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Stories and Identities in a “Pedagogy of Meaning”:

One Teacher's Self-Study in Three Parts

By

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### **Abstract**

This self-study, written in narrative form, considers the design of a “pedagogy of meaning” (Cooper, 2009) that supports children’s identity-construction, as the children uniquely “appear” in the classroom. The author shares this process with the children in her Grade 1 classroom. As part of the children’s “appearance” in the classroom, “voices” which have not often been heard come to be shared in meaningful/meaning-making ways. Also, in the course of this pedagogical design process, the author explores the construction of her own “teacher identities”.

The study is theoretically inspired by the Reggio Emilia approach; in particular, the central tenet of the “image of the child” as competent, capable, and resourceful (Rinaldi, 1993). This is a postmodern image of the child brought into being through the process of telling and interpreting stories of past and present. This “image of the child” is utilized as a guiding concept as the author endeavours to conceptualize and enact her own interpretation of a pedagogy of meaning in her Grade 1 classroom context.

A pedagogy of meaning is conceptualized as a relational and malleable construct negotiated between the teacher and children and among the children themselves, enriched by the participants’ individual and shared identities, contexts, and experiences.

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## **Chapter One: Introduction**

### **Inspirations and Tensions**

It is the end of another busy day in my Grade 3 classroom. I pick up the last of the pencils from the classroom floor, rearrange the books that have toppled over on the book shelf, and find a place on the shoe rack for the same pair of blue sneakers that lie on the floor every day after school. As I reflect on moments from the day, I find myself questioning the growing sense of weariness and self-doubt I seem to be feeling. Why is this year so difficult? Why are the things that have worked for me in the past just not working with this group of children? Before leaving, I stand in the doorway of my classroom looking back over my shoulder. I am hopeful that the conference I am heading to the next day with some of my colleagues will be the rejuvenation and inspiration I need to walk back into my classroom on Monday with a new sense of purpose.

The next day we are off to a Reggio Emilia conference in Calgary, Alberta. This conference is our first introduction to the Reggio Emilia approach and an opportunity for us to view the exhibit entitled “The Wonder of Children.” Our first stop is to visit an inner city school in Calgary where the principal, Carmen Roman, greets us in the hallway to give us some context about her school before we begin our tour. Carmen explains the transformations that have occurred to the physical spaces of the school and in the philosophical stances and pedagogical approaches of the teachers.

The hallways have been transformed into an art gallery reflecting the interests, experiences, and identities of the children who learn and play there. As we walk into the classrooms, I am struck by the pleasant aesthetics and care that is evident in the spaces. Photographs of children and families are the first images I see when entering the classrooms. The walls display beautiful artwork and detailed documentation placing value on the process of learning, rather than displaying only a finished product without any context. There is a sense of wonder, whimsy, and beauty in each of the spaces. Even absent

of teachers or children, the spaces welcome us in. These classrooms feel so inviting and compel me to rethink the space I had wearily looked back at over my shoulder the day before. Beyond the aesthetics, these classrooms are a physical representation of the people who live and learn in them each day. The documentation, artwork, art supplies, and natural materials make visible what is valued in these spaces. The care taken in creating these spaces suggests that the teacher plans the environment with intention and that children are involved in this process. When I walk through the spaces I feel inspired. Of course I believe that children deserve such caring spaces; I just never imagined they could come into being in this way! Of course the space can reflect who we are! Of course the space can be warm and inviting!

Following the tour, Carmen Roman gathers our group of visiting teachers in the hallway for dialogue. In response to comments from some of the visitors, Carmen begins talking about many of the challenges the children in her school face, and many of the challenges the teachers face in meeting their needs. With conviction, Carmen addresses our group:

It's not about *these* children. *These* children don't listen ... *these* children

don't want to learn ... *these* children don't take care of this place.

Every challenging child is a whisper in our lives. Those whispers are opportunities.

What will we do with those opportunities? What will we *learn*?

Who are we as teachers to allow a child to be unsuccessful in our classroom for

one more day? (In conversation, May 2006)

Although Carmen is speaking to the whole group, in that moment it is like she is addressing me directly and I start to feel an uneasiness growing inside of me. Facing my most challenging year of teaching, I start to question: Is it possible I am becoming "*that*" teacher? The one who blames the disruption of my teacher agenda on the behaviour of the children I am teaching? That teacher is not really who I set out to be, nor does she reflect what I believe to be true about children, teaching, or learning. I suddenly realize that



perhaps the challenging behaviours I have been trying to manage are quite possibly the “spill over” effects of trying to squeeze a diverse, creative, and curious group of children into a box neatly designed by the teacher. It is time to think outside of the box!

**New stories begin to emerge.**

As I began approaching pedagogy in the classroom with more critical eyes and a greater sense of purpose, I realized I was beginning to tell very different stories about the children in my classroom. The weariness I had previously experienced was beginning to be replaced with the excitement of possibilities, as children’s emerging interests and identities began to be represented in the life of our classroom.

\* \* \* \* \*

Looking around the morning sharing circle at the faces of my Grade 1 students, the excitement and anticipation of possibilities is palpable. Gurleen<sup>1</sup> smiles at Angelo and slides over to create a spot for him in the circle. Jhin rolls the marble around between his fingers that he has picked up from the floor. Christopher claims his territory sitting stiff and determined so as to not lose his coveted spot beside where he is sure the teacher will sit. Anne sits as a silent observer with her hands folded in her lap looking and listening with a serious look on her face. Vijay leans in to admire the shiny red HotWheels™ car cupped proudly in the palm of William’s hand. Chase sprawls out on the carpet lying on his stomach. His foot bumps into Baljit’s shoulder and she says gently, “Can you sit up please?” He sits up quickly, offering Baljit a smile. Sukhmandeep speaks in Punjabi to his friend Himmat, the story they share must be funny as they both laugh, nodding their heads. José and Heraldo elbow wrestle as they are squished beside each other, neither willing to move to a different spot. They exchange what appear to be some serious words, and

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<sup>1</sup> Pseudonyms have been used in all of the stories told in this thesis.

seeing an empty spot across the circle Heraldo relents and chooses a different spot. Johnathan talks to himself as he flips through the pages of the same book he has picked out of the basket each morning this week. When I listen carefully to his whispered words, I hear he is speaking Filipino as he reads the pictures. McKenna unrolls a wrinkled piece of paper she has taken out of her pocket. Kayla and Leah lean in closer to see the list of children's names she is writing in purple ink. Tan holds a book between his lap and Lilly's, pointing out details of the pictures. Lilly is visually impaired and cannot see the pictures he points to, however, the grin on her face and nodding head suggest she is making meaning of the story Tan describes. This first 10 minutes of the day, as our classroom community gathers on the carpet, is a ritual reflective of the richness of experience, valued individuality, and connectedness of relationships that sets the tone for all of the learning we will do together.

\* \* \* \* \*

This story reflects a shift that was beginning to take place in my conceptions of the role of children and teacher in the learning process. It was as if I was seeing the life of the classroom through a new lens. This lens was influenced by my new sense of curiosity and self-awareness. I began turning to professional literature to help provide me with some of the theoretical language to clarify and conceptualize for myself what I believe about children, teaching, and learning. This new lens was also nurtured by ongoing dialogue with other teachers who were exploring similar questions. Our professional dialogue often explored such questions as: *Why do we teach? What do we teach? What is worthwhile? Who decides? How does what we teach reflect who the children are in our classrooms?* I found myself connecting with teachers I considered to be mentors; these were teachers I felt were teaching with the kind of purpose and intention I was seeking. These teachers were in many ways *living* the teaching life I could imagine! I also began to listen more carefully to children and to approach my pedagogical

planning from a place of co-construction. My learning was not occurring in isolation, just as the learning of my students was not occurring in isolation. I began to appreciate that my learning was socially constructed, informed and influenced by colleagues, children, contexts, and experiences.

What I did not expect through this process of questioning my purpose and my role as a teacher was how introspective and personal this task would become. I began to recognize how closely my professional identities and purpose as a teacher were linked to my personal identities. And, I began to understand how closely linked my identities were to my approach to pedagogy.

The shift that began occurring in my practice involved slowing down the pace to honour the rhythm of children's interests. It involved talking less and listening more. It involved creating spaces—both physical space and spaces in time—to honour children's identities by allowing their experiences, interests, and voices to more fully permeate the life of the classroom.

Malaguzzi (as cited in Fraser, 2000, p. 55) suggests that our school space is “a sort of aquarium that mirrors the ideas, values, attitudes, and cultures of the people who live within it.” As I tried to teach with greater intentionality, the learning unfolding in the classroom began to become more reflective of the identities of the people who came to live and learn in it each day.

As an early years teacher, I found that many of the questions that initially surfaced for me were related to literacy learning. They reflected moments where my teaching practices were “bumping up against” an image of the child as an active meaning maker, not only capable of but also having the right to represent ideas and make meanings in multiple ways. Some of the curricular approaches I had seen (or tried) in practice seemed to run counter to an image of the child as a constructor of knowledge—supported through relationships with other children, with

adults, and with the environment and contexts around her/him. I began to recognize that my discomfort often occurred in reaction to approaches that decontextualized learning.

For example, in the context of a previous school community where I had taught, I had to answer to parent concerns about why their Grade 1 child was not bringing home a *levelled book*<sup>2</sup> and therefore why was I not teaching their child to read? These were conversations I felt I needed to negotiate thoughtfully with parents. After all, their child's first introduction to reading in a school setting had been through levelled books in Kindergarten. I needed to be able to articulate why I was not using levelled books and what I was doing instead. I wanted to communicate that literacy experiences in the classroom can involve rich literature that reflects children's interests and experiences and which include themes that children can think with, grow with, and question. This contrasted with tying children's reading identities to a text level and spending our precious time reading books that often have dull writing, superficial themes and concepts, and bland illustrations. The levelled books that lined the shelves of our resource room were written more for instructional and assessment purposes, rather than for purposes of engagement or for getting lost in the imaginative life of a story. Although some of the more experienced teachers I worked with felt levelled books had a place, I was struggling with how these books offered children room for constructing their own identities, both as children and as readers.

In my current context, I found myself thinking about the richness of culture, experiences, and multiple languages that were too easily overlooked if I tried to push my diverse group of learners, including many new English language learners and children with special needs, into a literacy curriculum I was beginning to see was too generic. When I stopped to consider some of

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<sup>2</sup> Levelled books are part of a series of books organized into alphabetically-designated levels, based on publisher's criteria for how "difficult" these texts are to read.

my approaches to literacy teaching critically, they did not seem to be serving the children's own purposes.

I began to understand that if I believe strongly in honouring the voices of competent, capable children, it is not good enough to approach my pedagogy from a place that undervalues the relationships and contexts that make up the whole child. Self-critically, I wondered if I was approaching literacy education from an overly timetabled, teacher-directed agenda. Was I providing only minimal opportunities for children to be active agents in their own literacy learning? In a way, our literacy pedagogy also felt too disconnected from the "stuff" of childhood. I never intended to limit children's opportunities to be actively involved in shaping their learning, and now that I was developing a greater self-awareness I was beginning to seek pedagogical alternatives.

The more I really listened to children, the more I could see glimmers of an evolving, organic and meaningful literacy curriculum that "could be." I could envision an approach to literacy education growing out of the lived experiences and relationships of the people in our classroom. I could imagine our literacy engagements being enriched by who we are and with whom we are in relationship. I could conceive of literacy as woven into and emerging out of what we are experiencing or playing. I could also see the inefficacy of a literacy approach that is heavy in predetermined outcomes and limited to a block of time, which seems to suggest: "It's Writer's Workshop time—for this hour only we are writers." I began to question whether my literacy teaching with children was too disjointed. I worried about what was lost when the richness, diversity, and dynamic composition of "who we are" was limited to a tidy, unchanging package created by someone outside of our context. I started to think more about that "stuff" that does not fit into that package, the "stuff" that too easily gets overlooked or left behind. For example,

there were children who had yet to represent a story at writing time, yet they were actively dramatizing spontaneous stories when engaged in fantasy play with their friends. These children were storytellers, but their play was not yet recognized as a way of telling a story.

As my image of the child became more clearly defined, it became evident that my current practice was honouring only “pieces” of who the child was, and was overlooking the life and family experiences, culture, and history a child brought with him/her to school. I began to recognize a shift occurring in my thinking about literacy learning, as my central question about pedagogy shifted from “*What* am I going to teach these kids?” to “*Who are* these kids I am going to teach?”

Although my tensions initially surfaced during literacy education moments, it was becoming clearer to me that these were actually questions of purpose and meaningfulness that reached into all areas of our learning. I realized that the questions of meeting the needs of a particular group of children and tapping into the rich experiences and competencies that each child brings to school with him/her are not just about making everyone feel good or making everyone feel as if he/she belongs (although these are undeniably important principles in themselves). They were bigger questions of negotiating identities, of building relationships, and of making meaning that needed to be explored in all areas of our learning.

I was experiencing a shift away from a well-intentioned, though perhaps teacher-centric view, in which I was assuming sole responsibility for creating a place where children’s identities could emerge. I began to recognize a greater *relational* view that acknowledges that children are competent co-constructors of meaning in the classroom, where all of their identities help to shape the community we create. In other words, I was not the only protagonist who could or should have the power or agency to shape the experience of the classroom. Our experiences, identities,

and relationships are all central to a dynamic process of creating a *lived* pedagogy; a pedagogy that is not pre-determined, nor decontextualized, but one which is co-constructed and meaningful for all. This study, then, is situated in my own process of conceptualizing a “pedagogy of meaning” in my context. Cooper (2009) describes a pedagogy of meaning as “teaching to help young children explore those things, including ideas, they find meaningful in the world” (p. 10). This study is my process of making meaning as a teacher, as I consider and reconsider the roots of my professional identity and my conceptions of who children are, the impact of my beliefs on my approach to teaching, and the implications for co-constructing meaningful pedagogy with children.

### **Research Questions**

The inspirations and tensions I have described helped me to surface the following research questions:

- What are the experiences that have contributed to shaping my professional identities? How have experiences of the past influenced how I identify my “image of the child” (Rinaldi, 1993) and how I identify as teacher?
- What are the implications of these constructs (image of the child and my own teacher identities) on pedagogy? How are these constructs reflected in practice? What are the “identity options” (Cummins & Early, 2011; discussed further in the next chapter) I highlight for my students that contribute to meaningful pedagogy?
- How has this research study transformed my professional identity—who I am becoming as a teacher? What does this mean for meaningful pedagogy going forward?

## Theoretical Constructs

### The Reggio Emilia Approach

Attending the Reggio Emilia conference in Calgary six years ago was my first introduction to the Reggio Emilia approach which has greatly influenced my learning and the direction of this study. The Reggio Emilia approach was developed in Reggio Emilia, Italy, following World War II. This approach to early childhood pre-school settings began as a movement by women in Reggio Emilia to create rights for themselves and for their children. These women envisioned quality learning experiences for their children, rooted in a social constructivist approach, with emphasis placed on collaboration among children, teachers, family, and the community (Fraser, 2000, p. 5).

The Reggio Emilia approach offers teachers a theoretical and philosophical grounding for considering their “image of the child”. In a Reggio Emilia context, the “image of the child” is one of a competent, capable, resourceful child. The child is seen as “rich, strong and powerful” (Rinaldi, 1993, p. 102); a child who comes to school already as a “full vessel”. This “rich” child is a social actor with agency, who constructs meaning in relationship with other children, teachers, parents, and the environment. In the Reggio Emilia context, children are seen as “unique individuals with rights rather than simply needs. They have potential, plasticity, openness, the desire to grow, curiosity, a sense of wonder, and the desire to relate to other people and to communicate” (Rinaldi, 1998, p. 114). Although there are many tenets of the Reggio Emilia approach, it is this central tenet of the image of the rich child that resonated with me and caused me to reflect on my practice and approach to children, learning, and teaching.

I left that conference in Calgary with a sense of urgency. It was time to listen more carefully to the children in my context. It was time to conceptualize more clearly my image of the child



and consider the implications for my role as teacher. It was time to move beyond the status quo, to teach in a way that reflected the students I taught, in a way that reflected *me*, versus teaching in a way that I had experienced or had accepted as “the way things were.”

The first inspirations of the Reggio Emilia approach I put into action in my classroom involved creating a physical space that was more aesthetically pleasing, functional, and reflected the identities of the children and teacher. Although this transformation was important, it was a surface level understanding of the complexity of this approach that I would continue to learn more about over time. Recognizing that children are capable, resourceful, creative, and social meaning makers, I began to feel tension about my daily practice. At first I could not quite articulate what was making me feel uncomfortable, but over time I began to realize that the image of the child I had conceptualized was not yet clearly emulated in my practice. This gap between theory and practice was the genesis of my initial research questions regarding how I might better honour the voices of children in my classroom, and how my practices might better reflect the identities, relationships, and experiences of children and teacher.

The Reggio Emilia perspective suggests that as educators, we ask, “How can we help children find meaning of what they do, what they encounter, what they experience? And how can we do this for ourselves?” (Rinaldi, 2001, p. 2). This self-study is a reflection on my process of better understanding and recognizing how meaningful pedagogy is *lived* or put into action in my classroom. Central to this study is the acknowledgement that what I believe about children and learning shapes what we do in the classroom. According to Dahlberg, Moss and Pence (2007), “constructions of childhood and children are *productive* of practice; in other words, pedagogical work is the product of who we think the young child is” (p. 52). In addition, my

constructions of who I believe *I am* as a teacher are also productive of the pedagogical work in my classroom.

### **A Postmodern Perspective**

This study is situated within a postmodern perspective. A postmodern image of the child acknowledges the child as a knower and co-constructor of knowledge, culture, and identity (Dahlberg et al., 2007). This image is reflected in the stories I am choosing to tell as I engage in a process of interpreting stories of past and present in order to conceptualize a pedagogy of meaning. The pedagogy that shapes the learning in our classroom is acknowledged as a construct that must be negotiated with the children I teach. The pedagogy will continue to be co-constructed each year I teach as new experiences are shared and new relationships are developed. According to Dahlberg (as cited in Dahlberg et al., 2007), “taking a postmodern perspective means that we can no longer fall back on knowledge as universal, unchanging and absolute, but must take responsibility for our own learning and meaning making.” This statement acknowledges that a pedagogy of meaning is a social construction that is malleable and open to transformation over time, through relationships and across contexts.

Malaguzzi (1998) refers to the classroom and school as “an integral living organism” (p. 62). Viewing the school in this way opposes pedagogy that is static or rigidly defined. A living organism is always changing. This image of the classroom and school opens up the challenge and possibility of a pedagogy that reflects the dynamic and changing nature of the identities, relationships, and experiences of the people who inhabit the learning spaces each day.

Janzen (2008) finds limited examples of child-focused research in early childhood education journals reflecting this postmodern image of the child as knower and co-constructor of knowledge, culture, and identity. Janzen asks a fundamental question: “Where are the children

in childhood research?” (p. 289). This is a question that has stayed on my mind throughout this study. Although this is a self-study, I acknowledge wholeheartedly that my understanding of meaningful pedagogy is a co-construction, with the children in my classroom context being key collaborating protagonists.

I acknowledge the potential tensions of situating a self-study within a postmodern perspective. The term “self-study” could suggest a conception that there is a singular self or identity. A postmodern perspective challenges the idea that there is a fixed inner self that an individual can know truly through reflection or consciousness. Rather, the “self” is understood as “complex, multiple, fragmented and ambiguous, contradictory and contextualized” (Dahlberg et al., 2007, p. 57). This self-study is not about coming to know a pre-existing, fixed “self”. Nor am I proposing an understanding of myself “once and for all” or that I have a singular identity. Through the process of writing, remembering, and interpreting, I am actually *constructing* the self (selves), or identities I am seeking to learn more about.

Situating this self-study within a postmodern perspective acknowledges a process of meaning making, rather than of seeking absolute truths. As a study of my own meaning making, I acknowledge that the multiple meanings I represent are constructions that cannot be universally applied to the children I teach, nor will they apply universally for readers of this thesis. Rather, this thesis offers a representation of my own meaning making, a process negotiated in deeply relational and contextual ways. I offer the stories and interpretations as malleable perspectives, not as representations of facts. Situating this process of self-study within a postmodern perspective, therefore, acknowledges my own meaning making, while offering the co-constructed knowledge as “an open-ended conversation ... seeking neither consensus nor a final truth” (Dahlberg et al., 2007, p. 58). In this self-study, I am making my subjective process of

meaning making shareable, while recognizing that knowledge is situated in interaction and is shaped by context.

### **Identities as Constructions**

*Identity from a postmodern perspective is no longer understood as taking on predetermined, rigid and universal forms through processes of socialization and reproduction. Rather, as a relational and relative concept ... postmodern children are inscribed multiple and overlapping identities, in whose construction they are active participants.*  
(Dahlberg et al., 2007, p. 57)

This study is a process of telling and revisiting stories that represent the identities of teacher and children in order to better understand who I am as a teacher and to conceptualize what a pedagogy of meaning is in my context. The term “identities” can be interpreted and understood in many different ways. Davies (as cited in Moje and Luke, 2009) suggests, “there are several meanings to identity ... that slide in and out of each other because one word is asked to carry so many meanings, meanings moreover that spill into each other in practice” (p. 471). It is useful, therefore, to explore how identities are conceptualized for this study.

Identities are considered to be at the center of the learning, relationships, and pedagogy in the life of the classroom, and it is identities that are central to the stories told in this study. In keeping with the postmodern perspective from which I am researching, I have intentionally chosen to refer to “identities” in plural, since I acknowledge that identities of children and teacher cannot be understood in a single or static way. Our identities are influenced by many things including our contexts, relationships, experiences, culture, history, families, and classroom environments, and so on. Our identities can change across time and across contexts. For example, how I identify myself today as a teacher is different from how I identified myself when I began teaching.

According to Moje and Luke (2009), “Learning, from a social and cultural perspective, involves people in participation, interaction, relationships, and contexts, all of which have implications for how people make sense of themselves and others, identify and are identified” (p. 416). In other words, how identities are understood in the stories I have chosen to tell for this study are acts of interpretation socially mediated through relationships, experiences, and contexts. How another may understand these identities may be different. How the children themselves may understand their identities may also be different from the interpretations I have made. Further, how identities are understood changes over time and place. Luke and Moje (2009) write, “identity or identifying are always dependent on the context in which the identities are made, represented or enacted” (p. 433). As with the stories told in this study, the identities identified here are not considered to be “true” once and for all. Rather, I understand the stories and identities in this study to be constructions influenced by unique experiences, relationships, and contexts.

As I shaped my research questions, I was cognizant that my beliefs are “productive of practice” (Dhalberg et al., 2007). It was this construct that influenced my decision to look more carefully at my own identities, including my teacher identities, in order to consider the implications for pedagogy. Cummins, Early, Leoni and Stille (2011) support this conception that teacher identity is “directly implicated in the pedagogical choices they make” (p. 156). It is fitting, therefore, that I explore my own identity constructions as they influence the meaningful pedagogy I am trying to conceptualize.

The role of identities in the classroom are never seen as easily defined or understood. The interplay among the teacher’s identities, the identities of the children, and the implication for meaningful pedagogy is explored through the stories told in this study. However identities may

be constructed or understood, the idea that *who we are* is central to our purpose in the classroom has been a theme woven throughout these stories.

Norton (2000) offers a conceptualization of identity that compliments the 3-part structure of this study (explained in the Methodology section). Identity is conceived as “how a person understands his or her relationship to the world, how that relationship is constructed across time and space, and how that person understands possibilities for the future” (p. 5). The influences of this image of identity is played out in the methodological approaches that follow.

### **Stories as Making Meaning**

*Humans, individually and socially lead storied lives. People shape their daily lives by stories of who they and others are and as they interpret their past in terms of these stories. Story ... is a portal through which a person enters the world and by which their experience of the world is interpreted and made personally meaningful.*  
(Connelly & Clandinin, 2006, p. 477)

As I reflected on children’s identities in the classroom and my own identities as a teacher, I realized that it was stories that I was returning to time and time again to make meaning. We live storied lives inside the classroom. How do children identify themselves in the life of our classroom? How are our experiences in the classroom personally meaningful for my students, and for me as their teacher? In this study I will tell stories that represent *critical moments*. Critical moments are classroom moments that stand out for me as being meaningful, where our identities are represented, negotiated, or understood in new ways: “Story is the very stuff of teaching, the landscape within which we live as teachers, researchers and within which the work of teachers can be seen as making sense” (Elbaz, 1990, as cited in Binder, p. 2). Storying these critical moments is an act of interpretation as I make sense and forge my way towards conceptualizing a pedagogy of meaning.

Author Thomas King (2003) suggests, “The truth about stories is that’s all we are. ‘You can’t understand the world without telling a story’” (p. 32). I read King’s book in my first graduate course and felt a strong connection to King’s idea. It was the stories that I told and retold that helped me to make meaning with and about my students, about myself as a teacher, and about our learning together. As I spent more time sifting through the layers of my own personal stories, I could see how this process was shaping my professional learning as a teacher. King’s suggestion that understanding was contingent on telling a story, highlights questions in my own classroom context that I need to consider more. I began to question whose stories were being told, and whose stories remained on the periphery of our life in the classroom. What implications did this have on our learning?

I began to turn to scholarship that suggests the power of story in making meaning, valuing identities, and building relationships in an educational context. Johnston (2004) suggests: “Human beings are natural storytellers. We constantly tell stories about ourselves to others and to ourselves, and the stories shape who we think we are” (p. 30). I wondered about the stories that were supported or inadvertently silenced in the classroom. How did those stories (supported or silenced) shape who children think they are? There were so many questions! What were the stories that children told about themselves as students in my classroom? Was I giving them the space to represent who they are? Was I giving my students opportunities to see others and to be *seen by* others, and to make connections with others? Was the pedagogy in our classroom reflective of who the children are, of their experiences, and what they know and care about? Was our classroom fostering what the children/teacher could learn with and from each other? Turning to stories of experiences in my classroom context, therefore, felt like a fitting place to begin to search for some of the answers to these questions.

As stories invite us into the minds, lives, experiences, and imaginations of others, we also learn about who we are in relationship to others through story. Nicolopoulou, Scales, and Weintraub (1994) support Johnston's and King's theories that stories help us to make meaning, suggesting that "part of what makes children's storytelling so revealing ... is that it plays a vital role in their efforts to make sense of the world and their place in it (as cited in Cooper, 2009). In this study, making sense of the world and our place in it emerges as a highly relational process.

Considering the role of stories in identity construction and making meaning provides compelling provocations for considering how children's voices or identities are represented in the classroom. The more I began thinking about creating spaces that honour, support, and foster children's stories in multiple ways (for example, in written, oral, or fantasy-play forms), the more I found myself thinking about my own stories. I realized that as I documented and reflected on the children's stories to better understand them, I began revisiting my own stories in order to better understand myself.

Reflecting on stories of my own experiences for the new purpose of better understanding my various teacher identities and my constructions of who children are, creates an opportunity to look at my own practice in more critical ways. For example, when I think back to my own stories of going to school, the teacher was the "gatekeeper" of what counted. The teacher was accepted as the "knower" and I was an empty receptacle to be filled up with knowledge that my teacher or another "outside other" decided was worthwhile. Thinking back to such stories, I can draw connections to my first year of teaching. I remember the initial sense of reassurance that came when another teacher offered me "tried and true" unit plans, or my resource teacher offered to "pull out" Bernard (providing a separate lesson outside of the classroom), who was reading at a "Grade 1 level" in December of Grade 4. Feelings of unease surfaced within me, as what I



once thought I should do just did not seem right anymore. I remember saying to myself, “I put so much effort into making this lesson fun for the children, why does it seem like they do not even care?” I remember asking myself, “Is having Bernard walk across the classroom to meet the resource teacher at the door with his head held low really helping him to become a better reader?”

Looking back to these stories now, I can see that accepting someone else’s approach to pedagogy as my own was too generic, and the image of Bernard and other students like him was that of a child who was in need of “fixing.” I did not really believe Bernard was in some way broken and in need of fixing. I knew Bernard to be a creative thinker, a remarkable sketcher, and a witty negotiator. However, what I recognize through looking back with more critical eyes, is that the learning supports available to Bernard in the form of “pull out” did not tap into his many strengths. Children are often cast into roles as people in need of fixing. Drawing upon a deficit model keeps children in a passive role, where their job is to absorb knowledge and skills transmitted by an adult. Through this model, children are seen as “unformed persons” (Hogan, 2005) or “empty vessels.” It is through reflecting back on this story and others that I can make meaning of the teacher I was then, and also of the teacher I am becoming.

When I began teaching I never imagined myself as a teacher who supported a “one size fits all” curriculum or as a teacher who viewed children through a deficit lens. I never set out to be the “all knower.” Boldt (2009) suggests that “learning grows out of individuals’ experiences and expressions ... pedagogy must therefore emerge from children’s interests and their lives rather than from predetermined content” (p. 10). Reflecting back on early stories, I can see that I was feeling tension when approaches to pedagogy were more reliant on predetermined content, rather than on who children were and what they were interested in.

I never intended to approach pedagogy in a way that was teacher-centric or which positioned children as less than competent. I never wanted to create a learning environment that privileged some over others. When I reflected critically on stories from my first few years of teaching it became evident that I was assuming a role as the teacher that I had not conceptualized for myself. I could not deny it was a role that I began slipping into, albeit with discomfort. It was easy to assume a role that I had been familiar with as a student myself. However, the tensions I was feeling were those “whispers of opportunities” that Carmen Roman had referred to; and, they told me that this role was not a good fit with who I imagined myself to be as a teacher. In this study, the process of reflecting on critical moments in the form of stories is an opportunity for me to reshape the image of myself as a teacher that more closely reflects my “becoming” identities. Making connections across these stories will also be an opportunity for me to conceptualize a pedagogy of meaning for myself.

Lindfors (2008) asserts that, “we’ve heard so often that our teaching begins ‘where the child is.’ But surely it must also begin with who the child is” (p. 81). When given the opportunity to voice their stories, children can show us who they are. They can show us the richness of the culture, life experiences, and interests they bring to school. According to Cooper (2009), “young children tell stories—write—and act them ... to know and be known.” (83). Creating the space for children’s voices and stories to be heard in the classroom is a process of coming to know the child, and a process of children coming to know each other. It is also an opportunity for children and teacher to learn something new about themselves. The stories I have chosen for this study are reflective of some of the critical moments where the identities of children and teacher are being negotiated and where meaningful pedagogy is being co-constructed through this process.

By situating the use of stories as a meaning making process within a postmodern perspective, I acknowledge that the stories represented in this study are my interpretations. These interpretations are influenced by my relationships, interactions, experiences, and contexts. These are remembered stories, retold through my subjective lens and although they do not purport to represent final truths, they do represent what I have come to know about meaningful pedagogy.

## Chapter Two: Methodology

### The Study Takes Shape

*These moments seemed ... like precious fragments of coloured glass, each one to be treasured, mused over, polished and placed next to the other pieces in a pattern. Each piece of glass could be gazed at or looked through, so that the other bits took on a new hue. There seemed an infinite number of ways to order the pieces, each pattern making a different story, each piece looking different depending on what I placed next to it. ...*

*But it is not that simple. Each fragment is also like the shards of pottery, the fragments of other lives that archaeologists dig out of the earth, and through which they imaginatively construct lives other than their own. In this sense I am too an archaeologist, piecing together meaning from what the children say, from my own memories and from the memories of others. And you as reader are the same, imagining life lived as a child, not just from the words on these pages, but using your existing ways of knowing, your immersion within, your subjectification through the same discourses out of which these children fashion their lives. (Davies, 2003, p. 15-16)*

Envisioning and designing a structure for my research questions has been a challenge. The learning and questioning that I have experienced are so multi-layered. I used to think of the process of reflective practice, of making meaning, as peeling back the layers. The analogy of thinking about our learning as “peeling back the layers of an onion” was one that I was introduced to when I first started teaching. Although I agree that making meaning about teaching and learning is a richly layered process, I began to recognize that my learning was not as simple as peeling back one layer of understanding to reveal the next. When one peels an onion that layer is shed. This is not true of my learning. Instead, one layer is interrelated and often intertwined with others. Each of the layers is connected to others, often in multiple ways. At times it is not always clear where one layer begins and another layer ends. At times layers begin to merge together, and at other times they transform into a new layer altogether.

Davies’ analogy of shards of glass which appears at the beginning of this section is a useful analogy in coming to understand the process of meaning making I am forging. The analogy of

placing the shards of glass or pieces of pottery side by side, or mixing them together in a kaleidoscope fashion, has helped me to conceptualize how this study might take shape. I have surfaced the questions that inspired this study, but how do I reign in the expanses of my questioning, and how do I share the many fragments of my thinking, or the many pieces of stories with others in a way that is meaningful? Meaning making is not linear, my learning is linked to experiences of the past, experiences I am living in the present, and conceptions of what I believe the future could or should be. How then can I represent my meaning making in the linear form of a written research project?

Weaving in and out of stories and drawing connections within and across experiences and contexts is a way for me to share my meaning making with others. In this self-study, it is the stories I have told and retold, in a sense “treasured, mused over, polished” (Davies, 2003, p. 15) that I am returning to for the new purposes of better understanding my teaching identities, the identities of the children I teach, and the implications for meaningful pedagogy. Through telling and interpreting stories from the classroom context that represent critical moments for me as a teacher, I am searching for common threads or connections among stories. Like Davies’ archaeologist, offering stories from my context is a process of “piecing together meaning from what the children say” and I invite my readers to do the same. The stories are offered up as the “pieces of pottery” or “shards of glass” that others may arrange, muse over, or lay side by side with their own stories of experience, in order to piece together their own meaning.

This research is a self-study in a narrative form. Whitehead (as cited in Samaras, 2011) describes self-study as “the opportunity to examine your lived practice and whether or not there is a *living contradiction*, or a contradiction between what you say you believe and what you actually do in practice” (p. 10). It is the living contradictions of my practice that led me to the

research questions of this study. By analyzing critical moments through narrative inquiry, I am able to reflect on those living contradictions, and learn from the moments where what I believe is more closely aligned with my practice.

Clandinin and Connelly (2000) describe narrative inquiry as a process of re-storying experiences, with the potential to support new meaning making and to highlight the significance of experiences. They view this process as central to a teacher's personal and professional growth. Johnson and Golombek (2002) suggest that in order for an experience to be educative, narrative inquiry needs to be approached "not as a set of prescriptive skills or tasks to be carried out but rather as a mind-set—a set of attitudes, what Dewey (1933) called *open-mindedness* (seeking alternatives), *responsibility* (recognizing consequences), and *wholeheartedness* (continual self-examination)" (p. 5). This approach to meaning making fits within a postmodern perspective as this process is a socially mediated one that does not presume to create universally applicable solutions to the living contradictions that emerge within specific, contextualized classroom experiences. The process of inquiry explores particular moments in time and place and acknowledges that teacher knowledge is always evolving and changing as teachers inquire, theorize, and retell their stories (Johnson & Golombek, 2002). With this mind-set, I am re-storying critical moments of past and present experiences in order to make meaning, question assumptions, and take action.

Making meaning occurs through the telling and interpreting of the stories. Carter (1993) suggests, "a story, in other words is a theory of something. What we tell and how we tell it is a revelation of what we believe" (p. 9). The stories I have interpreted reflect my belief as a teacher that central to meaningful pedagogy is creating spaces where identities are represented and valued. The stories are my way into examining my lived practice, in order to acknowledge the

“living contradictions” that exist there. I can then learn from them, make judgments, and take pedagogical action.

In deciding how to structure this thesis, I found myself reflecting back on past stories, listening more carefully in the present, and imagining the possibilities for the future. The structure of this thesis, therefore, serves the purpose of creating space for me to reflect on who I am as a teacher, to reconceptualize my beliefs, notice moments in my current practice that reflect those beliefs, and consider how connections across these stories are constructive of meaningful pedagogy. It is also an opportunity for me to consider how this process has transformed my identities as learner and teacher and continues to influence the teacher I am becoming. Connelly and Clandinin (as cited in Binder, 2011) define narrative as “the study of how humans make meaning of experience by endlessly telling and retelling stories about themselves that both refigure the past and create purpose in the future” (p. 2). For the purpose of this study, I would add “creating awareness in the present” to Connelly and Clandinin’s definition of narrative. I believe the process of *pedagogical documentation* (explained in the following section, Part 2), creates a sense of awareness in the present, as stories and experiences are valued and documented in “real time” so that they may be revisited and interpreted. Connelly and Clandinin (as cited in Connelly, Clandinan and He, 1997) call this process of making meaning of experiences a teacher’s *personal practical knowledge*: “It is, for any one teacher, a particular way of reconstructing the past and the intentions of the future to deal with the exigencies of a present situation” (p. 666). Revisiting the stories of experiences in the past, in relationship with stories lived in current practice, is an opportunity to reimagine purpose for the future.

In their research into identities and the creation of identity texts, Cummins and Early (2011) offer a complimentary framework to Connelly and Clandinin’s (1997) description of narrative

inquiry. Their framework acknowledges identities as central to the process of looking within, looking out, and looking forward. Cummins and Early assert that educators are actively engaged in negotiating a triangular set of images: “an image of our own identities as educators, an image of the identity options we highlight for our students, [and] an image of the society we hope our students will help form” (Cummins & Early, p. 156). Both of these theoretical frames have influenced the organization of this study, which I have called a 3-part framework.

### **A 3-Part Framework**

#### **Part 1: Reflecting on Experiences of the Past**

This section is a response to the first research question(s) I posed: What are the experiences that have helped to shape my professional identities? How have experiences of the past influenced how I identify my “image of the child” and how I identify myself as teacher?

In this section I will revisit stories that represent three critical moments from my experiences of the past that help me to better understand the roots of my professional identities.

Acknowledging that my identities and beliefs are “productive of practice”, I have found that returning to stories that I have told and retold for the new purpose of better understanding who I am as a teacher today is a worthwhile process. Binder’s (2011) research into the role of stories in teacher professional development supports this process of teachers’ reflecting on their stories of personal experience. Binder (2011) asks an important question: “What do our stories of experience reveal about our personal and professional identities?” (p. 1). Through this process of retelling stories that reflect critical moments from my past, there were three stories that figured most predominantly. They were stories that I found myself telling to others or to myself over and over again. As I wrote them, I started to discover connections among the stories that help me to expand my understanding of the roots of my professional identities and my image of the



child. I offer the stories to others to make their own connections or interpretations. Following the stories I will share my own process of meaning making as I offer my own interpretations.

### **Part 2: Living the Stories of the Present**

This section is a response to the second research question(s) I posed: What are the implications of these constructs (image of the child and my own teacher identities) on pedagogy? How are these constructs reflected in practice? What are the “identity options” (Cummins & Early, 2011) I highlight for my students that contribute to meaningful pedagogy?

The stories that I have chosen to tell from “the present” have emerged in my Grade 1 classroom during the 2010-2011 school year. Our classroom is situated within a K-5 urban school setting. Many of the families who attend this school are newcomers to Canada, speaking Punjabi or Filipino as their home language. The children in this Grade 1 classroom represent a rich community of learners with a variety of social, emotional, academic, and life experiences. The children in this context are described in greater depth in the stories.

Telling stories about my present experience is a way for me to look closely at moments that reflect my teacher identities, and highlight the identities of the children I teach. I will analyze the stories of the present using narrative inquiry as I draw connections across stories to help conceptualize meaningful pedagogy. The stories of the present are complimented by pedagogical documentation. [See Appendix A for a visual of the data sources].

Engaging with pedagogical documentation in my classroom is influenced by the Reggio Emilia approach. According to Moran, Desrochers, and Cavicchi (2007), “documentation is the purposeful and systematic generation, organization, and analysis of a wide range of records and artifacts that depict multiple perspectives” (p. 83). Documentation is an opportunity to create a visible path reflective of the theories, experiences, and knowledge of children. According to

Grieshaber (2008), “making children’s knowledge count in the classroom means that it is visible (and therefore valued) and can be used productively for further learning” (p. 99). Documentation in my classroom is used as a tool through which children and teacher can socially construct meaning, it is also a tool that can make our learning visible and shareable with others.

Documentation can help me to understand the children I teach in new ways and can help me to make meaning of a particular experience. Documentation is a tool that helps to inform the direction of pedagogy and inform the next steps I may take as the teacher to support a particular child or group of children.

Although there are many uses for documentation, for my self-study I am revisiting the documentation from the 2010/2011 school year for the new purpose of exploring my research questions. The documentation I used included: transcriptions of children’s and teacher dialogue, photographs of student work and artifacts, field notes and reflective entries from my reflection journal. Selected examples of these forms of documentation are woven into the telling of the stories of the present. I have used a separate font to delineate the stories from the rest of the text throughout the thesis. Photographs of children’s work and artifacts are represented using figures and appear alongside the transcriptions to compliment the dialogue.

Using documentation as a method for self-study in order to piece together meaning is a fitting methodology for this study, which is situated in a postmodern perspective. Documentation does not assume to reflect a final truth or a single story. Rather it recognizes that meaning is a construction influenced by the lenses through which one may read and interpret it. Documentation creates a “listening context” (Rinaldi, 2001), whereby the role of teacher includes listening carefully, and valuing and cultivating the voices, stories and identities of children.

The documentation created during the 2010/2011 school year, allowed me as a teacher to slow down, stop and listen, and take notice. Using multiple forms of documentation (photographs of student work and artifacts, field notes, reflective journal entries, and transcriptions of conversations) I have been able to recreate the critical moments in the form of stories in a way that is enriched by the words and work of the children themselves. This study acknowledges that a story can never be told from a neutral perspective. The teller has the power to make decisions about how and what to tell. Creating documentation amidst an experience creates a tangible record of one's experience in a particular moment. It also creates a record of a meaningful moment in time, making visible that which is valued. The documentation does not assume to represent truth, but it does represent my selective story of a particular moment in time; this is a story that could easily have been remembered differently, or not remembered at all, if not captured in a way that could be revisited.

Dahlberg et al. (2007) suggest that documentation can “function as a tool for opening up a critical and reflective practice challenging dominant discourses and constructing *counter-discourses*, through which we can find alternative pedagogies” (p. 152). Returning to the documentation in order to tell stories of three critical moments, is a reflective process through which I am learning about my practice, and conceptualising an alternative pedagogy that I am calling a pedagogy of meaning. This approach to pedagogy counters the assumption that there can be a universal or standardized pedagogy that suits all children. As with the stories of the past, I offer the readers these stories lived in the present, as an invitation to construct their own meaning. These stories will be followed by my own process of meaning making where I will share my interpretations.

**Part 3: Creating Purpose for the Future**

The third section is in response to the final research question(s) I have posed: How has this self-study transformed my professional identity—who I am becoming as a teacher? What does this mean for meaningful pedagogy going forward?

Weaving together connections among the stories of the past and present is an opportunity to imagine purpose for the future. The purpose for the future is to reconceptualize how a pedagogy of meaning can be nurtured in the classroom so that identities of children and teacher appear in our learning. The purpose is also to experience my own transformations as I grow into the identities of the teacher I am becoming. Clandinin et al., (as cited in Binder, 2011) suggest that, “by *storying* our experiences, the meaning of teaching emerges as a tangible construct and our personal and professional identity can be reshaped” (p. 3). The connections I make across the stories of experience will help me to conceptualize a pedagogy of meaning, and will also be a process of reshaping my teacher identities. This opportunity for pedagogical change is the ultimate intention of this study. Describing the constructs I see as being at the heart of meaningful pedagogy is a process of moving from a place of telling stories, to a place of critical reflection and thoughtfully considered action.

### Chapter Three: The Stories

*Their story, yours and mine—it's what we all carry with us on this trip we take,  
and we owe it to each other to respect our stories and learn from them.*

-William Carlos Williams

#### Part 1: Reflecting on Stories of the Past

##### September 1979

I race down the hallway of our apartment block, tugging to loosen the hand knitted poncho from around my neck.

“Hurry Mom, Nannie is waiting for me. Hurry before I forget my song!”

She unlocks the apartment door and I see my Nannie right away, sitting on the couch reading a novel with yellowed pages. She folds the corner of her page and sets the novel down on the pile of books on the coffee table beside her when she sees me run in.

“Ooooh, *there's* my girl,” she reaches out to me with outstretched arms. I run into her arms as I do every time I see her. She smells like a mixture of Oil of Olay and a red lifesaver candy. I pull back from her arms and stand as tall as I possibly can in front of her. I am something special. *I know it*, I can see it in her eyes.

I begin my daily ritual of singing her the new song I learned in daycare that day. After about four words in, my Nannie always starts singing along with me.

*Is it possible my Nannie knows the words to EVERY song ever written?*

I start to sing,

“Do your ears hang low ...”

*Nannie is not singing yet.*

“Do they wobble to and fro...”

*She is still not singing!*

“Can you tie them in a knot, can you tie them in a bow?”

*Silence.*

TODAY IS THE DAY!

I am jumping up and down as I sing the rest of the song. I have finally outsmarted my Nannie; I finally have a song I can teach *her* to sing! I am overjoyed!

“*Well done Cookie!* I learned a new song today because of you!” There is a pride in the tone of her voice that I memorize.

Then she follows my actions and repeats each verse after me.

I can feel the excitement bubbling inside of me. The celebration of this moment is permanently imprinted in my mind and heart. I feel confident, smart, special, and valued.

## **September 1984**

Day 1

I am 9 years old and it is my first day of Grade 4 at a new school. I am excited to ride the school bus to school for the first time. One of many changes in my life since July. When I get on the bus I nervously tug on the gold chain that hangs around my neck. It has a small heart with my birthstone, a gift from my Mom’s wedding to my adoring Stepdad in July. It has replaced the key to our apartment on the fluorescent orange shoelace that last school year hung around my neck. In Grade 3 I walked myself across the street to school ... Hercules is over, time to turn the TV off, and walk to school. Now I ride a school bus through the countryside, it’s 7:45 AM, and this road stinks like horse poop, or is that turkeys?

Many kids get on that bus, they smile at me, but we don't say much, the bus driver glares at us in the big rear view mirror. This morning I learn that kids can't laugh or talk or make eye-contact on the school bus.

Someone just threw a crumpled up note onto my seat!

How are you? Check off one box:

- Happy
- Sad
- Hungry
- Scared

I check off happy, because I think that is the one my new friend will approve of.

One hour later the bus pulls into the school yard.

*I hope my teacher likes me.*

Day 2

Hide and go seek is fun. It must be, all of the other kids are laughing and racing out the door for recess.

I'm "IT" again. I wish I could remember that boy's name in the blue shirt; the one who had to move his desk right beside the teacher's because he tipped his chair backwards and fell right on his back. Why can't he just sit still like the girls do? Mrs. Deerling smiles at us when we sit nicely. She doesn't smile at *those* boys.

*"1-2-3 on you in the blue shirt!"*

Day 7

Being one of the new kids has its advantages. Especially in a school of 100 children where 25 have the same last name (including one of the teachers). Like many of the other children in my new classroom, my new classmate Darren is part of a long line of family members to go to this school. His mom, dad, two

aunts and four uncles all went to this school. His sisters are in Grades 6 & 8. His cousins are in Grades 1, 3, 7 & 8. There is only one 'Paul' in the school (that's me, Katie Paul). Everyone wants to sit beside me because I'm *new*. There hasn't been a new face in this group since they all started Grade 1 together. I'm feeling pretty important as I tally the mental waiting list of kids who want to be my partner in gym today. They laugh at my jokes and I saw Tanya admiring my new jelly shoes.

But then *Darla* bursts my bubble.

"When Mrs. Deerling sent you to deliver the mail to the office the other day, she told all of us that you are *lonely* and that we better be real nice to you and take turns being your partner because you don't have any friends. So can I stand beside you in line?"

Why do my cheeks always get so red? I can feel them burning up. The *teacher* talked about me in secret to the *whole class*? I didn't even know I was lonely. I know Kelly is my friend because she wanted to sit beside me even before the day Mrs. Deerling sent me to deliver the mail.

Day 22

I think this is going to be a fun day. The new smiley face borders on the bulletin board are gleaming. Mrs. Deerling has put something up for us to look at! She must have another good idea. Don is sure it is a racetrack: "Only racetracks have checkered flags at the end." We all wait eagerly for our teacher to share her secret idea with us. I think it is going to be a game.

I open my desk lid and grab the pencil lying underneath my day old sandwich. I know I will need it because she is heading towards the math textbooks. No! .... wait a minute, she's still walking. She picks up a bucket. I can see there is something colourful inside.



“Children, these are your race cars! It’s going to be so much fun! You each have a car with your name on it. See? I wrote it in big letters so everyone can tell whose car is whose! Now, I’m going to line up your cars along the bottom of this racetrack. You see these numbers along the side of the track? Those numbers are for your times tables. When you get all the answers correct on your times tables test, you get to move up the racetrack! The first person to reach the finish line is the winner!”

Don moans and receives a scold from the teacher that is usually reserved for him. He seemed to love racetracks up until now. Linda cheers, “Hooray, I’m going to win the race!” We all know it is true. Mrs. Deerling smiles a big grin and winks at her.

I’m excited for the big race. I think I stand a chance.

Day 26

I hate racetracks even more than Don does. He sticks his tongue out at me. He’s finally made it to #4.

I am the only car left at #2.

Day 28

Linda wins the timetable race. She gets a candy and a shiny, new pencil with a hot pink eraser and unicorns on it.

I am the only car left at #3.

Day 40

My heart starts to beat quickly and my hands are shaking, I hide them in my lap. Do Darla or Linda notice my cheeks burning? Mrs. Deerling is walking towards the math textbooks. I avoid eye contact.

I’m so *stupid*. I hate math.

**September 2001**

It is the first day of school and my first day as a teacher. I am excited beyond words. I have an out of body experience that morning as I hear my shoes going 'click clack' down the hallway and realize those grown up sounding teacher shoes are my own!

The kids file into the classroom, they seem nervous, can they tell how nervous I am? I hope that parent standing by the door believes that I know what I'm doing.

*Do I know what I'm doing?*

.....

We've made it to the afternoon, we refer to the schedule on the whiteboard, and it's time for Math Workshop. I have a plan. We'll start with something fun ... the more experienced teacher down the hall tells me about the great way she always starts the year for math. She photocopies a page for me out of a teaching manual. She must know what she's talking about, she's been teaching for 15 years.

I sit on the stool at the front of the class and introduce the fun game we are going to play. It is called, "Mad Minutes."

I feel the itch of uneasiness as I start. As I hear my own voice call out the numbers, I'm noticing it's starting to sound like a quiz. The unease is growing. But I am kind enough to reassure the children:

"Not to worry, it's just for *fun*! It's not a contest. Only you will know how you did and next time you can see how much you have improved."

At the table in front of me sits Caleb. He has one of those smiles that is contagious and when he cracks jokes even I can't keep a straight face! He has a sense of humour and gentleness about him that endears him to his peers and to adults instantly. As I read out the math questions, his smile melts then turns into a quivering lip. His brow is furrowed and he has his forehead in his hand as he looks down at his paper, his

head low to the table. As I sit at the front leading the “game”, I suddenly feel a rush of nausea come over me and my hands start to shake. I am ashamed. Looking at 9-year-old Caleb pushing the tears back into his eyelids, I am also looking at my 9-year-old self in last place of the car race, sinking into my own seat in humiliation.

*Didn't I know better?*

I end the “game” immediately.

As the kids run out the door for recess I catch Caleb’s attention. He walks over to me with his head looking down at the floor. I apologize for making him feel so uncomfortable and I tell him I think I made a mistake. I tell him I am learning too. He smiles at me and gives *me* a hug. He is standing taller again (and I suppose I am too).

It is okay to feel challenged. It is not okay to feel humiliated.

### **Making Meaning**

Revisiting stories of my past has afforded me the opportunity to examine more purposefully how I came to be the teacher I am, and how these past experiences have helped to shape what I believe about children, teaching, and learning. Looking back at stories of the past is a process of reflection that contributes to my understanding of my professional identity in the present. Binder (2011) describes the process of looking back as considering “how the significance of the past shaped the present” (p. 4). This process of revisiting “stories of old” through a new lens is an opportunity to gain some perspective as to why the image of the competent, resourceful child is central to my role as a teacher. It is also a way for me to see why supporting and co-constructing meaningful pedagogy in my classroom is so important to me. Of course, these are not the only

stories of the past that have shaped my teaching identities, but each of these stories in their own way played a significant role in my identity construction.

These three stories are ones I have told and retold in various contexts over the years. I have told some in my life outside of school and some in my life inside of school. Laying these three written stories side by side, I am finding new meaning in them. There are threads of connection among the stories that I did not see previously when I told them orally on their own. In all three stories I believe the most significant themes are concerned with negotiating identities and building relationships. These processes are entirely interconnected.

In the first story, my relationship with my Nannie has played such a powerful and positive influence in my identity construction. My Nannie's respect for who I am as a child and a learner, her excitement and genuine interest in what I have to say, and her participation in my interests, all contribute to my identity as a person who is competent and valued. There is a real sense that when I am with my Nannie she truly *sees* me. These are all relational qualities that have particular relevance in a classroom: listening, excitement, interest, participation, and attention. But, these qualities are easily forgotten if we lose sight of what our *purpose* is as educators. I think many people have been in or have visited classrooms where these relational qualities are absent, and in these classrooms it feels as if the life has been "sucked right out of" the learners and out of learning.

In the second story, I am a child who is entering a new school having experienced many significant life changes. When I put myself back into the jelly shoes of that 9-year-old child riding the bus to the new school, I am reminded of just how much significance I placed on whether my teacher is "nice" or whether she will like me. When I enter the classroom, my teacher does not *see* me. She seems to think she knows exactly what she needs to do *for* me, but

it is not what I need or want. I do not have a relationship with my teacher, nor does she support the process of building relationships in the classroom. The curriculum is generic; it does not reflect who the children are in the classroom, and, in fact, it is divisive and teaches a whole other curriculum that has nothing to do with multiplication. The non-relational qualities of exclusion, competition, and extrinsic motivation create an uncomfortable space that shapes my identity as a math learner.

This story is an example of the assumptions adults often make about what children need. I did not identify myself as lonely or without friends until my teacher described me that way to the rest of the class. The adult in this story never talked to me, or made any attempt to get to know anything about me. To others this story may seem insignificant, but for me it is a critical moment in my identity construction which reminds me of how it feels to not belong or be given the opportunity to succeed, and it affirms the personal significance of recognizing and supporting children's identities in the classroom.

In the final story, I am in the beginning stages of conceptualizing my teaching identities. Although as a beginning teacher I saw myself as thoughtful and caring in my approaches, I found myself assuming a very similar teacher role to that of the teacher who taught me about exclusion and humiliation. This was such a critical moment for me because it created an awareness of how I was negotiating my identities and needed to do so consciously. It was time to decide for myself who I was becoming as a teacher. It was a reminder that the decisions I make as a teacher need to be intentional, and it was a beginning exploration of the question that is ever present in my teaching today, *how does what I do reflect what I believe?* The next chapter of this story entailed building a relationship with Caleb and the other children in the classroom. I made the choice to teach from the children's strengths and resisted creating a climate of competition that highlights

what children *cannot* do. I like to think I contributed to shaping Caleb's identity as a competent, capable learner. Did Caleb influence my own identity construction? I believe he did. If so, who was the learner and who was the teacher?

These reciprocal roles of teacher and learner highlight for me the importance of never underestimating the significance of a moment or interaction with a child. In each of these stories the moments that stood out as critical are actually subtle moments that may seem insignificant to others. On the surface these do not appear to be "profound" moments, in fact the people with whom I have shared these moments may have quickly forgotten about them and surely have not stored them away in their memories as I have. No interaction, experience, or story, however, is neutral. Learning is occurring even in those moments when we are not intentionally teaching. And, even during what we believe to be intentional teaching moments, the lessons learned by others may not match what we intend. This has huge implications. As educators and as human beings we are always teachers and learners. We are always negotiating our identities in relationship with other people, and in relationship with our experiences and contexts. It is not a novel idea that negotiating identities is a central theme in stories of the past. But for me, revisiting past stories highlights an essential and ongoing question in the classroom context: In what ways am I as a teacher creating spaces that support and honour the identities of a particular child or a particular group of children?

## Part 2: Living the Stories of the Present

### The Race Car

Prologue:

William is a 6-year-old boy with a permanent grin on his face. Before you get to know William you may think he is quite shy, but if you watch carefully, you will notice his day is filled with “thumbs up”, “high fives”, and other excited gestures directed at his classmates. William is a loving child who thrives on being with other children, and as fitting his age, he loves to run, jump, build, and play. He is also the first to tuck underneath my arm to sneak in a hug any chance he can get. When I am first introduced to William during transition meetings from Kindergarten, he is described as being a child with Autism, who was non-verbal before entering Kindergarten. I am told he is starting to say one syllable words and is beginning to string two words together. At home, William’s family speaks Filipino and English.

Every day in the classroom we begin our day with a *Sharing Circle*. This is a time where we sit in a circle on the carpet and children have the opportunity to orally tell stories that are personally meaningful to them. Children “pass the tap” by tapping the shoulder of the person beside them when they are finished their turn. When first joining the Sharing Circle, William smiles when the “tap” comes to him and quickly passes the tap along to the next person without saying anything. Following the Sharing Circle we transition into *Explorations* time. This is an inquiry-based time largely centred in play, choice, and artistic expression. During Explorations time William consistently heads to the block area to build structures. Other children join him, but their play is largely parallel. Following Explorations we move into *Writer’s Workshop*. Our writing time is structured as a workshop that begins with a mini-lesson as a whole group, followed by a time for children to write independently or in small groups, and ending with a gathering together and sharing time. During Writer’s Workshop time, William is reluctant to hold a pencil in his hand. I quickly recognize a change in his demeanour as he often slumps in his chair with his blank piece of paper staring back at him.

I ask him prompting questions to encourage him to draw a picture, but this is unsuccessful. As a class we are focussing on telling our own oral stories, picturing the story images in our minds, and representing these images as illustrations. This is a process that is successful for many of the children. Creating a space in the classroom for telling stories during Sharing Circle has helped many of the children to find rich stories to tell. For William, however, the Sharing Circle is not yet serving as the kind of invitation he needs. We have not heard William's voice yet in the circle, and we have not seen William's stories represented visually on paper. I begin to wonder about William's oral language abilities and how his voice can enter into the social world of our classroom. What will be my role be in offering him the encouragement and support he needs to help him tell a story he has never told us before?

\* \* \* \* \*

We start the morning with our Sharing Circle on the carpet. As we gather to greet each other, we begin with our daily morning song—"What a Day", by Fred Penner: *"What a day, What a day, filled with surprises, What a Day, What a Day, friends by your side. No matter what the weather, when we're all here together, it just keeps on getting better, What a Day, Oh What a Day ..."* Children's voices ring out as we accompany the song with actions they have created. William does not sing the words, but is beginning to follow the actions, closely watching his buddy who sits next to him. I believe his participation is less about the song than it is about William feeling a sense of belonging. This ritual sets the tone for the day and invites all children in the classroom to participate in a shared experience as we welcome in a new day and each other.

There is anticipation in the air as children think about what story they will tell today. Mostly the children tell informal stories that often include themes about life at home, favourite toys, adventures and misadventures with their friends, siblings, or cousins. Today when the tap reaches Jake, José announces, "Shhhh, everyone, it's time for Shadow's adventure story!" There is a hush as the children lean in closer in



anticipation of Jake's daily story about his beloved dog Shadow. Stories about Shadow are a staple in the classroom and children have come to rely on them as part of our morning routine. It's as though the day could not possibly begin until we have heard what trouble Shadow has been involved in this time! Hearing Jake's latest installment in the ongoing saga of his mischievous dog Shadow is as much a routine in our day as returning our book bags to the baskets in the morning. What the children do not know is that Shadow is the longest lasting, consistent relationship of unconditional love Jake has had in his life. Jake cannot tell stories about simple moments shared with his parents, or stories of family experiences, or outings like other children often do, because of circumstances in his life that are far beyond his control. When he tells a story about Shadow, however, I have the feeling that he is negotiating his identity—as a child who belongs and laughs and plays and is loved, in the ways that are reflected in so many of the stories of his fellow classmates.

William seeks out a spot in the Sharing Circle each day beside Jake. There is comfort in the reliability and predictability of Jake's humorous stories. William is not yet sharing a story himself, but by sitting beside Jake he knows what to expect. He can put his arm around Jake as he tells us that Shadow ran out on to the road and another dog tried to bite him. He can laugh out loud and clap his hands as Jake tells us about how Shadow climbed into the garbage can and got stuck. William is "in on the joke", he is part of the story. I am amazed at Jake's ability to welcome William into his stories. When William makes a comment about Shadow, I am not sure what he is saying as his articulation is difficult to understand (especially when he is excited), but Jake always understands William's words—at least his smile and nod suggest he does.

The next day at Sharing Circle Jake absorbs the approving laughter of his peers as he concludes his Shadow story, then passes the tap to William. There is silent anticipation around the circle as William does not quickly pass the tap on as he usually does. Instead he reaches into his pocket. It is like he is doing it in slow motion and I wonder afterwards if he was doing it for effect. Daily he has witnessed the admiration the

other children have for Jake, as he keeps them hanging on his words for the conclusions of his Shadow stories. Was William trying to have the same effect on his peers? All eyes are on him and he is grinning widely. From out of his pocket, William pulls a most precious item. It is cupped inside his hands. We get a peek at the colour, but he has not yet held it out in full view. The children are beginning to lean in closely like they do for Jake. William uncups his hands to reveal a shiny, red HotWheels car (Figure 1).



Figure 1: William's red HotWheels car

As William holds the car in front of him, his hand extended towards the middle of the circle, there is a resounding "oooooh" from his classmates. He holds it up in the air for a long time and I am struck by how respectfully the children just sit and stare at his car. Then taking us all by surprise, William exclaims, "MY CAR!" Everyone is smiling and there are a few giggles. I can see many of the children are looking at me to see my reaction. This is the first day we have ever heard William's voice in the circle! Jake leans in and gives William a high five. It is proudly received by William who nods his head with confidence.

Following the Sharing Circle, we move into Explorations and William returns eagerly to the block area. This is often where he chooses to spend his time. I know I will be watching him carefully as he embodies a new sense of purpose heading towards the blocks. William continues building the city streets and bridges he has been building every day, only this time they need to be functional as no one wants a shiny red sports car to end up in the shark infested lake! On this day, another child, Christopher, joins William. He

can see there is important work to be done and begins to help William build a stable bridge. I am excited to see Christopher join in William's play, and equally excited to see William accept Christopher's help.

Christopher is new to our classroom. His family moved to Canada two weeks previously and his family speaks Filipino at home. I am not sure how much English Christopher speaks yet, as he is very quiet and when I talk with him he often responds in a whisper of one or two words.

The following is a transcript of the conversation I audio recorded that day in the blocks (October, 2010):

William: My car!

Christopher: Cool! Cool car!

William: My car, *rrrrrrrrrrrrrrm!* (drives car up the ramp and flies it through the air with his hand)

Christopher: Here, here, over on here! (motioning to the bridge).

William: *WoooooWooooo!* (drives car on the bridge, the bridge collapses).

Christopher: *Aaaaaaah!* Shark eat you!

William: Ya, shark eat you!

At the end of the day I am sitting on the carpet after the children have left and listening to the recorded conversation again from the block area. I am so pleased that I placed the recorder in the block area today. William and Christopher's stories are beginning to emerge in a way I have not heard before. What a story! A red race car driving over the bridge and crashing into the water where hungry sharks await! It makes me question the concerns I have had during Writer's Workshop time when William has not yet produced a story. Clearly William has stories to tell, here is an adventure unfolding right before us amidst the blocks.

#### Reflection Journal, October 2010

Today was such an exciting day! I continue to be amazed by the power of our Sharing Circle. When William held up his car, you could just feel the anticipation in the air. And, he was so proud of himself for

sharing. Once again the children show their understanding of one another. It's as if they have an intuitive sense of kindness. Laughing in response to a classmate's story, or fixing their gaze on a car that is being held up without any explanation. No one interrupts or grows tired of looking at the car in silence. It is like they are saying, "Hey, I like you, I appreciate you, you belong here." When William said those two words, "My Car!" Wow! I was not the only one who understood the significance of that moment. José, McKenna and Himmat all turned to look at me to see my reaction, they knew something special was happening.

William and Christopher were so excited to hear their voices on the recorder today. Now I'm wondering if this story might continue on into our writing time. William always shuts down at writing time and does not seem to want to attempt to draw anything. I think William and Christopher are "on a roll" and are feeling a new sense of confidence in themselves. I wonder what will happen if I offer them an invitation at the block area tomorrow that might extend this experience into drawing/writing? Maybe writing time could be part of Explorations time? But, I do not want to interrupt their play or impose my ideas either. I just wonder if William recognizes that the story he is telling amidst the blocks *is* a story. I wonder if he realizes that he has a story to tell that is not unlike the stories Jake tells during Sharing Circle, or the stories McKenna (who often sits across from him at Writer's Workshop) is creating with detailed illustrations and recently the addition of some words.

I think I better give them some more time to play together and help them build their relationship with each other before I add a new invitation. My intervention needs to be open ended so that they can choose to take it up or not.

\* \* \* \* \*

The next day William and Christopher return to the blocks again and re-enact almost the same story they played out the day before. A few days later, I decide to leave them a simple invitation at the blocks. The invitation is open ended and they can easily ignore it if it has no meaningful purpose in their play. I

decide to offer a large piece of paper that reflects the scale of the area they are working in (about 3 meters in length). This paper does not in any way resemble the story paper we usually use at Writer's Workshop time (see Figures 2 & 3).



Figure 2: A new invitation at the block area; markers and large paper

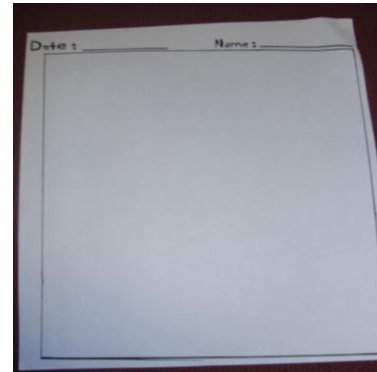


Figure 3: A typical 8 1/2 x 11 story paper used at Writer's Workshop

At first William and Christopher step over the paper to pull the blocks off the shelf. They lay the blocks across the paper and the familiar scene of the road and "shark lake bridge" takes shape. William pauses for a moment and seems to be staring at the markers. He starts to push the blocks aside to clear off the paper. Christopher appears concerned at first, he is not happy that the shark bridge is being disassembled, but he is curious enough to watch William to see what he is planning. William takes a red marker in one hand and is holding the red HotWheels car in his other. The edge of the marker is touching the side of the race car, so that as the car drives it leaves a trail of red behind. An intricate system of roadways starts to take shape, but even more interesting to me is that the roadways take shape as their play unfolds. The drawing on the paper *is* their play. William's story becomes intertwined with Christopher's story and the representation on paper follows the lead of a red HotWheels car. The lines on the paper record the twists and turns of the plot of their play (see Figure 4).



Figure 4: William and Christopher's final story map that emerged through their play.

The following transcript is the conversation between William and Christopher I record at the block area that day (October, 2010). The photographs which appear to the right of the transcript illustrate how the story map unfolds.

William: I drive my house, *vroom*, that's me!

(points to the house he has drawn) (see Figure 5).

Christopher: That's our school!

William: *My school. rrrm rrrm*, right there.  
(drives his car to the school).

Christopher: Sun in the top.  
(draws the sun on the top of the paper).

Christopher: I need some gas.



Figure 5: William's house

William: (draws a gas tank, drives car beside his tank) (see Figure 6).  
I need gas too – g, g, g, g, eeeeeee!

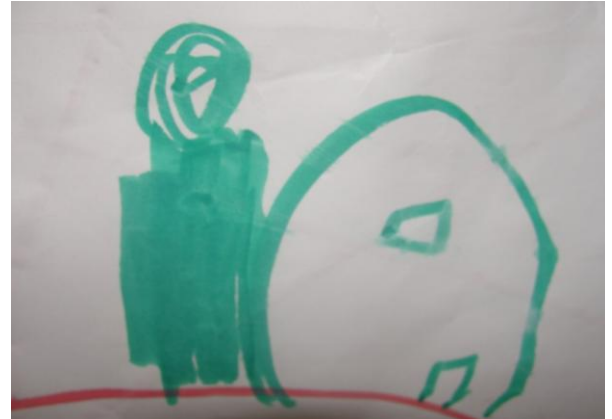


Figure 6: Gas tank

William: (draws a long curved line, drives his car along the line).  
A mountain! (see Figure 7).



Figure 7: A mountain!

William: Vijay's house, I at Vijay's house.  
(draws his classmate's house, parks his car in front of the house) (see Figure 8).

Catherine: Where are you going if you drive over this way?  
(pointing to the side of map not yet drawn on).



Figure 8: William standing outside of Vijay's house.



William: My cousin's house!  
 (draws a house, drives his car over)  
 (see Figure 9).

Catherine: What about you Christopher?  
 Where are you going?

Christopher: My Grandma's house.  
 (draws his Grandma's house near  
 William's drawing)  
 (see Figure 9).

William: Cool!

Christopher: My cousin too! (draws another house).

William: Uh oh! Car hungry. A red gas station!  
 (drives car to empty space and draws another  
 gas station) (see Figure 10).



Figure 9: William's cousin's house next to Christopher's Grandma's house.



Figure 10: The red gas station.

Christopher: *I'm hungry!* I'm hungry too!

William: Right over there ...  
 (He points to an empty space, then draws  
 a square).  
 Look, I.G.A! (see Figure 11).

Catherine: How will Christopher know this is a place  
 where he can buy food?

William: See? Watermelon (drawing circles).



Figure 11: I.G.A. (the local grocery store).  
 The circles are the watermelons indicating that people can buy food there. In front is William's mother going into the store.



William: (pulls his car up to the food store. He leans over his car to see the driver side door. The marker touches the car door, as he draws his mom coming out of the car door) (see Figure 11).

There's my mom!

Catherine: What is she doing?

William: *Milk and watermelon please!*  
(mimics his mother's voice).

Christopher: (watches the store come to life then starts drawing).  
I drew this, look, Toys R'Us™!  
(draws the trademark giraffe that appears on Toys R'Us signage and advertising) (see Figure 12).

Christopher and William: (Laughter)

William: *Vroom!* (quickly drives his car over),

*Wooosh!* Mario, get in! Luigi, get in!  
(draws Mario and Luigi in their cars. Labels 'M' above one of the figures)  
(see Figure 13).

This one Mario. (Pointing to 'M').  
(draws a long line from the Toys R'Us store down to the houses they drew earlier).

Mario and Luigi go up high and fall  
AAAAAALLLL the way to here!  
(Drives his car along the line he has drawn to the houses) (see figure 14).



Figure 12: Christopher's illustration of Toys R'Us.



Figure 13: Mario and Luigi in their cars.  
Mario is labelled with 'M' on top.

Christopher: Hey, to my cousin's house  
and my Grandpa's house!

William: Yep! Hi Grandpa! (In a silly voice, both  
boys erupt into laughter).



Figure 14: William draws the path that Mario and Luigi travel to the houses.

This is the first time William's story appears on paper or takes a form that can then be shared with others. As his teacher I learn so much about who William is as a person and as a literacy learner. The themes of race cars, family outings, playing with his cousins, and the adventures of Mario and Luigi become familiar and recurring themes throughout the year for William. His peers begin to connect with him based on these story themes. Similar stories emerge for other children as they build relationships with the boys based on their common interests and experiences. Creating a space through Explorations values the boys' play and allows this collaborative story to emerge. By taking the time to listen carefully, I learn about what matters to William and about how he understands his world. I learn about his close family connections and some of his family routines. Through his play, William shares his understanding of places within his community. He also demonstrates an understanding that print conveys meaning as he is beginning to label pictures with beginning letter sounds. Through his play, William demonstrates that he can visually represent a story, and I also have a much better understanding of his oral language abilities.

Perhaps most significantly, William's and Christopher's story is becoming socially woven into the stories that make up the fabric of our classroom community.

### Lilly's Song

#### Prologue:

Lilly is 6 years old. She is full of joy and energy and makes everyone around her laugh. Lilly is known by every adult and many of the children in the school because she has a personality that lights up a room. She has a sense of humour and wit that often takes others by surprise. She communicates in a deep, gravelly voice and is often asked to repeat herself, in order to help others understand what she is saying. When asked, for example, "Do you need help tying your shoe Lilly?" she responds quickly with, "No thanks, easy peezy, lemon squeezy!" When asked a question about an activity she is working on, she often responds with a resounding, "Remember, I'm not a *genius* you know!" Lilly's mantra is, "It's like I always say, NEVER NEVER NEVER give up!" These are wise words for a child who faces multiple health challenges and is legally blind. There is nothing that Lilly will not try. She is determined, strong-willed, and eternally optimistic. As her teacher, I find myself baffled again and again by her actions. No matter how many times I read her file or talk to the vision consultant, I cannot wrap my head around her vision abilities or challenges. Lilly has one eye in which her field of vision has been described to me as the equivalent of a pin hole. Her other eye is a prosthetic. She holds objects up to her glasses, rubbing them against the lens in a circular motion to view them, yet she negotiates the monkey bars, play structure and slide without hesitation. This is alarming to the adults who are with her, as she has no fear, is hyposensitive to pain, and operates on only one speed—in a *HURRY!* At the beginning of the year she negotiates her way around the classroom and school by bumping into things at high speed. Lilly needs support to be aware of any objects or obstructions that may endanger her safety. She does not care for walking, her excitement and eagerness for new activities or experiences propel her forward at a fast pace, leaning in the direction she is

headed. Lilly is tenacious and has a spark that reminds me daily of the power of optimism, persistence, and positive energy.

Although Lilly is quick to offer humorous quips, it is very difficult to engage Lilly in a reciprocal conversation. Lilly does not yet share stories about her life outside of school, and inside the classroom her play with others is largely of a parallel nature. During our morning Sharing Circle, I have tried to prepare Lilly to share a basic story with us before coming to the circle. Lilly's familiar routine, however, is to scratch the side of her head, and say in an exasperated way, "Ummm, I don't know!"

#### Reflection Journal, February 2011

I have been thinking a lot about Lilly lately. I am feeling some tension about her place in the classroom. How do I help Lilly share who she is with the class and what she is interested in, in such a way that she is fully "seen" and valued by her peers. I am starting to notice that feeling of tension emerge again! Something just does not feel right but I cannot quite put my finger on it. She is happy. She is comfortable in the classroom and eagerly engages in her play choices at Explorations. I think what I am noticing is that there are children who are really comfortable with sharing their ideas with others and their peers have an understanding of "what makes them tick" so to speak. But I am not so sure about Lilly. The other children are kind, they welcome her to join their activities, but I think they do it to be "nice" to her, not because they really know who she is or because they think she might have something to contribute. If she joins someone during Explorations, she seems to soon fade into the background, not because this is intentional, it just sort of happens. It just does not seem like enough of a connected relationship. I am glad the other children are kind to her of course, but it seems superficial in a way.

If I think of McKenna and Leah, for example, children interact with them because they are interested in their ideas, because they know McKenna can help them with animal sketching, because Leah always thinks of great ways to use the materials in the junk trunk. They interact because they have mutual

interests, because they can learn something from one another, because they can help one another, because they have shared experiences they can build on. “Being nice” is just one of many reasons why children engage with one another.

I wonder, “Where is Lilly’s voice?” When do other children stop and communicate with her or notice what she is doing in order to jointly make meaning? Do the other children see her as a person with ideas and experiences that might connect or contribute to their own understanding of who they are and what they know? How do I help Lilly into the social world of our classroom in a way that is recognizable to others—in a way that makes meaning making collaborative and makes other connections possible? I need to think more about what opportunities and media are available to Lilly to express herself and relate to others. This is challenging because the opportunities and media available in the classroom have so far not served as that bridge between Lilly and her peers. The use of art, illustrations, books, time spent orally in Sharing Circle, and her recent play in a “restaurant” at Explorations have not yet helped her to connect with others in what I would consider to be a truly relational way.

\* \* \* \* \*

It is our second visit to *Music Explorations* with our music teacher, Sally. Music Explorations is an extension of our classroom Explorations, where children have the opportunity to make choices to explore their questions, ideas and interests through music, instruments, and materials in the music room. Sally has created a structure for these Music Explorations to occur for a block of time once per cycle. Sally has invited me into her process of exploring the use of “music as a language” to enrich learning in a more reciprocal way. We have had conversations about the potential for music to inspire our work in the classroom, as well as the potential of our work in the classroom to inspire the experiences in the music room. Sally is interested in the connections that can be made as children’s musical experiences are less decontextualized from their experiences in the classroom. As the classroom teacher, I am excited to have

this opportunity to collaborate with the music teacher and I am eager to have her support in an area in which I lack confidence. I am hopeful this opportunity will help me to explore some of the questions I have been asking myself about the many different ways I can offer children to express their stories or represent who they are. I am hopeful about the possibilities that Music Explorations hold for children whose voices are not easily heard in the classroom. Perhaps music will be a language through which they can tell us something about who they are, in a way that they have been unable to do before.

The excitement rings in the air, as bells, xylophones, African drums, cymbals, shakers, and hand drums erupt in cacophonous waves.

“CRASH! CRASH! CRASH!” I look across the room to see Kulnoor banging on a cymbal. For the first time since he arrived at our school from India a week ago he is beaming from ear to ear.

“CRASH! CRASH! CRASH!”

I am trying to resist my urge to make that giant cymbal disappear in a hurry. I am scanning the room for a good hiding place for an instrument of that size. Kulnoor looks up from the cymbal that teeters back and forth on its stand, and we lock eyes. He acknowledges me with an assured nod and a wave of his drumstick in the air.

CRASH! CRASH! CRASH!

I smile back at him and push through my discomfort. I remind myself that meaningful learning moments do not only emerge when I am comfortable!

The children are exploring a variety of instruments freely. Many begin to naturally form into groups and create music together. Kulnoor walks across the room to join a group, so there is a reprieve from the crashing.

Later in Music Explorations children are invited to think about the animal research we have been doing in the classroom. They are invited to think about the connections they can make between the music they are playing and the animal they are researching. In our classroom the children are representing an animal using clay, writing fact books, and using a variety of natural materials and water colours to create habitats and playscapes for their clay animals.

Lilly's favourite animal is an elephant. Every day she finds a new person in the school with whom to share her personal connection to elephants: "Elephants can't see good. Like me. But they feel things with their trunk. I don't have a trunk, I use my hands." On this day, during Music Explorations, Lilly picks up the hand drum and starts beating it with a loud force. "Listen to my elephant," she says. "It's loud walking 'cuz' it's big," she says to the other members of her group. They have also chosen instruments that they feel represent their animal's sounds. I sit down alongside the group and I am amazed to see Lilly surface as a leader in a way I have never seen before. As the three other group members play their instruments at the same time, I can see Lilly is becoming agitated. She puts down her drum to cover her ears.

"It's too loud!" she yells.

Lilly seems to be frustrated because each member of her group is playing an instrument without any consideration of what the other "band members" are playing.

This is the interaction I record between Lilly and her group members that day (February, 2011):

Lilly : Stop everybody. Stop everybody! (in a firm voice).

Group members: (continue playing, then one by one they stop, as she reaches in their direction pushing their instruments to get their attention).

Lilly: It's too loud! Okay, I'll do like this (beats her drum two times), now you start. Okay, ready, 1, 2, 3, ...*beat beat*. (beats drum two times).

All of the group members start playing together. Once more they play randomly—there is no discernible rhythm—but Lilly seems satisfied that at least they began at the same time. The group plays together for what seems like a very long time. I am wondering when they will decide that their song is complete. I am starting to think about how I will ask that question when Lilly does the two beats on her drum again and stops playing. The group seems to understand her cue and they stop playing too.

Lilly: That's right, I do this (beats two times) and we stop too. Now we are ready, our song is ready.

At the end of Music Explorations Lilly's group has the opportunity to share their composition with the class. Lilly is the only member of the group who speaks, as she declares, "I am the leader." Her group members see her as the leader and very seriously await her cue to begin playing. As they play they are smiling and anxiously looking at Lilly for her cue that it is time to end the song.

The audience watches the group carefully. From my observations of the other groups during their exploring, I notice that the challenge of how to begin and end a song, and the task of organizing the band members into a unified ensemble, is a challenge that is not unique to this one group. Today Lilly is a leader for her group, and for the entire class, as she shares her idea of how to start and stop a song with the beat of her drum. When Lilly presents her idea to the class, Sally and I exchange an excited look, we both recognize this as a critical moment for Lilly. This is the first time she publicly shares something of her initiation with her peers, and it is the first time her peers are seeing her as someone who has something to teach them or to contribute to their work. This is the first time Lilly leads a sharing moment or presents herself to the class as a leader. I think Lilly has a sense of this accomplishment too since she cannot contain her excitement and pride.

That day after school Sally and I meet to debrief our Music Explorations experience. Our conversation immediately turns to Lilly, as Sally is as excited as I am to see Lilly's voice emerge in this new way. Sally and I begin discussing possibilities that I might extend to the classroom the next day. I am thinking about



ways that Lilly can continue to take on this leadership role using music, and how this can be incorporated into our classroom during Explorations time. I am curious how this new found sense of purpose and urgency of Lilly's to play instruments and to lead a group of musicians may help her to share her voice with us in new ways. I am certain I want to help Lilly pursue this new found interest further. It is not only an opportunity for her to express herself and share her ideas; even more, I believe this music experience is serving as the bridge I have been searching for to connect Lilly's ideas meaningfully with those of her peers.

The next day during Explorations in the classroom I have some instruments available to the children as an invitation. Many children return to the activities they were working on the previous day in the classroom. Others seem to be inspired to use the instruments they had spent time with yesterday in the music room. In the classroom today many children turn to the musical instruments to compliment play experiences and projects that are already underway. For example, a poetry anthology a small group of children are working on is now being transformed into a song book. A book that two children have been working on together is now turning into a play, with instruments being used for the sound effects. The restaurant area the children have created in a corner of the classroom now has live music for customers to enjoy as they eat their meals.

Lilly heads directly to the circle table where the instruments are laid out. She touches each of the instruments, then picks up the same hand drum she had yesterday. I wonder if she will return to the elephant sounds she had been composing yesterday in the music room. To my surprise, Lilly seems to have a plan the moment she picks up the drum, but this plan has nothing to do with the group members she was working with yesterday. Lilly often needs the support of an adult to make a choice at Explorations time, so I am particularly intrigued about the sense of purpose she has today. Lilly makes her way to the paper shelf, and picks out three different coloured pieces of construction paper. She then goes to the

marker bin and selects a marker. She sets her drum, paper, and marker down on a table and taps her finger against her temple, "Think, think, think!" she says out loud. Lilly lines up the paper side by side and is then off again to retrieve one of the most sought after tools in the classroom which she will need to complete her plan ... the stapler!

With help, Lilly staples the three pieces of paper together so that they look like an accordion style book. Then, she begins drawing lines on the pages with the marker. Lilly draws a line and then points to it. This is the first time I have ever seen Lilly initiate her own symbol-making of any kind on paper. Lilly then picks up her drum, drums a beat on her drum, then draws and points to one line, and beats her drum again. It is clear by her pointing, then playing, that each line on the paper represents one beat on the drum. Lilly has created invented music notation (see Figure 15). This is her first entry into creating her own print text!

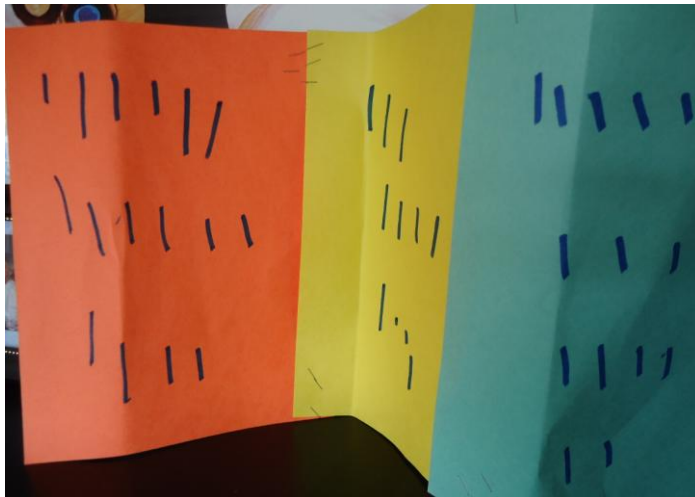


Figure 15: Lilly's invented notation

Lilly plays and replays her composition, beat for beat, on her drum. She stops playing as she notices the sound of music off to her side coming from one of the xylophones. Lilly sets down her drum and walks towards the music. When she reaches the source of the music she stands and listens intently to McKenna, who is playing one of her own compositions on a xylophone. McKenna has a strong sense of herself. She is one of the most verbal children in the classroom and easily expresses her ideas with others. McKenna is

seen as a leader by her peers. McKenna is always bursting with creative ideas and often initiates her own investigations. She is learning to share her ideas with others, while remaining open to her classmates' suggestions. I have been supporting McKenna to explore her ideas in ways that do not overtake the ideas of others. My hope is that McKenna will discover that others can contribute to her learning in meaningful ways.

As Lilly makes her way over to McKenna I hold my breath. I feel myself on the edge of my seat anticipating that I may need to step in and support this exchange between these two learners. Lilly's learning is unfolding right before my eyes and I do not want her ideas to be overshadowed by a child who has a more assertive personality and a wider range of experiences as a learner. Lilly stands beside McKenna for a while and listens to her play a repeating melody on her xylophone.

Her voice confident, Lilly says to McKenna, "Come with me McKenna, come try this. I wrote a song, you need a song to read to help you play." To my delight, McKenna picks up her xylophone and carries it over to the table where Lilly's drum and music notation await. McKenna does not attempt to take over this experience, she listens carefully and assumes the role of a willing participant and student of Lilly's "teaching". Lilly's voice gets louder and faster as she realizes that she has McKenna's attention and interest. She props up her accordion style book of music notation so that the two of them can see it as they play. Lilly resumes her pattern of pointing to each line and playing one beat on the drum. *Point, beat, point, beat, point, beat.* McKenna continues to play the melody she was playing before Lilly invited her over. Lilly turns to McKenna with encouragement and reassuringly says, "That's right McKenna, you got it right!" McKenna smiles at Lilly and then picks up a marker and begins creating her own invented notation on a separate piece of paper. The moment is magical! This is the first authentic interaction I have seen between McKenna and Lilly. Lilly has found an opportunity and a medium to express herself in a way that connects her work and play with others. Her confidence and creativity with the musical instrument, and her

use of invented notation, serves as an invitation to her peer. Creating invented notation is a new experience for the whole class, and Lilly is exploring this concept along with her peers. Perhaps more importantly, Lilly has entered into the social world of her peers!

The following is a portion of the transcript of the dialogue Sally and I had following our Music Explorations experience (recorded March, 2011). This section reflects some of our reflections on Lilly's growth:

Catherine: It certainly makes me think as a teacher about what I'm doing, because I never really gave her the opportunity to tap into that (musical representation) until we went to Music Explorations. You'd think I would have thought of that sooner. But you can't just say, "here you go, you get an instrument, Lilly." The whole point was that it was occurring within a relationship, with a connectedness to what was going on with our whole group, not just, "here's something different for you to do because you can't see like everybody else."

Sally: And I think that's what it was. Everybody was doing this thing, and it was something that she could completely do. And it probably took her a while to realize that. But then that she took it to that "writing down" place, and that visual-notating place, is really interesting.

Catherine: Well, you know what happened after that was really interesting, she started making books after that. Like, with help, but as soon as she started doing that notation in music, she started having this new-found interest for words on the page. So we started making large sized books, the "how-to" type stories [stories that explain how to do something in simple steps], and she would, hand-over-hand [my hand supporting hers], make these simple black line pictures, and we would make the words very big so that she could see them. And then because they were easy, predictable stories, even if she didn't know the words, she could "read" it. And

she could see the print, and that was a new world for her as well, a new connection. She really started to pay attention and make connections to print in a way that she hadn't at all before. And that happened after the music notation.

Sally: Which was the sound, and a mark representing a sound. And then she made the connection to a word, and letters representing a word.

Catherine: And then she started also doing squiggles, and saying, "I wrote a poem."

Sally: And that it came from something she wanted to do ... it was entirely her own plan. She went and got that piece of paper, and began writing the signs that were the sound of her drum.

Catherine: And nobody had done that before, right? That was totally her idea.

Sally: I think it sounds like at some point, Lilly made the connection, through that simple drum thing, that you can represent a sound through a written down symbol, which would be a more obscure concept to her because seeing isn't her strongest asset, and then suddenly all these other things could be represented that way, and she knew that she could do it because she had done it—in fact, she had thought of doing it herself!

#### Reflection Journal, March 2011

Today Sally and I sat down to reflect on our Music Explorations experience together and our conversation quickly turned to Lilly. I have been amazed by the growth I have seen in Lilly since inviting music into our learning in a more sustained and connected way. It is so powerful for me to hear Sally's interpretation of Lilly's growth too. To have that affirmation from another teacher that the moments that stood out for me also stood out for her, as well as having the opportunity to discuss our theories together about what Lilly is learning, has made this whole experience so much richer and more meaningful for me as the teacher.

On so many levels, I feel that Music Explorations has been a turning point for Lilly. She has joined into activities that so many other children were already invested in, and in some cases she was the person with the ideas who invited others in. I saw a shift in her interactions with her peers, from more parallel play at Explorations to communicating and engaging with others in a far more relational way. Her transition into being a *contributor* helped her to relate with certain peers with whom she had never had a relationship before.

Sally made the observation that perhaps Lilly is more connected to sound given her limited eyesight. The music invitations allowed her to connect with others in a place where she is not entering with something less, so to speak. I was really intrigued by this idea and felt a sense of disappointment that I had not offered her these kinds of invitations (i.e., invitations that are not just visual) sooner. I think the beauty of Music Explorations is that every child was invited into this experience and could make connections in ways that were personally meaningful. That is one of the things I value greatly about Explorations, it is not just about adapting or differentiating an activity for children who have certain needs. Sometimes I think it is easy to make assumptions about what a particular child may need based on what we as teachers think he/she needs. I wonder if we actually limit children when we make assumptions about what they need. This example of Explorations was instead an invitation that situated Lilly as competent and creative enough to express herself in a way that suited her self-identified needs and was personally meaningful for her. It was an invitation to all children, not just an adaptation made for Lilly. The invitations were rich, yet they were also open-ended enough to give Lilly the space to come into her own.

Sally and I were both amazed at how Lilly's exploration of music led her into the place of notation-making. It was through playing with music that Lilly made a connection to print as a visual representation of a sound. Since finding her interest in music notation, Lilly has demonstrated a new curiosity about print in general. She demonstrates an awareness that print conveys meaning. During Writing & Reading

Workshop it is as if a whole new world has opened up for Lilly. She is always asking if it is time to make a book, and the first book she made was a “how-to” story about baking a birthday cake which she published shortly after her birthday. This was also the first book she could read on her own (sometimes approximating what was written on the page, but maintaining the sound and meaning of the text) because it was personally meaningful to her; because, it is *her* story. I am amazed at how attentively she is paying attention to print now and how much of her time she spends writing symbols on paper. It is as if the music notation offered her an invitation into the world of print. I have been reading Vivian Paley’s book *The Boy Who Would Be a Helicopter* in collaboration with my teacher candidate, and this quote now jumps out at me: “Once changes begin, they happen fast. The child leaps and expands in several directions, according to a mysterious plan that no one can anticipate” (Paley, 1990, p. 142). This is exactly what has happened with Lilly—and music was the beginning!

### **The Storytelling Chair**

Prologue:

The yellow storytelling chair sits in the middle of the classroom. Our chair is a well worn “granny chair” reminiscent of the one that sat in the corner of my Nannie’s living room when I was a young child. This was the chair that creaked as she welcomed me into her lap with open arms, and told me stories that tickled the back of my hair as she spoke.

We know to brace ourselves as we sit down in *our* chair. We always sink in farther than expected, the springs are well worn. The back of the chair is just the right height for a 6-year-old to stand behind, a chin resting on folded arms, looking over the adult’s shoulder at the story that is unfolding on paper. The arms on the chair are faded in two spots, from the elbows of children leaning in to read the words. To the untrained eye, the chair sitting empty in the middle of the room may look like it is destined for the big blue dumpster in the parking lot ... but we know better. For us, the chair is an invitation destined to bring forth

the next great story. Yesterday it was “*The Great Pickle Race*”, today it is “*Fishing with Papa Tom*”, tomorrow it may be the story of a voice we have never heard before.

\* \* \* \* \*

Anne sits as a silent observer in the morning Sharing Circle. It is January, and she still has not felt comfortable speaking during this sharing time. During writing time, Anne illustrates tiny pencil drawings. The size of her drawings and light touch of the pencil reflect the same hesitancy on paper that I observe when she is given opportunities to tell her stories orally. When working one-on-one with me, Anne speaks with a quiet voice and gives minimal information relating to a story even with encouragement and guiding questions.

The following is an interaction with Anne that took place during a writing conference (recorded December, 2010):

(Anne and I sit down together to look at the story she has chosen to share from her writing folder. Her story is in the form of a very lightly pencilled illustration).

Catherine: So, this is the story picture you would like to share with me today Anne?

Anne: Yes.

Catherine: What would you like me to know about this story Anne?

Anne: (long pause, shrugs her shoulders).

Catherine: Can you tell me what is happening in your story picture?

Anne: (long pause, shrugs her shoulders).

Catherine: I see you've included a lot of people in your story picture Anne. Maybe you could start by telling me who these people are in your story?

Anne: (looking at the paper, a long silence)

Catherine: (pointing to one of the people) Who is this?

Anne: My sister.

Catherine: Who is this?



Anne: Me.

Catherine: I thought so, I could tell by the braids. What about these people over here? (pointing)

Anne: Those aren't people, those are our Polly Pockets.

Catherine: Oh, of course, I see it now, that is why they are so tiny!

Anne: Me and my sister like to play Polly Pockets.

Catherine: That sounds like the start of your story! Should we write it under here? (pointing to bottom of page).

Anne: (smiles and nods)

Catherine: Me and my sister like to play Polly Pockets (writing each word as it is dictated).

I believe that Anne does not fully understand that she has a story to tell. She needs these guiding questions to invite her to describe what she has drawn. Anne has well developed oral language and is able to tell a story, but she is not yet confident to do so. Anne's writing conference is audio recorded this day, with the use of a recording device, as are many of the other students' conferences in December. The opportunities I have to hear her voice are fleeting and I do not want to miss anything. I also want to be able to revisit these conferences later to help guide my planning for future lessons.

\* \* \* \* \*

I have just finished reading Vivian Paley's book, *The Boy Who Would Be A Helicopter*, and I am inspired to try her approach to storytelling in the classroom. Paley's storytelling curriculum involves children dictating stories from their own imaginations or experiences while the teacher writes them down. Afterwards, children dramatize their own stories with the help of their classmates. During our Sharing Circle lately, we have been taking a moment to put our head in our hands and close our eyes so that we can imagine the story pictured in our heads. I want to help the children connect the stories they tell with the stories they write. The importance of this connection occurs to me as Jake regularly tells his adventure stories about his dog Shadow, yet he is unsure of what to draw when it comes to writing time. I want to help the children recognize that their lives, their stories and experiences, are the "stuff" of books! I want to

help them recognize that sometimes stories come from “big ideas” and sometimes they come from “small ideas.” You can see the excitement on children’s faces when they tell a story and the response is, “Wow, I can really picture that story in my head. I can’t wait to see what that story will look like in a story picture at Writer’s Workshop time!” I have found this simple addition to our morning Sharing Circle has given a renewed and connected sense of purpose to many of the students when they sit down to write.

But, I am still thinking about that group of students who are not yet comfortable with the invitation to tell their stories orally during Sharing Circle. I am hopeful that when children tell their own stories, and recognize themselves in the stories of others, they will realize that they all have stories that are worth telling.

#### Reflection Journal, December 2010

Today I was looking back over my written records of who shares during Sharing Circle. There are three children who have not shared even once this year! Yikes! I am, however, excited about how the purposes of the Sharing Circle are evolving and how many children are sharing during this time. I am also amazed at how many children are actually choosing to illustrate a story during writing time that is based on the story they shared during the Sharing Circle. But, I still cannot stop thinking about those three children who have not shared yet (and the others who do not share very often). This circle is not adequately inviting their participation.

I wonder what kind of invitation they would feel comfortable with. Is it okay to never share your story in the circle? Maybe. But, when are the other times in the day when they have an opportunity to express or share who they are with others? They do express themselves during their play at Explorations I suppose, but that is not really shared with many others. These are not children who volunteer to talk about their Explorations choices when we share at the end of Explorations time. Does their play need to be “shared” with others in order for their identities to appear to both themselves and to others? I am questioning myself

because I keep feeling that although I value children's play and inquiry, I am struggling with the idea that maybe something is missing if expression is not formalized in terms of individual children's relationships with the rest of the classroom community.

I am feeling discomfort that some voices are heard every day, some are heard once in a while, and some are never heard. Am I sending a message to the children that I do not want to send? Every child's voice has value. I know that, but do they? Where is the evidence? I have some work to do.

\* \* \* \* \*

Heraldo traces the seam along the edge of the storytelling chair with his finger as I begin the read-aloud book. The children are gathered in closely as I read the book "*Ginger*", by Charlotte Voake, to a captivated audience. Voake's beloved book offers the perfect invitation into story acting. The images in Voake's book are vivid and the content easily invites the children to make personal connections. The next day I hold the book so that the children cannot see the pictures and I invite them to imagine the story in their heads. I ask the children if anyone would like to stand beside the storytelling chair and create imagined pictures with his or her actions. I explain that we are going to make a "story play" out of Charlotte Voake's book. As I read the words on the first pages, we begin to imagine what actions we might use to match the words. Many children are eager to act out their ideas, hands are waving upwards and there is a chorus of "ooh, ooooh, ooooh's!" on the carpet.

To my surprise, Lilly is among the first children to raise her hand. Lilly has never put her hand up to share at carpet time before. Although she engages with books in the classroom, she can only see portions of the illustrations she holds up against one lens of her glasses. Lilly is unable to see the printed word in the books as the print is too small. When I read one-on-one with Lilly she is excited to hear stories, and often asks to be read to. When she is asked questions about the story or when the story lends itself to

making personal connections, Lilly usually responds with, "Ummmm, I don't know." So, today I am happily surprised that Lilly volunteers to act out the story in front of the class.

I am curious if Lilly understands the task I have asked her to do. But that worry is quickly set aside when she stands up tall and confident at the front saying, "I'm ready!" Then she puts her hand to her mouth and giggles with excitement. A few other children stand beside her, excited to be actors too. As I begin reading the book, Lilly and her classmates act out the story page by page. At one point in the story, Lilly bends down to pull on her imaginary boots in anticipation of the next page I have yet to turn to.

As I close the book, the excitement of enjoying this story in a new way causes a buzz of energy in the room, and many children ask if we can do it again tomorrow. I am excited too, and very curious about how we can transition from turning Voake's stories into story plays, to then turning our *own* stories into story plays. When I ask the children who thinks they might want to try story acting tomorrow Anne eagerly raises her hand high in the air for the first time.

The next day at Sharing Circle, Anne resumes her role as the silent observer. As we transition into Explorations, dictating stories at the storytelling chair is offered as a choice. The children are reminded that their stories can then be acted out, just like the story of *Ginger* that we had acted out yesterday. It is interesting to me that the first two children who join me at the storytelling chair are two very active boys in the classroom who struggle to be still on the carpet during story time and Sharing Circle. The boys frequently bump into others, or against the side of the storytelling chair, or may even lie on their backs and flip their legs over their heads in the middle of a crowded Sharing Circle. The quiet sitting times when we listen to stories, or tell stories, are challenging for them, but today they are the first to sit beside me at the storytelling chair to dictate a story. Story acting is giving them a new opportunity to physically move *inside* their stories. These are their first stories dictated and recorded that day (January 2011):

Skating

By Chase

I was going skating with my friends at school. I was skating good. There were so many people skating there. I fell down, but I learned how to get back up again.

My Tooth Story

By José

Last night I wiggled my tooth. Then I pulled it a little. Then it popped out. I screamed to my mom, "Mom, my tooth came out!" I was too surprised to go to bed. Then I had 1 hour of sleep. Then it was morning.

## Reflection Journal, January 2011

It is our first day of exploring storytelling inspired by Vivian Paley, and I just have to sit down to write my reflections. I am struck by how powerful two very simple stories were in the life of our classroom today, or, perhaps even more, how powerfully they spoke to me as a teacher about the importance of providing children with multiple ways of telling their stories! I have been thinking about children whose voices are not easily heard in the classroom, but today I was struck by the understanding of something I had not thought of before. Some children's voices are easily heard, yet their ways of expression do not necessarily *fit* within the existing structures of our classroom! José and Chase's stories highlighted this for me today, and I know I have to think more about what all of this means.

We often hear José and Chase's stories, but because they have to tell their stories in the Sharing Circle or at Writer's Workshop time (both "sit down", "be still" moments), they often need to have their actions redirected. While it is not my intention, they may be receiving a message that they are interrupting our learning because of how physically active they are. Today, it was as if I was seeing them in a new light. What if their very physical ways of being in the world could in fact contribute to our learning and were not just interpreted by me as interruptions? Acting out their stories transformed their wiggly, bouncy, loud

actions from something undesirable, to something socially valued and admired. We were all entertained by their stories and dramatizations.

\* \* \* \* \*

The next day at sharing circle, José tells his tooth story again, but this time when he jumps up to give the imaginary tooth a good wiggle, no one is surprised or uncomfortable, it fits with his story. The tap comes around to Anne, and I am hopeful that today might be the day she will share. I know she lost a tooth on the weekend and I wonder if she will connect with José's story. Once again she passes.

Before heading off for Explorations, I invite those who did not share to "give it a think" during Explorations time, and to let me know if they decide on a story they wish to tell. I also remind children that the storytelling chair awaits the next storyteller. Anne takes a few minutes to watch the choices that the other children make for Explorations, then she comes over to me and says in a voice that is almost a whisper, "Catherine, I have my story ready now." I am thrilled and smile to myself as Anne squeezes her tiny frame into the storytelling chair beside me.

Anne's first story play (dictated January, 2011):

We went to the Country Fair with my Grandma, my two Aunties, my uncle and my big cousin Cindy and my baby cousin Jennifer. I pushed Jennifer in her stroller. We went and watched the horses. My dad got us some pizza for lunch. We watched the acrobats too. My Auntie got cotton candy for us and fudge. It was so sticky. My mom and dad and uncle went on a crazy ride. We watched the dog show. After the fair we went to my cousin's house to eat supper. Then it was time to go home. We had a fun day!

After dictating her story Anne is beaming from ear to ear. She invites children into her story to play the parts of the other characters. Anne sets aside her anxiousness today as she asks classmates to be in her story play. Anne shares a side of herself that we have never seen before in the classroom. Although she has not yet felt comfortable telling stories in the Sharing Circle, having the opportunity to tell her story with the intimacy of our one-on-one relational time, on the comfy storytelling chair, is just the invitation Anne needs. The process of telling her story and watching it unfold on paper as I write her exact words affirms

for Anne that she *does* have a story, and that her story is worth telling. I believe the story gives Anne a sense of her own power, as she now has something she can share with others, which others are very excited to be a part of. Anne is transforming from being a silent observer to becoming a storyteller and an actor—bringing her story to life alongside her peers, before a smiling audience of many toothless grins.

### **Making Meaning**

*Students invest their identities in the creation of these identity texts – which can be written, spoken, signed, visual, musical, dramatic, or combinations in multimodal form. The identity text then holds a mirror up to students in which their identities are reflected back in a positive light. When students share identity texts with multiple audiences ... they are likely to receive positive feedback and affirmation of self in interaction with these audiences. (Cummins & Early, 2011, p. 3)*

Revisiting my documentation of the 2010-2011 school year helped me to tell the stories of critical moments in my classroom. According to Dahlberg et al., (2007), “the documentation tells us something about how we have constructed the child, as well as ourselves as pedagogues. Therefore it enables us to see how we ourselves understand and ‘read’ what is going on in practice” (p. 147). Each of the critical moments I have highlighted situates children as actively engaging in meaning making in relationship with others. As the teacher, I am engaging in my own process of meaning making in relationship with others as well. Revisiting the three stories that highlight critical moments allows me to make new meanings by drawing connections among these experiences. By reflecting on these stories side by side, like the pieces of glass laid side by side in Davies’ (2003) analogy, the stories begin to “take on a new hue” (p. 15), as they are interpreted relative to one another. Reflecting on these stories collectively has helped me to recognize just how relationally interwoven our experiences are.

A connecting thread that ties each of these stories together is the question of *voice*. In particular, it is the question of reimagining how to support children whose voices (real and

metaphorical) are not easily shared, so that they may be heard, and so that their identities may emerge and may be included more fully in the social world of the classroom. In each of these stories, I am grappling with my understanding of who the child is, as I work to create opportunities for these children and others to engage in meaningful, meaning-making pedagogy. In each of the stories I am realizing the importance of moving relationships beyond the children being “nice” to one another, to a place where our relationships exist in a reciprocal and valuing experience of communication and meaning making.

Cummins and Early (2011) suggest that “teacher-student interactions create an interpersonal space within which knowledge is generated and identities are negotiated” (p. 31). In each of these stories, children’s identities are being negotiated among all of the participants—teacher, child and children—and they are being fostered through play and stories told and shared in multiple ways. It is in the interpersonal spaces that I am able to ask questions about whose voices are heard, in what ways they are heard, and in what ways they are understood. In each of my stories, children are being supported and encouraged to take risks within interpersonal spaces and to “step into the shoes” of who they are becoming. Lindfors (2008) supports this agentic role for children, stating that when children’s voices and stories are validated, we are helping children to “*be the very thing they are becoming*” (p. 5). For example, in music explorations, Lilly has a new opportunity and medium through which she can communicate her ideas with others. She is not only *becoming* a leader, by starting and stopping her band members with the hand drum, Lilly *is* a leader right in this moment.

Norton (as cited in Cummins and Early, 2011) suggests that the learner has “a complex identity that changes across time and space and is directly affected by patterns of social interaction and societal power relations” (p. 32). The complex and changing nature of Lilly’s, William’s and



Anne's identities in these stories are evident. The identities of any child cannot be fixed by a single story. This is further highlighted in the story about José and Chase in *The Storytelling Chair* story. It is all too easy to define who José and Chase are by their disruptions. When given the opportunity to use their bodies in an active way to tell their stories, their identities emerge in new ways, and I fashion a very different construction of who these children are as learners. There is a shift in power, as behaviours which I might previously have viewed as undesirable are now viewed in a different light by me and by the other children. The identities of these children are understood in new ways and will continue to evolve through future stories and experiences.

The stories told in this study reveal a shift in power relations for other children too. William's identity changes across time and space as he negotiates his play with others in the block area and begins to see himself as a sharer of stories and a teller of jokes, not unlike his admired friend Jake. For Lilly, there is a shift in power relations in the classroom as she becomes a leader, and her ideas are listened to and validated through the acknowledgement of her peers as they collaborate in music-making and notation. Anne's identity shifts as she begins to view herself for the first time as a storyteller: "Catherine, I have my story ready now." As Anne tells her story through story dictation, her stories support her in negotiating new social interactions with her peers, and in seeing herself in a new light. "Story plays" become an opportunity for her to share common experiences with others. They also become an opportunity for her to invite her peers to play out stories that reflect her unique experiences and imagination. Anne, William and Lilly have new opportunities to invite other children to play *inside* their stories.

Each of these stories demonstrates in its own way the centrality of relationships and the importance of making time and creating spaces for such relationships to develop. I learn that William needs time to hear the stories of his peers in order to connect with them and to

conceptualize for himself what kind of stories he has and what kind of storyteller he may be. He needs a variety of opportunities to play out, play inside, and play with his stories, in order to find connections and build friendships with his classmates. Connections that may not have existed through existing classroom and life experiences are forged anew through shared experiences involving play and telling and listening to stories that occur regularly at school. While Jake's life experiences outside of school are different from William's, his stories about Shadow invite William into his world, just as William's HotWheels car story play invites Christopher into his. Creating the time and the space for William to become a participant in Shadow's adventures, or the time and the space for William to invite Christopher's blue car to go for an imagined drive with his own car to his Grandfather's house, values and builds on each of the boy's experiences and generates new opportunities for friendships to develop.

Lilly too needed pedagogical opportunities to build relationships with her classmates through classroom experiences. Without such opportunities she was left on the periphery of their play and on the periphery of forming friendships in the group. Although children were kind to her and did not overtly exclude her, they had not had significant opportunities to come to know her. It is not until Lilly has a forum through which she can express herself during Music Explorations that such a relational shift begins to occur for her. Wolf (2006) stresses the importance of helping children represent who they are in multiple ways and suggests that, "without finding their medium, they haven't found themselves" (p. 20). With the medium of music, Lilly becomes a contributor, rather than solely a bystander. Lilly's classmates begin to see her as a person with whom they can have a reciprocal relationship.

In each of these stories, the children are situated as competent and capable as the roles of teacher and learner are often blended. The task of activating prior experience, building on

background knowledge, or scaffolding meaning, is a task shared by both teacher and children. In each story I see my role as being a collaborator with the children. I am not the only person who can scaffold the children's learning, nor do the children see me that way. Our understanding is socially constructed. William's interactions with Jake at the Sharing Circle are scaffolding the storyteller William is becoming. Jake's powerful influence on who William is becoming as a storyteller cannot be underestimated and likely not matched by me his teacher. For Anne, seeing stories emerge in the form of story plays, feeling empowered to invite others into her stories, and seeing her words unfold on the page as she dictates her story, scaffolds the writer she is becoming. For Lilly, playing music collaboratively with her classmates scaffolds the friendship, communication, and leadership roles Lilly is taking on. Playing with invented music notation, alongside children who are confident readers and writers, is scaffolding the "reader and writer" (broadly defined) that Lilly is becoming too.

Lindfors (2008) suggests that a collaborative process among children and teacher is significant as it relates to children's literacy development (p. 53); and, I would add that collaboration is also essential to a child's social development. In each story, whether creating a story map, music notation, or a story play, it is the relational and collaborative experiences between William, Lilly, Anne and their peers and teacher that allow them to grow as learners. This socially constructed process among children, and between children and teacher, allows the child to enter into a space "neither totally beyond the child's reach, nor completely within her grasp. It is the area between the two, an area of promise and possibility" (Lindfors, 2008, p. 53). How beautiful is that? The area of promise and possibility! This is not a region of deficit, nor an area where children are "at risk." This is a space where children are seen as competent and

capable and their identities and relationships are recognized as being central to meaningful pedagogy.

Storytelling that emerges through play and life experiences creates a space where:

Children's thinking (is made) public and available in the moment, ... (and)  
gives teachers a laboratory to study what they need to learn next. ...

The teacher must relinquish control over what the children *should be* thinking  
and actively embrace what they *are* thinking, individually and as  
members of a group. (Genishi & Dyson, 2009, p. 50)

This process of making meaning of children's thinking and ideas shifts the teacher's role from approaching pedagogy with the assumption that knowledge is constructed *for* or *about* children, to meaningful pedagogy that is also constructed *with* children. Relinquishing control over the "should" opens up the interpersonal space where knowledge is socially constructed—a space of promise and possibility.

Genishi and Dyson (2009) offer educators a reminder that, "if children are observed in only one kind of play, or if their stories are heard through the filter of only one kind of narrative, then teachers' own professional stories of the children in their care will be underdeveloped" (Genishi & Dyson, p. 80). Each of these stories reflects my process of developing my understanding of children in a new way, and reflects my tensions as a teacher in accepting a "single story" of who a child is. In Lilly's story, for example, I find myself questioning why I have only offered her visual ways of expressing herself. When her identity begins to be expressed in new ways through Music Explorations, it reminds me that her ways of representing herself would be underdeveloped if visual approaches continue to be privileged over others.

In each story, it is evident that the identities of the children are not only represented in an experience, but they are also shaping the learning experience. William's opportunity to share his stories through play, Lilly's opportunity to communicate and connect with others through music, and Anne's opportunity to see herself as a storyteller, represents critical moments where each child is an active protagonist in his or her learning. William's story map, Lilly's musical notation, and Anne's story play, can all be referred to as examples of what Cummins and Early (2011) call "identity texts" (p. 3). As suggested in their quote at the beginning of this section, texts that are created in each story form (story map, music notation, story play) hold up mirrors that reflect who each of these children are in a positive light. Their texts also influence the evolution of Explorations and Reading and Writing Workshop over time. For example, William's introduction of cars into the block area and the creation of a map, grew into a larger class inquiry into the places in our community. Anne's entry into telling a story that she could invite others into began her journey as a writer whose stories grew in complexity and artistry over time.

According to Cummins (2011), "students' perceptions of their intelligence, imagination and multilingual talents are a part of their identity and when these are affirmed in the school and classroom context, they invest their identities actively in the learning process" (p. 39). When William, Lilly, and Anne's identities are affirmed in the classroom, it is evident that each child is investing actively in the learning process. For each of the students, there is a transition from passive observer to active participant. Greishaber (2008) describes this shift as "transform(ing) children to an actor in (their) own story, as opposed to a passive onlooker of the dominant story" (p. 99). William, Lilly, and Anne are no longer limited to "following along" with the

experiences and interests of others, they are pursuing (and finding) their own interests, and their ideas and experiences are inviting others into relationship with them.

Paley (1990) asks a fundamental question of herself as a teacher: “Do I search for new ways to help each child unlock and open the gates to full participation in classroom life?” (p. 163). In each of these stories, I feel a close connection to Paley’s question. I am exploring the identity options available for William, Lilly, and Anne to represent who they are and to tell their stories, so they may begin to participate more fully in the life of the classroom.

The Reggio Emilia approach has also influenced the new ways I have tried to “unlock and open the gates”, as I acknowledge children’s need to express themselves and make meaning in multiple ways. The Reggio approach refers to the “hundred languages of children”, affirming that children use “graphic, verbal, literate, symbolic, and imaginative play ‘and a hundred hundred hundred more languages in making meaning of the world” (Fraser, 2000, p. 193). Similarly, Genishi and Dyson (2009) suggest that children need opportunities to develop a “symbolic repertoire” (p. 83). Children need multiple ways to represent themselves and to tell their stories in order to understand themselves, their world, and their role in it (Fraser, 2000; Gee, 2003; Genishi & Dyson, 2009; New, 2003; Wolf, 2006). When children are given multiple symbolic ways for expressing and relating, their meanings are recontextualized. This recontextualizing can help children to relate to others, to see connections across contexts, to interpret and *re*interpret as they make meaning (Genishi & Dyson, 2009).

The stories of William, Lilly, and Anne highlight the significance of having multiple “languages” for expression and making meaning. These are children whose voices are not heard in the ways that are often privileged in classrooms. For example, writing their stories or illustrating their stories during Writer’s Workshop did not offer these children success. It is a

question whether the voices of these children would have emerged in any significant way, or whether these children would have entered into the social world of their peers, if they had not had access to a “symbolic repertoire” which included, play, music, and dramatizing.

In each of these stories, the use of varied “languages” for expressing stories, offer William, Lilly, and Anne what Genishi and Dyson (2009) refer to as “rich resources for building relationships and for fostering language in oral and written modes” (p. 79). Recognizing that storytelling does not have to be limited to writing, but that stories can be expressed through play, offers a rich resource for William through which he can build friendships and communicate verbally. Through his play with his car in one hand, and his marker in the other, he is also beginning to communicate through his illustrations. Using “music as a language”, Lilly is able to not only communicate, but collaborate with her peers in relational ways. Music also gives Lilly a resource through which she can enter the symbolic world of print. For Anne, dictating and dramatizing her stories shifts how she identifies herself as she emerges as a storyteller. She sees herself as having a story to tell, and builds relationships with her peers as they enter into and validate her experiences through their participation in her story play.

Each of these stories highlights a view of children as “social agents and participants in a range of symbolic practices” (Genishi & Dyson, p. 80). The significance of having a repertoire of symbols of communication, or a “hundred languages”, is underscored in each of the stories. Just taking two factors into consideration—the academic learning needs and language diversity of the students in my context—it is striking to consider what is overlooked or even stunted without a rich repertoire through which children can explore and make meaning. The richness coming out of our interrelations, children’s play, and storytelling is undeniable. The stories that emerge when multiple opportunities and symbols for expression are offered, emphasize just how

many identities remain invisible, or at the very least undervalued, when one or two modes of expression (i.e., reading and writing) are privileged above others.

In each of the stories, my role as teacher is challenged as opportunities I have previously offered children have not yet responded adequately to their identities. Norton (2010) describes the challenge to educators to “conceptualize classrooms as semiotic spaces where children have the opportunity to construct meaning with a wide variety of multimodal texts, including visual, written, spoken, auditory and performative texts” (p. 5). Norton considers this challenge to be a process of meaning making where children do not just *use* multiple ways to communicate, they also create them. This idea compels the teacher to listen carefully. To return to José and Chase for a moment, their physical movement was recontextualized from being an “interruption”, to being a meaningful way for them to act out their stories. This began to shift their role at story time, and offered new ways for them to channel their physical actions into contributions to their learning and to the learning of others. Their story also represents my own changing ideas about my role as their teacher. As I watched their actions more carefully, I began to imagine other possibilities present for their physicality on the carpet.

It is evident that the support of a symbolic repertoire invited the previously unheard voices of William, Lilly, and Anne into the social world of their peers. Wohlwend (2008) suggests, “power is wielded through exclusion as certain individuals are held on the periphery and denied the *scripts*, or accepted ways of representing” (p.134). When voices that do not fit into the most recognizable scripts of our classroom are no longer heard only on the periphery, their voices or stories can begin to hold social value like those of their peers. This is evident when William transitions from a listener and admirer of Jake’s stories to a storyteller himself with the help of his HotWheels car. William is seen as a person that other children want to collaborate with.



Christopher is eager to join in with William's play and to weave his experience together with William's in a social way. Lilly transitions from a classmate that children are kind to, who is largely in the background of their play, to a collaborator and contributor of new ideas. Anne transitions from the periphery as a silent observer, timidly joining into activities led by others, to an enthusiastic storyteller who leads the direction of an activity or play experience which is based on her own ideas and experiences.

The experiences reflected through the stories in this study not only affirm the identities of children, but may also contribute a counter-narrative to the practice of identifying or labelling children that can emerge in deficit based approaches to teaching and learning. Learning experiences that are identity affirming and which "hold up that mirror" reflecting children's identities, are critical in countering identities that can too easily be assigned "less than" labels. These are labels that are often used to describe who children are in an educational context, and, sadly, can often be the first introductions teachers receive about a child. For example, an Autistic child, nonverbal, visually impaired, learning disabled, special needs, 'at-risk' and so on. Paley (1990) asserts:

None of these labels apply in a classroom that sees children as storytellers.

These labels don't describe the imagination. A storyteller is always in the strongest position; to be known by his or her stories puts the child in the most favorable light. (p. 54)

William, Lilly, and Anne have the right to be known for their strengths, their interests, their personal knowledge and experiences. They have the right to participate, communicate, collaborate, and contribute to the life of the classroom, in meaningful relationships with their peers and with their teacher.

The Reggio Emilia approach supports this view of children having “rights” rather than just needs. Reggio Emilia educators refer to children as having “special rights” rather than “special needs,” and they place high value on differences. Differences are seen as opportunities to develop knowledge about oneself and about others (Smith, 1998, p. 205). William and Lilly are children with “special rights” whose differences contributed to the relationships and the learning experiences in the classroom. Their stories reveal that as a teacher I did not try to make them “like everyone else,” nor did I have expectations for them as learners that were based on predetermined outcomes. Rather, these two children (like all of the children in the class) were offered opportunities in which their unique identities emerged. Through their “appearance” in the classroom, our knowledge of one another as members of a classroom community was enriched.

Further, Paley (1990) reminds us that “none of us are to be found in sets of tasks or lists of attributes; we can be known only in the unfolding of our unique stories within the context of everyday events” (p. 12). This is true for all three children represented in the stories. Their unique stories unfold in the context of everyday events that represent their interests. Through listening to, recording, and revisiting their stories I learn new things about William, Lilly, and Anne as children and as learners. I learn about these children in ways I could not have had I subscribed to labels or inflexible, decontextualized assessments. Children are not “autonomous and decontextualized being(s)” (Dahlberg et al., 2007, p. 59), and, therefore, cannot be moulded by a decontextualized student role or pedagogy. Each story speaks to the richness that grows out of experiences that are authentic, socially constructed, and personally meaningful.

Finally, what cannot be underestimated in the stories of William, Lilly, and Anne, is how significant each of these experiences was in the context of our classroom community as a whole.

Paley (1990) positions storytelling as an opportunity to learn more about how “in the telling and performing of these stories, customs are invented that bind a group of children together” (p. 35). The three stories of the present, and many others like them, helped to bind our group together in shared experiences of kindness and friendship, as we searched for meaning together. These experiences were more than opportunities for children’s unique identities to surface in the classroom. They were also experiences for children and teacher to respond to new experiences and to each other in new relational ways. Biesta (2006) describes the educational responsibility of teachers as providing opportunities for individuals to “come into the world” (p. 28). According to Biesta, providing these opportunities requires pedagogy that allows children to respond in their own unique ways, but it does not stop there. Coming into the world is about “entering the social fabric and is therefore thoroughly relational” (Biesta, 2006, p. 28). William, Lilly, and Anne’s emergence in the classroom as children with interests and ideas that others could connect with, influenced the experiences and relationships in the classroom and helped shape the kind of classroom community we were becoming.

A little red race car, (or really the child *behind* the little red race car), sparked an interest in building roads, bridges, and in mapping that led to a long term inquiry as a whole class. More importantly, that little red car was an invitation into friendships that a child with limited verbal experience had previously not had. Being invited into Lilly’s music notation was an opportunity for children to recognize that part of being in a community includes listening to the ideas of others, and involves taking the time and care to recognize that every person has something to contribute. The interactions that took place in the storytelling chair helped children to recognize that their voices have value, and gave other members of the classroom community a chance to respond, relate, and engage through these stories.

## Chapter Four: Putting the Pieces Together

### Part 3: Creating Purpose for the Future

*It is in the development of their themes and characters and plots that children explain their thinking and enable us to wonder who we might become as their teachers. (Cooper, 2009, p. 43)*

By revisiting stories that reflect critical moments in my past experiences and stories reflecting my current pedagogical practice, I have been able to reconsider what I value as a teacher and why. This process has also allowed me to imagine the kind of teacher I am becoming. In the following section I have organized my meaning making into themes that surfaced from the interpretive process of revisiting stories of past and present.

#### **Shifting identities.**

Norton (2010) suggests that teachers have the challenge to consider “what pedagogical practices will help students develop the *capacity for* imagining a range of identities for the future. What shifts of teacher identity will such practices necessitate?” (p. 10). This study has helped me to recognize some of the shifts in my identity that have occurred (and will continue to occur) along this journey of personal and professional growth. Revisiting three critical stories of the past helped me to understand the roots of my beliefs and brings them to a new level of awareness. The stories representing three critical moments of the present helped me to reflect on experiences in which I could see my beliefs reflected in pedagogy. This process helped to uncover a range of identities for myself, as I imagine a way forward, living a pedagogy of meaning with the children in my context.

This self-study has been a powerful process for me to come to know the children in my context in new ways. It has helped to surface the approaches to pedagogy that respond to children’s identities, voices, interests, and needs. It has also been a process of allowing my own

voice and identities to emerge as a teacher. While striving to create time and spaces that allow children's identities to appear in ways they have been unable to appear before, I have found myself engaged in a parallel process. By taking the time to reflect on stories of my past and present I have created spaces for my own identities to emerge in new ways.

The value of creating spaces to consider more carefully and consciously my identities as a teacher and a learner cannot be understated. The work of teachers is complex, changing, and will always be subject to outside pressures, influences, and judgments. It is, therefore, so important for me to never lose sight of the purpose, the intention, and the identities behind the pedagogical decisions I make as a teacher. This process of self-study was a reminder to teach consciously, and not to be "swept up" by busyness or perceived pressures which can threaten to overshadow my purposes and my identities as a teacher.

**Context: value and response.**

This study highlights the richness that can emerge when a particular context, a particular child, and a particular group of children are more fully valued. Meaningful pedagogy must always value the identities of children and teacher, but may materialize in different ways for different children in different contexts and different times. Dyson (2002) emphasizes that "stories are not prescriptions for practice; rather they are 'material to think with'" (p. 18). This description can be used to describe a pedagogy of meaning as well. Meaningful pedagogy cannot be reduced to a set of steps, or a specific program to follow. There is always "material to think with" as teachers consider the implications of identities, relationships, and changing contexts on pedagogy. Likewise, the role of teacher can also not be prescriptively defined. Biesta (2006) offers a description of the teacher's role as a "response", suggesting it is "as much about activity, about saying and doing, as it is about passivity: listening, waiting, being attentive,

creating space” (p. 28). In each of the stories, identities emerged in different ways, and in each instance, a unique response as the teacher was called for.

### **Pedagogy as relational.**

The relational nature of meaningful pedagogy in the classroom is a central understanding that emerged in this self-study. The teacher I am becoming is shaped by the relationships I have with children and adults. Besani & Jarjoura (as cited in Fu, 2002) view relationships as having a “symbiotic quality where each person is viewed as essential to the other” (p. 69). This symbiotic relationship between a teacher’s and children’s identities allowed meaningful pedagogy to unfold in ways that would not be possible without value being placed on relationally supportive experiences. Further, the relationships that grew out of the experiences, where teacher and children were coming to know one another in new ways, were essential to the evolution of my teacher identities. As the teacher, I needed to experience meaningful relational moments with the children in my classroom in order to recognize my own role in supporting them. I also needed to reflect on these relational moments with the children in order to recognize the transformative potential of these experiences for my teacher identities.

In this study, the active engagements with our stories helped us to foster relationships in our classroom community. For many children, having the opportunity to tell a story, or express themselves in a way that could be shared or understood by others, helped them to join the social world of their peers. It also helped me as the teacher to connect with children in a far more reciprocal way. The content of the stories also helped us to make connections with each other, and between and among our experiences and interests. As stories became part of our daily life in the classroom, they helped to inform and shape the questions we would investigate, the materials we could use to explore with, and the themes of the books and stories we would read, write, and

dramatize. These experiences strengthened our relationships with one another, and our relationships reciprocally influenced the nature of our shared experiences. As the children's teacher, recognizing the essential and central role of relationship in education has shifted my teacher identity. I now see myself as being in a co-constructive educational role with children; making decisions in relationship with them, rather than making decisions for them. Although I always believed relationships were essential to learning in the classroom, this study helped me to recognize the kinds and quality of experiences and opportunities that can launch those beliefs in action, in ways that more intentionally shape pedagogy.

The stories I have reflected on in this self-study have helped me to think carefully about my role as the teacher in supporting relationships not only among teacher and children, but among children themselves. In each of the stories, the critical moments highlighted experiences where children began to see one another in more relational ways. My identity as the teacher has expanded beyond the role of a facilitator of relationships with children, to a "connection weaver" of sorts. Paley (1990) describes her role as "drawing invisible lines" connecting children's experiences. By reflecting on the stories in this self study I can see more clearly the moments where those invisible lines have been drawn. For example, by taking the time to record William and Christopher's play at the blocks, I was beginning to draw an invisible line between their play, their oral storytelling, and their burgeoning friendship.

### **A listening context.**

The Reggio Emilia approach describes the classroom as a listening context, where children and teacher are involved in the active role of searching for inter-subjective meaning together. Listening is considered to be central to any learning relationship (Rinaldi, 1998, p. 2). In each of the stories, a listening context is emerging as I am conscious of talking less and listening more. I

find myself biting my tongue and resisting the ever-present urge to jump in or to talk in the spaces of silence. By listening with a renewed sense of awareness, I am able to ask children questions that are more open-ended and resist imposing my own ideas or “shoulds” on an experience that is unfolding. I recognize the value of paying closer attention to children’s play, to their interactions, and to their relationships with others.

The process of creating spaces for identities to emerge in new ways has compelled me to rethink pedagogical decisions that may privilege certain ways of expressing over others. When my role as the teacher became more attentive, when I listened more carefully, the opportunities for children’s identities to emerge grew from their self-determined interests. I began responding to children’s play and interactions in ways that were supportive, and yet open ended, versus planning in a way that assumed to know the “end point” of learning in advance. Engaging in the telling of stories, reading and acting out stories, playing inside and through stories, are all part of a repertoire of opportunities and materials that children need in order to be able share their interests and express themselves in relational ways.

### **The collaborative creation of power.**

The stories in this self-study highlight the richness that is present in the moments where there is a shift in the power relations within the classroom. In the three stories my identity emerges as a teacher who shares power with children, versus identifying myself as the “gatekeeper” (as I had believed my own teachers to be in the past). Sorin (2005) describes children as active agents and co-learners with adults, interacting with their world. Given this image of the child, the adult’s role is to “negotiate, challenge and guide while sharing power with children” (Sorin, 2005, p. 7). William, Lilly, and Anne emerge as children who are recognized, valued, and known anew by me their teacher and by their classmates in relational ways. Our experiences are negotiated



through our relationships, and our comfort zones are challenged as we share in new experiences. A context of shared power is created through this process of building relationships and socially constructing meaning. Cummins and Early (2011) make reference to “the collaborative creation of power” (p. 163), which I see as a fitting description of the relational experiences that unfold in the three stories of critical moments. This context of shared power is not only collaborative, but I also see it as caring. I see my professional identity as becoming a teacher who helps draw connections across experiences and ideas, who relates and responds through relationships, and who co-constructs meaningful pedagogy within a caring context.

### **Reframing a concept of time.**

This self-study has helped me to rethink my understanding of time, and has helped me to value time in new ways. Before this study I often viewed time with a sense of frustration and unease. I always felt as if there was “not enough time.” Part of my teacher identity was that I was never doing enough for the children in the time we had together. Although I admit having “enough time” may remain an elusive concept in my life as a teacher, I am learning to reframe my concepts of time. This has begun a shift in my teacher identity from a teacher who never has enough time, to identifying myself as a teacher who values slowing down, and *taking the time* to look more closely and to listen more carefully. This allows me to honour the time a child needs, rather than feeling the need to rush forward in fear of running out of time. Each of the stories selected for this self-study highlight the value of taking time, and of giving time. The children whose identities emerged, did so in their own time. This was not a quick process. Their growth occurred over time, with a variety of opportunities to play and revisit ideas over and over again. This reframing of time will help me to think carefully about future pedagogical decisions, as I

thoughtfully negotiate the pace of our learning. It is also a process of being more understanding towards myself, recognizing that my learning too is a process that takes time.

**Teacher as learner—trust in discomfort and risk.**

The process of this self-study has helped me to spend more conscious time in “my own skin” as a learner. It is easy to talk about being a “lifelong learner”, but there is a certain amount of risk and vulnerability that goes along with this pursuit. Although undeniably worthwhile, this risk and vulnerability does not necessarily make the journey of “lifelong learning” an easy or a comfortable one. Looking back at the stories that describe the tensions that I felt in earlier years of my teaching life put me in a vulnerable place. Knowing what I know now, it is with some discomfort that I retell those stories and make them public. However, this process has taught me that reflecting on those stories is essential to my growth towards the teacher I wish to become. Of course, the crux (or maybe better said, the richness) of this process is that the more we learn, the more we realize we have yet to learn!

As I revisit the stories of my earlier years of teaching, I recognize how necessary it was for me to try on someone else’s “pedagogical shoes” in order to recognize the discomfort. This discomfort helped me to step out of those shoes and begin the journey of stepping into my own. What I have learned is that the discomfort is actually not undesirable (although it may feel that way at the time). I have learned to trust in the discomfort, and not to accept the status quo as unchangeable. Through the process of reflection, of revisiting stories, of dialogue and critical thinking, this discomfort has transformed my learning. Feeling my own tensions and discomfort as a learner, and finding meaning in those moments, is an important reminder to me of the importance of stepping outside of my comfort zone. It also affirms for me the importance of living my life as a learner, just as I envision for the children I teach.

In telling the stories for this self-study, I found myself surprised by the level of risk I felt when actually writing these stories for others to read. I recognize there is risk inherent in offering stories of my own experiences and in providing my interpretations, from which others will make their own judgements and create their own meanings. Yet, when I think about the children who tell their stories in our classroom, I realize that in sharing my stories and interpretations I am in some ways doing just what I have been asking them to do all along. William's willingness to hold up that car in the sharing circle was a risk. He could not yet use his words to tell his story in the same way as many of his peers. But, his story was important enough for him to find his unique way in which to share it. Lilly took a risk when she introduced her ideas for starting and ending a song with the beat of her drum. She had never led a group before, yet she felt compelled to stop what was going on around her and to offer a suggestion. Anne felt vulnerable in our storytelling process. She needed time and multiple invitations to share her story. She chose the relational "one-on-one" time in the storytelling chair to tell her first story. For the first time, a child who usually followed the lead of others took a risk to not only tell a story, but to invite others to participate in dramatizing it. Anne opened herself up to the possibility that her peers might refuse her invitation—"No, thank you." There was also the possibility that they might not appreciate or understand her story as she intended. Looking back at the process of this self-study, I recognize that many of the risks I have perceived for these children are actually risks I have perceived for myself in my own learning as I have written this thesis.

Situating myself in the role of learner has helped to affirm my identity as a teacher who continually asks questions, and is willing to take risks in order to grow. This has added new questions to my pedagogical approaches, such as:

Are the risks that children are asked to take with their learning appropriate? Are they risks I am willing to take with my own learning?"

Am I asking children to engage in pedagogy that I would want to engage in myself? Is our pedagogy relevant and personally meaningful?

**“Going public” as advocacy.**

The children in these critical moment stories all had a story worth sharing. I believe there are critical moments of tension or inspiration where teachers feel compelled to “go public” with their own thinking and stories too. Although going public involves risk, it is an opportunity to make that which we value visible and shareable with others. Sharing stories is a chance for our identities to emerge as children’s advocates, and as reflective learners and teachers, as we open up dialogue and invite others into a relationship of thinking and questioning, agreeing and disagreeing—a process through which meaningful pedagogy is nurtured.

### **In Closing**

I return once again to Davies' (2003) image of the archaeologist, introduced earlier in this thesis. Like pieces of pottery or shards of glass, I have mused over, polished, and arranged these stories of experience, in order to piece together a conceptualization of meaningful pedagogy. The stories have been shaped by my identities and the identities of the children I teach. They have been offered to you, the reader, so that they may also be interpreted through your identities and your experiences, as you make your own meaning. The pedagogy of meaning I have conceptualized is richly layered. For me, the layers are made up of caring spaces, multiple contexts, a repertoire of languages, materials and opportunities for expression, and, always at the centre, *relationships*. Woven within these layers, there are still more pieces: curiosity, questioning, a willingness to take risks, trust in discomfort, listening, reflecting, co-constructing, and imagining a way forward.

Let us envision for a moment this pieced-together pedagogy of meaning. It is not seamless or smooth. It is not neat or tidy. In fact, many of your pieces are shaped differently than mine and cannot possibly fit together in the same way I have constructed my pedagogy of meaning. And, depending on the angle from which you view it, or the context in which you place it, you will find it actually changes shape or hue or texture. It can be said that many identities shaped the personal meaning that will be given to it, that many collaborative hands, and much thoughtful care went into piecing it together. For you see, it is in the imperfections and impermanence of this pieced-together pedagogy of meaning that its continuing beauty exists.

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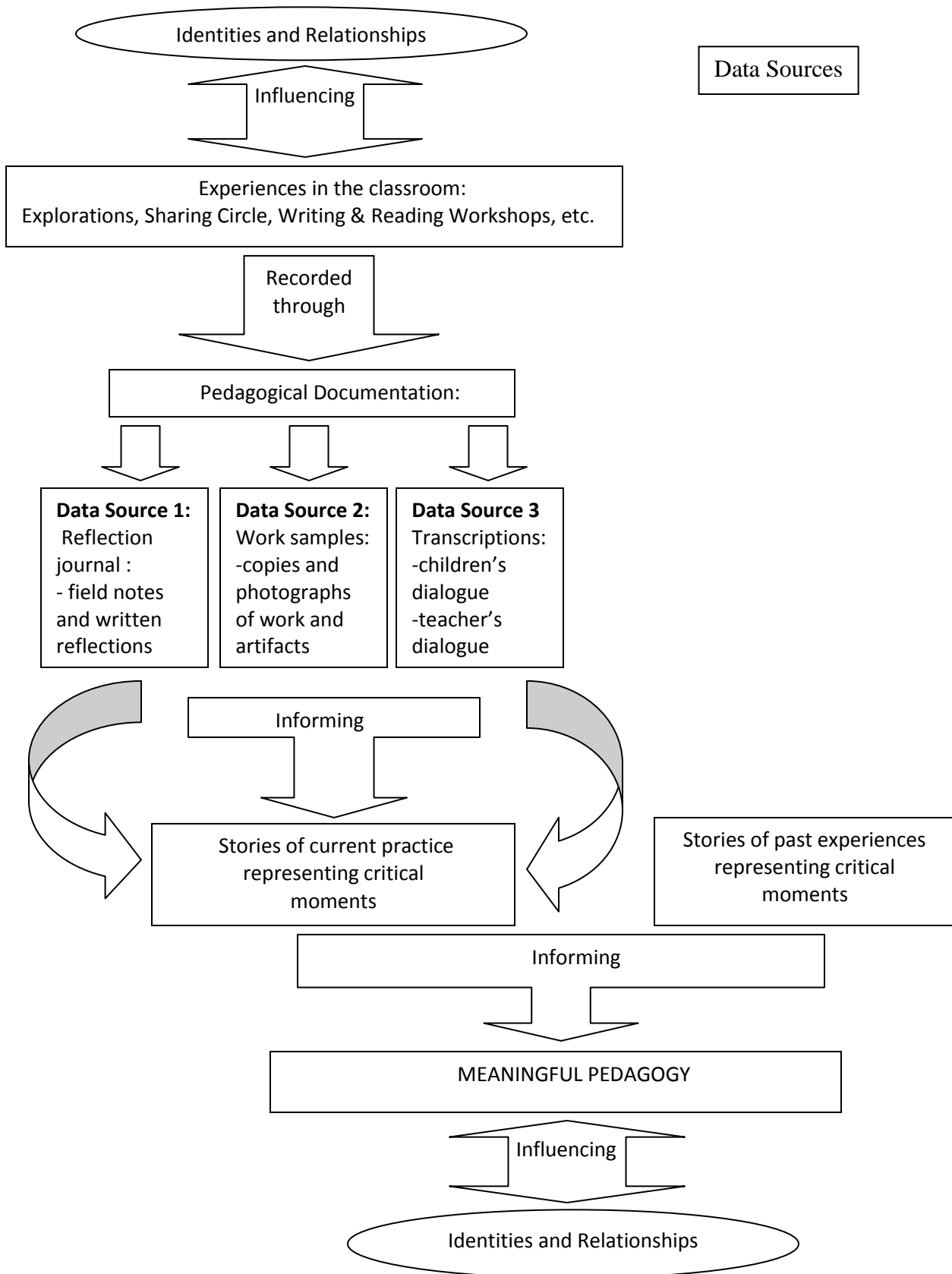
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**Appendix A**



**Appendix B**

UNIVERSITY  
OF MANITOBA

Faculty of Education

Department of Curriculum,

Teaching and Learning

230 Education Building

University of Manitoba

August 2011

Dear Parents/Guardians:

I am writing to you to share some information about the teacher-research I am pursuing and to make a request in this regard. As part of regular classroom experience in Grade 1, your child was encouraged to play, explore, represent, write, tell stories and share ideas about experiences and areas of interest that were meaningful to her/him. In these meaningful moments, I believe children are honoured for who they are, relationships are supported, and our learning about ourselves and each other grows. I believe it is in these moments that “meaningful curriculum” is created. We shared stories about some of our learning with you throughout the 2010/2011 school year in the form of documentation (work samples, photographs, recorded conversations that have been written out, and written descriptions of activities and experiences). You have seen some of these examples during weekly updates, two student led conferences, and our school wide ‘Arts and Learning’ evening. Now that the end of the 2010/2011 school year has come to a close, I will be conducting a study in which I am interested in looking back on the school year to think about my teaching practice and consider the classroom spaces, the learning materials and the relationships among children and teacher that contribute to creating ‘meaningful curriculum.’ This research is part of the requirements for a Masters of Education, at the University of Manitoba. It is being conducted under the supervision of my research supervisor, Dr. Wayne Serebrin. You may contact my research supervisor at (204) 474-9024 or [serebrn@ms.umanitoba.ca](mailto:serebrn@ms.umanitoba.ca) regarding this study.

The purpose of this research study is to look back on my teaching practice in order to learn from it. I want to do this by revisiting moments where I can see that children’s ideas, interests and experiences were acknowledged and built upon, where relationships were helping children and teacher to enrich their understandings, and where children were engaging with literacy in authentic ways. I am choosing to call these moments “critical moments.” It is in these “critical moments” that I believe children can come to know themselves and one another better, and that I can come to know them better too. This is a process that I believe helps us to create “meaningful curriculum.” “Meaningful curriculum” is therefore shaped by who we are in our context (children and teacher) and what we know and care about.

In August 2011, I will begin my self-study as I look back on my teaching practice. I am calling my meaning making process a “pedagogy of meaning,” recognizing that the meaning I make as a teacher is influenced and enriched by my experiences and relationships with the children I teach. I believe there are “critical moments” that emerged during the school year that will help me to illustrate the classroom spaces, learning materials and relationships that can contribute to “meaningful curriculum.” For example, a “critical moment” might be when a story unfolds between two children during a play activity at Explorations that results in a spontaneous and authentic use of literacy. Looking back on this “critical moment” by revisiting the conversation I wrote down, and the illustrations the children created, may help me to consider what decisions I made as a teacher, and what other factors may have influenced the path of our learning.

The richness of our experiences in the classroom throughout our school year are far too numerous to include in one study. I have therefore chosen to limit myself to three “critical moments” to help me

illustrate my learning as a teacher. I have not selected these moments yet, and will do so only with your permission to review documentation I have collected during the school year for the new purposes of my research. During the school year I have used the documentation I have collected to inform my teaching practice. Some of the documentation I have also made public to you throughout the school year to communicate with you, to help children make meaning and draw connections between their ideas and those of others, to help build relationships, and to help make our learning visible and shareable. I am now seeking yours and your child's permission to use the documentation for a new purpose. The University of Manitoba requires that permission be sought for the use of any information for the purposes of research. Therefore, I am requesting your consent and your child's assent to revisit examples of documentation for my Masters' Thesis to help me reflect on my teaching practice. At the bottom of this consent letter you will find a checklist highlighting the types of documentation I would like to revisit. You may select which specific types of documentation you and your child are giving consent/assent for me to revisit for the purpose of this research. In the written report of this project, my thesis, I intend to refer to children's theories, comments, work samples, artifacts and photographs represented in specific pieces of documentation that may help me to explain my learning around what contributes to "meaningful curriculum".

Please note that any photographs of children, video or audio recordings will be revisited by me and will not appear in the final thesis. The documentation I will be revisiting may contain photographs, videotaped images or audio recordings of your child. All conversations were recorded and then written out only by me, or were written in my notebook as they occurred. These forms of documentation will be used to help illustrate my learning and may be described in my thesis. When I refer to children I will use "made-up" names to keep any copies of work, examples of conversations or descriptions anonymous. *The actual pieces of documentation, photographs of children or audio/video recordings will not be shared with others in any way.* The content of the written thesis may be shared in later presentations and publications. The thesis and later presentations and publications will not contain anything beyond what I was given permission to share in the written thesis.

The selection process of the three "critical moments" will involve revisiting pieces of documentation involving students for whom I have received consent to participate in this research study. I will not revisit the documentation for which I have received consent until after August 30<sup>th</sup>, 2011. All documentation pertaining to the children for whom I do not have a consent form, will not be included in any form in this research study. From my collection of documentation for which I have received consent to revisit, I will choose three "critical moments" that stand out for me as being significant. I am looking for "critical moments" that demonstrate the interplay among understanding ourselves and others, the role of our relationships, and our authentic experiences with literacy. With the support of these specific pieces of documentation for these "critical moments", I will consider my teaching practice and what I have learned in regards to "meaningful curriculum". Any documentation that does not specifically pertain to these three selected moments will not be included in this study in any way. Upon selecting the specific documentation, I will contact you again by phone to invite you to schedule a meeting, at your convenience, should you wish to review the documentation again that I will be revisiting. If you do not hear from me by September 30<sup>th</sup>, 2011, you can assume I am not using any documentation pertaining to your child in any way for this study.

All of the documentation selected for the three "critical moments" will be kept in a locked cabinet in my home office until the completion of my thesis. At this time I anticipate completing my thesis by June 2012. At the conclusion of the research, no one other than me will have access to any information which might include any identification of the child.

Your permission to use as data documentation reflecting your child must be given voluntarily. I want to assure you that there are no consequences that will arise from giving or withholding your permission. To ease any pressure you might feel because I was your child's teacher, I am asking that all returned consent forms be sent to the school office, addressed to [REDACTED], the school secretary, not to me. [REDACTED] will store the consent letters in a sealed envelope in a locked cabinet

in the office. She will not reveal the names to me until September 7<sup>th</sup>, 2011. On this date I will open the envelope and then compile only the documentation for the students for whom I have received consent. I will then begin the process I have described above of selecting the three “critical moments”. Again, you will be contacted by me by phone if I choose documentation pertaining to your child.

If you decide to withdraw your consent, or your child decides to withdraw his/her assent you are free to do so at any time by contacting me (204-██████████) or the school secretary, ██████████ (204-██████████). If permission is not given or is withdrawn, no documentation regarding your child will be used or referred to in my written thesis or subsequent presentations or publications. There are no known or anticipated risks to your child associated with giving consent for documentation to be reviewed in my research study.

I have informed the school principal, ██████████, and ██████████ School Division Assistant Superintendent, ██████████, of my intended research, which they have granted me permission to complete. Should you feel that there are pressures or unanticipated consequences as a result of participating or not, you are free to contact ██████████ (204-██████████), Dr. Wayne Serebrin, my research supervisor (204-474-9024), or the Human Ethics Coordinator (HEC) (204-474-7122).

This research may benefit my own professional practice and contribute to an educational dialogue around advocating for “meaningful curriculum” that recognizes the strengths, ideas, and interests children bring with them to school. If you decide to give consent/assent for me to use documentation and copies of work pertaining to your child for the purposes of my study, I will contact you directly by phone after completing my written thesis to provide you with an opportunity to read a summary of the study that shows how this data informed changes to my teaching. A copy of my completed thesis will be left at the school and the secretary, ██████████, and Parent Council will be informed when it is available to be viewed by interested parties. At this point I anticipate completing my thesis by June 2012.

I will be available at your convenience to answer any questions you may have. I may be reached at school (204-██████████), at home (204-██████████), or via email ██████████. In addition to contacting me or my research supervisor, you may verify the ethical approval for this study or raise any concerns you might have by contacting the University of Manitoba Human Ethics Coordinator (HEC) (204-474-7122).

Please discuss this letter with your child and determine whether he or she agrees to give assent. I have attached a simplified bulleted list of what this research entails to assist in explaining this process to your child. Your signature of consent and your child’s assent as indicated by his/her printed name, indicate that you and your child understand the above conditions of participation in this study and agree to allow your child to participate. You and your child are free to withdraw from the study at any time without prejudice or consequence. Please return one copy of the signed consent/assent form in the attached envelope directly to ██████████ at the office by September 7<sup>th</sup>, 2011, and keep the other for your records.

Thank you for your time and consideration.

Sincerely,

Catherine Paul-Sawatzky  
██████████

**Consent Form:**

**Your signature on this form indicates that you have understood to your satisfaction the information regarding participation in the research project and agree to participate as a subject. In no way does this waive your legal rights nor release the researchers, sponsors, or involved institutions from their legal and professional responsibilities. You are free to withdraw from the study at any time, and /or refrain from answering any questions you prefer to omit, without prejudice or consequence. Your continued participation should be as informed as your initial consent, so you should feel free to ask for clarification or new information throughout your participation.**

**The University of Manitoba Research Ethics Board(s) and a representative(s) of the University of Manitoba Research Quality Management / Assurance office may also require access to your research records for safety and quality assurance purposes.**

**This research has been approved by the Education/Nursing Research Ethics Board (ENREB).**

**If you have any concerns or complaints about this project you may contact any of the above-named persons or the Human Ethics Coordinator (HEC) at 204-474-7122. A copy of this consent form has been given to you to keep for your records and reference.**

---

I give consent to Catherine Paul-Sawatzky to revisit examples of documentation referring to my child for the purpose of her self-study, which may include:

**(please check all boxes that apply to indicate your consent)**

- Photographs
- Video recordings
- Conversations that have been written out (by Catherine)
- Copies of work samples or artifacts without student's names (i.e. artwork, writing, story maps)

I give consent for Catherine Paul-Sawatzky to refer to anonymous samples of documentation about my child in her Master's Thesis for the Faculty of Education, at the University of Manitoba. I understand that Catherine's written thesis may include written out conversations using "made-up" names, and copies of my child's work without identifying names (if I checked off those boxes).

I understand that Catherine's written thesis will not include photographs or audio/video recordings identifying my child, nor any written out conversations or copies of my child's work that indicate his/her name.

---

(Name of Participant's Parent/Guardian)

---

(Signature)

---

(Date)

**(Please talk about this with your child and if they assent, have *her/him* sign the form by printing their name on the line.**

I have asked my child, \_\_\_\_\_ who has indicated assent to have Catherine revisit examples of documentation about her/him to be used anonymously in Catherine Paul-Sawatzky's Master's Thesis for the Faculty of Education, at the University of Manitoba. My child understands Catherine's written thesis may include written out conversations using "made-up" names, and anonymous copies of his/her work. My child understands that Catherine's written thesis will not include photographs, or audio/video recordings identifying him/her.

\_\_\_\_\_  
(Name of student)

\_\_\_\_\_  
(Student print name here)

\_\_\_\_\_  
(Date)

\_\_\_\_\_  
**(Researcher's Signature)**

\_\_\_\_\_  
**(Date)**

This consent form, a copy of which will be left with you for your records and reference, is only part of the process of informed consent. It should give you the basic idea of what the research is about and what your participation will involve. If you would like more detail about something mentioned here, or information not included here, you should feel free to ask. Please take the time to read this carefully.

**Possible Script for Parents of Grade One Participants**

- Catherine is doing a project called a study. This study will help her finish her University course, her 'teacher school'.
- Catherine's study is about creating learning experiences in the classroom that are interesting to children and helping children feel that they are important in the classroom. Catherine is interested in how better understanding who children are can help her make decisions about what the class will learn together. She is interested in many different ways that children can help others learn about who they are in the classroom.
- Catherine is interested in looking back over the school year you have all had together in Grade 1. She is thinking about important moments that happened that helped her to get to know you better and how those moments helped her to make decisions about what you could all learn together.
- Catherine is asking if she can look back at the documentation, pictures of your work, and the notes she wrote down in her notebook. She wants to look back again on some of the work that you did together that you used to think about your learning, or that you shared with your family at conferences.
- In her study, Catherine might like to use some of the documentation about you to help her understand how to be a better teacher.
- In order to use some of your work for her project, Catherine needs your permission. You can say yes or no, either is fine. You will not be 'in trouble' if you say that you don't want her to use your work, or to write about your ideas. She won't even know if you said, 'yes' or 'no'. You are going to give your answer to [REDACTED].
- If you give Catherine permission use documentation that you were a part of, and you change your mind later, that is okay too. We will just call [REDACTED] and tell her you don't want Catherine to use your work, and [REDACTED] will take your name off the list of children whose documentation Catherine can use.
- If this sounds okay to you and you want to give Catherine permission to look back at and use some of the documentation that you were a part of for her project you have to sign the assent form by printing your name on the line on the form. I have to sign the consent form too, and then we have to mail it to [REDACTED].