work as teachers and how we could learn from that examination. I heard her describing

deliberate, purposeful actions of well-informed teachers. I accepted the invitation to talk to her more over the summer. My work began to take on a different look and feel.

August, 1990 With modelling and practice, results should be more cooperative behaviour -- student will show she has learned skills. There is a problem here. Johnson model -- too complicated? Too many steps? Are all roles necessary? Re-read Johnson and Johnson and re-think model -- develop my own?

Another problem: What exactly is cooperative learning? Learning more facts and retaining them longer? the social process? the product? What do I concern myself with? -- see if process gets the product? Is the product higher marks?

September 9, 1990 Students select their own seating arrangements this morning. Groups of three. Students seem content with this new look. Groups of three sit side by side. Not much oracy. Is it because of changing the furniture around?

Students reluctant to speak freely. We are working on a writing piece and the kids are asked to interview each other but have difficulty. I offered interview questions to get things rolling. Groups a bit stiff in their reactions. What is making this so hard? Shouldn't this be fun?

I want to seal these interviews in separate envelopes as letters to be re-opened next June by each student. It will be a looking back on the way it was.

September 13, 1990 New classroom tables for centre activities. Groups in four, in pairs, face each other. Face to face works better. More talk. I've decided to try homogeneous groups, opposite of what the book says. Difficult to cooperate/ cannot make the banner together. Arguing. Loud. I don't think this groups of kids likes each other very much. Too much homogeneity?

October 2, 1990 Will togetherness at camp solve this problem of getting along with some harmony?

Groups are resisting this quad arrangement of furniture. Feuds going on. Is it the homogeneity?

October 5, 1990 Talked to Linda, the principal, after school about my frustrations with cooperative learning and the kids. Not too coherent. Her comments about cooperative learning are encouraging. Just having someone to talk to helps me to find enthusiasm again. I heard her say something about different models. She'll observe a class.

Joanne talked about keeping my own reflective journal about my school day. This is a glimpse of the first. I told my students what Donald Graves had told me about not knowing what he had thought until he had looked at what he had written. The huge difference was that now I was experiencing that for myself.

So began the first few months of my first research project that was to change my understanding of what it means to be a teacher.

With cooperative learning theory I was beginning to learn about goal structures, clearly described tasks, and outcomes. I was beginning to learn with action research methods that there was a way to organize my thinking so that I could see the classroom picture, and not just feel the emotional turbulence. The mirror reflection was becoming refracted. Hamilton (1973, cited in Stenhouse, 1975) speaks of this 'refraction' as opposed to transmission: "... the relationship between a teacher and

taught is best understood as a refracting rather than as a transmitting medium" ... "different individuals learn different things from the same event" (p. 154). I had a sense of the complexity of the matters ahead. I wondered if I would find a coherent concept?

Somewhere, I had read that according to cooperative learning theory skilful group members are made, not born. It was becoming clearer to me that skilful teachers are made, not born. Experiencing what is important, however, takes time. I would learn patience.

Becoming Reflective and Watching Kids

I wanted to know if students trained in cooperative learning with demonstration, instruction, modelling and guided practice, with opportunities for practice in specific contexts with appropriate teaching skills (listening, sharing information and ideas,) would stay on task, encourage others to participate, reflect on group process? Would they demonstrate by some type of product (oral, written, cooperative presentation) an understanding of the process of group work by meeting some specific criteria? The criteria needed to focus on behaviour such as courtesy, polite interaction, respect, attentive listening.

I didn't know that important parts of the problem would be the thinking through of social-emotional factors that would help the cognitive, or what teaching strategies would be used to help the students develop skills such as brainstorming , prioritizing, categorizing, note-taking, etc. I did know however, that my fact-finding techniques would include observation, interviews, some surveys, and audio and video tapes of classroom activities. I started.

When collecting and analyzing what I had, I hoped to do some networking with other teachers. Then I would be ready to present my conclusions and recommendations about how to proceed the next time I attempted to look at my practice. The complexity of the task at hand was overwhelming.

This is an excellent example of what Kieran Egan (1990) means when he says we have no coherent concept of practice. There may appear to be a logical relation of parts in this problematic aspect of practice that I have described above; however it was the experience of teacher as researcher that allowed this logical and orderly relation of words to evolve into a cohesion of parts that permitted comprehension.

I did a literature search to learn about cooperative learning. I started with Circles of Learning (1986) by

Johnson, Johnson, and Holubec as well as Group Processes in The Classroom by Richard A. and Patricia A. Schmuck. I read every recent article from *Educational Leadership* and *Cooperative Learning - The magazine for Cooperation in Education*. I attended after school workshops conducted by people well-trained by David and Roger Johnson, from Minneapolis, and by the similar work of Kagan (1990), now working in California. These workshops were especially interesting since they were made up of teachers who came from such different backgrounds, yet we were all together, interested in the same topic.

I was active in the workshops where we talked about our classes. My class that year was busy and bubbly. A fascinating group of individuals; similar to the chaotic group from the previous year in the sense that there was a lack of harmony and the feeling of not getting along. Friendships and alliances were always changing and there was an unusual amount of squabbling. How was I going to foster a togetherness, a family feeling, a "community"? I also wanted to engage them in academic concerns (higher marks) but I didn't think I could do that until there was some cooperation within the classroom.

The workshopping was a "stuff it in" kind of problem approach. We were stuffing our back packs. I was learning "stuff" but when it came to employing what came out

of the back pack, making meaning with these facts in the classroom, I began to really struggle. I think this is what Boomer (1987) means when he says that minor "stuff" can be told, transmitted; what is of major significance needs to be experienced, to be acted upon so that one understands it well and does it effectively (p.12). I needed to chew and digest the backpack stuff.

That's the point of it all. Why didn't I see? I spent a lot of time gathering facts and information but had absolutely no idea of how I was going to use that information. What good is going to workshops and learning "stuff" if it can't be made useful in the classroom? Also, what I didn't see at the time was that in order for me to be able to teach cooperative learning theory better, I had to understand it well myself. Oh, I thought I understood it. I had an armload of handouts, diagrams and notes, did I not? I was starting to "tinker" (Huberman, 1992) spontaneously to test a few things, was I not? Not. The frustrations were many. Until I started to grapple with my own learning I was still "transmitting" and not transacting.

The educational research surrounding cooperative learning theory was very positive (Johnson, Johnson & Holubec, 1986; Slavin, Dec.89-Jan.90; Maeroff, 1990; Kagan, 1990; Sapon-Shevin & Schniedewind, Dec.89-Jan.90). But what exactly did it all mean? What exactly was cooperative

learning theory? I was still struggling. Could I recreate the astonishing claims that had been made in the literature for my own students? I abandoned the books for a while.

I started questioning other teachers around me and found much material already in use in other classrooms. This amazed me. When I asked, teachers were happy to share resources and stories of their own experiences. This also amazed me. I was surprised and comforted by learning that other teachers were working with the same "problem". Comforted because I liked the feeling of being connected to what we were all doing.

This was an atmosphere of sharing. We shared teaching materials and the experiences that go with such materials. I was new in the school, didn't know teachers very well, and it gave me a common ground for talk. I enjoyed experimenting along with colleagues. One teacher talk helped me reach a better understanding of the theory behind cooperative learning because we shared moments in practice. Working collaboratively gave me support and encouragement. Maybe this same experience would be important for kids? I think this is what Huberman was saying about the state of the art of teaching. What works is collegial activities and similar goals. It is not that simple, but I was making a start.

Back to the books again. The detail about classroom structures in David and Roger Johnson's work is comprehensive. The theory suggested that children would perform like clockwork if they were properly trained with these structures. Everything was laid out step by step. I perceived from this recipe-like book that elements of positive interdependence, face-to-face interaction, individual accountability, interpersonal and small group skills, and procedures for processing at the end of the lesson, were simple. It was simply a matter of cause and effect, was it not? If I did this and the students did that, then this would happen. Wouldn't it?

I genuinely started to tinker in the classroom. I had books, notes, colour-coded charts. I explained to the class a whole lot about what working co-operatively could look like. I made a chart explaining the roles students could take when trying to work together to complete some work. The chart consisted of what the role looked like and what the role sounded like. We modelled what the 'recorder' and 'materials person' did and said, and the facial expressions that the 'encourager' could use. We also made a list of words that people who were the 'encourager' could say. I tried to give the kids the global idea of what this manner of working together looked and sounded like. I kept the charts on the walls through out the year for easy referral. Kids needed reminders and so did I.

I assigned roles to each of the four people in the groups of four, assigned a task, and observed the interactions that followed. At the time, I believed the task was not as important as the practice with the roles. I am not sure this was clear for the students. It was the task that they seemed to need to see as important. Getting involved intrigued them. They liked the puzzle and mystery. I observed that they were quite unconscious of the new roles they were supposed to be playing. They were involved with the puzzle because the puzzle, not the new role, was the 'work'.

The learning of the cooperative manner in which to work did not appear to be their goal yet. The roles they were enacting were quite new to them and they needed practice. I told the kids that some might feel a little phoney in the new 'role' to be played, but that that was okay. I assured them that soon, when they were more comfortable with their role in the group, this cooperative way to behave would seem more natural. We needed to do a lot of practicing, I said.

I observed an interesting thing as the kids were 'acting' out their roles assigned. Amy was assigned the role of 'encourager' and could not say the words out loud that would encourage others to work. Even though she had taken part in the talk and recording on the chart of what encouragement sounded like, she could not say the words to

the other kids in the group. Although she had in front of her the written visual aid, she was frozen. I could see a blankness in her eyes. She looked terrified. I teased and struggled with examples of words she could say and finally got her to say "All right!"

This was the same student who was lost at the Hallowe'en party when it came time to play party games with other kids. Amy simply did not know what to do socially. As encourager, she did not know what to say. Was this a fear of something new? (I could relate to that!) Did she not have the vocabulary? Were the words not inside her? Had she had no model in her mind about encouragement? Had anyone encouraged Amy as she was learning to do new things? I began to think of her sense of self-worth and wondered where the esteem words fit in her life. If they were in her life, what could I do to enable her to speak them? If they weren't in her life, then what? Was it possible that everyone in the class needed to hear these words more frequently and practice them more?

I decided what the class needed was a model. I was certainly more attuned to practicing out loud all the self-esteem words I could. Could I be a model? With practice, I *would become* more comfortable saying these things without making them feel as if I was insincere. I tried something new.

During a late night television show I was fascinated by the comedy skit about "daily affirmations". On the late-late show, these comments were a bit saucy, but the idea was a great one. The next day I wrote out small cards , one for each child, with a short positive message. I wrote words such as "I'm glad you are here", "You are wonderful", "I noticed how you helped with Martha's reading yesterday", "I'm glad you are in my class", "Keep up the good work" , "That's the first time I've had anyone think of those helpful ideas in class discussion. Thank You". I wanted to personalize the cards, yet planned to reuse them. My intention was to shuffle the "deck" and each morning, place a card on each desk; intending simply to add to their cheerful morning opening exercises!

I tried the cards the next day. I watched the kids' reaction when they discovered the cards on their desks. Some were pleased. Some were sceptical. I had intended to collect the cards, reshuffle the deck, and do the same routine the next morning. No such luck. The kids kept the cards! That night I made a new set and once again distributed them. The kids came in to class, noticed the cards again, picked them up, shared them hesitantly, giggled and kept the cards again! I felt it was though I wasn't in the picture; at those moments I was out, looking in. I chose not to step in. I never had the heart to tell them I wanted the cards back. They loved the daily

affirmations that they were wonderful and cared for and trusted. Their feelings of self-worth needed all the support they could get. The next and last set of cards for that week had their names on them. And yes, they kept them.

Another teacher and I were sharing some talk about encouraging a cooperative attitude and very early in our investigations, she said the one thing that struck her was this: "Self esteem is everything". The cards had proved it.

I thought of the good-looking tough kid, Brian, who had to win the game with the chocolate candy kisses as the prize. He had to win. He had to win more candies than his partner. He boldly articulated why. He said if he did not win, he would "lose face".

In Brian's world the important thing to do to gain favour was to be the strongest. So I guess when the game was designed around an arm wrestle, there was only one pattern of behaviour that would work for him. Games were competition, and competition meant that there was only one winner. Important learning for me was Brian's openness and understanding of competition and losing face. This was a self-esteem issue with him.

It gave me a clue about this kid's toughness. He was the tough guy on the play ground, the leader in the games. The other boys appeared genuinely to like him as I observed that he was a fair person but not averse to backing up his decisions with a threat if needed. The other boys usually did not challenge his leadership but at times a girl would. The boys tended to treat such challenges for control by the girls in a chauvinistic manner even though in this particular case, Brian knew Julie packed a big punch. What probably complicated the challenge for the girls was this chauvinism at a time of puberty. This was probably no ordinary muscle-flexing. Brian was a rebel and some of the girls were noticing.

I saw Brian from a different point of view. I also knew he was the most gifted writer of stories and poetry in the classroom. He was a sensitive and inspired writer. He was intelligent when intelligence was not the standard of excellence in his social group. In this way, the confusion I was feeling about his 'street' behaviour was beginning to clear up .

It is the talking with students and observing them during these learning activities that is so intriguing and informative. Watching kids took on a new meaning. I felt I knew that student 'better'. Not surprisingly, as this parallels the value I place on teacher talk time. Talking

about real things in common changes relationships in an important way. Such encounters certainly informed future practice.

Things get messy

I was anxious to try some more complex cooperative activities in the classroom and collected some lesson plans used by other teachers that 'worked'. The next thing I did was to rearrange the furniture for face-to-face interaction of students. This was one of the rules. Students need to be looking at each other as they talk and negotiate the task. There was a big problem of getting the students to listen to me when they were arranged to face each other. So much for switching the locus of control and not being clear! Much later I learned to use the furniture differently. However, these physical arrangements continued to plague me because the furniture and the shape of the open area space was not conducive to this kind of interaction. It was not only the difficulties with teaching the strategies of cooperative learning to the kids, but the difficulties with the physical set-up of the room that was causing me concern now. Putting kids face to face is not easy in some settings and does not automatically guarantee that there will be any interaction whether productive or positive. There is more than just being face to face; what if they hated each other ?

We tried a task in groups of four. There was something magic about four. Students were asked to create a design, banner, or logo that incorporated something from everyone in the group. This class of students had been in the same grouping, with very few people changes, from their beginning school days in this building. This was their fifth year together as more or less one group. I was surprised that small groups could not agree on a few ideas to finish a task.

There wasn't a lot of progress to complete the banner. They didn't seem to need to look for me for clarification of directions. What was happening? Was it the phase of the moon? Was it the directions? Were they sleepy? But then, I saw things start to bubble.

There was a lot of talk in the groups. Some looked quite emotional. Some were bossy with their ideas, some were angry because they didn't feel listened to. Some were silent. And a few were already skilfully capable of working co-operatively towards designing the artwork. I observed things other than the incomplete assignment.

This was a very complex thing that I was expecting them to do. The social skills the students needed to practice were much more basic than the strategies I was attempting to inculcate. I was beginning to believe that

the sense of self worth was the most important and most basic building block of all. I didn't want to coerce the students into 'acting' out a 'task'. I wanted them to stretch their belief systems to value the accomplishment of a group goal. Finding ways to help them get in touch with their belief systems, with their awareness of themselves as unique and wonderful, needed as much work as the 'practicing' or 'acting out' of cooperative roles. And of course, this was a huge matter in itself, adding to the complexity of any work with children and life in school.

My teacher friend had said, "self-esteem is everything". A strong sense of self can contribute to a strong sense of group and a strong group can certainly help to make stronger a person's sense of self-esteem. Which first? I decided I needed to work at developing both at the same time.

Early in that school year our outdoor education experience was something I was counting on to create a different sense of togetherness than the one I was observing and thought I understood. Changing the milieu changes ways of thinking sometimes. We would be physically closer for longer and 'school work' would be different. What if something did come up?

I wasn't happy that not all the students in my class were taking part. Kenny had isolated himself from the group for several weeks now and was determined not to go to camp. He tore up his camp letter, he refused to talk to me about it, and it seemed he didn't want his mother to even know about it. When I phoned his mother to talk to her, she was surprised. She had received none of the school communications about camp. She was willing to go along with his strong resistance not to go on this three day outing in the Whiteshell. I told her I needed him there. I could not understand his stubbornness, I said. His mother told me that she thought she did and that he wouldn't be going on the trip. Later she disclosed something tragic that had happened to her son when he was away from her for a summer. I was reminded that children's agendas deserve respect. I was resisting his resistance because of my agenda; I wanted the student group structures to be ideal. Ideal from my perspective. There is no perfection.

I also wasn't happy with the way we decided to structure the student groups for camping. The kids' groups were mixed according to gender and classroom groups. This meant that kids would get a chance to get to know other kids. This school was somewhat unique in that there were classes of heritage language students and classes of students who were not in a heritage language program. The streaming caused by the heritage language program

segregated the students for much of the school day. Cultural and curriculum as well as groupings and timetables were social barriers for friendships. Camp organization was a chance to change that. There were broader goals that need to be considered.

We attempted to expand the students social network. I believe that reorganizing student groups may work towards the broader school goal; however benefits may be short lasting. There was little in the daily practice of the school life to mix kids. The school leadership was aware of this and putting some changes into place. But the streaming continued. Did this teach the kids that expanding their social circle was less than desirable, simply because we did not model it?

Home room groups did have time in each camp day to meet. This was the best part of the day for me. We sat on the floor. We talked about the day and spent most of the time laughing about funny and scary things that happened to us. We did some writing. There was something to collaborate about. There was this big-as-all-outdoors experience to talk about. It touched all of us, one way or another. I wondered how to capture this magic, transport it back to the classroom that seemed so far behind ?

I intended to think hard on that.

Group processing that goes on at the end or during the task is crucial. This is Schön's contention about reflecting in- and on-action. We were talking about our experiences and we were laughing and making connections with each other. I tried to recreate the magic of the camping evenings later in class.

At camp we raised our hands and drew an imaginary string from our lips up into the air for a silence signal. The kids were taught this trick and we loved to watch each other as it worked for a group of one hundred hungry people before meals. The next week I tried it back in the classroom. There were some giggles and tentative compliance. Then someone said with a sneer, "That's dumb. We don't have to be quiet. That's just for camp."

"Why?" I asked.

"Because it just is."

I didn't know what to do next. I felt I had lost something. How to retrieve that authenticity?

Julie showed me what real meant. Group process pages were half sheets of chart paper tacked to the bulletin board and stored there chronologically, with the most recent record of what went well, and what we could improve upon for

next time. These charts became the learning logs for the groups. I was surprised one day to see the kids clustered around the charts before their next Social Studies class. The leader in this cluster was Julie who also had so much difficulty making social and friendly overtures during the Hallowe'en party. She got up out of her chair and led the group to use the charts to see what they had done the day before! It was not necessary for the teacher to focus the class. She was already doing it, standing in command, jabbering and leafing through the chart paper, organizing the others. When I saw teachable skills enabling the learning I was thrilled! She had worked through this new technique and made it personally meaningful, making a tool out of it. There was an interdependence developing and an independence with learning. My knees were weak.

The one thing Julie was good at was organizing. She was the student who always asked if she could stay in at recess to organize the shelves. The shelves certainly needed organizing! The shelves needed to have someone in charge who was an expert. And I guess Julie needed to practice what she was good at. A year later, Julie would still return to this classroom and ask if she could organize the art centre, or sort the books and papers. Her contribution was valued and she could recognize a job that needed doing!

One day I needed to talk to her about her homework and I found her alone, in tears, in the classroom at the end of the day. A story spilled over that was not predicted. She was an only child. Her two parents were always "at work". Julie needed to get home to the apartment before the end of her mother's work day. Mom would always be tired and grouchy. Julie tried to have the housework done so that when her mom would come home her mom would be happy with her. I asked Julie if she ever talked about her school work or the school day to her mom. She said no, that her mom was "too busy". Mom came home, made supper and Julie would be in another room, watching TV or reading. She wanted to talk to her mom but her mom was "too busy". This was a child who had difficulty making friends at school and had so little friendliness from her mom at home. I asked Julie if she ever helped her mom make supper. She said that she had never thought to do that. I suggested that maybe if she helped with supper, this might be an easy way to begin to talk. Maybe her mom would have time to talk to her then? I asked her if she was willing to try this and if she would let me know how things went. She said she would. The homework issue was set aside for the moment.

Soon it was Parents' Day and I met Julie's mother. I can never forget Julie and her mother that day. We talked about Julie's excellent progress and I invited the mom to look at some of Julie's work. The mom commented that Julie

always had school work at home, that Julie was always doing school work. When I asked her if she ever looked at any of the work, the mother said no . By this time Julie had collected her work and was eager, if not frantic, to leaf through her blue Social Studies binder with her mom. I watched as the mom started to take over the book by putting her hands on it and pulling it close to her. Julie regained possession of the book by pulling it back and started to proceed, page by page with an explanation of the writing and the diagrams and pictures. I was intrigued by the physical struggle with the book. The detail and recall of the assignments astonished me as did the pride and care with which she spoke about her work. This was cut short by mom jerking the book away and flipping ahead with only a half glance and what Julie had created. Another tussle over the book ensued with mom announcing that she "didn't have time", there were "things to do", "Mrs. Thompson was busy" and that they had "better get going". Julie showed frustration and disappointment. The mom was uncomfortable. Julie appeared hurt.

Julie wasn't particularly popular with other kids because she was bossy and she physically pushed others around. She didn't know how to approach others any other way and didn't appear to have any consideration for how anybody else in the group felt about things. She had learned that behaviour.

Later in the spring of that year, Julie seemed more at ease with herself. She talked about her parents' plans to move into a house, something that the family was anticipating with happiness. She also mentioned a few times that she had been camping with her family. Just the three of them at a lake near by. She had loved the school camping! I noticed the change in her.

Two years later, I met Julie in her new school. I was there with a girls' basketball team from the new school I was teaching in. I smiled when I saw her but she shyly avoided me. She was not on a team, but was observing from the sidelines, cheering the team on. I was startled to see that when one of the players on her school team went down with a twisted ankle, it was Julie who bounced off the bleachers onto the court to scoop the girl up and carry her off the floor! Julie had the strength to carry a classmate and the quick action to beat the coach to the job. There she was again, not actually part of the team, taking care of a job that needed to be done, recognizing the need before anyone, peer or adult, could act. I never spoke to her that day. Later that same year I had a chance to see the band play from her school and there she was! Part of a school team! I talked to several kids after the performance, at least seven or eight who were members of that grade five class so long ago. They were quite shy but I could tell they were happy to see me. She didn't speak

then and she never got back to me about helping her mom with supper. But she did smile.

Time and circumstance, context, is complex. This realization struck me near the end of December that year and has continued to be reinforced. Each child has so much going on in his or her own life that become factors in this mix. I was beginning to learn some patience with the process of learning about teaching and learning about individual students. I was beginning to value the importance of permitting time frames to alter. Timetables used to be the primary consideration instead of the student and the task. I knew it wasn't working well when I found myself rushing through lessons. When I decide to compress time frames for learning, I am aware that the compression of the time will only be useful for some learners. Now I was trying to expand the time frame, to give permission to the learner to explore and removing that time barrier that allows the naturalness of the investigation to unfold. Relationships are allowed to develop. It is these relationships with kids and the remembered relationships months and years later that are so important. I was learning that.

I decided that what it is that I want to learn more about is central to the inquiry approach to learning. It begins with a 'critical incident', something problematic in

daily life in the classroom for me. I make observations, develop a hypothesis to help organize the thinking, experiment, experience, and then assess/evaluate. It is a spiral. The deliberate, purposeful attitude combined with the reflection when practiced during a cooperative learning activity or during an individual investigation can be practiced until it becomes a habit.

There is more than one way to go about learning what it is that I choose to investigate. A tool I find useful is sociometry to try to understand the social patterns. I had never worked with sociometry before and when Jane mentioned its usefulness in one of the teacher researcher meetings, I was eager to read the book she offered and try the technique. It showed me ways to design heterogeneous groups. Or at least I thought it did. In a confidential questionnaire, students were asked to write the names of the kids they wanted to work with on a project. They were also asked to identify people in the class that they did not work with or play with often, but with whom they would like to work with more if they had the chance. They were also asked to write the name of someone whom they felt they could not work with. I told them that I would use this confidential information to help me make groups for them.

I told them that sometimes I wanted to make the groups rather than allow them to always choose their own groups.

Wouldn't there be a lot of anxiety if one thought nobody would pick her? I told a personal story about feeling left out when I was in school and told the class that I didn't want that to happen to them. There was another issue niggling at me. Something was telling me to be careful.

This is a part of cooperative groups that I have not resolved. How ought groups be organized? I was assuming because there were groups, kids were "in". How to avoid the "out"? I tried to keep in mind that the purpose for the group dictates the design of the group. Once the purpose for the group was clear, then it should be easy for the groups to be formed. Whose purpose? Are there more than one? There is more to the unification of a group than the group goal. There are many social skills that make the accomplishment of a group goal more successful. It is the teaching and learning of these social skills that is as much a part of the 'curriculum' as the task.

With sociometry I was able to identify the student in the class with the least status, the one always picked last. Donny was the "cry baby". He was usually complaining. He had temper tantrums, although these were not directed in harmful ways at others. His parents complained that other kids picked on him. He was always 'in trouble' at recess. He often cried because he told me he was being picked on. I also learned that he had a record number of broken bones.

One of those 'accident prone' kids his parents said. In addition to all these ways that others seem to reject him, I found myself rejecting him. Not that I consciously found him unpleasant to be with; indeed he was bright, artistic. It was just that usually when he was coming towards me with a crumpled face, close to tears, I got that weary feeling akin to "Oh, no, here we go again." He must have sensed an aggressive, "Now What?" that was a spurn or discredit.

This really struck me out of school hours. There was more than once when I was correcting papers at home in the evening that I knew there was a paper missing. I did not have the right number of assignments with me. I couldn't think of the name of the missing child for the missing paper! This child had no name and no face when I was not in the classroom. The missing paper was Donny's. I was thunderstruck by seeing Donny as the isolate in the sociogram because I realized that I had been regarding him in the same way as his classmates. The sociogram showed me something I had intuitively felt but had not connected to some purposeful action. When I saw what the sociogram showed, I could no longer not do something to repair some damage that had been done. I started with a renewed belief in this kid and a determination to change my own behaviour.

When I started treating Donny in a more inclusive manner, so did the others in the rest of the group. I went

out of my way to smile at him, to recognize his talk in the group, and to be warmer and friendlier. The "Now What?" became "I'm sorry to hear that. How can I help?" I gave less attention to his throwing of papers and books and more attention to his high quality written work on those papers. Donny had a reputation for being bright. I hadn't rewarded his quality work before because I was expending so much energy on sorting out the 'trouble' he was always in. He had been getting a lot more attention for 'being bad' as I often heard him refer to himself. I purposefully emphasized the positive and observed him more. His self confidence in his work was growing stronger because his competence in something he was 'good' at was being celebrated.

There was a lot more I could do to celebrate the good things these kids were doing, rather than to given attention by mopping up after all the 'trouble'. I was stuck on the weaknesses and failure and that was the focus. If the intent is competence and confidence then that should drive my purposeful action. Raising the status of just one group member had an amazing positive effect on everyone else, the teacher included. When I started to make efforts to make him feel valued, others did as well. Everyone is good at something. I needed to do a lot more exploring of the positive stuff kids are good at. As in this case with Donny, it leads to more good stuff being discovered.

Knowing the students well is important. Caring relationships are essential for children and learning.

Cooperating on a class project - things get messier

I designed a Social Studies Unit with cooperative structures to give the class the experience with the processes as well as content. I expected that such a project would make cooperative learning lessons understandable. I was convinced that the way to learn about group process was to involve oneself with group work. I learned by doing, observing, reflecting, adapting, doing again. I wanted to create this for the kids.

Designing cooperative lessons improved when I better understood the theory and the practice; after reading, talking to other teachers, trying activities with students and asking them to group process. There is much to be said about refining the process. I've learned not to give up, and especially not to give up too soon. I decided to trust my instincts that it is okay sometimes for things to get worse before they get better. By this I mean that I found my self "backing up" in the teaching process at times to design smaller steps. For example, there is much observing, monitoring and teaching of the social skills needed. Usually short, simple games, activities were the way for me to understand the steps, the teaching of the

step, and the understanding by the students of the steps. I didn't know, and couldn't know, what step was needed, nor how short or long, until the work was in progress. Dewey (1938) said that we learn by doing.

Some children are skilled socially in the way that Johnson and Johnson describe the skills: they can encourage and praise, recognize and acknowledge positive efforts in others; they can disagree without becoming hurt or hostile; they can sit together and talk face to face. Many children cannot. I was struck by how less-than-skilful I was with the social actions I said I valued. We were all getting practice.

In this Social Studies project with the kids, I used an audio tape recorder as an aid to understanding children's thinking and action. It was not possible for me to observe or conference with all the groups all the time and I hoped the audio tape would give me a different as well as an additional perspective on what was happening with the kids.

I also used the audio taping in a group interview around a large round table when the students had parts of their project to talk about. I wanted to verify observations I had made about the cooperative manner in which they had searched for information for their projects. There were some disadvantages and some advantages.

I was using the tape with them for the first time. It inhibited the discourse, in my view. I started the interview with a set of questions that I thought would get me where I wanted to be. As soon as the students would say something unpredictable, instead of pursuing those thoughts with them, I kept on with the questions in front of me. I reflected-in-action on this and the decision I made was to stick with the script. Looking back, and after more experience with the technology, I would be more open to the unpredicted twists or turns. But this was a first. It was novel. I was nervous. I discovered some interesting ideas.

I learned that there was more cooperation, negotiation, and sharing amongst them than I had thought. It was only the noisy behaviour I noticed as I walked around the groups. I did not pause too long to actually listen and observe. The groups spread out in many of the open area spaces and this became a big concern for me, mostly control. But when the tape was played back to me, I was struck by the number of times the kids explained how they helped each other.

Teacher: Did other people help you?

Student: From our group?

Teacher: Or from other groups. Any other people.

Student: No, not from other groups. But we all helped each other a little bit. The teachers helped. Mrs. Paul did. And you did. Yes, the librarian. She showed us like where books were and all that.

Teacher: Did other people stop you from working in the group?

Student: In our group? Kids from our group? Only when they needed help or to find something, or to tell what a word is, like ----- or something like that.

Sometimes the word looks like ... you can't understand it very well.

Or later ...

Teacher: What made it hard?

Student: Just certain things that you couldn't find. The tidal bore. Yes, there wasn't much [information] about the tidal bore. One person wanted to do this, and one person wanted to do that. Then they started arguing. But after awhile when one person got something to do then ... and we didn't argue any more.

Teacher: Was there anything that you really like about doing the project together?

Student: Accomplishing something. Helping each other.

Teacher: How did it make you feel?

Student: Right. Important.

Teacher: What happened that made you feel this way?

Student: By working together and accomplishing.

There was more difficulty caused by inadequate resources than lack of a cooperative spirit. There were some expectations placed on students that were almost impossible for them to fill for a variety of reasons that I had not thought through in advance.

Teacher: Could you find the equipment or books or information you needed?

Student: Sometimes ... I never found books on lobsters, population. I didn't get enough help. Some information we got there was no books just on those questions by itself. There was book about like the whole world. Like the part about the forestry. We had ... it was like so small.

Teacher: What would make it harder for you to do work like this all on your own?

Student: It would be a lot harder. 'Cause you would have other people to help you look and by yourself you wouldn't have anyone else to help you look. And you'd have to do all the work ourself instead of splitting it up into separate groups.

Teacher: Splitting it up makes it easier?

Student: Sometimes. Like when Kenny wanted to colour the Nova Scotia tundra, we all, like Jay wanted to colour it and

so did Kenny so we just let Kenny do it.
'Cause he didn't want to do anything else.

Teacher: What part did you like the best?

Student: Colouring. The maps and the painting. Modelling. And the time in the library. We got ... each other, and we have lot of information in the books so we didn't have to go back and forth like to the library and to classrooms.

Teacher: What was the hard part?

Student: 'Cause we were only just sitting down and working away. Can't take rests ... really hot in here ... real boring in here. Sometimes we ... we have to do the comments, like look up forestry, make up the questions, do the maps, provinces and all that, and it was hard.

This was an incredible perception check! I was placing very high expectations on them. This project was on the Maritime Provinces. There wasn't much prior knowledge. The class was divided into five groups of four. Each group was to look at a different region of the Maritimes. I provided the categories for each region, categories that were similar in all five groups. They practiced the social skills of encouraging and checking for understanding. They had some choice over what subtopic to research and the group had control over how to best present their work to the rest of the class. I provided maps of the regions and art materials and paper for their final products in attempt to

facilitate what they told me they needed. I anticipated some needs, but some things the kids needed help with were quite creative, things I had never suspected they might need. I provided some research material. A big problem was finding material appropriate to a wide range of reading abilities.

The content was challenging as well as the manner in which they were asked to work. Students needed to be able to make decisions in the group, share work, research information, read it, understand it, record the information and organize it, and prepare the information for presentation. Groups of four were not new to them but the management of the large amount of work during a longer work period was difficult. Some kids found the act of researching for information somewhat difficult because they were beginners with this type of activity. Some found the reading hard because it was expository. They found the decision-making about dividing up the work was not always easy or fair, but they did settle on something workable .

This aspect of fairness and everyone doing one's best effort for the group was a key issue, one I am still struggling with.

I noticed other things that gave impetus for reflection. The project design could have included more

student choices to give them more control over how they wanted to get involved with this topic. The kids were somewhat 'forced' into the cooperative structure as well as the geography topics. The narrator's meanings of the words on the audio tape are open to interpretation. A video tape may contribute to the quality of the interpretation of a speaker's words by recording body language if the camera person was expert enough. The dimension of language could be problematic if I considered how the language and communication was shaped by my directive questions, what I chose to respond to or not. The questions were stiff. I was nervous and I think the kids picked up on this. I also think that some students may be fearful that they will say something that the teacher thinks is incorrect.

I wanted to keep the aspects about this design that worked. I wanted to shovel away what was useless. I decided to explore independent studies, something I was reading about, as a result of my reflection-on-action of the use of this audio tape. I would open up the 'curriculum' to encourage exploration on topics kids were interested in, personally. To some extent this would give an opportunity for those who were more dependent in their learning to receive more teacher-time and for those who were more skilled and independent with their learning to fly with it.

Students were making choices about their learning. Some students could manage larger amounts of information and research than others. Some were better readers and some were more interested in the topics, perhaps. Individual learning styles were being accommodated without my planning for this in advance. I could see this in choices and expertise, but was not sure at the time how learning styles are so important. All students were active participants in some aspect of the work of some reading, writing, listening, and sharing. I was, however, expecting them to demonstrate what they knew in the same way. I noticed there really wasn't much choice for them.

I saw divergent thinking. Working in groups, many creative ideas started to get tossed about. This was evident in the final products. That some students had special preferences for how they wanted to represent what they were learning about surprised me; some artistically, some verbally, some three dimensionally. In the beginning I was so worried that this might not go "according to structures" presented in the cooperative learning literature that I spent a lot of time over-organizing and directing the learning. The work of Johnson, Johnson and Holubec (1984, 1987), concentrates on a method that is curriculum free. I knew lots about structure. The work of Kagan (1990) concentrates more on the social interaction as well as the organization of it. Later, I learned a different

perspective from the work of Slavin (1985) which is more curriculum specific and talks mostly of teacher behaviours.

The students were skilful in ways I had not previously observed and were quite capable of researching and learning about topics of their own choice. As I observed this, I was reminded of parenting. As parents we teach "skills" and values, the stuff of what we think it is important for our children to learn. Then we let them practice. We are there to encourage and support and reassess. I was convinced that these were all good observations to support independent studies. I was learning to let go. The tape is evidence and documentation of this learning for me that I now keep in my teacher portfolio, my personal, learning collection.

A few years later, when I was much better at understanding and facilitating independent study in the classroom, I was struck by the naturalness of the cooperation that goes into the completion of the topics. Not all students need all skills. They learn a lot of cooperation with a classmate just by their own choosing to work on a topic that interests them both. The purpose of the task drives the design of the group and the manner in which the task is accomplished. Where had I learned that before? Cooperative learning became more fluid and natural.

However...now it is less messy

With cooperative learning I started by thinking I could apply a model to a classroom situation to fix a problem. I learned there is no program, no prescription. There are only a wide variety of informed decisions upon which to draw, a repertoire of strategies, that develop from a sound theoretical and practical base. The theory and the practice are intertwined. Before I started to examine practice deliberately, things seemed to be a constant fight. I soon turned this thinking around and now perceive classrooms and schools to be places where there are many important things worth fighting for. Let me explain.

I used to think that cooperative learning was a band-aid solution to a problem. Apply the remedy and the sore will heal. That's not how it worked. Now I think that this as a studio tradition, the learning in action that Schön (1987) talks about. This meant for me a lot more learning by doing, experiencing, reflecting on the action, reassessing, doing again.

I used to think that there was one best way. There was always my agenda, ahead of everyone else's. There is no teacher-proof model to follow that is anything like slapping on a band-aid. There is problem-solving to be done, but it is important how to view the problem with all its

understandable and yet to understood parts. If there is a model, it is in the modelling of acting on beliefs and understandings about the problem. I learned to practice these cooperative learning ideas at the same time I was reading and talking to others about the theory. The ideas stopped being a recipe and took on a life and a look all their own when the classroom started to work like a workshop. I learned a great deal about the workshop perception when reflecting about the camp experience and the social studies unit. I changed it, and made it more useful.

I used to think that teacher intervention was leadership. Positive interdependence need not be artificially constructed by the teacher. Students are able to create this for themselves, but at times they need help. What kind of help? The help they identify. I observe this when a small group is interested in learning more about the same topic and they decide to work together. They search out resources together and find ways of sharing the resources. Their individual learning styles accommodate each other. One group wants to learn the work by making picture flashcards; a second group designs a card game that turns into a board game with definitions on each card; some students want to write and write; and there are some that just need to talk and talk and talk some more about the facts at hand. Some even find ways of working alone with a

group. I'm there as mediator if needed. Sometimes the kids know there is something wrong but cannot say exactly what it is. Maybe they don't know. Maybe they're shy. I observe, ask questions. Some situations are not ideal. I coach with learning styles and offer suggestions and alternate ways to think about getting the job done.

When I started to teach them about learning styles, most students thought this was the most fascinating work they had ever done. They loved learning about learning. I believe that giving students information frees them to decide on their own what it is they want to do about it. We reflected. What would that new knowledge mean? How would they work with their partners now? Differently? They started to look at each other through different lenses, with more factual information. Another person wasn't simply popular, or unpopular, smart, or dumb, as they also learned to separate emotions and facts. We looked at how we all went about getting the job done best for us. There was a sense of wonder. I liked the interdependence when it made them independent too.

Learning about how they learn gives students control over how to challenge themselves. It also works towards inclusivity. There is a group caring and a nurturing. I am reminded of Donny who was so much an outsider in life that he ended up with broken bones. He was on a different path

when he learned to care for himself and that he was cared for. The care is articulated and the care is shown. There is a group or community feeling. It provides a goal. Everyone is struggling with their best efforts toward a goal. We are collaborating about learning theory. There is no need to compete with each other. There is the idea that if we know ourselves better we can help in the group when we are working together. What we want and what we need is openly discussed. The spirit is certainly less competitive if not cooperative. It is interdependence.

I am reminded about the camp experience and how I was unable then to articulate or to show how this trip had the power to change the way we thought about and worked with each other. I didn't know that Kenny couldn't leave his mom. I didn't know how to bring the special zero noise signal back into the classroom. I didn't know the lasting effects of pleasurable camping for Julie and her family. I didn't know that I didn't have to control everything. Now, reflecting in- and on- action with the students throughout the learning process there is a sharing of the responsibility. It allows us to self-evaluate with a new vocabulary. There are words for what we are doing and in that way the describable become the discussable.

I used to think that face-to-face literally meant facing each other. It is a metaphor for communication and

exchange. Face-to-face usually looks and means something different in each collaborative opportunity. Students chose to work side by side and knee to knee and elbow to elbow at tables and on the floor. They work together at home during the evenings. Parents give me feedback on this many times when they unwittingly become involved. Face-to-face also means their own mirror images when students produced video skits on a topic. At one point I had everyone in the class hand in their "homework" on a video tape. There is lots of productive talk. Negotiation is on-going as is assessment and evaluation.

I used to think that I was the one who could evaluate all the learning. Now, individual accountability looks like something other than a pencil and paper test. Students demonstrate their understanding of their research by building models and dioramas, creating posters, conducting personal and telephone interviews with primary sources, writing journalistic accounts, and presenting their work to peers in a variety of ways. They also demonstrate their understanding of working together in the process of completing the task, not just in the final product. My record-keeping has become a combination of marks and a separate notebook for anecdotal remarks as I assess on a daily basis, task by task. This one separate coil-bound notebook has been the most efficient management tool I have

discovered and saves me time when it comes to communicating with kids and parents about goals and accomplishments.

Group processing and individual reflection on work has a different look. We have moved from large chart paper as a single classroom focus to individual learning logs. I conference with individual students and small groups working on the same topic; we record progress, successes, talk about goals, and discuss what all of us can do to help to accomplish those goals. Student goal-setting and personal as well as group reflections are strengths of this process. My work of assessment and instruction is part of the ongoing student work.

We work on interpersonal skills constantly. Students usually are helpful. If they are not, I deal with the specific problem at that specific time. If students are not cooperating, there is a reason. The reason is usually a short-lived hurdle; if it isn't, we just keep talking it over. For one squabble, I called on the school's peer mediation group's help. The two students at odds in my class agreed to this, although reluctantly at first. I wasn't privy to the resolution of the conflict nor did I need to supervise the learning of the new skills. I didn't need to be in charge of solving everyone's problems all the time. Young people are quite capable of handling life's

problems in this way. I simply enjoyed the results - harmony!

I started by thinking that there was something not working, there was something out of focus in the classroom. There was this battle, constantly. What was causing it? What was wrong with them? Now I think it is not a war zone, it is a place to build relationships. I learned that getting to know students well, nurturing caring relationships, is essential to my planning and facilitating carefully and well. It also helps them understand themselves and their world. The tensions and conflict and power struggles amongst themselves and with me are natural. This is what stimulates thinking and change. This is not to say that there is no harmony or humour. There is plenty of that. We are learning, questioning, challenging, and growing and negotiating all, every moment. Classrooms are alive!

If a group doesn't seem to be working collaboratively on most important things, I stand back. It is an inquiry stance. I observe for awhile. I stimulate conversation about what I see when it seems appropriate. I don't go "out", bring back "in" a recipe, and apply it like a band-aid. Although I do consult with colleagues from time to time. I design activities and plan discussions but no longer with a view to providing the single solution. It is

more to find out more about the problem. What is going on with the kids? What are they saying? What are they actually doing? What do they think about what is going on? What are their perceptions of why things aren't working. Maybe they think things are working! Then what do I do? It is an investigation. Not a rush to fix things.

Sometimes I have to just let things be. Cooperative learning theory can be intrusive. There were times when the control I was keeping and manipulation I was creating made me feel like a monster. It made me want to burst. This was the witch that Judith Newman (1993, p. 40) talks about in her poem. This is a moral dilemma. Deciding on who should work with whom in groups is never perfectly worked out. The working out that I can't do in terms of designing group numbers, matched up with group skills is usually rounded out simply by the students deciding who can help them get the best job done. The confidentiality with which I have to handle some situations turns into rare, unique relationships with kids but I have to act sensitively and very carefully. I can't remember reading about moral dimensions of cooperative learning. This is odd. Choosing cooperative learning is value-laden. Choosing to cooperate is a moral decision.

The control moves back and forth between me and the students, it is a more negotiated curriculum. This is a

moral stance. I believe that I do not control all, that I have all the answers (especially anything like a recipe), that I am always right. This is a democratic stance. Students have a right and a responsibility to make their own choices and somewhere, somehow, they need to be taught how to choose and have time to reflect on the consequences of their actions, and have opportunities to re-negotiate, re-do works and behaviours that they decide need changing. School ought to be one of those places that can happen.

I started by expecting learning to be automatic and instant. What I saw was that learning and learning to be an independent learner just doesn't happen accidentally, although in some cases, it does tacitly. It is okay to work through mistakes and failures. Learning occurs step by step, bit by bit, over time. And it is not always forward movement step by step. Sometimes there is a wide plateau. Students "rest"; some learning is being processed that needs additional time. Learning to do and to understand things takes a lot of practice and time.

Just as I was beginning to feel quite smug about my learning and accomplishments about what to teach and how to go about it, Pat, the paraprofessional who was working closely with me at the time, asked, "Don't you ever give them tests?" We both paused.

"How do you know they are learning?" she asked seriously.

Another hard question. My assessment practices had already started to change. But how? I needed to be clear. What were the implications of these changes?

Just when I thought I had it figured out, things started to get messy again.

CHAPTER TWO

Implications for Assessment When Practice Changes

"I'm trying to make them more responsible for that," I spoke softly.

"Well, I think they need more tests. They need the discipline, " Pat said with conviction.

I sighed. How well we both knew that they needed to improve behaviour. I also thought how testing is used to control students, to keep them quiet, and possibly make them fearful and anxious. What really intrigued me was her question, "How do I know they are learning?"

My gaze shifted to the cooperative learning projects tacked on every available wall and bulletin board space. I spied the audio and video tapes I had recorded. Demonstration was all around me. I was beginning to put into a clearer shape and a sharper focus some of the principles that I found essential for learning reflection, self-evaluation, and the ability to set goals. They were cooperating in small groups but they were also making great strides personally, in their individual efforts and willingness to risk-take within the interdependent group. This contributed to the success of the class. I was reconceptualizing my notion of curriculum.

Being more sensitive to the foregoing made me rethink exactly what was worthwhile teaching and how it was to be taught. If this "curriculum" was something worthwhile teaching, then it was worth learning. Students were demonstrating their cooperative learning.

It was time to step back and look at the larger picture of assessment. It made "uncommon sense" (Mayher, 1990) to explore assessment further.

I stepped into another classroom.

"Jan ... Help!"

"Hey, Lady. How 'ya doin? What's up?" And she flashed me that gigantic smile she is famous for. Jan has an uncommonly clear way of getting to the heart of the matter.

Jan was working with her students to present collections of student work to parents as evidence of accomplishments and as the basis of goal setting. Her motivation for designing this type of reporting with parents was driven by her need to clearly communicate progress. She saw this as a move toward accountability for student, parent, and teacher.

What hooked me was the visual and graphic demonstration of the learning. It was a tool that could be used to communicate the learning. I saw parallels with the work I was doing after reading Donald Graves (1983) and Nancie Atwell (1987) to produce student writing portfolios; dated samples of the drafts of pieces in progress, final copies, peer editing, reflections, check-lists. Students in my classroom were already growing comfortable with a working structure in writing. Why not put together a cooperative learning portfolio?

Jan, sparked by a workshop on children as self-evaluators, developed a series of questions for students to help them develop self knowledge, a sense of self-worth by knowing and writing about their strengths, and ideas about things they would like to improve. She also wanted their plans for accomplishing their goals. She wanted students to decide, to take ownership, and to control. She included parents. Students were asked to identify how they thought they could be helped at home as well as at school in the accomplishment of the goals students had set for themselves. Parent comments and signatures were part of this student document. Jan also gave the students a legitimate opportunity to write a report about her.

Jan was putting into action some powerful measures to build self-esteem and increase student control and decision-

making. I could see a powerful communication tool for learning being created here and I especially liked the parent connection. I got to work thinking about what cooperative learning portfolios might look like.

The work in the student folder would be the way I could show and tell parents about group work; reveal tasks, goals, self-evaluations, my assessments. In the cooperative projects group "marks" became contentious. How to evaluate without summarizing the learning with a grade? How to "evaluate" social skills learning and the accomplishment of individual learning goals by "grading"? "Grading" connotes comparison. I had no intention of comparing one student's progress with another's. How might a student compare her improvements to her earlier efforts? How would I do the same? Certainly not by a "grade". What, then?

I began by handing folders to the kids and telling them that these folders were for particular pieces of work to share with their parents. As the kids were focussed at their painting and illustrating I couldn't help but wonder, what were we going to show and tell?

"What are we gonna put in?" Carrie was painting broad brush strokes across her folder. There it was. Kids are sometimes one step ahead.

"What do you think we should put in there?" I wanted them to explore this idea with broad strokes of a different kind.

"We could put tests in to show," someone else spoke.

"Naw. We have to get 'em signed. They've seen 'em already." This voice from another serious painter.

"We could put stories in," another contributed.

"We can't do that. What is our writing portfolio for then?" queried another, rather impatiently.

"I never show my writing portfolio to anyone. That is private," Jason said with emphasis.

My eyebrows shot up at that one! News to me. I continued to listen and learn. The "uncooperative and disengaged" class was actually problem-solving coherently and respectfully with each other about school work? What was going on here? In a short time, however, the timbre or tempo of the group shifted away from talk about their folders. Things derailed. I was sorry to end this short, intellectual interlude, sorry that we might not be able to recapture this moment, and had no idea how to extend this to draw further on their abilities to explore and clarify.

As I look back in my journal writing, the writing seems to jump from one idea to another as well. Without the journalling, I might have completely lost some of these early important connections. My reflecting in action led to my making a decision to take away the control from the students in those moments, to go with their restlessness and change the work focus. There had to be a way to do a much better job of responding to the "curriculum" as it was being negotiated. I was reactive and had a sense of running behind them to catch up. There was no sense of "leading", either from behind or ahead!

For the parent evening, I made most of the decisions about what the folders were to contain and did most of the talking to parents about the contents. In Julie's case, she had believed what I had said about a show and tell of contents and took quick action. She capitalized on the chance to show her mother her blue Social Studies binder.

I handed the folders to the parents as they sat down with their children. Twice, students took possession of the file. Students were part of the talk and sat side by side with the parent. I sat opposite. Most of the kids were quite shy when the talk turned to the contents.

I asked all students to be part of the discussions with parents but some students did not come to the school. I

worked hard to be inclusive with students of this class and to convince the parents that this discussion was of most benefit when we were all together. When parents said that they didn't want the child to hear some things, I said that we could arrange private meetings anytime.

Jan felt strongly that the student work samples and the triad situation with parent, teacher, and child demystified the evaluation process for kids. I could see that at work. I could also see a demystification process over-taking me.

When parents and students were absorbed with the folder, I could observe and listen. I saw how the parent and child acted with each other. The pieces in the folder reflected progress, strengths, and gave visual impact to the discussion points. I saw some pride and taking of control of the evaluation of the contents by some parent and student comments.

"I see you could use some extra practice with handwriting. I can help you with this at home," one said.

I also saw that some parents were uncomfortable with looking at a collection while I was silent. This was new for them. Most often teacher talk dominated. I saw it as something that we all could learn more about.

I felt a shift of the responsibility for assessment from my shoulders alone to include the parent and child and I felt a physical relief that evening. When a parent looked at the child's work and talked about the assignment, parent assessment was taking place. This was authentic collaboration.

The only documentation in the folder about the cooperative project was a final quiz. Around the room there was plenty of evidence; final product posters, student writing and art, charts representing the cooperative methods, including the powerful group processing chart was there, front and centre. There were no grades on the projects. If the parents noticed, they didn't say anything to me.

I continued with the practice of student collections throughout the year, but I lost the threads of this as an assessment tool for awhile. My focus was social behaviour and I didn't see further connections to incorporating this into the file folder collections of student work that were in the room. I was still not quite clear about what counted as learning and therefore worth assessing. I hadn't made too many connections with goals and accomplishments as Jan was demonstrating.

I had experienced designing my own home reporting before this. I learned that it was solitary, labour intensive, valued by the parents. When I was in a previous school, I included "my" report card along with the school form with letter "grades" such as VG, S, NI.

I asked the students, "What did your parents think of the new report card?"

"Oh, they really like it. But that isn't the real report card, is it?"

Some parents told me that they liked the anecdotal, the reference to student work. "That's a lot of work for you. I couldn't expect you to do this all the time." Now that was confusing. How else could they know about what went on in school? They seemed to be satisfied with the information they thought they had.

There were right about time. I spent late evening hours and many weekends preparing. I was reporting to parents on several months activities and goals as well as writing an evaluation of the child's progress during this time. Anecdotal comments on student progress were added to activity summaries and objectives set by the teacher. There was much repetition on these lengthy individualized statements and I did not have computer technology to help

file and sort information. This reporting was definitely more real. I felt it was honest, clear, detailed, and could provide a sound basis for discussion with parents. But, how to make it manageable?

I worked with a group of teachers from a number of different schools on designing a divisional report card. It was gorgeous, multi-coloured and multi-layered with carbon paper and tear-off portions. The format was based directly on strategies and concepts from the Provincial Language Arts Curriculum Guide. Hours of work went into this and lots of money. Working with the report card put me into a different world. It seemed we had designed the ultimate. Theoretically, the form should have worked well. Back in the classroom, it looked a horror. Practically, it raised many questions for me. Do I teach to the report card? How was I going to check off all these boxes if my curriculum was different? How best to explain boxes not ticked? After all this work put into the form, how was I going to report on what the learning activities were in the particular context? I was really back to where I had started. And so were many other teachers because we had a few laughs about the incongruency between our labour over the ultimate report card and the fact that there was probably no such form. We never continued the conversation about why there was no such form.

I knew there were other teachers also designing their own report cards in our school and this was encouraged by the administration. I don't know why those of us working with our own designs did not get together, share ideas and the work. Diane and I were both designing our own report cards and we never once looked at each other's work. We were recreating the wheel, alone and in isolation. Breaking this tradition was for another time and place. Jan and I talked more and shared ideas that really made a difference in my thinking, that nudged me along the way. Efforts were to become even more collaborative.

Student portfolio collections

It was April, 1992, an ideal time and place to break with traditions. We were sitting around the large table in the Teacher Centre. There were platters of delicious cheeses and fruits, plenty of freshly brewed coffee. We were the teacher team dreaming and planning for the opening of the newest school. We were meeting once a week, after school hours, to begin to pull some ideas together. Each meeting had a different theme. The theme for the meeting that day was assessment.

Helen said, "Wouldn't it be neat if we didn't have to have marks?"

I said, "I've been doing some work with portfolio collections. Let's look at that."

I wanted to look more closely at the relationship between students' portfolio collections and assessment and evaluation as it had begun for me in the fall of 1989. There seemed to be agreement in the group that traditional report cards were inadequate. Average marks were quite meaningless. The principal told a startling story about her son and school:

"His first term mark in Math was 52%. He was finding it difficult. This was troubling since he knew his mark had to be much better than that to be accepted into University. He worked even harder. Each test had better and better marks until it came to the final when he finally achieved the "A" he wanted -- he got 87% on that exam. He was so happy and of course at home we were very proud of him because we knew how hard he worked. When the report card came home, his mark was a "C". The report card only had average marks for the term recorded. When schools do this, what do they teach kids?"

We did some research, shared some articles, started to plan some professional development days on the theme of alternative assessment. There seemed to be no shortage of

reading material and we found colleagues in other schools and in other cities to share their experiences as well.

We learned so much from each other that first year. We were challenged by the new approach and were willing to take risks. Someone would share a terrific idea that worked for her or him, everyone else would crowd around, take a look and listen, then start thinking about how it could be adapted for themselves. It was very much a recursive process as we worked through many notions together.

We were learning from each other everyday. The photocopying machine became the main meeting place some days: "I found this great idea by the machine! Whose is it? Anyway, this is what I've done with it for my group! Who wants to have a look?" We crowded around.

We did a lot of reading. We started with educational philosophy for middle years students. It was a comfort to read much that made a fit with what I had already learned in my past teaching and was presently learning with the cooperative learning experiences. I started to tinker with a variety of other teaching strategies from which developed unique assessment strategies. There were many aspects of practice that I wanted to continue with and some new ones to explore.

I continued with the student self-evaluation and reflections. I had to think how to use reflections throughout all subject areas now, not just specific lessons designed co-operatively or with writers' workshop and the keeping of writing portfolios. I tried something differently with goal-setting when I observed a colleague at work in her Science class. I wanted to understand peer critique; although the peer critique that I found in the literature looked somewhat alien to the critique that evolved from cooperative group processing, the notion was similar enough and I was curious. I felt very strongly about becoming more skilful with independent studies as a teaching strategy; this made a nice fit with the educational philosophy I was reading for middle years students. I was reading a lot about increased decision-making for students. I wanted to develop oracy skills with more emphasis on debating, student presentations, class discussions. I was led to some research on the use of rubrics when the question arose about how we would define excellence in tasks. I also wanted to improve my skills with conferencing with students about their work. The importance of talking to students about their work was one of the most powerful things I had learned with cooperative learning. My record-keeping took on a new look. The reality shock was, that in a few months the students would have a portfolio that reflected all this to share with their parents.

I gathered data on student learning from multiple sources - from my observation notes, personal journals, student writing, parent writing, video tape - to fuse some horizons (Gadamer, 1975, p. 348, as cited in Coulter, 1994, p. 81). My purpose for data gathering became a combination of re-informing by notions of instruction and research, and forming my own fusion of theory and practice dialogically constructed in the classroom. In a practical sense for students, data in the form of selections for a portfolio needed to be collected. I knew I had to do this, but was not sure what decisions I would make.

But I am getting ahead of myself. Let's go back a bit.

Working together

To contribute to the reading our staff was doing, we also made a connection with the University. On June 18th, we met with Ken Osborne, member of the faculty of Education, University of Manitoba, who co-authored the Middle Years Sourcebook for the Manitoba Department of Education and had a keen interest in being part of the Leila North School process as it was developing. He was speaking about assessment and Middle Years educational philosophy. He spoke of portfolio collections of student work as an on-going record of what was happening, an opportunity to explore the creative and critical aspects of teaching. The

more *autonomous* side of teaching would be a characteristic of this approach. That was a hook for me; Stenhouse uses this word. Curriculum and teaching strategies would be reflected in the portfolios that the teacher and students prepared together. This would be goal-oriented. He highlighted some of the tensions in assessment including the importance of communication with parents. At this meeting I was forced to step out of my reverie of educational ideas and consider some practical thoughts.

The principal asked if we were still willing to have monthly parent-teacher meetings as first suggested? Preliminary discussions about student assessment made us think that we needed to see parents more frequently. Concretizing was risky business. We were committing ourselves to something about which we had insufficient knowledge and didn't know how to do. We took a plunge.

Our first meeting in September, the day before the students were to arrive, was another reality shock. The first item on the agenda was "evaluation". Could we come up with a common statement of what this would mean for the school? We had read parts of TheodoreSizer's (1984) Horace's Compromise and were inspired by performances of learning. We wanted portfolios to demonstrate learning and to represent how instruction and assessment mesh. Evaluation would no longer be an "add-on" to assessment of

progress. We were being asked to be articulate. What we needed to be able to say was that evaluation would be systematic, an integral part of the instruction, on going, and effectively communicated. I would learn to make my work visible (Boomer, 1987) in ways that allowed me to study and improve what I was doing. The describable becomes the discussable.

Small teacher group meetings were our life-line. Five months had passed since our first meeting as a group. Not much time to dream big educational ideas, complete the school year in our own schools, read, read and read some more. Now that our new school year had begun with the kids, things started to fall into place. During our first year we had grade-group meetings during the school day, one each six day cycle. These were of enormous help in providing time to get to know each other better, share resources, identify issues we wanted help with, and to plan curriculum. We often talked about portfolio collections and what they could look like.

What would we put in them? What counted as evidence for learning? What would make student portfolios visually meaningful? What pieces ought students select? How would they decide? How to coach the students in the manner in which they were to present their portfolios to their parents at home? How would we include curriculum summaries and

evaluation from all aspects of the curriculum? Would this be done arranged subject by subject?

Co-ordinating all staff members and their anecdotal contributions to each student portfolio was a massive undertaking in logistics considering the fact that some teachers had fifteen students and some had all three hundred and sixty. Teachers were cutting and pasting and photocopying in a manic rush toward "P" day. We called this time of the school year P.M.S. : "portfolio mental stress". We all suffered from it! The management of such collections and the time commitment required of lengthy, comprehensive anecdotal reports was almost too much to bear. How to become more efficient?

We were attempting to implement a complex idea as we were learning about it. Managing it was difficult, inefficient, and guzzling gallons of personal time. Students did their share of complaining about all the thinking and writing they had to do to put a portfolio together.

"This is so much work, Mrs. Thompson," was always punctuated with groans of compliance in the classroom. Yes, learning requires a lot of effort. I'm not sure they saw their effort as taking more responsibility for their own learning. I saw it as a liberation, an emancipation, but

had no idea how I could nudge them toward this understanding. They were certainly doing a lot more writing and at times I stood back and remarked on how much their writing had improved in all aspects. It is significant work.

Parents were fairly patient with this new process called portfolio assessment and continued to ask important questions. The most persistent questions were about standards and worries about the high school world and the work world, about their children's futures. Some of these questions we attempted to answer and attempted to address by making shifts in our thinking about the communication of the collections.

However...more questions

The words "educating the reflective practitioner" were looming large. What began as a band-aid solution to a problem of unruly students became an investigation into the latest educational research on cooperative learning which was interwoven with practice on what it meant to be a teacher researching my own actions and thoughts. I was now exploring in more depth the notion of integrating assessment and instruction. It was also crystal clear that I had to be able to communicate what it was that I was learning. But how?

I was beginning to understand what it meant to assume responsibility for creating an educational climate; meaningful "curriculum", student choice. I was also learning about putting responsibility with students for learning. The responsibility was no longer all mine to assume. Students needed to enter the conversation about learning and needed to make some decisions. They were demonstrating what they knew, were able to talk about it, may have indeed been asked about it for the first time, were able to reflect on what went well and what they thought they needed to do to improve. Parents were connected differently.

In the new school with a new group of teachers, I welcomed the collaborative opportunity because I knew it could be exciting. At the same time, I was finding that talking about my work as a teacher was risky business. Sometimes I couldn't get the words right and of course the risk of sounding foolish or stupid was tough to handle. How was this going to work?

In the new school, I was making connections with some remarkable teachers who offered me ideas and challenges along with friendship. What were other teachers doing in their classrooms about the same problems? What motivated them? How was the context in room 134 different from my context in room 140? Jan and I had managed to become

friendly and share our ideas in the old school. Now in the new school there was a school-wide collaborative effort. We were all working on the same notion toward similar goals. What would this interdependence look like and feel like? It was a little scary when I thought back on what Jan and I had been asking our students to do. I realized I had done this without actually experiencing that for myself. What would be the differences between working with a close friend and a whole staff?

There was never any question whether or not I should be trying out new ideas, taking risks, being willing to share the failures and successes about the issues of portfolios as alternative assessment tools with other teachers. We knew there was no magic report card form that would satisfy all contexts for all time. We were working on an alternative. The investigative stance was given status and legitimacy by the creation of a group of teachers for a new school who wanted to approach education differently. Tensions surrounding collegiality, trust, and time, were yet to surface.

And now here I was. A new school. A new group of energetic, creative, people with a mandate to create a lighthouse on the prairie. Collaboration was a given. We met as a group once a week and shared delicious food and intellectual conversation. We dared to dream. We took

risks. We looked at educational research on a variety of themes that were to drive our work in the new school. We sifted "Middle Years Philosophy" from educational philosophy. We made enduring connections with the University and people who were researching teacher practice. The dream was quickly becoming a reality. We were soon to meet for a social evening with parents and students who would be enrolled in the new school. We would have a chance to meet , even if only to share a few quick anecdotes and see what each of us looked like. And of course an empty building to fill. Yes, indeed, many more questions! What books? What teaching resources? What science lab equipment? What furniture? What colours? How were we going to organize the classroom groups? What needs to anticipate?

CHAPTER THREE

Portfolio Stew

What was happening for all of us in the classrooms was the attempt to arrive at a clearer understanding of teaching differently and assessing differently. I was developing curriculum and integrating that with assessment and evaluation. For some of us, we were teaching new subject areas and a new grade for the first time. We were reading similar research articles and talking about what we had read. There was some comfort in knowing we were all in this together, like vegetables, boiling and simmering and coming up for air every now and then to savour the individual and group tastes. There was less comfort in the swimming up stream.

I was attempting to make sense out of "the stew" just like I think we all were; taking some time to retreat to our individual classrooms to try to put some new things in place, think about them. We were boiling down some ideas so that they could begin to look less messy, at least for awhile. I was learning that I could hold on to a new idea, at least for awhile, before it started to change again. Sure enough, our retreat was temporary. There was a lot of popping in and out of each others' classrooms to observe and talk about what was simmering for us. We had small group

meetings to help us with collaborative efforts as well. I relied on the investigative techniques of planning and gathering information much as I had done with my first teacher as researcher project. I needed something that worked.

What instructional activities needed to be in place so that students could present ample amounts of evidence? Cooperative learning theory had a lot to offer. I would start there. I wrote observations about behaviour and accomplishments in a small coil-bound notebook and my journal, which became the life-line for my record-keeping. I continued to keep anecdotal comments during conferencing with students, marking assignments, oral testing, checking up on homework. Weekly quizzes helped me diagnose who needed help and what kind. I expected students to reflect on progress, set goals for learning and follow through. Students took an active roll when they didn't do well on a quiz; they were expected to reflect why not. They knew. They could write about what went wrong, that they knew what they needed to do to improve, and that they wanted to improve. Our goal was mastery.

I started to use peer critique as a component of evaluation for class presentations. This would give extra practice with evaluative and reflective language. It would involve the class in working with the criteria for

excellence they had established. I felt the more they worked with the criteria, the better they would understand them, and the more conscious they would be about standards of excellence when they were putting together their own presentations. I thought it was a way to learn from each others opinions and a way for students to support their own opinions. I saw it as a way to build community and interdependence with its emphasis on respect, sensitivity, helpfulness. This decision created quite an adventure.

I decided to use the three step response we had used for peer editing in the writing process. It would be a familiar model, therefore less threatening. We called it SAS: what struck you during the presentation? Write it down. Ask a question based on the content or the form. Make a suggestion. Keep in mind that the presenters want your help. Be as helpful as you can. Let's emphasize the positive I said. I distributed a response form for each member of the audience.

I mentioned this classroom work to my psychology professor and got quite a shock when she said, "Oh, no. You can't do that. Never ask students to evaluate each other. It is much too threatening."

Here I was, in the middle of it. Now what?

I gathered up all the student responses and asked my friend, a reading specialist , to look them over and give me a reaction. "This is neat! Hmm ... this is good. Oh, this is an interesting comment. Oh, I can see what you mean about Joey's thought processes here. Maybe we should do some reading testing with him ... okay, so what's your problem?"

"Is this threatening? Is this a destructive thing to be doing if my goal is to create interdependence?"

"No. The questions are not threatening. And students have to give a reason for what their opinion is. This should be a confidence builder. What is your sense?"

"I did think in advance about whether or not this would increase the anxiety of the presenters. I thought there would be anxiety. I thought more about the potential for student empowerment and interdependence."

"What have the kids said?"

They had plenty to say. As a class of sixth grade students, they were quite confident about speaking their minds. Yes, the peer critique made them nervous. Sometimes the answers others gave them were "dumb". If his voice was soft and one student wrote TALK LOUDER, that was hurtful.

Some comments made them feel good. FANTASTIC did that trick. I didn't think there would be any damage to their self-esteem, but I knew I had to do a lot more work with language.

"What is the most helpful about peer critique?" I asked.

"When people are honest. When they say things nicely," Karen said.

We did more large group and small group brainstorming about what helpful words could be used. We worked with the dictionary and thesaurus to find every adjective and adverb we could. We alphabetized the words. We made charts and hung them all around. We talked through the hurtful things and it was the large letters that gave the tone of disrespect more than the observation. I talked about artistic impressions and how graphic artists design words that mean heat or fire with flames or flashes, cold words with icicles. They weren't convinced. There was hurt that no artist could persuade otherwise. One student communicated this well.

"I know I have to talk louder." (shoulder shrug)
"So, big deal." (pencil tapping) "I'll try .. next time ... maybe." And he responded to my grin at those last

words. *Yeah, this is not easy I was saying, and he knew he had my sympathy.*

About this time, another teacher noticed that there was no rating scale on this peer evaluation and wondered why I chose not to do this. I cringed. "Please don't ask me to use numbers. I hate numbers. I'm trying to not work with percentages or averages or anything to do with numbers." He thought I should try a scale.

Then I thought, "Okay. I'm no coward. I'll try something. I'll see."

The next time around using the same format, I included a rating scale of one through five and a space for a written justification of the number. This small section caused a rebellion. When I probed the mumbling and rumbling, students told me that the numbers were unfair.

"She rated me a 2 because I rated her a 2 ... even though my project was better than hers."

"I don't care what she said on the line, look at this number!"

"People are using the numbers to be mean."

" Yeah. We shouldn't use numbers."

My worst fears were confirmed but it was fun to pick away at the dilemma. I was beginning to trust there was always another way to look at this. I checked all the peer critiques again. I noticed that a range of numbers, from two to five, were given when a strong, positive justification was given in the statement part. One student received a two and another a five when the comments were similar to: "Good work." "Hard to hear but I liked your project." I summarized this information on chart paper with multi-coloured felt pens and presented it for class discussion. It was a good time to talk about subjectivity and evaluation. The students saw the similarities of written comments and judged them fair but the wide range of the use of numbers was not. What was going on here?

"Are you sure that you think the words mean something that the numbers do not?" I asked. Was this report card residue? Probably. What if it wasn't? I interpreted this discussion as support for my misgivings about numbers and rating scales and the hurtful possibilities numbers had for ranking and grading. When I mentioned this to colleagues, they had a good laugh, thought I'd made a gigantic leap of understanding, but didn't present me with any other considerations.

I felt a little bit more secure with using this strategy another time, without the scale of course, but was sure I would do some more thinking. We modified the response forms; sometimes they were much less formal. That year, students completed six independent study projects so we varied the style of the peer critique with the goals each time. For example, we had a very detailed response form for one Social Studies project on Exploration. Another time, the forms were scraps of blank recycled paper and students copied a brief model I had sketched for them on the chalkboard. During some presentations, only a small group in the audience wrote evaluations while the rest of the class responded orally with questions and comments to the presenters and also to my questions. I made sure everyone had a chance to respond and tried to mix the groups by gender and ethnicity. This was to cut down on the use of paper and photocopying, teacher preparation time, student writing time, and it did make the response process faster. Some students asked if they could critique more than one presenter. I allowed that. I wanted as many voices as possible here. I also wanted to show that five or six quality critiques could be as helpful as twenty-seven. Presenters received, read, and signed the critiques before handing them to me. I read and signed each one. As we became more skilful, we became more efficient. I stapled my evaluation of the presentations with the peer critiques and

students had envelopes in their portfolios to store these forms.

Students valued these responses. Parents were very interested in them as well. There was a communication problem with parents about this once. Parents looked at the teacher evaluation as summative and felt it to be inadequate. They did not notice the conferencing notes, written editing remarks on the several drafts of the individual and group work, the goal-setting between teacher and student, and following through during the process. They were used to looking at the end, the final product, what my final comments were. Parents complained that there was lots of self-evaluation and peer evaluation and not enough teacher evaluation. They did not read the process and see the continuous coaching by the teacher. As the teacher, I did not see the pedagogical need to be elaborately summative when I felt that I had been exhaustively formative in my coaching. There was a conflict. I knew I was assessing and evaluating more authentically and documenting that with conferences and quick notes more than I had ever done. Integrating assessment with instruction had a different look. I was back to the problem of how to communicate with the parents as this had profound implications for a portfolio.

I saw class presentations as a way to assess and evaluate more than the student ability to use a clear voice and captivate the audience. Students would have some real power here. They would have a chance to talk about what interested them, what they were curious about. I see this as student decision-making. It is a way students control curriculum. It is also an "event" that builds on research skills, organization of ideas in writing, exploration of different ways to present ideas with an emphasis on the multi-media possibilities, critical listening skills, evaluative language development. I video-taped a series of class presentations so that kids could view them and enjoy them; I also wanted them to see themselves and use the tape as a basis for reflection.

The day the class viewed the tape, there was a lot of laughing and talking. I did not ask the students to reflect in writing on what they saw. I considered that as a first experience, this might be quite intimidating. We did some oral large group processing. I asked the class two questions and students volunteered their answers. The questions were: "Considering all the presentations, what could we improve?" and "What did you like best about the presentations?" Students could not always hear the presenter well. This was one way that TALK LOUDER became 'talk louder' - a less emotional and more factual look at the problem. Speaking clearly was an issue. One student

commented this seemed to be a technical problem with the video camera and this also was a balm for some residual hurt. One student commented that the audience was not always polite; they were talking when they should have been listening! I think they were recognizing how important respect was by experiencing the lack of it and having the chance to talk about it. All students liked the choice and control they had over the topics. They wanted to do more independent studies.

I chose not to have them reflect personally on their individual efforts after they had viewed them with the video cassette. It reminded me of the two video tapes I had of my teaching. My first attempt was a risky business. I didn't have a problem getting the taping done. It was part of the research. Viewing it was an entirely different matter. In both cases I had asked a student to video tape me and the class. I didn't prepare myself or the class in advance. Libby and the camera were available one day. I said, "Let's go!"

I wasn't sure what I was going to find, but I wanted to have something to reflect on. When I viewed the first tape for the first time, I waited until my house was empty. It was late at night. When I put the video on I was shaking. What would I see? I hid the tape away for a long time before I viewed it again. I was looking for something

specific this time. Much later I viewed it again with yet another and different reason because I was researching myself, my movements, my voice, my attitude. Everytime I looked at it I was home alone. I didn't want anyone in my family to view it. It was two years later when I had the second tape made and it was much easier for me to confront it as a professional development tool. I was amazed at the time it took me to deal with this. I was incredibly self-conscious, nervous. My comfort level with the mirror was rising.

There was so much laughing and talking going on during the viewing of their class tape, I couldn't have stepped into the students' conversations even if I had wanted to. There was a lot of laughing at themselves, not each other. This was a mirror for them too. I never heard an overt critical comment, but I did feel their nervousness in the loudness and the laughter. I was proud of them, but I was nervous too.

After that first experience with wanting the students to reflect on their video performance, I have used evaluation forms for every instructional video I show. It is a technique that helps students develop their analytical skills, listening, and summarizing of information. Students know in advance of viewing that I want them to be able to tell me what the main idea is and what some of the details

are. The goal is to continue to develop their language for evaluation. Sometimes I ask that a web of ideas be built after the viewing and as a group process. This type of evaluation is kept with their notes on that topic. If I ask students to select something from their work for their portfolios that shows they have improved listening skills, or can summarize information, they might choose to put in a video evaluation as an example of that.

I used rubrics to provide ways for students to learn the standards of excellence. Initially, the class discussed what made a good presentation, what made a good project. We brain-stormed details, a student acted as recorder, later I typed this in a formal way, then each student received a copy. The criteria we identified varied according to the assignment. There was room for teacher goals and individual goal-setting so that students could see what they had accomplished and what they still needed to work on. The rubric was used for students to plan how to begin the work. It was used for peer evaluation and peer editing. It was used when they were conferencing with each other on work in progress. I used it to guide the one-on-one conferencing and also for a final evaluation. A final mark is no surprise.

I learned how difficult a rubric is to design. I did a lot of experimenting, revising, and polishing. It made me work hard to design assignments that were purposeful and meaningful and goal oriented. Since evaluation is so multi-dimensional, I learned to leave a large space on the evaluation form for comments that I had not planned for in advance. I can't think of a time when something didn't arise that we hadn't expected. This format was always more difficult when giving a mark. I emphasized to the students that any mark is to be questioned and that I would always discuss any discrepancies that arose. I wanted to be careful about numbers. Students do compare answers and the numbers have to be fair. There were times when I predicted I would be challenged on a number, and I was, and that I would have difficulty explaining it, and I did. Fairness is probably the single most important thing to them in evaluation. This rubric is stapled to the assignment and if that piece was chosen for the portfolio, then the reference for the student or myself was at hand when giving an explanation for the parents. Parents were telling me they needed to see numbers.

One parent said, "Give me an A or a B. That means something to me"

I said, "My frame has changed. Letters and numbers have no meaning for me now."

He was patient and he was intrigued. I didn't want to lose him in the conversation. I told him the classroom story about the peer critiques and the subjectivity with the rating scale of one to five. I got the feeling he would be more comfortable if he heard something else. He wanted a standard for comparing. I call it an "out of body standard" when a dad says, "Now, Hemingway! There's a standard!" Yes. *Your son is twelve years old. Right now he is just himself, not a Hemingway; but, some day he may be. Right now he is trying so hard to please you, sir. Recognize him.* Discussing education with parents is fascinating.

Conferencing with students became another important evaluation strategy. Side by side with goal-setting and reflection, it facilitates learning. I learn as much as the students do in this process. I diagnose difficulties and coach toward the final goals. Students know in advance that it is conference day and they sign up for a time when they think they can be ready.

I like to sit at my desk during a conference because I have my records spread out on my desk. Students like to sit on the high wooden stool which is close to my chair. If it is a group conference they bring extra chairs. They show me their work in progress and come with their learning logs and conference notes. The conference starts when everyone has work, a log, and a pencil. They talk and I listen and give

supportive feedback. Their conference notes keep us on track. There is a place for the date, the main ideas of the conferences because they are organized in advance, time lines, a space to make quick notes of what was accomplished. I help them write their conference notes. I also keep a record of my own. Their conference notes need to be handed in with the final project because they are part of "the mark". When the conference is over, students are clear about what they have to do. Assessment is very much a part of the instruction during these information sharing sessions. When students talk to their parents about this work, parents may see how the process has developed by reading the conference notes. My evaluation for the project is a summary of these notes.

Conferencing helps to build the teacher-student relationship because it is conversational and social. It is a challenge for me when students are intense and intellectual about their learning as much as when they seem disengaged and without a plan. We are together, we talk, and there is time to help. I like to plan conferences when I have another adult in the room so that if I need to spend more time with the more dependent students, the other teacher can lend a hand. It took a year of trial and error to design a comfortable form to use. I need the visual concrete form to keep me on track. I think kids do too. For students who make the connection, it flows. For

students who don't as easily, I use it to tug them back to the task or to me: "If you are ready to conference, bring your form!" Of course there's a mad scramble.

"What form? What's she talking about? Ohhh. That form. Oops! ... Okay, here it is." Or sometimes, "HHmmm ... I musta' lost it."

I can lead, arrange, support, even "do" for students whose abilities or self-confidence with more independent learning needs more time to develop. Those who have acquired independent skills can be more independent with it. Those who need it, get more supervision. Conferencing is a tremendous enabling process.

The new school had been open for a year before we committed ourselves to student-led discussions. I saw this from two perspectives. The first was student empowerment and student voice. In a discussion with their parents and the teachers, the student would present the portfolio of work samples and be prepared to answer questions. Together, goals would be assessed and new goals would be identified. I also saw it as a move away from the horrendous load of comprehensive anecdotal reporting in a summative way. Teacher evaluation would continue to be a part of the assessment and instruction process on a daily and weekly basis. With all the extra effort I was putting into daily

and weekly evaluation, surely this would be adequate for the parents! I had not yet learned to be more efficient with my record-keeping but it had come a long way. Not quite livable yet, but it was right around the next curve. With some more thought into portfolio construction, could the portfolio "speak for itself"?

The stew gets hotter...

The next curve became the first student-led discussions which took place in early November. Students came into the classroom with their parents at the appointed times and arranged themselves in small groups at tables. At one time, there were three or four families in the room. The discussion time lasted about thirty minutes. I circulated among the tables. We discussed goals based on the student work and the goals were recorded. I asked the parents to set a next appointment time before they left.

It was a Thursday. This event was another first for our school. Most students arrived on time with their portfolios, writing portfolios and agenda book. Often the whole family came. Family groups sat together around tables grouped to increase the privacy. I think some of the kids were as nervous as I was. When the students opened their portfolios and started to talk, I sat quietly and observed or circulated to see if there was any assistance I could

give. Then something terrible happened. A mom called me over to her table and said, "Is this all there is?" Her face was furrowed.

"What do you mean?" I asked.

"Do I not receive a report or a growth commentary on how well Dawn is doing? I want to know how well she is doing in all subjects."

"No. There is no summary statement in the portfolio for each subject. You will see my evaluation comments on each piece in the portfolio. Dawn, what questions does your mom have that you cannot answer by showing her your work?"

"Well ... ummmm ... What do you want to know, Mom?"

"Well, I can see by your work that you are doing very well. But what does the teacher think?"

I sat down with them. "Let's go back over the goals we set in September together."

Dawn turned to the goals set. She was keeping this in the front of her agenda book. At the goal-setting meeting, our first meeting with parents in the fall, Dawn was encouraged to work ahead in Math, to set her own pace, and

we would monitor Math progress with conferences. She was interested in different ways to present her independent studies and wanted more multi-media experiences. I wanted to encourage that. She was a voracious reader and wanted to do more writing. Over the six week period, Math progress was good, she had mastered the essay format and presented a final piece of writing based on three novels by the same writer. She had kept a comprehensive log on a moon watch. She was fascinated by the night sky, aurora borealis, even U.F.O.'s. and her first independent study presentation was a play, foil costumes included, about comets and planets. She was independent and creative. The portfolio had drafts of her writing, math work samples and tests, her Science log, a video of her independent study presentation. She had also been working hard to establish a relationship with another student in the room who was choosing not to speak; who responded with slight nods of her head or when spoken to. Dawn was caring and was expressing a great deal of social responsibility when she spoke to me some days after school about her worry and frustration with this friendship. Did mom know about this aspect of school life? Some very important aspects of school life may not be as easily to record in a binder.

There was a change in the mother when she heard me summarize the accomplishments of her daughter. By not having this summary written down in the portfolio, I had

created some anxiety for her and the family. She felt I wasn't doing my job.

Another family called me over and I saw more cloudy faces and furrowed brows. "Oh, no. What now?"

The mom said, "Why are we doing this? Why have things changed? Is this the way it is going to be all year?"

I smiled and said, "As you recall from our meeting in September, I stated that I wanted to see you in the school more often this year because it is important that I am with you when Candace talks about her work with you so that if you need clarification from me I am here to give immediate feedback. It is my goal to work together with you."

"Are we going to do it this way next time?"

"Yes, I hope so. Please note any concerns on the response sheet and I will get back to you by phone or by letter. If you want to arrange a private meeting with me, we can do so next week. We will see this goal-setting sheet in the front of Candace 's agenda book right next to our September meeting summary. I hope to see you again in six school weeks from now. We will have time to talk about the latest work in the portfolio and how it is evidence of the

attention we have been paying to the goals we have set. Is this same time, Thursday, January 13, 1994, good for you?"

"Yes, this is a good time for us. Actually, we like this type of meeting. We wish our son in the (other school) had these arrangements. Then we could keep track of what he is doing. The teachers never talk to us until it is too late." That made me feel I was accomplishing a lot.

The time went on and the groups in the classroom changed and quiet conversations continued as I moved from group to group. Earlier in the day my class shared their portfolios with sixth grade students for a practice run. They whipped through the pages like maniacs. This time, the half-hour set aside for each family often was not long enough. Some family groups stayed as long as an hour. There were parents who were waiting for uncomfortable periods of time to speak with me as well. This would have to be fixed. I observed the students taking charge of the discussion in most cases.

I was sad to see one mom in charge of the portfolio pieces by having them in front of her. At first Miranda was sitting across from her mom. I said, "Miranda, move around to this side and sit beside your Mom so that you can look at your portfolio together." Miranda moved but did not take possession of the portfolio. Mom corrected all her mistakes

with a pen and was criticizing something every time I circled by. In Miranda's daily diary where students are asked to write a question about their learning for that day, Mom pointed to one question and said, "This is stupid. 'How can they live?' These people shouldn't be here."

I couldn't let that one go!

"Mrs. Brandson, on that day, our class spent quite a lot of time with the special needs kids. We were in their classroom, we sang, we listened to other students present stories about all of the interests of the kids who were confined to wheel chairs and we depended on others for complete health care. Miranda was struck by their quality of life compared to her own when she asked, poignantly, "How can they live?" I understood and was touched by her question."

Miranda had written in her daily log, "How can they live?"

"Yeah. What are those kids doing here anyway? They should be in hospitals. And all that money they are costing the tax payers! It is not right," Mrs. Brandson continued forcefully.

"Are you thinking about the articles in the paper recently? In this school we believe that all kinds of kids should learn together. Maybe the media could look at what we are doing here. I think the news stories would look different," I answered. I could tell by her face that she was not very happy with the situation.

One family was particularly rushed. They arrived late, sat absorbed while their child presented the portfolio and then rushed out in such a hurry that the dad did not even make eye contact with me. The mother phoned me after school the next week to shout her frustration that I had not provided a written summary of accomplishments and that I was not doing my job. Why had I changed things when they were so happy with what the last year's teacher had done, and was I going to send home a written evaluation, or did they have to 'take this higher' ?

I knew she was threatening me with a call to the principal and superintendent, but I could only reflect, "Who could be 'higher' than I? I was the one who knew her child's academic life better than any other school person." And I was confident that if the administration wanted more information, there would be a conversation about this, not accusations.

Several parents wanted to take the portfolio home along with the response form and promised to return the work the following Monday. I had asked everyone to respond to some questions. About a third of the group wrote on the form and handed it back to me the same night. Most wanted more time. They wanted to think carefully through the response form and to respond from home. I thanked them and told them that I would phone or write a letter to them next week, based on their feedback.

The portfolio evening struck me as "other-directed". Students brought their parents in, sat down , and started to share. Parents focussed on the student work and listened and ask good questions. For the first time, the appointments took place on time. In the past, parent interviews often started late and ended late, or parents felt ushered in and rushed out.

For the first time I felt like a facilitator with parents. I spend all day and well into most nights responding to their children's work. It was good to be able to arrange an opportunity to see the parents responding to their children and to the exhibition of learning in the classroom. I was so exhilarated by the evening that I could not sleep when I got home. My husband and I sat up late. I was sharing some of my insecurities about the evening and he said, "Look Zoë. You have another life.

This takes so much time. If the parents want a check-list report card, why don't you just give it to them?"

"I don't think there is any going back," I said.

What I had failed to do was make the portfolio "speak for itself" more independently of the child's voice. I was depending on the student voice because that was what I thought was very important. I needed to coach them more with what I saw as a new power for them. I also had to readjust my view to see this as a parent would. My reflections that night however, were so positive. Over the next few weeks, I was to hear parent voices that were not so. I learned some important things about portfolio construction that year.

Another parent was very angry. He phoned the day after and demanded a private meeting with me before the winter holiday. He was threatening to place his daughter in another school because he felt our school was not communicating about her progress in a way he could understand. He was not happy with the portfolio as a 'report card'. I asked the principal to sit in the meeting with me.

Both parents arrived. He was bothered by the idea that his daughter's friend came home with a report card and over

the phone she could tell everyone her grades. When the girlfriend asked how his daughter Carol was doing, his daughter was at a loss for words. "My daughter does not know where she stands. What is this? I want my daughter to go to a school where she knows where she stands!"

For me, this meant that the old vocabulary and patterns of talk had not yet been replaced by the new way Carol was learning to understand and talk about her portfolio collection. The parents were in a panic that the child did not know "where she stood". I spoke to them about the skills their daughter had and reminded them of the goals we had set in September to make improvements. Dad was all in favour of goal-setting. He saw that as important in real life. But what was the standard? How could her progress be compared to that of others? He was concerned about her future.

I wasn't sure that the parents went away with what they were seeking. They seemed more at ease with the information we shared. I promised to make some changes they felt they needed to make the portfolio make more sense to them. I admitted that my first effort that fall could stand a lot of improvements and that I would think about what they had said very carefully. We agreed to meet in January for a follow-up discussion.

The principal told me later that I was articulate about pedagogy and that I had communicated a detailed understanding of the student. She was impressed. The portfolio had not. We decided that working so closely with students to demonstrate learning resulted in a closer relationship with them. Carol stayed in our school. Friendly relations continued throughout the year with the parents.

I hoped that I would not lose track of my idea that student voices were critical in this dialogue. I was resisting the idea that the portfolio could "speak for itself". It was the dialogue that made the portfolio distinctive, authoritative, and authentic. Teaching students how to talk about their work was a definite goal for me.

I learned a lot from the parent talk and the response form. Some parents objected to being in one room with other family groups and some asked for private time to meet. Some were perfectly comfortable with this and liked the opportunity to see other families and socialize. Some parents objected to "little kids running around" while I liked the siblings there and thought it was true to life. Some parents didn't want a meeting at all. Parents who did not see the need to come to school told me that the regularly talked about school work with their child. Some

of the parents who worked shifts-work wanted regular phone calls. There were two parents I kept in touch with by writing notes in the child's agenda book.

The January 1994 meeting with parents and portfolios, the second student-led discussion, had its own special characteristics. The portfolios had a different look and we had made some schedule changes as well.

Students had worked hard from November 18, 1993 up to the Christmas break making organizational and content refinements to the portfolio collections. A table of contents was added. This represented work during that time period and a note to parents from me outlined curriculum goals. This would guide the choices of work samples that students would enclose. "Do we have to include all those on the list, just because you say so?" I answered with my reasons for wanting samples from each category included.

"Just suppose you chose not to put a work sample in from one category on the list. What would that mean to your parents? Would you be ready to explain that?" I wanted them to think ahead, think through consequences of their choices. I was to arrive at a different understanding of what this could mean for student selections at a later date.

This meant something about accountability to me and to them. If something missing meant work not complete, then the lack of evidence provided a point of discussion about decision-making or work habits and homework.

Students had also done a rather lengthy self-reflection on the September to November work which became part of the portfolio collection, just before the Christmas holiday. I also planned to continue the student self-reflections/evaluations weekly in the new year. Every Friday morning I would summarize some of the week's activities and ask the students to respond to those activities by describing them and then commenting on goals and accomplishments. This would provide more practice with reflecting, self-evaluation, and evaluative vocabulary. Parent communication would be enhanced by knowing what the learning activities were that week. "What did you learn?" was the object of the writing. On that weekly correspondence there would be a place for me to make comments as well as a place for parents to respond to me and to the child.

At the end of the first week in January, I sent home the December reflections including my comments. I also included a second reflections/self-evaluation from the students that represented the work from the first week back to school in the new year. I attached a letter to these

writings that explained some of the changes in the portfolios that the parents could expect to see during their next visit.

Schedules were adjusted so that there were fewer family groups in the room at the same time. Some parents had requested private time in the classroom as they were uncomfortable speaking in front of others, no matter how quietly we spoke. This was a plus for me, as things unfolded, as I honestly felt I had more time to talk with each family. The down side was that this took three different evenings to complete all the meetings.

One dad who worked for a multi-national company said that this system in my classroom was not reflective of the "real" world. In his view the world grades and sorts people and this was not preparation for the cold realities of a life they would meet about eight to ten years from now. He is graded in his work. He has targets to meet. How was this preparing his daughter for the real world? This was 'baby stuff '!

My eyes sparked. "These are twelve and thirteen year old children, not adults. I do not believe that I ought to grade and sort children. During a time when their abilities, their understandings about themselves as learners, their potential, etc. is just beginning to bloom,

they need opportunities to make decisions, opportunities to share their ideas, to gain self-confidence about their accomplishments. They need encouragement to become independent and critical thinkers and to learn how to problem-solve. Every child is different. Each child needs to be understood for her/his own strengths and needs encouragement to build on those strengths. Learning difficulties need to be identified and worked on together with parents as part of this knowledge and planning." I was really on a soap-box.

"I know what you mean by that. My own two kids are as different as night and day. And we tend to treat them differently, too," He admitted. Okay. Someone was listening.

"Do you talk to your children about that? Do they know that?." I wondered about this to myself. I continued to explain. As teachers we were trying to model with self-evaluation and reflection practice that self-knowledge was important. Was self-knowledge not important in his work? Did he not have to make his own plan about how to meet his targets? Did he not have to collect evidence of his work and his accomplishments so that he could argue his case before his boss for his next raise, or with his next account? Did he not have to have the skill to speak confidently and well about his own ideas, his work, and the

company's interests? Did he need only his boss's opinion, or did his own opinion count, in order to improve his performance? What other opinions were significant in this process? his family's? his friend's?

I explained by referring to the portfolio that I was attempting to design instructional activities in my classroom that would lead to self-knowledge, would promote co-operation and more importantly collaboration, that would alert students to the importance of setting goals, and would encourage self-reflection and self-evaluation. This was learning for real life. He just stared at me.

One parent asked me if I would write down my explanation of portfolio assessment. Listening to my explanation was clear, but she needed something to take away with her to read and to respond to at another time. She laughed and said that perhaps she was a "visual learner" like her daughter. She was referring to the learning styles work in the portfolio. We shared a laugh over that! She was learning from her daughter and about her daughter's learning style. I said I would. I made copies of what I wrote for a few other parents I thought might be interested but never received a personal reply.

There is a connective tissue in the portfolio development with my students and that I have found to be

patience with the effects of intended behaviour. The most recent student-led discussions offered even another changed view. In my journal I wrote:

Student-Led Discussions- November 1994

What struck me about the student-led was a link to three ideas; credibility, caring, and curriculum. This is a credible, worthy, valued process and I feel a credibility that is mine, as much as the students, because I am able to facilitate this process in their lives. What small things am I doing now that may have large implication for their futures? I observe a caring, concerned relationship between parent and child; I feel connected to that. I am sitting here, they are over there in their family groups, but we are connected. I know the kids well and this gives a new understanding to the word partnership. I actually hesitate to use this old vocabulary; it would be useful to include the antithetical - I am not a stranger, not an adversary. I feel a connection with parents. They seem relaxed, definitely in a mode to listen to their child. I have time to get to know the parents. These talks are taking a long time. One mom stayed for one and one-half hours this afternoon. When we talked about her child's learning she said more than once, "That's Jane! You've got that right!". We are building relationships and the focus is on goals and plans to accomplish those goals and we focus on what is worth learning. Better than that, there is agreement, a consensus, about what appears to be worthwhile. There is a clearness about what it is we are doing here. The "curriculum" we are actually talking about is what we are doing for and with the child as parent and teacher and what the child is doing for herself. "Right" procedures have these "good" effects. The connective tissue is the intentions, we cause the future.

My writing was interrupted at that time by a teacher walking into the room who needed clarification about a project we were working on together. What is valuable for me about the writing is the completely different perspective

and mood I was feeling that date, compared to the anxiety and tension I was feeling in previous student-led discussion encounters. I had learned something in November, and now, January 1995, I use this journal entry as a springboard from where I am now to be able to outline some challenges I still see.

A meal to digest...

There are times when it is becoming clearer, less messy, for me to think about my work in school.

Portfolio assessment implies example and argument. It is illustrative of three important educational issues - assessment, pedagogy, and curriculum. Student portfolio collections as alternative assessment in method and manner (Fenstermacher, 1992) are non-competitive and descriptive; show scholarly respect for evidence; represent an openness to ideas from all stakeholders; is a dialectical process of interdependence of teachers, students, and parents; includes skills of self-reflection with goal setting and the follow through; and symbolizes theory in practice. Portfolios have the power to instruct teaching, to establish defensible "practical arguments" (Fenstermacher, 1986).

I am learning about collaboration, what makes education transactional as opposed to transmission, when I worked

with cooperative learning theory. The timbre and tempo of a collaborative classroom is not always an easy flow. Students have taught me that a shift in tempo or timbre is usually a signal of a frustration level and not necessarily a signal that they want to switch activities. I started to trust this aspect more and be patient with that frustration that is being created, give it more time, so that some new learning will be an outcome. The disequilibrium, tension, conflict, usually means that some new learning is being worked out, and that disequilibrium is a positive signal for a teacher and the class. Not necessarily a negative one. I let them stew more. I'm not so quick to rescue them from the simmering and bubbling.

When teacher talk time becomes part of the teaching day, it may become part of the teaching culture. It is not an add-on to the teaching day. Teachers need time to establish a relationship, to share, to trust, to organize their ideas, to change things! It functions in a similar way as peer critique and group processing, the give and take of power, and the talk needs to be part of learning, during the action, and after the action. This process needs to be individual reflection in- and on-the-action as well as group reflection. Student talk time needs to be part of the teaching day, the student culture, the school culture, with a view to improving on what has gone before. I'm quite certain that there has to be more talk time with parents. A

reflective school culture is quite a change from the traditional, "empty vessel" metaphor.

I am learning to be clearer about expectations and standards of excellence using the rubrics. The criteria for assignments are something that students are more likely to take responsibility for when they help negotiate them and use them as a basis for setting goals. Rubrics are usually in a state of change from one work to another. They represent goals and standards.

Conferencing has tremendous power. It works very well in a co-teaching time. Having another teacher in the room to be there in a multitude of ways for the kids who are not conferencing is an enabling condition for learning. I have experienced some wonderful learning in co-teaching time. Teachers need adult learning buddies too! Co-teaching is an opportunity to collaborate to improve the quality of education for kids that I am just beginning to learn more about.

There are no recipes, there is no one right way. Ideas are not applied, they are negotiated in context. Practice becomes visible because it is shared with an overture to trust and exchange. Learning is more process than single event. During observation and discussion there is reciprocity as all shareholders become resources for one

another. There is no detachment but involvement and responsibility-taking. Method cannot be divorced from manner.

Curriculum becomes visible because it is shared and has been looked at systematically by such processes as self-reflection, goal-setting, and the dialectical interdependence of teachers, students, and parents. The teaching medium becomes visible so that it is accessible to theorizing (Boomer, 1987, p. 6). One can revisit the theory after working with the ideas and reflecting on the understanding of those ideas. Understanding change is then understood as learning and change.

Kemmis (1987) asks what makes one's practice educational and I find an answer in the enactment of my beliefs and values in order to do a better job of realizing those values. There is a realization that teacher knowledge is not just about pedagogy, curriculum, and assessment, but about the moral dimensions of teaching (Goodlad et al., 1990; Fenstermacher, in Goodlad et al., 1990; Coulter, 1994; Noddings, 1984). Sergiovanni (1994) employs his powerful metaphor of community to alter perception, language, and actions. When our language changes, the way we act on the meanings of those words also changes.

How has my learning changed? My practice has become *praxis*. I write a personal journal, student observation journal on behaviour, and anecdotes of conferences. I expect students write about learning activities weekly in commentaries to parents. I think more deliberately about designing lessons with built-in evaluation of goals and accomplishments. Self-esteem is built by offering more student control over curriculum decisions, and giving them the authentic, significant work of learning. There is more dialogue with students and parents. And naturally, there are more questions.

I have yet to settle, with a greater degree of satisfaction, the notion of student voice that is still niggling. It must mean more choice and control. But what? What more can we do with co-teaching time to make the classroom more meaningful for the students? What other possibilities are there for the portfolio as a structure that informs teaching? What indeed are the possibilities for my own portfolio? And of course, there are many questions that I have about the notion of curriculum.

The next chapter turns to the explication of some of the "however's" that keep being stirred up in the stew. It continues to be of great interest to me to find out how the notion of teacher as researcher will continue to enable me to study my own practice so that some of the implications

for that knowledge allow me to be a part of quality education.

CHAPTER FOUR

Teacher as Researcher - A Changing View

Why should teachers bother with teacher research? Because it is a way of knowing and learning about teaching. I have learned some valuable lessons about teaching and how I go about being a teacher. Now, school is less messy and yet at the same time it is more complex. Now, I have a language for a concept of teaching that is becoming clearer. Now, my monologue is challenged, published, open to scrutiny as I have come to believe teacher work should be open. At the same time, I am also aware of an oversimplification in this writing in the explanation of this work in my pursuit of the ideals of caring, community and collaboration.

Nonetheless, this writing is an attempt to articulate adequately the principles behind teaching (Smyth, 1992, p. 296) that characterize my practice. A concept of teacher as researcher provided the framework for an investigation that has led me to a deeper understanding of four aspects of teacher work - curriculum, pedagogy, assessment and a moral dimension of teaching. Norms uncovered include caring, community, and collaboration, and the central role of reflection in this research effort. My initial question of

how to improve my practice or be better at what I am doing as it is tied to quality of education in my classroom, became a matter of understanding better those four aspects with caring, collaboration, community and reflection as the connective tissue.

The description I have given of my teaching is not an end in itself. ... "[I]t is a precursor to uncovering the broader principles that are informing (consciously and otherwise) [my] classroom action" (Smyth, p. 297). I am seeking to develop "defensible practical principles" so that I may move "beyond intellectualizing the issues to concrete action for change" (p. 298). By taking a teacher as researcher stance, my practice has changed in ways that I believe improve the quality of education for students. By being reflective, critical, and by working collaboratively with others, I can take the power to decide what educational aims should be and how schools should be operated. I have become clearer about my philosophy of education.

"What is going on? What am I trying to accomplish here?" are the initial questions that led to an increased understanding of teaching that have led me closer to being able to say, "This is good practice." I recognize that I have been seeking what is good practice the essence of which is dialogic in nature.

As I look back on the classroom stories, I see they represent a way for me to make a connection between beliefs, purpose, and the way I act as a teacher. All of this can be understood in relationship to colleagues, students, and parents. The conceptual link for all my teacher work is the understandings about relationships with people that I have derived from such stories, about the ways in which I learned to organize curriculum to understand students, their parents, colleagues, and activities. Caring, collaboration, community, and reflection represent touchstones of my way of knowing and acting; I organize curriculum, pedagogy, assessment, and am mindful of the ethical ideal, in light of these norms.

The words of Hlebowitsh (1990) remind me of my own experience that is part of my stories. Hlebowitsh argues for an integration of curriculum and instruction and reflective consideration of the moral implications of teaching. When I stood in the chaotic aftermath of that school day in the prologue to this writing, I knew I needed to examine what I was teaching and why, and how it could be done better (p. 156). As I embarked upon a deliberate, purposeful journey as teacher as researcher, school work became even messier. Curriculum knowledge involves a justification of aims, a development of teaching and learning strategies and content that puts all members of the learning community in tune with the subject matter and the

values and aims of society. Curriculum knowledge develops through reflective consideration of the moral and pedagogical implications of teaching. I learned how incredibly complex all of this is and have decided that although the tensions are many, the effort is worthy because the reward of the learning is worthwhile.

School is also less messy. The norms of caring, community, and collaboration are clearer to me, and are now part of the language I use to describe what it means to me to be a teacher.

Caring

At some point along this journey I learned that good teaching is caring. Establishing a humane relationship with students and their parents is the basis of understandings with them, about them, their goals, and how I can facilitate their learning. There are times when I feel I have learned more from students and parents than they could possibly learn from me. But then I smile to myself and think of the word "transactional". When I reflect upon these stories above that show the importance of a caring relationship in the social organization of the classroom, I am reminded of the words of Noddings (1984) when she speaks of the "means of nurturing the ethical ideal" (p. 184). Finding and putting into practice the means and more fully understanding

the means of nurturing the ethical ideal began for me the day I decided to set about exploring cooperative learning theory and what that could possibly mean in the lives of my students.

Then, I was motivated by the claim that student marks would be higher on tests if students could learn to work productively and cooperatively in their studies. My goal was to increase test scores. If I could improve marks on tests that would mean I was a good teacher and the quality of education in the classroom would improve. I assumed students and parents and my principal would be happy about my decision, if I could replicate these astonishing claims. Then, I was also motivated by the observation that students really didn't exhibit much cooperative behaviour. I valued harmony and wanted to see if deliberate, conscious effort on my part could create that value in students. I was still thinking that this learning could be transmitted; it was something I had to "do" to someone else. In the transactional process that unfolded, I learned much more than I expected.

One of the things I learned is that good teaching is grounded in caring. Deliberately and purposefully setting about to improve the quality of the relationships between members in the class brought me closer to an understanding of the students. I came to understand them as human beings,

with separate wishes, fears, curiosities about the world, that I had never imagined, and I continue to be intrigued by their ways of thinking. How much conversation is needed, over and over, to help them with big ideas such as truth, and honesty, and fairness never ceases to amaze me. I was teaching for about ten years before I began to see this more clearly as a "responsiveness" and "receptiveness" as I now use the language from Nel Noddings (p.2).

I also learned to ask a lot more questions. I used to assume I knew what a student was thinking, fearing, wondering about. Now when I want to know something about what is going on in the classroom, I ask. It's quite a simple practice even though the responses usually aren't. However, when I find that questions such as "what's going on here? what am I accomplishing?" popping into my mind, I ask those around me about how they perceive that. The skill of group processing, derived from the cooperative learning story from the classroom, is a reflective action that makes public for the consideration of others, the work of the group that day, at that time. Students are expected to discuss what went well, what the group could improve on for next time, and come back to these goals. Then one student reports to the class as we all listen. We talk in the classroom about their learning in other forms; other process logs, their reading-writing-response journals, in their self-evaluations before and after a test, in letters

to parents. I need to see their faces, hear their words, and "receive what they are feeling" (p.3) about their work to facilitate next steps.

I observed that good teaching as caring plays out in the affective responses in the classroom. I noticed this when I taught about learning styles. I wanted to find a way to give students information about some educational research on how we learn. This information intrigued them as I hoped it would. As we learned about learning styles in my classroom, I facilitated opportunities in social studies projects for students to choose from a variety of activities that would help them learn more about their preferences and judgments. I worked with my class about learning styles after much talk with colleagues and was encouraged by the responsiveness of the students when they started to learn that there were a variety of styles. Students learned to study in different ways. What intrigued them was that there was in fact a variety of ways to study - not just one way. One group of kids got together to make flashcards to help them study for the tests. Just because they needed flashcards in their review to help retain information they were released from the label of "dumb". There was a myth in the group that because one group of students needed visual pictures to help them understand, rather than just facts from a written page, that they were "dumb". One group, the students who needed to talk, just

wanted to discuss what they had learned -- they questioned each other from their notes. Another group designed a game to be played with the facts. Two students in the group wanted to rewrite their notes.

I care that students have information that makes a difference to them in their lives. Student responses, their interest, and even their relief in some cases, showed me that sharing information about how we learn is important. It validates choices and values those choices as a "real" part of the work. I was fascinated when students saw learning style information as important to their "work". A different group of students at a different time did not see that learning the roles of encourager or materials person was a "real" part of their work. Both groups learned to work somewhat differently, however. If the result of this exchange of information about learning styles or cooperative roles is increased tolerance and understanding among us, then the decision I have made to teach about "differences" becomes a means of nurturing the ethical ideal that Noddings writes about.

I learned that relationships in the classroom improve when I teach this way. Sharing information about learning styles, teaching about cooperative roles, exchanging our ideas about assessment, establishing criteria for what makes an excellent piece of work, involving students and parents

in goal-setting and the follow-through; all this leads to knowing students well and enriches the relationship. Recall the story of Donny, the isolate. Once I understood clearly that I was also treating him as though he was not really in the class, our relationship improved and I know other students started to see him differently. How the teacher acts is crucial.

In some ways, I learned that I was also cared for. Throughout my experience with the teacher research group in the division, I was learning that teacher work is valued as unique and important to educational dialogue. The superintendents' team, the School Board, other teachers, many authors cited in this reference list, value thoughtful research that admits to being on-going and incomplete. I was given the freedom, the opportunity, the time, and the moral support to explore my own learning and make connections with that learning to students - with the expressed purpose of improving the quality of education for students. How could that goal be accomplished without involving myself in conversation with other teachers, the students, or indeed, their parents? At our research meeting, we talked about how things were changing for us in the classroom. The day that someone in the group said that "the rules had changed", we were encouraged to talk about this with the students with an eye to increasing their involvement with the learning. It was a way to involve

them, to allow them to take more responsibility for the classroom interaction in a conscious way. It was a way of "letting go" (Newman, 1991, p. 228).

If I felt cared for when I shared my work, would this also be valuable for students to learn that their work is valued, that they are cared for in a similar way? I'm in the midst of an attempt to do this. In the classroom, I make many efforts to involve students in conversation and reflection about their work as students. I have been encouraged to respect my own work and that of other teachers and believe that the next logical piece is to encourage students to respect their own work. In my classroom stories, we learn to write evaluative and reflective statements and to set goals together and individually. I give reflective language and monitor how students use it and indeed if they are learning how to use it. Self-evaluation and goal setting are a part of daily life in the classroom because of the drive to integrate assessment and instruction in the examples given in the above stories. Goals are jointly arrived at through teacher reflection on the accomplishments of the individual, through individual reflection on what was accomplished, how, and what each person wants to do to improve. Parents are also a part of this conversation during student-led discussions.

We discuss and write down what makes a piece of work of the highest standard. We use the rubrics in a variety of ways outlined in the stories to show how these standards of excellence are used throughout the process, to help students inform their work as it is unfolding, not just at the end. The criteria are set during a class discussion, are typed, copied, and given to each student to help them with the process of whatever task the rubric represents. There are no surprises for students when there is a "final" evaluation. Students can articulate what they did or did not accomplish according to what we set for ourselves at the outset. Students can also extend the dialogue to take into consideration other learning factors that arose in the meantime that we had not predicted.

During one evaluation, the students told me that one problem with this work was that they did not have time to present or listen to all the projects before the two-week winter holiday before Christmas. Something else came up for study in class and resuming presentations in February did not make sense. Students decided to make sure next time that all work was presented during a two day period, starting on a Wednesday, and Thursday, and having Friday as an extra day, for time, just in case something unforeseen arose. Students saw this as a fairness issue. We had not considered "time" as part of the criteria on our rubric. To me, this shows the power of student voice, the important

ideas that surface when students are encouraged to reflect, evaluate, and articulate the process. Students assume more responsibility when they make some of the decisions and they know they are listened to.

The technique of peer critique was used so that we were able to talk about ratings and numbers and comments and learn new language that was helpful, not hurtful. It is a way to provide student input, to give students the opportunity to talk about student work, to teach language necessary in order to do that well. Usually students present projects and the teacher evaluates. It is not always necessary for only the teacher to plan, reflect, write, and respond. Students need these opportunities because these are life-skills; making judgments based on criteria, thinking deeply about criteria and working with those criteria, justifying decisions. This practice encourages self-confidence. Peer critique enables us to talk about many issues students think of that I hadn't predicted. When comments like, "She gave me a 2 just because I gave her a 2 even though my project was better" enabled us to explore feelings and new language and much larger ideas such as "subjectivity" and "objectivity".

Caring involves increasing the student voice. When students started to group process during the cooperative learning lessons, they worked together, they reported to the

class as a whole, they kept track of progress, and Julie, bless her heart, used this as a goal-setting and organizational tool for future work. She recognized this tool and led the class to make this connection with the charts as well. Julie also deliberately took her blue Social Studies binder off the shelf and shared it with her mother in an assertive and articulate manner that overwhelmed me and completely confused her mother. This was the first "real" student-led discussion that I witnessed and had inadvertently engineered. As time went on, for me this meant that students had more choice over selections for their portfolios and increased opportunities to discuss their selections. The stories graphically show what went on during peer presentations, student-led discussions, increased conference time with the teacher, all of which added to the practice of the practice.

Caring means authentic involvement with parents. Increasing parent voice means that parents, students and teachers have more opportunity to talk about skills and goals, study habits, and resources. When the staff decided to look at portfolio collections as alternative assessment practice, we knew that arranging more time to talk with parents was important. We knew that asking parents for feedback to questions and surveys would help us with the communication process. Enabling parents to help in the goal-setting with student and teacher increased their

involvement with the process of developing student portfolios and assessing student interests and abilities.

In our school we have many families who do not speak English as their first language so we were aware that communication was not going to be simple. We hoped that with student-led discussions focussing on the portfolio that school talk would happen in a variety of languages. That happened very naturally. We were there to help with any clarification that was needed. We often see siblings at the discussions, the older ones often involved in translating. In our school there are many parents who work shift-work and often both parents work, but there is a high percentage of parents who attend student-led discussions.

We have asked parents to fill out surveys. We struggle with the wording on these questionnaires to keep them free from jargon and academic language to encourage participation. Often the students and parents discuss the questions, talk in their own language, and then the student writes the parent response. One mom said she was not very good with English, so if I didn't mind, she wanted her daughter to write for her. The parents contribute valuable insights. As a school we have used parent comments to inform and to change our practice. One comment was repeated throughout, for example, that the portfolio discussion took a long time. Parents did not begrudge the time spent with

their children, comments were positive about the quality of the time. Teachers and students are well aware of the time required to teach and learn reflective practice. I have thought hard on that and have managed to rearrange the portfolio itself, encourage fewer and more indepth student reflections on work samples, and made curriculum summaries shorter.

Increasing parent voice also means that we are going to hear things that are critical of our practice. As the teacher, I have felt like a target instead of a partner at times. As I reflect on the first student-led discussions where I had not included a lengthy growth commentary, I feel like a target. Parents were impatient with a change in format, frustrated because they were in a room full of other parents and students and could not talk freely. The mopping up I felt I had to do after exposing myself in that situation took months of more talk and meetings with parents, students, and the principal. As a teacher I was taking risks and struggling to meet the challenges of the decisions I had made. This was not for the faint-hearted. At one point with a group of difficult parents, I felt I was running out of words. I was not meeting the parent needs and did not know how to do that.

I continue to learn about authentic involvement with parents and struggle with how to share that meaning with

them while involving them. Do parents see the student-led discussion, student self-evaluation, reflection on accomplishments and goals, goal-setting, as an effort to bring them closer to what goes on for their child and his or her school day? Do parents understand this to be an improved relationship with the child, the teacher, the school, and the child's learning? How do I show respect for the learning of the parents in this process of attempting to increase their involvement with classroom activities? Certainly, my learning with this issue is ongoing and incomplete. I also believe that through continued examination of the practices we have created in our school, this aspect of school may become less messy. I have learned that caring invokes respect for the learner. Parents, teacher, and students are learners in this dynamic, some probably more consciously involved than others, although I take the liberty of naming all people in this relationship as learners.

Caring means it is not the worst thing that could happen if one failed. I encourage students to think about what they could then do, to fix the problem. I respect students by knowing that they can experiment and fail and reflect and try again and learn to succeed. I have felt it safe to do so. I respect students by being patient with their learning and knowing that learning is not always easy and that it takes time. From my perspective, students who

are able to present their portfolios and talk about their work with a receiving teacher or a parent or any other audience they so choose, that audience would be confronted with work samples and self-evaluations as well as teacher evaluations from different times of the year. This would be an informative demonstration of learning. Much more informative and personal and respectful of the learning that had gone on than simply a list of marks, or a set of averages, or a rating scale that compares one person to another.

Caring also means providing the time for learning to develop. I have learned that learners need time and patience and practice. Teaching about how to get along is arduous; learning those skills is even more so. Interpersonal skills need time to develop and unrelenting care because they are the building blocks of caring relationships - student and adult. Amy could not say the encourager words, even after lots of group practice. Dividing up the tasks in the cooperative group was not always fair - especially the time Kenny wanted to color the maps when everyone else wanted to do some map work too, and he refused to do anything else. I never did give group marks on the projects because the students were raising too many issues that didn't seem to fit any model. We had individual quiz marks which showed that students who put in

the effort achieved higher marks on the quiz. The marks were directly related to effort, not intelligence.

This caring relationship means that I step back more and allow student to experience a disequilibrium that accompanies all new learning. I am not as quick to change the task, intervene in other ways, to rescue. When students got noisy and restless during a task, I used to change the task. Now I observe more and circulate among the students to see what they are accomplishing and listen to what exactly it is that is making the noise. Usually, it is just louder voices and not disruptive comments. Students who are off task get more of my personal attention than students who do not need a teacher's intervention at that time. When I reviewed the tapes for the social studies project on the Maritimes, for example, I was struck by how cooperatively the kids *were working*. Before I listened to the audio tapes, all I was worried about was how much noise there was around me. I learned to look beneath the surface of the classroom tone and tempo.

Students learn from practice with leading. Students can lead: they can negotiate high standards of work, they can examine their work and decide what needs to be better and how they can go about accomplishing that. They are developing confidence and skill with language to speak clearly about their work. Students learn about cooperating

by have interdependent as well as independent work to do. Besides cooperative learning strategies, many teaching strategies are revealed in the stories that enable the learning process.

Caring means that the learning is negotiated. This is a way of letting go. Students have skills to learn and develop through a wide range of curriculum activities and student choice is an important component in that range. A variety of perspectives is honoured as is learning style, interest, and ability. In independent study projects, students set themselves a problem and then journey to investigate what solutions there are. There is no rush to supply answers before one finds out what the question can lead to. When students have an interest in what they would like to learn more about, sometimes they end up questioning what exactly it was that they first set out to discover. Usually an investigator finds out there is something else she needed to find out about, something unpredicted.

Caring means that the risk is worth it. We cared enough about assessment and communication about learning with students and parents to take personal risks with our own learning and to have that risk-taking open to discussion, and at times, heated debate. We were a group of teachers who, for my part, hardly knew each other yet were drawn together with enough commonalities that focussed us on

what we wanted to do that made things better for kids. There was and still is a commitment and a choice. The commonalities have been established and we are genuinely interested in what each one is doing, where the research and learning is going, what seems to be new on the agendas. "The commitment is to cared-for and to our own continual receptivity, and each choice tends to maintain, enhance, or diminish us as ones-caring." (p.175). The point of teaching is student learning and the manner in which we teach (Fenstermacher, 1992) reflects our moral knowledge and behaviour.

A common thread through the above discussion is that of collaboration, being together to improve the quality of the educational experience for kids. The norm of collaboration is another connective tissue that helps sustain the conversations.

Collaboration

The more I became involved with others and their conversations about teaching and learning, the more I became convinced that good teaching is collaborative at crucial points along the way. For me this means that within an educational community committed to the construction of what it means to improve the quality of education for students, we need to be in touch with others in order to do that.

This notion is in danger of oversimplification again; however, let me simply say that because of collaborative efforts in a particular intellectual climate and environment, I was able to connect some ideas and experiences, construct meaning for myself, about myself, and about teaching.

The first critical incident was collaborative in nature. This began with the investigative stance introduced to me by Joanne, seven years ago. It was fortuitous that I developed relationships with other teachers who supported this direction. Many voices resound from the literature as well. For me, the work of Stenhouse offered a new image of schooling and there was an opportunity for me to explore that with a group of individuals in whom trust was placed. Trust and openness is at risk when teachers talk about their ideas and frustrations. Teachers are supposed to know everything, aren't they? Teacher as researcher is not concerned with this 'expert' thinking. There is a vision of individual teacher growth connected to curriculum and professionalism focussing on the notion of re-search as educative and developmental as well as important to the wider world of schoolpeople.

I experienced an independence and an interdependence in collaborative efforts. The collaborative part was the exploration of notions with a group of teacher researchers,

working with these ideas in the classroom, writing about my personal experience with these ideas and classroom events, and then talking to colleagues. Writing for a wider audience is also an important part of the opening up of teacher work for dialogue. The independent part is the personal cultivation of some of those ideas that I shape into connections with ideas that help to develop my learning and understandings. An enabling climate allowed for this. There is a respect for teachers as learners. Some guiding words for me are:

Good teachers are necessarily autonomous in professional judgment. They do not need to be told what to do. They are not professionally the dependents of researchers or superintendents or innovators or supervisors. This does not mean that they do not welcome access to ideas created by other people at other places or in other times. But they do know what ideas and people are not of much real use until they are digested to the point where they are subject to the teacher's own judgment. ... [F]or only teachers are in the position to create good teaching (Stenhouse, in Hopkins, 1985, p. 69).

To me the words of Stenhouse reveal a powerful respect for teachers as learners, as *autonomous* and independent, all the while respecting the collaboration that is necessary along the journey towards increased understandings about teaching. The notion that teachers are capable of making informed decisions partnered with the idea that teachers welcome ideas created by others is a powerful image for me.

This notion has been very important in my learning. First it validates the respect I feel I warrant for being capable and intelligent and then it validates a second important idea that in order to do my work I need to work in concert with others. I think I needed to learn to be *autonomous* before I could learn to be part of a collaborative effort and I needed the collaboration in order to be independent.

I visualized this at first as my stepping out of the photograph of the students of a classroom picture. The classroom photograph had an empty space at times; the outline of that empty space was my outline. Then I stepped back in to the photograph. The stepping out may be the time when I need to digest a new idea to make it *subject to my own judgment*. When I step back in to the picture I see it as an indication that I have learned something, I have changed, I am ready to explore collaboratively this idea again. I have changed because of the ideas generated from the group; notions that have struck me from what students have said.

It is a lot of fun to extend this classroom photograph to see students opting in and out at times. If I allow myself the freedom to step back or step out, do I also allow respect for the other learners to take the same freedom? The picture could as easily be a photograph of a teacher as researcher group, a student-led discussion, a

staff meeting, a university class, a team meeting with those teachers with whom I closely work, my family. Of course, learners need to step in and out at different points along the journey. Stenhouse speaks to me in a way that validates my own autonomy and judgment concerning my stepping in and out, respects the time and space others need to learn and do their own stepping in and out, and also binds me to the social construction of the meaning that enables that autonomy.

An important piece of this stepping in and out of the picture is the concept of reflection. Because of my work with other teachers as researchers, because of collaborative as well as individual effort, I have developed a commitment to knowledge and understanding with an emphasis on the process of reflection (Schön, 1983,1987). There is a wide-awakeness that is needed; a careful consideration between thoughts and action, a stepping in and out of the photograph, if you will. Now I see schools as centres of inquiry and the locus of teacher research is what happens in the classroom so that students learn. When there is an aspect of practice that appears problematic, a questions arises instead of a headlong rush to "fix" the problem.

A collaborative effort is expended during our team meetings at school to organize learning for a thematic unit.

Teachers bring a variety of perspectives on what the theme means, we look at our students and make decisions about what might work, we collect resources both inside and outside the school. We involve students in preliminary discussions to see where the areas of interest lie. We attempt to involve parents as resources. We combine classes of students so that they are working and playing with students in other age groups. I learn much from this experience. I learn about friendship and professionalism. I learn that others have unique approaches to problems and I am less stuck in my own thinking. I am more willing to try something new because if I fail I have friends around me who care. There is no such thing as the "f" word, fail, because I have learned that I always learn something worthwhile. All this is the easy part. The hard part is developing and nurturing the relationships among people. Being clear about what we are doing and why, being purposeful and deliberate, being mindful of ethical ideals, is an artistic balancing act.

Fenstermacher (1990) advocates dialogue in the classroom that draws attention to what we are doing and why. This allows students to see and understand educational intentions upon which we reflect jointly. As a teacher, I give knowledge by sharing it. When I first wondered if teaching cooperative learning skills to students would improve the relationships in the classroom, or when I wondered about how I could demonstrate a different way to

assess learning because now I was teaching differently, I was setting the stage for an examination of practice that involved the students, parents and children, other teachers, other educational researchers. Fenstermacher also believes that we must know the learner well, and that in the practising and failing and practising again, by expending effort, there is a reciprocity of effort and a commitment to the responsibility to learn (p. 137). When he speaks of reciprocity I read collaboration and from this I see connectedness and commonality on a larger scale which I call community.

Community

Community is another part of my language that extends the notion of belonging. Not "belonging" in such a way that individual thinking is overtaken by a mentality of "group think"; that would be destructive in its ignoring of the individual creativity so important to the dynamic. But in the sense that there are ones caring and those being cared-for in a reciprocal relationship. This attempt to define this notion is in danger again of oversimplification; however, the descriptions from the stories may add to the clarity of the notion.

Collaborating represents connectedness and commonalities in a community of learners. The community may represent the classroom, the school, the school division as groups of schools, including the multicultural neighbourhoods of which we are a part. As teachers we cannot ignore that we are also a part of the political and social dynamic of this city and province with its traditions and ways of thinking. Locally, I have more control over decisions and I will begin by describing the small community of which I am a part.

We become learners bound together in certain ways. My goal as a teacher is to facilitate students' understanding of their connectedness to their own learning. And I have narrative experience to guide me. Sergiovanni (1994) extends this idea and speaks of school as community; it provides a sense of belonging (p.67) and ties teachers and students in a special relationship to something bigger than themselves. This "something bigger" is shared values, and a higher sense of self-understanding and commitment to these values. A sense of belonging is what is good for kids, a precursor to self-esteem. He speaks of teaching as stewardship: " .. loving students not only helps them learn, but it is a good thing to do (p. 102). He speaks of care (p. 91) and relationships (p.102): curriculum and pedagogy reflect collaborative inquiry, some aspects of which are student initiated. Sergiovanni focuses on values and urges

schoolpeople to select practice that is consistent with those values. When I explore values with my students I ask them what their goals are and indeed we discuss student goals with their parents.

What do students value? Students write about working hard, doing their assignments, listening to the teacher, following reasonable directions. There is more resistance to planning. There is also some resistance to the idea of reflecting on their work, although most students seem to be able to do this very well. Students have a great degree of self knowledge when it comes to their school work. They value fairness. They value the opportunity to speak their own opinions. They need to feel listened to. They want to be treated as individuals and they want to work with their friends. It seems to me that in Middle School, students have a lot of difficulty making connections between their school work and their lives outside of school. By observation, Middle School students have one large concern and that is relationships. They have insatiable curiosities about many topics. Relationships: is that not what I have been talking about all this time? For me at this point there seems to be a gap between my aspirations and practice; making their work, curriculum decisions, relevant. And just when I thought things were clearer, ideas get muddled again.

How is community fostered? It is valued, how then can it be realized? We need an opportunity to explore what in fact the connectedness and commonalities mean to us as individuals and the implications of the individual meanings on the workings of the group. Does collaborating with students gives them support and courage through a process that has many challenges? Collaborating with a group of teachers has certainly given me the support and courage I have needed throughout a process that has many challenges. It has allowed me to see, through the give and take of dialogue, that there are choices to be made and that I can make them. This needs to be made as real in the relationship between student and teacher and parent as it is between teacher and teacher.

The strategy of independent study gives students control over what they want to find answers to. Involving students in the decisions about learning during the teaching of thematic units provides an opportunity for decision-making, creativity, individuality, cooperative work, and emphasis on planning and reflection. Students have told me each each that the best part about their school work is this type of work because they get to decide what they want to do. It always involves making contact outside of school based on their interests. They hardly expect such out of school experiences to be possible. Conferencing, co-teaching, and arranging large blocks of time, is a large

part of the management of these student tasks and is accomplished because student choice and student voice is valued. I believe it gives them a sense of belonging.

I have been an active member of several teacher groups who held a view of educating as inquiry and have received support for teacher work through the groups. The school division organized a fledgling action research group of teachers who were interested in investigating their own practice and committed to mutual support. I have been a member of a teacher group investigating the Teachers' Association interim policy on teacher evaluation by interviewing teachers over time, interpreting data on their changing views of practice, writing about what all this means for teaching, and presenting the findings to an international group of educators. I have been a Teacher Team Leader in our Division and encouraged teacher initiatives, and organized critical dialogue opportunities in school that centred on issues specific to our school. We are co-teachers in our school. Having a learning buddy is a wonderful experience and we have teacher talk-time as part of our weekly schedules. We research and discuss educational issues as part of our grade group meetings that happen weekly. We have a grant for our school which provides the money to hire substitute teachers that allows time for teachers to work in small groups to research our progress with alternative assessment, teaching strategies,

parental involvement. I see this as an effort to uncover our connectedness by values.

The leadership in the school division has enabled these collaborative conditions which in my experience are so necessary for the improvement of relationships between teachers and therefore teaching. Graduate student experience and relationships with University people has enriched and enabled my learning and made me aware of my changing view of teaching. At the moment the University of Manitoba and a collective of interested teachers in secondary and middle schools are meeting with pre-service teachers to invite them into a wider conversation to enhance the perspective on the work of schools.

Community lends itself to the ideas of a central focus, or at least some focus. Each of these groups about which I have just written are research groups. We are investigating something we find problematic in our practice with a view to improving that practice. Participation teaches me valuable lessons about trust and caring and also about group dynamics and a healthy sense of self-worth. The consciousness of which becomes part of my attitude and approach to people and hopefully into the classroom curriculum. The assumption of the healthy sense of self-worth became the single motivating force behind what cooperative learning theory was beginning to mean for me. This is important for all learning because

learning is risky. Issues of trust and collegiality , restructuring leadership roles, power, and networking are on-going and provide the challenges in collaborative work. Community becomes an over-arching idea with caring and collaboration as important pieces.

Community efforts involve reflection in and on the action in any larger scale reform effort. Kemmis (1987) reiterates this connectedness when introducing the notion of critical theory to action research which is to " ... adopt a dialectical perspective" ... "that schools can only be reformed by reforming the practices that constitute it" (p. 82). Kemmis speaks of emancipation through critique, collaborative action research, a democratic ideal achieved through dialogue, theorems and action. Coulter (1992) refers to Kemmis's interpretation of action research, the relationship between theory and practice, as a "double dialectic" involving thought and action, individual and society. Winter (1987, cited in Coulter, 1992, p. 10) speaks of reflexivity, self-critical reflection in narrative, that in its thick description establishes grounds for theory, a theory which grounds its validity in experience. The story teller becomes her own critic and is charged with identifying the contradictions in the dialectic of action and research. "[E]ducation is a normative concept" (Coulter, p. 22) and action research is not only a technology but is purposeful action with moral and ethical

constraints involved. The dialectic is never fully resolved (Briskin, 1989). When educators approach their work with these understandings, teaching has a tendency to become less messy, at least for moments. If there are common values, their identification and reference helps clarity when teaching becomes messy again. Articulation and clearness of values helps me to make even the smallest decision.

Collaborating in the ways mentioned has been energizing. That is not to say that relationships with people have always been harmonious or based on mutual understanding, nor at all times respect. Sometimes the energy is destructive rather than constructive when relationships and language get confused. Working together has been met with an openness as well as varying amounts of temporary or longer term misunderstandings, fear, risks, and changes that get in the way of clear understandings. The effort to establish a common language itself is difficult. What is meant by "reflection in and on the action", or "student voice" or "collegiality"? Indeed, what is meant by "improving" the quality of education for children? It seems to me that the efforts to arrive at commonalities of understanding are what creates community. It also seems to mean that there needs to be a resistance to a type of group thinking that would exclude challenges and stifle actions. It is the tensions and conflicts that make the dynamic.

It is the dynamic that supports learning when there is a purposeful effort towards goals. That is not to say that learning is always easy. However, collective action and a collaborative spirit can be a positive force in that it breaks down isolation and opens discussion to enable learning. The effort our entire staff has invested in portfolios as a tool for student assessment is an example of collective action toward at least a few common goals. We are free to experiment, reflect on that, share, begin again. We are also supported by the administration to do this. Linda Briskin's feminism (1989) describes a sense of belonging that frees the individual. This reminds me of what Stenhouse has meant to me. I have worked with groups of learners in ways that have both enhanced interdependence and independence. Participation in the group effort has allowed me to see myself as an agent of change. First of all I have learned to be an agent of change of my own behaviour; then it may be possible to be able to teach that, once I have learned it myself. "To learn to be human is to develop through the give and take of communication an effective sense of being an individually distinctive member of the community" (Dewey, 1957 [1927], p. 154, as cited in Webb and Sherman, 1989, p. 25). "One can be *individually distinctive* only as a member of a group. The aim is not to free individuals from society but to create freedom in society" (Webb & Sherman, p. 25). Sergiovanni (1994)

describes belonging as crucial to finding meaning, significance and strengthening one's own personal identity (p. 67).

Osborne (1991) describes pedagogy as political practice and describes education as *acting*. I see a link with what he writes and his classroom practice and then to mine. To me, Osborne talks about morality when he talks of civics education, and community when he speaks of the teaching about citizenship: discipline and classroom management practice strategies reflect a central view of values. When we choose to teach fairness, tolerance, cooperation, whose values are these and how do we act because of them? Ours of course, carefully considered, chosen, and acted upon - overtly discussed with the other members of the classroom community. Nor are we neutral in another sense. "... [S]chool is not simply a building or an organizational convenience... it teaches in its own right... [and we] cannot afford to ignore its political content" (p.24). To me, political means that which relates to the community.

Briskin's (1989) feminism describes pedagogy as political practice and describes education as *acting* as well. Her practice involves a sharing of power in the classroom. She includes the notions of collaboration and community in her writing. There is a link between practice

and curricula with an emphasis on process. Briskin advocates that an aspect of curriculum is that we teach about power. We don't just assume power as teacher, or adult, or expert; we teach explicitly about power.

Osborne extends this when he speaks about teaching about citizenship; we expect students to be critical and to challenge, we show them their agency outside the classroom when we teach about democracy in social studies lessons. When classrooms are viewed as centres of inquiry, rather than places to transmit information, we design inquiry with such questions as "do we need law?" (Osborne, p. 11) or "what can we do about sexism, racism?" (Briskin, 1989, p. 14). We are teaching about relationships as we attempt to nurture them.

Both of these educators, and many more cited in the reference list, advocate an active, cooperative and collective effort to arrive at shared understandings of problems and relationships amongst people. Both of these writers write about their work as teachers in an integrative way. I read, listen, talk, and learn. I learn about the value of a collaborative spirit when I recognize the enabling conditions for learning that are created for me because of the opportunity to talk about teaching and learning. It seems to me that when we teach directly about community and the relationships that make up its dynamic, we

are making a closer connection between student work and real life. I am closing the gap between aspiration and practice and that is another aspect of what I believe good teaching to be.

Reflection

Good teaching is, often enough for me, a long term project that requires a great deal of reflection both in and on the practice. There are few quick fixes. For me what is better, is informed reflective actions.

"The gap between aspiration and practice is a real and frustrating one .. [which] can be closed only by adopting a research development approach to one's own teaching, whether alone or in a group of cooperating teachers (Stenhouse, 1975, p.3).

Teacher as researcher is immersed in a wide variety of reading to inform my educational theory. The work of Elliot and Winter (1991, 1987, in Coulter, 1994)) for example, reveal broad conceptions how we make meaning for ourselves.

There is another level of theory that relates to whole language and other theoretical perspectives by such writers as Newman (1990), Wells (1994), John Mayher (1990), Clandinin & Connelly (1988), Duckworth (1986), and Flinders (1989), who provide a wide variety of readings against a backdrop of teacher as reflective, active practitioner.

There is a systematic, investigative role to be played in the conscious acquiring of evidence in classroom inquiry. The variety of perspectives encourages teachers to examine their beliefs about the nature of knowledge, what counts as learning, roles of schoolpeople, constraints, tensions. Descriptive writing that emerges as a learning log of these theorists does much to enhance learning about the theory/practice relationship.

Feminist and critical pedagogy (Noddings, 1989), Gilligan (1982), Weiler (1988) , McNeil (1988), Newman (1990) , Giroux and McLaren (1989) have also had their influence. Moral philosophers such as Noddings (1984), Goodlad (1990), and Fenstermacher (1986), are also included in this group.

I began to see different patterns of interaction and classroom routine when I looked back at my journal writing and documentation I had saved as artifacts of the teaching experiences I was learning to keep track of. Writing in a variety of forms has enabled me to reflect on practice. When I do this, I see a new way to look at self. There is a different sense of confidence and authority about knowledge gained in the classroom about the particulars of the interactions of learners. Writing, reflecting, talking to others " ... has emerged from the dialectic of [my] experiences as both [practitioner] and [researcher] and from

[my]unwillingness to privilege one role over the other " (Cochran-Smith, Lytle, 1993).

A number of feminists advocate reflection as a norm. Nel Noddings (1986) builds a philosophical argument for an ethic of caring emphasizing moral attitude rather than moral reasoning. Carol Gilligan (1982) has a similar agenda. Kathleen Weiler (1988) is a qualitative, ethnographic researcher who analyzes race, gender, and class as a link between theory and practice. Anti-racism, anti-sexism, and leadership are taught as strategies for social change. Cooperative ways of learning is a feminist pedagogical approach that attempts to add the experience to the learning process. Briskin (1989) also recognizes that change needs to be systematic. Reflection on this approach to the teaching and learning experience validates a sense of self through writing and the narrative experience. Good teaching has resulted when I look back, reassess, reformulate the next step.

I have learned to appreciate the rewards of patience that I learned through reflective practice. The writing experience over several years had allowed me to reconstruct experience. It is a vehicle for reflexivity and reflection. When I became a writer, I could teach about writing because there was a common ground of experience on which to meet my students. Our struggles were similar and we could both

learn to write better, to be more articulate, to be clear, and to be perceptive. Donald Graves (1983), Nancie Atwell (1987), Lucy Calkins (1986), Frank Smith (1983) were as much among my beginning teachers as were my students. When I became a writer I became conscious of writing as a process and a way to read myself. I couldn't become a writer simply by reading all the wonderful stories in my experience but I could learn about writing by deconstructing and reconstructing that experience by writing. If my intention was to encourage great writers then I had to behave like one. I had to *do* to understand and I had to understand to *teach*.

Research methodology (Hopkins, 1975, Patton, 1990) provides a rationale and a procedure for systematically studying some aspect of practice that includes reflection. The journalling in addition to other forms of writing recommended in this process has allowed me to separate emotion and fact, to get a better perceptual grip on matters not only a better conceptual grip through reflection. I came to see the framework that Hopkins (1975) talked about as a way to organize my thinking and my work in such a way as to make better sense of the actualities of classroom life. For example, in the cooperative learning story, activities I planned for students became cooperative learning projects students carried out. Through my own reflections, this became a closer look at roles and

relationships among students and between students and myself. I also developed student reflections. I involved the students in evaluating their work and mine which had a positive effect upon the group. I became more conscious of a variety of teaching strategies and investigated them purposefully with my journalling as a way to guide me along the journey. I learned in future years to involve the students consciously in their learning and to write about what that means to them. I also learned to invite, if not expect, parents to come along. For improvement Stenhouse (1975) says:

... we cannot expect to leap for a solution to the complexities of educational problems: we can only aim to embark on a line of policy development which will give promise of a fairly long process of systematic and thoughtful improvement. Such developmental style towards a tradition of curriculum research focuses on the study of problems and responses to them rather than on the invention of ambitious solutions before the problems have been properly studied (p. 125)

Learning takes time. Learning about my teaching and learning to articulate that has been a complex and time-consuming process made more successful by the reflective process, writing, and "community-building" efforts. It has taken about six years for me to arrive at a better understanding of patience with learning for myself, other

colleagues, and with children. There are times when teaching is less messy simply because I have glimpsed how extremely complex it really is. I am still acutely aware that mothers and fathers are not even close to being partners in the discourse and maybe for this to happen we will need a great upheaval rather than patience and time.

I learned that good teaching is developing a reflective approach to consideration of curriculum. My curriculum in the cooperative learning project was the teaching of social skills such as listening, discussion, and an understanding of roles and division of labour. While I was asking groups to reflect on what they had done well and what they would do differently next time, their assessment was directed to the product. We looked at the accomplishment of the social studies activities and not consciously to their "cooperative" skills that were being built. I began to see the "curriculum" as my method and manner, the moral choice to teach cooperative skills and values, as much as the study of the geography of the Maritimes. Without keeping a journal, being able to talk to other teachers about what I thought was going on in my classroom during this turbulent learning time for me, without the opportunity to write about the experience at a distance of a few years later, I may never have discovered this connection between teacher purposes and intentions and

what is traditionally described by provincial curriculum documents, as *curriculum*.

Reflecting on curriculum now has come to be defined as a better conceptual grip on matters being taught. Getting a better conceptual grip was what drove me that day in the prologue as I stood in the warm window surveying the chaotic aftermath of yet another bewildering school day and such has been affirmed by Barrow (1984) and Egan (1990). I have learned there is a language for a concept that is becoming clearer. For the unruly class that loved to be read to, I discovered that they needed a central focus, a story about people just like they were to provide some calm and respite in their lives. For Greg and the many others like him, he needed to make a closer relationship, a connection at school to help with the pressures at home. How often it is the student who is the most unlikable who needs to be liked. The concept of curriculum is connected to caring and collaborative efforts in the way that Hlebowitsh (1990, p. 156) describes as involving a justification of aims and content that puts the learner in tune with subject matter and values and aims of society.

Coherent, fully explained concepts are needed and the implications of these ideas must be spelled out so that this theory as it developed may be clearly communicated. Through the process of reflection, individual and

collective, in the study of problems and our responses to them in the educational communities of which we are a part, we have the opportunity and the responsibility to nurture a developmental style of curriculum research.

If our schools were to be caring and collaborative and reflected community, we would have to admit that classroom activity is driven to a great degree by the beliefs and practice about relationships.

"What I have been emphasizing so far is the central importance of dialogue in nurturing the ethical" ... "[t]raining for receptivity involves sharing and reflecting aloud. It involves the kind of close contact that makes personal history valuable ... A relationship is required" (Noddings, p.121-122).

It seems to me that teacher as researcher opens up the possibility for teachers to take a closer look at relationships and school. The entire magnitude of the teacher as researcher projects is a search for a greater understanding of our work as teachers and learners. Inquiry is central. Question-asking is the basis for this search for meaning so that decisions we make are good for kids, that we improve the quality of education for the young. Beliefs and values drive the decision-making. And of course, what type of decision-making will take place?

I have also learned through a caring, collaborative, community-focussed, reflective process that there are important questions to be asked and that questions will probably always drive the investigations. These questions are now part of the characteristics of my practice. They are part of an evolving understanding of the four aspects of teaching I have come to identify and the connective tissue that binds them.

The questions continue to surface now that I understand better that educating is inquiry. How best to facilitate that for kids and parents is somehow connected to how best I understand that for myself. That continues to be the more complex part of teacher work. As I look at my day planning book, I see notes in all margins, reminders for the next day, arrows to show last minute changes, several colors of pen and pencil marks. It's a mess! But out of that comes some order and that I can describe by showing in the following chapter, what it is I have learned and what is still to explore. The evocative and representational concept of teacher as researcher will continue to evolve.

EPILOGUE

Teacher as Learner- A Changing View

In some sense I am back where I started from. I still have many questions, yet I have a better understanding of how I go about being and teacher and what that implies. I have examined how it is I go about teaching through the research methodology and philosophy of the concept of teacher as researcher as I have come to understand it. Now I think of educating as inquiry and am more comfortable with the incompleteness of teacher work.

Through thoughtful consideration of how I ought to organize people and activities in my work as a teacher, I am mindful of the central importance of relationships. Connected to this notion of relationships are the norms of caring, collaboration, community, reflection, and reflective practice, that I have uncovered as I looked more closely at what it was I was teaching, how I went about that, how I assessed and evaluated that work, as well as the moral dimensions of that way of working.

It was a simple matter of becoming more wide-awake, in the words of Maxine Greene (1978). Conscious, deliberate, purposeful action are the organizing ideas within the teacher as researcher notion which provided a valuable

framework for me to look at how I went about being a teacher. Taking risks no longer is accompanied by the anxiety of failure; I reassess and grow and realize perfection is often an ideal. The making of commitments to processes I didn't fully understand and the strength and willingness to persevere in the search for social meaning has held risk, but I have learned to ask "What else is education for?"

I also learned how caring about teacher work is a powerful constituency in schools and have tried to find ways to show that caring about their own work can be a powerful force in the lives of students. The variety of perspectives gained from collaborative efforts is positively energizing even if at times it is frustrating and possibly destructive. Language makes a difference with ideas; thinking about schools as community rather than institutions conjures a different set of values, metaphors, and consequently, different ways of acting. Reflective practice that is productive in a purposeful way continues to be my goal; it is a routine I draw on when I need it. I am learning to become better at reflecting about what I have done and am more comfortable with its articulation.

Teacher as researcher, characterized by dialectics and dialogism, has become part of the teaching culture and part of my approach to professionalism. Teaching is

transactional; teaching and learning are part of the surfacing and working out of divergent views among participants in the development process. Belief systems and values are socially constructed (Vygotsky, 1978) and reconstructed in the midst of cultural diversity. There is an interdependence and exchange. There is an effort to decentralize decision-making and a resistance to standardization (Toffler, 1980) with the realization that there is no one best way to approach any teaching and learning; this is a contextual process. Where do issues such as integration and inclusiveness fit? How do communities value tolerance, understanding, and caring in our consciousness of gender, race, colour and such diversity? There are many more questions that I have yet to explore that both serve as a conclusion for this piece and the beginnings for future stories.

"What am I trying to accomplish?" becomes a question for all learners, not just a teacher question. "Is what I am doing right now help me to accomplish my goal?" "What arrangements do I have to put in place to get where it is I want to be?" It seems to me that questions such as these demystify the educational process and open the process to conscious question-asking and decision-making. Putting oneself in the position of asking the questions puts oneself in control of the possible solutions, or, at the very least, responsible for pursuing the learning possibilities.

What "reform" is necessary to meet the challenge of learning along with the child of the next century? Certainly the transactional nature of caring, collaborating, negotiating what is to be taught and learned, valuing relationships, thoughtful, reflective behaviours, are all descriptors of what I believe will work. I began with an inquiry, dialogic approach to come to grips with the messiness of teaching and proceeded to ground my actions in the norms I uncovered.

Am I trading one kind of alienation for another? Am I alienating myself in a different way because I am meeting resistance from others? I am certainly alienated from the political and economic agendas of the present provincial government decisions about what I ought to teach, how it is to be done, how it is to be assessed when I read some of *Renewing Education: New Directions* (1994). I am advocating teacher decision-making and the exercise of that collective power at a time when teachers feel most vulnerable and powerless. I have said it before; "There is no going back."

Am I alienating kids because I expect them to think and act differently? They meet some powerful opposition when their peers and parents expect them to "measure up" to external standards. Teaching about social control, not just controlling, and teaching about power, not just using it, is

what feminists such as myself would say is relevant curriculum.

How is time and place to be organized? Structures such as time and timetables sometimes get in the way. How I decide to organize student and teacher time is influenced by how I think about my relationships with those people and what it is we hope to accomplish together and alone. It requires a clearer view.

To what extent can we remain isolated from each other as teachers? To the extent that isolation is not what we value. There has been a breaking down of the isolation by creating more opportunities to talk about teacher work and also build relationships as friends and as professionals when we meet for team meetings, co-teach, prepare for Critical Dialogue, involve ourselves in school research projects about aspects of practice that we identify as problematic.

What risks do I take and at what cost? For example, poorly thought out attempts at reform may cause my own loss of credibility. Some parents were running out of patience with the "portfolio system" when in my classroom, they did not know how to read the portfolio along with their child and I had not provided much assistance for them to do so.

At the same time, many parents see the students' development toward independence and value that. The dilemmas are many.

How do I learn from this way of knowing about teaching? How do I step in and out of the picture? Reflective practice forces me to explain for myself what it is I value and how I want to act. Standing back from my practice as I demonstrate now, allows me to think and write about what it is I believe.

There is a continuous incompleteness about learning; it is not static, is often open-ended, and this leads to new discoveries dispelling "old truths".

As much as I have set for myself new problems to be investigated at some future time, I also find myself in the classroom at present. I attended a teachers' meeting two days ago and our goal was to develop our thematic unit in a more concrete way so that we could begin class discussions soon. There were moments when I thought of this as a "fit of collective insanity" (H.G. Wells, in Osborne, 1995). Then I reminded myself of my status of learner. I was one learner among a small group of others who had also marshalled their resources toward a group goal and who were in conversation about that. Then I thought of the kids - hopefully soon to be engaged with curiosity in relevance and meaning. I take heart:

What on earth am I really up to here?
Why am I giving these particular lessons
in this particular way? If human
society is anything more than a fit of
collective insanity in the animal
kingdom, what is teaching for? (H.G.
Wells, in Osborne, 1995).

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