

Along the Path: Hope and Despair of a Veteran Activist Educator

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ABSTRACT

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This thesis is written in three parts, and supported throughout by feminist critical pedagogical analysis and a narrative methodological approach. In Part I I lay a theoretical groundwork that weaves the Freireian roots of critical pedagogy with its more contemporary theories in application to K-12 schooling, and with feminist thinking, most notably Sara Ahmed who's work has moved me both as a human and a teacher. In Part II, I take a deep dive into autoethnography (Bochner, (2017), Ellis, 1999). In Part III, I offer a memoir of my experience as a classroom teacher over a nearly 20 year period. The story of my work as an activist elementary school teacher oscillates between phases of hope and despair around the potential for forwarding a broad range of social and ecological justice ends through teaching and learning in the Ontario public school system. Finally, in Part IV, I return to conceptual analysis to reflect on the key themes of my memoir including teacher burnout, teacher efficacy, teacher resilience, and the ways in which these interact with teacher learning communities, school cultures and the relationships that underpin the work of teachers and educators.

Keywords: hope, burnout, teacher activism, social justice education

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A Note About Names and Places

In an attempt to protect the identities of those students, teachers, administrators, parents and other community members I have used pseudonyms for the names of schools and individuals. The events and anecdotes shared in this thesis are real. I acknowledge that my writing is drawn from memory and that my recollections will be an imperfect reflection of the truth. I have tried wherever possible to write with compassion, to be gentle and thoughtful, while at the same time honouring my own thoughts and emotions.

Part I: Introduction

Why Am I Writing This Thesis?

I am writing this thesis because I am burnt out. I am struggling to stay hopeful and committed to my vocation as an elementary school teacher. I am struggling to maintain my belief in education as a path to social change: To believe that as a teacher working within the system, I can help to improve outcomes, redress systemic injustices, and protect and honour the diversity and beauty of the natural world of which humanity is a part. I am struggling to feel that the work I do is “enough” in the face of global injustice and a planet on the brink. I want to understand why my work as a teacher—joyful, creative, fulfilling and well paid as it is—feels so hard. I am trying, through writing, to understand why I feel so much despair despite what would appear, from the outside, to be a successful teaching career.

I hope that as I document my experiences as an activist educator, that I will be able to identify the factors and forces that continue to shape my work and my identity; those that sustain me, those that wear me down, those that are intrinsic to the public education system, and those that lie outside of it. I hope that as I write, I might better understand my teacher self, forge a path through the despair I feel, and find a way to stay.

In my 20s I worked with organisations that were on the frontlines of activist work. I was involved with projects that focused on forest conservation, food security, housing advocacy, economic justice, women's rights and environmental protection. I became a teacher, in part, because I felt that it was a way to move from the margins of activism and into the mainstream. I thought that I could continue to advocate for people and the planet from within the public education system.

At the outset of my career, I believed that I could work for positive social change simply by being a really good teacher, one who kept students happy and engaged, and who helped them to master the knowledge and skills they were expected to learn. I wanted to be a good teacher of “the basics”, i.e. reading, writing and arithmetic because I believed (and still believe) that students need these skills to make their way in the world and to become change makers themselves.

As I grew into my “teacher-self” I knew that I also wanted my pedagogy to engage and inspire students to learn and work for justice. I embarked on a journey to figure out how to enact a pedagogy that revealed the injustice of economic, political and

social systems at a local and at a global level and that shone a light on stories of resistance and courage. I wanted my pedagogy to tackle racism, heteronormativity, sexism and ableism. I wanted it to honour the teachings and legacy of First Nations, Metis and Inuit peoples. I wanted it to highlight the beauty and sacredness of diversity both in the natural and human world. At the same time I also wanted to make change outside of my classroom more broadly within the schools and system in which I work. I wanted to be a part of something bigger than myself and my practice. I wanted to learn and work in community with other teachers who shared my hopes and my commitment to elementary education as a vehicle for change.

I still want these things. I am still hopeful that my work in education can be a part of resistance and change making and working for justice. But, now, 20 years in, I am feeling increasingly cynical about whether real, lasting change is possible. I am increasingly aware of the shortcomings of the education system and of the students and families who continue to be pushed to the margins. I am tired and my hope is waning. Both I, and my practice are human and deeply flawed as is the system in which I work. This thesis is also an attempt to see the good, to forgive myself for my shortcomings and to discover new possibilities for learning, growth and transformation.

Personal Rationale: Thinking Feeling Tension

As they become known to and accepted by us, our feelings and the honest exploration of them become sanctuaries and spawning grounds for the most

radical and daring of ideas. They become a safe-house for that difference so necessary to change and the conceptualization of any meaningful action.

—Audre Lorde (1994, p.

37)

I am a deeply emotive person who is also fiercely cerebral: I want to know and understand and think through. I love ideas and debate, I seek proof and examples and rationales. I am the oldest child of a scientist and a registered nurse; a child of parents who themselves were raised in the positivism of the 50s and 60s, where to be reasonable and rational were commendable attributes, where supporting your position with facts and figures was celebrated and expected. And yet, I reject Cartesian notions of selfhood, *à la* “I think, therefore I am.” How I want to be in the world is rooted in my heart-self: “I feel, therefore I am.” My actions and choices are informed as much by sadness, anger, and love as they are by a rational, “scientific” understanding of the world. I am moved by stories, events, circumstances, both those that touch me personally and those that speak to the human condition. As Eisner (2008) writes, “The ability to empathize with others is a way of understanding the character of their experience that, in some ways, is the first avenue to compassion” (p. 8). Empathy and compassion inspire and motivate me to act for change. I share McWatt’s (2019) conviction that “in public conversations and actions around race, politics and ecology, we can’t leave out emotions—like grief, sadness, anger, shame—because these are key to action. We can’t explore and achieve equality without them” (p. 211).

Where I'm From¹

I am from:

Tears and laughter in equal measure

Joyful affirmations and angry outbursts

Heart on my sleeve and butterflies in my stomach

Comfort and discomfort

Intuition and instinct

Impatience and empathy

Reaction and response

A heart:

Breaking

Shaping

Stretching

Opening

Out.

There was a time when I tried to moderate my passion and my emotions, when I felt that crying or “emoting too much” was not professional, that it belied the supposedly “neutral” stance that one was to adopt as an educator—see, for instance, the Ontario College of Teachers’ (2021) Ethical Standards. I am curious about how and when I began to internalize this message about “not getting too emotionally involved,” about keeping a “professional distance.” Why is this the standard and the goal for the teaching profession?

I love teaching because every day offers opportunities to feel deeply, to stretch my heart, to live out the armed love about which Darder (2009) and Freire (1970) write. I don’t think I could keep teaching if this were not the case. As I have become more confident and secure in my place in the teaching world, I feel less of a need to apologize

¹ This poem is inspired by George Ella Lyons’ poem, *Where I’m From*, which I now know is also the inspiration for drama activities and creative writing prompts that I have encountered in classrooms, programs, workshops, and AQ courses since the late 1990s. To read the original poem and Lyons’ own words about how the poem has been used around the world to inspire reflection and promote community building, see her website: <http://www.georgeellalyon.com/where.html>

for my sadness about the state of the world, my anger about injustice, my joy in discovery, and my love of children, community and learning.

I recognize that who I am is a work in progress. I am shifting and changing and evolving sometimes outwards and sometimes inwards. I inhabit different worlds as both an outsider and an insider. I feel strong affinities with different groups of people. I am a member of multiple communities of belonging and practice (Wenger, 1999). Like Cajete (1994), I believe that “the community is the place where the forming of the heart and face of the individual as one of the people is most fully expressed” (p. 165). I am immersed in a complex web of relationships. I am in relationship with both other people and with institutions, norms (Butler 2005) and systems, some of which are visible to me and others which are not. And different aspects of my identity, of who and how I am in the world, move in and out of focus depending on these relationships. As is the nature of webs, I tug on them, they tug on me, we are in a constant state of interaction: of action and reaction.

As a self-professed Math Geek, I also cannot help but think about my identity as a series of Venn diagrams, a Spirograph flower composed of different loops. Sometimes I stand in individual loops, sometimes I find myself at points of intersection, and at others I am in a loop inside a loop.

I know that my identity is a collage; it is multifaceted. There is not just one story of who I am, but many. I understand that my stories and my identities are socially and culturally constructed. One of the challenges I have in situating myself and describing my identity is the tension between *who* I am and *what* I am. In *Relating Narratives, Storytelling and Selfhood*, Caverero (2000) suggests that “what” we are is tied to universals—to generalizable, relatable representations of our identities—whereas “who”

we are is about the fragmented non repeatable aspects of ourselves that come to light as we share our stories with others and they share our stories back to us. I do not want the “who” of my identity to get lost in the “what,” and yet they are so closely intertwined that I struggle to separate the two.

Yes, I am a joker, and teaching is both a performance and a production. When it comes to producing and performing who we are, Urrieta Jr. (2007) cites the work of Holland et al., (1998), who suggest that we live our lives in different “figured worlds” — places where our identities are shaped through the “work” that we do, and the artefacts (objects, events, discourses) that we value and share with others. Figured worlds are “places” where we negotiate our positions and their associated power and influence (or lack thereof), in response to and in relation with those around us. These figured worlds speak to both the universal and the particular. As I try to tell the story of myself as a veteran teacher and an activist educator, there are some universal “what I am” that come to mind: a particular set of actions, and attitudes that are assumed and even imposed upon me. They relate to my roles and responsibilities within a school and school community and to the artefacts I share with others. They confer both responsibility and power and they speak to the relationships that I nurture and negotiate. These are the institutional identities (Gee, 2000), the organizational and institutional narratives (Loseke, 2007) that are part of the broader social and cultural context of teaching. They have a profound impact on *who* I am and *how* I am in the world. They are the parts of my identity that are shaped by the situated and professional scenarios (Carillo & Flores, 2018) of schools and schooling. These are the identities that are most visible as I construct a memoir about my life as an activist educator. They are identities woven into stories about doing and

relating, about process and product, about power and position, about role and responsibility, and about working within the educational and schooling systems (big and small) in which I have been immersed.

But then there is my identity as a deeply emotional, caring and loving, critical, veteran, activist educator. These are part of what Gee (2000) calls my “discursive or D identities”; identities that find expression through words, deeds, ways of interacting, values and beliefs, and so on, and by being a “certain kind” (p. 109) of person. These are the words and ideas that others use to describe me and that I sometimes use to describe myself. Gee notes that some D identities—for example, menopausal White woman, middle class voter, bleeding-heart environmentalist, “firecracker”—are ascribed by institutions and groups. Still others—for example, activist educator, queer parent, extrovert, life-long learner—are ones that individuals claim for themselves. Discursive identities overlap and interact with other identities, including: institutional identities (those associated with systems and institutions, authority, status, power and position, such as: teacher, division chair, instructional coach); natural identities (related, but not limited to, our biology, such as: White, right-handed, oldest of three); and affinity identities (about the groups and communities with whom we share interests, practices, and a sense of belonging, such as: vegetarian, activist educator, dancer, French Immersion teacher). These identities can be contested and negotiated, and it is recognition by others that gives them texture and weight.

When I think about my discursive identities, I think about the stories I tell about myself and those that others tell about me—stories that are rooted in how I act and interact and that come to light through what I say, what I think, what I feel and what I do.

I think about the tension that exists between different aspects of myself and about how this tension plays out in how I relate to others. I think about the delicate dance that exists between “owning my awesome” and recognizing my flaws, between accepting and rejecting the stories that are told about who and how I am in the world.

I have been accused of being strident and forceful. I have been told that I am too sensitive, too reactive, that “my energy is a lot,” that I can be overconfident and controlling. I can’t help but think of Boal and Epstein’s 1990 paper “The cop in the head”: these (mostly negative) ideas about the kind of person I am are part of an internalized, oppressive monologue that has a profound influence on the way I respond to situations. It takes energy and effort to refute these voices and to not give them too much power. They also are cause for reflection. They are the voices that challenge me to listen more actively, to consult more, to pause before responding, to seek feedback and critique. It is true, I am reactive: I respond quickly to impulses and stimuli. And I am intense: I am prone to outbursts of both enthusiasm and indignation, passion and anger. This is sometimes “too much” for those around me and can push people away. (We also live in a world that is quick to vilify women who express passion and strong emotions outside of socially prescribed contexts.) The flip side of this is that I am responsive and flexible. I adapt quickly to new people, situations, and ideas. I can think on my feet, whether in a staff meeting, in my classroom, or in a conversation on the street. I am comfortable changing directions, dealing with crises, and adapting to challenges. I can express a passionate opinion in one breath and re-evaluate it in the next. I listen deeply and I care deeply.

And yes, I can be controlling and (over)confident. I am not afraid to take charge, take ownership, take responsibility, get things done. I am comfortable taking risks, expressing a clear position, cutting to the chase, organising an event or a workshop or a lesson. And I do have a lot of energy. I am fuelled by joyful anger, by a love of learning and play. This energy pulls me forward and moves me to care and to work for change. It draws people to me and can have a positive ripple effect on those around me.

I am still learning, at 48, to tone down my responses, to moderate my passion, contain my energy so that I can relate more readily to others. I try not to be too critical, to choose which problems to highlight, which hills to die on. I try not to be a “killjoy” (Ahmed, 2017) or impose my unhappiness with the world on others. I try to get in line to “avoid the consequence of being out of line” (Ahmed, 2017, p. 55). This has particular consequences for my engagement with teaching as a means for social transformation, and for my sense of myself as an educator committed to educating for peace and justice.

What do these identities, these discourses, and the inherent tensions between them mean for me as a teacher? How do they influence the way I respond to different situations? How do they interact with my feelings of despair and disenchantment with teaching and with my feelings of frustration and alienation? What impact do they have on my hope, my resilience, and my commitment to the work that I do?

Positioning Myself: The Path I Walk

I live, learn and love in (Peterborough)Nogojwanong, the place at the foot of the rapids on the unceded territory of the Mississauga Anishinaabe. This knowledge informs my life and my teaching, but sometimes fades to the background like other uncomfortable truths. I am trying to be more present with the knowledge both in my

personal life and my life as an educator. I try to honour the land on which I walk by treading lightly and respectfully in my relationships with living and nonliving features of the landscape through which I move.

Who I am is shaped by both the path I have chosen and the path upon which I was set down when I came into the world. I acknowledge that the path I walk is relatively obstacle free; I can move along it mostly unhindered. I am able to take in the trees and the sky without having to attend too much to errant rocks or roots that might cause me to stumble. When I come to a place where the trail divides, I am, for the most part, able to choose which way to go, to pursue a passion or an interest. I can be curious and contemplative. I can even (because I always seem to have something to prove), choose the path not taken, the one that seems muddier or more overgrown, steeper or rockier. I can seek out hardship and embrace adversity because I have the gear and the wealth of experience to get me through. I believe in myself and have reason to do so: I have a whole support crew to urge me on and provide assistance and advice if and when I need it. I know that I will find my way.

These freedoms to move, to choose what comes next, and to welcome discomfort speak more clearly to my privilege than simply naming the visible markers of my identity. I recognize that these markers confer (often unearned) power, opportunity, and status. What strikes me most is that they also smooth the path, cut swaths through the brush, and shield me from the elements.

I acknowledge the privilege informs and sustains my life and my work as an elementary teacher working in the public education system in Ontario. As explained by Cory Collins (2018), privilege is about the built-in advantages I have in my life that are

separate from my efforts or my income. This privilege is unearned (Niblett, 2017) and gives me greater access to power and resources.

I am a white, cis-gendered, able-bodied, settler woman born into an educated, middle-class family and these aspects of my identity contribute to my privilege to the ease with which I live my life. My privilege is manifest in the access I have to opportunities, and in the freedom I have to make choices in my life unencumbered by fear, judgement and prejudice, oppression or harassment.

Throughout my life my privilege has granted me access to experiences that have allowed me to learn more about myself and the world, and to develop skills and aptitudes that in turn have opened the door to work and learning opportunities: A lifetime of swimming lessons allowed me to access well-paying jobs lifeguarding and teaching swimming which allowed me to finance a trip to India at the age of 19. A “college fund” allowed me to volunteer, instead of working throughout university and to take a low-paying position at the Bronte Creek Project shortly thereafter. My salary at Bronte Creek barely covered my living expenses but I had no student debt burden and could afford to work there. My experiences at Bronte Creek played an important part in my acceptance to the focus track in Outdoor and Experiential Education (OEE) program at Queens as part of my B. Ed.

My privilege is inextricably linked to the freedom I have to choose where I will live, where I will travel, and where I will work. I can live and work just about anywhere in the world without fear of persecution or discrimination. I can choose challenging experiences knowing that I have a social and financial safety net to ensure my wellbeing.

I can choose to push at boundaries and edges knowing that my relative status and power will in many cases buffer me from critique and consequences.

My white privilege provides me with freedom from fear for my own wellbeing or those of my loved ones at the hands of systems and services that are supposed to support and protect all people regardless of race or class (police, healthcare, judiciary, education). This aspect of my privilege manifests in the way I am treated and addressed in a range of situations and circumstances; as a consumer, as a client and as a citizen. My encounters with all of those systems have been either neutral or positive. I am well served by them and am generally treated with respect and dignity. I am aware that this experience is not mirrored by Black, Indigenous, and other People of Colour (BIPOC) and/or by those living on the margins due to a myriad of intersecting factors including poverty and mental health. These systems I work in are predicated on systemic white supremacy (DiAngelo & Sensoy, 2014) and as a white person, I benefit from them every single day.

My class privilege means that I do not have to expend time and energy worrying about how to juggle funds for housing, food, electricity or childcare. It means that I can afford to do a Master's degree. It means that I have ready access to transportation and extra curricular opportunities for myself and my son. It means that I don't think twice about buying books and materials for my classroom.

My privilege also protects me from physical and emotional trauma. I do not pretend to know what it is like to contend with overt and subtle (but equally insidious) forms of racial aggression on a daily basis or to live with intergenerational trauma born of a systematic erasure of my language and culture. I do not know what it is like to be unsure of where I will be sleeping from one month, week or day to the next. I do not have to

devote time and energy to figuring out how to meet my own and my children's most basic needs. My privilege acts as a cushion or buffer and I do not have to spend energy dealing with oppressive systems; this allows me to "choose hard" and to seek out challenges and causes that require mental and emotional energy. It also plays out through the "power of normal" (Collins 2018): As I live my day-to-day life I know that my identity and my preferences will be reflected in choices available to me everywhere from the grocery store and the pharmacy to the pages of my local newspaper, and the children's books on the shelves of the public library, and the resources and models that are available to me in my role as an elementary school teacher.

My privilege is inescapable (Niblett 2017) as are the white, ableist, middle class, settler biases that are its constant companion. I am working to notice these biases, to name them and unpack them, unlearn them and mitigate the harm they cause. The teacher community in which I work is overwhelmingly white and middle class. White, middle-class biases permeate teacher culture in the schools in which I work. These biases are revealed in obvious and more subtle ways from the questions that we, as teachers, ask students about their week-ends, to the environmentally well intentioned litterless lunch initiatives championed by many schools. My racism and class biases are my own and they are also shaped by the culture around me. These biases make themselves known to me in the flash judgments I make about the contents of a student's lunch, the state of their winter clothing, or of the way in which they speak. I know my biases are reflected in my writing in how I describe situations, students and experiences and in the words and turns of phrase I use. There are times in my narrative where I have resisted altering my thoughts or judgements even when they do not hold me in a good light. The experiences I share are a

snapshot in time, the biases that are revealed are part of my process, an indication of my flaws and the work I still have to do. Some biases are clearer to me now as I read and reflect others remain deeply rooted. I am indebted to the friends and colleagues who help to unearth them.

No matter how I frame it, I know that I have a TON of privilege. And, I have some sense that this privilege should place me in the position of being more readily able to make positive change within the education system: I have access to social, economic and political capital that often places me in a position of power and influence. I also have energy and passion to spare because I am not engaged in a constant effort to navigate, negotiate and overcome social, economic and political systems that underpin both my work and home life. The question remains whether I can actually make the most of my privilege or whether there are other forces at play that work against the change making potential I feel I should be able to enact.

In *Shame on Me, an Anatomy of Race and Belonging*, McWatt (2019) writes:

I became aware of my ‘whiteness’—my own and that of many of my white friends—as a state of mind that allows erasure and violence towards others while claiming liberation for all. It was another moment of shame, when difficult, uncomfortable knowledge rushed in.” (p. 95)

I am still coming to terms with my unearned White-settler privilege. The feelings of guilt and shame that McWatt (2019) articulates are real. And, I acknowledge the advantages I have and the positions of power I occupy (Niblett, 2017). I know that part of what drives me to act is to try to move beyond my guilt and to reframe my privilege as a “positive opportunity to distribute social power more equitably” (Niblett. 2017, p. 13).

Theoretical Framework: Teaching for Social Justice Through Pedagogy

Joking and Brokering

For me pedagogy is about the moves I make. It is a complex, improvised dance. Framed another way, it is about joking. Joking is a concept forwarded by Boal (2000) that involves working with actors and audience members in a kind of performance called “forum theatre” to propose alternative solutions to conflicts and dilemmas that arise during a performance. In forum theatre, actors perform an oppressive situation and then halt the scene at potential turning points. Spectators (or “Spect-actors,” as Boal called them) are invited onto the stage to enact solutions to the problems. The whole process is facilitated by a joker through a repertoire of theatrical tools and facilitation moves. Joking involves: skillful control and an awareness of the forces at play in any situation; trust in a team and in a process; a willingness to take risks and be vulnerable; being comfortable in the limelight, pushing boundaries, and sharing power while staying in control; and (echoing Dewey and Freire) a benign manipulation of situations or experiences to maximize their potential for learning and change in subversive or transgressive (hooks, 1994; Oyler, 2017) ways. Jokers need to be both astute and intuitive, must be able to process energy, emotions and intent quickly, are responsible for the safety of both the spectators and the actors, and must know when to cut a scene or let it proceed. Jokers mediate between performance and participants (Me and my students? Me and parents? Me and colleagues?): they have one foot in the audience and one foot in the performance and are constantly mediating between the two towards a shared understanding and resolution. In his work around communities of practice, Wenger (1998) talks about border-brokering, a sort of situational straddling performed by people

who are able to relate, operate and mediate between different communities or groups who share different repertoires, priorities, goals, and experiences. And so, my joking is also border-brokering. I do straddle worlds and stories. With my students, I need to find the balance between critical-rigorous and fun-accessible—I need to meet them where they are at, and encourage them to step into new worlds, new experiences, new ways of seeing and believing. With most other teachers and many parents, I need to de-intellectualize my process, speak in “plain English,” and translate the language of critical pedagogy into descriptions and explanations that are more familiar and less radical.

Dialogue, and Interaction

In more concrete terms, pedagogy is about meaningful interactions between teaching and learning (Wink, 2011). It is about how I teach and about how I learn as I am teaching. I want my pedagogy to be engaging and provocative, to position all students as both learners and knowledge-holders. I want to find a balance between experiences where students discover patterns, concepts and big ideas for themselves (“Multiplication really is a shortcut for repeated addition!” “Seeds don’t actually need light to germinate!” “Settlers were really resilient and perseverant but if Indigenous people had not shared their knowledge of the land and the ecology with them, they would not have survived the winters!”) and modeling and scaffolding processes that allow them to solidify their understanding and ask questions that launch even deeper learning.

As much as is possible, mine is a critical pedagogy, rooted in a quest for equity and justice, grounded in nurturing relationships, and anchored in problem-posing (Freire, 1970) and educative experiences (Dewey, 1938) that prompt students to ask critical questions and to develop deep understandings of how opportunity and privilege play out

in their lives and the world around them. My pedagogy is inspired by the principles of John Dewey and Paulo Freire, and by Sara Ahmed, Audre Lorde, bell hooks, Susan Griffin, Vandana Shiva, Nel Noddings, Jean Baker Miller and other feminist thinkers who position feeling, caring, and connection at the center of what it means to be “fully human.” I try as much as possible to transcend the banking model of learning (Freire, 1970) where students are seen as mere vessels into which a teacher pours knowledge. I strive to teach in a way that is both generative—constructing understanding together through conversations and collaborative problem solving (Niblett, 2017; Wink, 2011)—and transformative (Darder, 1998)—connected to change-making in the real world.

Honouring, Countering, Nurturing

If I am trying to work for peace and justice by countering the status quo, then I can also consider my pedagogy to be a “counter practice” (Simon & Campano, 2013) where I resist ideas about “normal” and work to develop and refine my teaching so that it honours the potential of every child to learn and contribute. It isn’t enough to be aware of injustice or of structural and systemic oppression and inequality. Nor is it enough to draw the eyes of my students to injustices in the world. It is important to me that my students find themselves immersed in a learning community where they feel safe and valued, and where they are active participants in the construction of knowledge and understanding. A nurturing and inclusive classroom community is foundational for justice work (Niblett, 2017; Rogers & Shafer, 2018; Wink, 2011). It is a place where teaching practice is grounded in “building caring relationships and democratic spaces” (Picower, 2012, p. 566). For me, this means that my class is a space where students can ask uncomfortable

questions, where they can be vulnerable and be comfortable with “not knowing,” where they can explore ideas, and risk trusting others to help them find solutions to problems.

Guided by care and compassion, I try as much as possible to create experiences that feed curiosity, that invite my students to develop their own understandings, that draw on their strengths, and that position them as teachers as much as learners of themselves and of each other. I also strive for a classroom where students are repositioned (Oyler, 2017) as capable of learning instead of struggling to achieve (Simon & Campano, 2013). I try wherever possible to home in on their interests, to provide choice in how they show what they know, to create learning activities that engage heart and hands and head. I try to position all of my students as having something to offer the class. I make use of participatory strategies such as Think Pair Share, and Math Talk Moves (Chapin et al., 2013), group problem solving tasks, collaborative quizzes, and peer coaching. I try to assign competence (Esmonde, 2009) to students who might otherwise be relegated to learning margins by highlighting strengths and contributions. I try to allow students to take the lead in discussions (although mostly I fail at this because: I am impatient; I want to maintain some control of focus and direction; I want to push for deep instead of shallow connections; and time is finite). I set up challenges that require students to work together to solve problems. I try to create a community where we actively celebrate failures and mistakes as opportunities to grow and build stamina. I also have high expectations, I push. I try to situate my students on a continuum and encourage them to challenge themselves, to stretch their learning and do just a little bit more than they think they can. I refuse to think they are capable of less just because of their social class or their comparative lack of opportunities to learn outside of my classroom.

Relationships Are Everything

“Building schools for democracy, equity, and pluralism requires that we position teaching as an activist profession and understand it to be rooted first and foremost in human relationships.”

— Celia Oyler (2017 p. 31)

I see a “just and humanizing pedagogy” (Rector-Aranda, 2019) as fundamental to my life and work as an educator. It is enacted in the growth-fostering relationships (Jordan, 2014; Rector-Aranda, 2019) that I nurture in my classroom and in my life outside of school and that I try to nurture within my school community. The foundational principles of growth-fostering relationships are trust, mutual empathy, authenticity, radical respect, and vulnerability (Jordan, 2014; Rector-Aranda, 2019). These foundational principles, which are central to Relational Cultural Theory (RCT) (Jordan, 2014), echo the values and beliefs of a Freirian pedagogy (Freire, 1970) grounded in love and shared struggle.

Like critical pedagogy, RCT seeks to challenge and transcend conservative (dominant) ideals that place self-sufficiency, power over others, individualism and competitiveness on a pedestal above all else (Comstock, 2008; Jordan 2014). It has strong connections to care theory and care ethics, which situate caring as being foundational to social-emotional maturity, moral judgement and decision making (Jordan, 2014; Noddings, 1984; Rector-Aranda, 2019). Proponents of RCT propose that true caring, empathy and connection are not possible in our relationships with students and families unless we are taking steps to break down barriers such as the scarcity of affordable housing, lack of support for mental health and addiction, limited numbers of subsidised

childcare spaces, and other systemic injustices that prevent students from moving forward with their lives (Rector-Aranda, 2019).

Windows and Mirrors: Positioning and Repositioning Students

I also want my students to see themselves and the richness of human experience represented in the classroom. I know it is my responsibility to ensure that my classroom is a space “where all voices can be heard because all students are free to speak, knowing their presence will be recognized and valued” (hooks 1994, p. 185). I believe, too, that teaching depends on dialogue, on “talk that changes us or our context” (Wink, 2011, p.65) through the exchange of questions and ideas, even (and especially when) topics raised are controversial or uncomfortable. True dialogue prompts reflection, asks that we reconsider our biases and assumptions, and that we consider carefully the ideas shared by others. I know, too, that dialogue needs to build from my students’ strengths and that it is up to me to create spaces where they *all* feel that they have something to contribute. Hopefully in this way, they will share their ideas; participate; grow in confidence, resilience, and empathy; and be increasingly able to tackle complex problems.

Being Present in Our Bodies, in the Learning.

I try to create spaces for embodied pedagogy (Oyler, 2017)—experiences that allow my students to be expressive and “in their bodies” through movement, drama, visual art and performance. Carving out time for these experiences and ways of being resists the emphasis on science and math and test preparation. They are also ways to invite parents and the larger community to share in and witness our classroom community, and our capacity to learn and create together.

Just Good Teaching?

Much of these practices are not strictly activist pedagogy: they are just good teaching. Good teaching is about pedagogical content knowledge (PCK²) and subject knowledge. It is, to go back to Boal's joking (2000), about the moves a teacher makes to design and facilitate experiences that help students develop understandings and skills that will help them to read and write the world (Freire, 1985). Our school board is big on "equity," by which they mean good teaching that "reaches every student," and this could be framed as an activist pedagogy. However, I know that there are classrooms in our board where *not* every student is reached. Some of this *is* about pedagogy, some of this is about beliefs, attitudes and political views, and some of it is about a lack of resources in classrooms, schools, and school boards (personnel, materials, time).

I do question the radicalness of my pedagogy. Yes, I have had students engage with issues in their community and the world. We have written letters about and raised funds for access to clean water, both in Sub-Saharan Africa and in Canadian Indigenous communities. We have learned about and advocated for a housing strategy in Peterborough and other municipalities where affordable housing is scarce and many families experience insecure housing. We have analysed the Mercator map projection and discussed its colonial and trade-centered perspective and its impact. We have calculated the fully inhuman proportions of Barbie dolls and action figures in relation to the pressures girls and boys feel to look a certain way. We have created budgets to assess

² PCK is a term coined by Lee Shulman in the 1980s. According to Shulman, it is "a special kind of knowledge possessed by experienced teachers that constitutes a fusion of subject matter knowledge and the pedagogy appropriate for teaching particular topics. It includes knowledge about learners and how to represent subject matter knowledge in forms that make it comprehensible to students" (Hashweh, 2014 para 1).

whether the minimum wage is actually a living wage. But, for the most part, my students do not perceive themselves to be “oppressed,” and perhaps this is a failing on my part. Even if I look at this through the narrow lens of the sense of student voice (which is very much overlooked in elementary schools), and the power they do or do not have to shape school culture, students seem to accept that schools are “just the way they are” and to believe subconsciously that they are not really in any position to shape how they operate. I don’t think I have ever unpacked this with my students and I wonder if I should? In her 2011 book *Critical Pedagogy*, Wink’s message is clear: Start with where students are at, honour their language, culture and experiences, and work to help them find their voices and their power. Wink argues that it is through a process of engagement and validation that students become advocates for their own learning and for change within their schools and communities. So what changes and challenges am I really unearthing?

There are a few challenges for me here. One is that most (though not all) of my French Immersion students come from White, middle-class families. They have stable homes and their learning at school is enriched by many activities, from piano lessons to family vacations to Europe and such. I do have students who do not have this privilege in my classes, whose families are housing insecure and whose parents are working two minimum-wage jobs and sharing apartments to make ends meet. These students usually make up about one quarter of my class. I need to be aware of protecting their dignity, especially as they get older, and not singling out their lives and situations as “wanting.”

Playing the Game to Beat the Game?

I have also not actively critiqued the provincial testing regime (EQAO) that has framed my curriculum for the last 10 years of my career (where I have been in either a

Grade 3 or Grade 6 class—provincial testing years—or working as an Instructional Coach to support teachers in these grades). This is partly because of my own conflict about standards and expectations, about wanting to ensure that my students are “ready to succeed” at whatever the system throws at them. Is it critical pedagogy to give them the tools they need to “beat the system?” This is unclear to me.

Ultimately, I want my classroom to be “a place where students learn to be active and engaged citizens” (Styslinger et al., 2019, p.13), where they are agents both in their own learning and in the creation of more just and sustainable worlds. I can do this by “design[ing] and enact[ing] pedagogies that are culturally affirming, relevant, responsive and sustaining” (Simon & Campano 2013, p. 32). I know that *if* I can resist deficit attitudes and approaches—which frame students as failing to measure up, lacking in skills and qualities, and “hard to serve” (Esmonde, 2009; Simon & Campano, 2013)—and *if* I provide my students with the tools they need to access and develop knowledge and skills (Gutierrez, 2007), and *if* I can create experiences where they can harness those same skills and understandings to become changemakers who challenge the ways in which power and position play out in society (Gutierrez, 2002), *then* my practice is moving towards a critical pedagogy that is oriented towards social justice.

At this point, though, I am just not quite sure if my practice meets the promise of ideas that critical pedagogy purports to uphold.

Teaching for Social Justice Through Content: It’s About What I Teach

My activism and my search for social justice also express themselves through what I teach. Teachers in Ontario are bound to a provincial curriculum, but we have considerable autonomy when it comes to the materials and texts we choose to use, and

which curriculum expectations we choose to emphasize or de-emphasize. And content does matter: the texts I choose matter and the expectations I choose to explore deeply matter. I am cognizant of what long-time teacher and critical pedagogue Wink (2011) calls “the hidden curriculum” or, the “unexpressed perpetuation of the dominant culture through institutional processes” (p. 69). My awareness of the subtle but pervasive impact of mainstream culture and ideas on schools and schooling means that I am constantly asking myself critical questions when I am designing experiences, planning lessons, creating assessments, and selecting materials and texts to use with my students. Thinking about the hidden curriculum is also part of a critical literacy practice that “requires frequent reflecting, questioning, and acting in response to power hierarchies” (Mundorf et al., 2019, p. 71). As I plan and teach and reflect, I need to ask myself: Whose stories and whose interests are affirmed by this text (Mundorf et al., 2019)? By this curriculum? By this standard? And whose are not?

Sharing Stories, Challenging Norms

Paying attention to content matters because representation matters. I want my students to feel seen in the materials I use, but I also want them to be exposed to counter narratives (Oyler, 2017) and to lives lived outside of their own. I give a lot of thought to the books in my classroom library because I know that teachers (including myself) often unintentionally “tend to perpetuate single stories [by] limit[ing] students’ curricular and reading experiences” (Mundorf et al., 2019, p. 75). Schools and schooling reproduce the dominant narratives about what is considered “normal”—read: acceptable or desirable in society (Kumashiro, 2000). I want to challenge this narrative and expose my students to texts that question and resist this narrative. This includes challenging the word “normal”

itself. I do not want White, nuclear families to be the norm; I do not want Judeo-Christian and able-bodied to be the norm; I do not want middle-class-settler to be the norm. And so, I share films and stories and songs and art and discoveries that highlight the richness and variety of human struggles and achievements, from people and places across Canada and around the world. I try to foster a critical understanding of conflict and an appreciation that history is written by the winners, who may misrepresent their own achievements at the expense of others. I try to highlight stories of resilience and ingenuity from cultures that are lesser known and often maligned. I want my students to have a voice, and to be exposed to many voices, because “the broader the diversity of voices, the better the quality of society” (Wink, 2011, p. 86). I also want students to think about whose voice is missing and to consider carefully the “danger of a single story” (Adichie, 2009). I am aware that “there is always diversity in a group, and that one story, lesson, or voice can never be representative of all” (Kumashiro, 2000, p. 34). I draw in current events because what is happening in the world in real time is relevant and meaningful. Examining current issues and events helps my students to discover injustice and inequality (and inspiration) for themselves. I try to help them to develop the tools they need to voice their concerns and make change wherever they see injustice. Critical literacy involves reading in context. I want my students to move back and forth between reading the words and reading the world (Freire, 1985) and to make their own connections between the ways in which choices and decisions (both their own and the ones made by schools, governments, businesses and organizations) are made based on the way power and opportunity are distributed. I agree with Freire (1985) that “reading is a

matter of studying reality that is alive, reality that we are lying inside of, reality as history being made and also making us” (p. 149).

I am intentional about the texts I select for my class. To adopt a metaphor first articulated by Bishop (1990), I want the texts I choose to act as mirrors, windows and sliding glass doors. Students need to read texts that are mirrors in which they see themselves, and they also need texts to be windows through which they can see into the lives of others. And the power of a really well-crafted text is that it can also function as a portal, a sliding glass door through which students can step into the feelings and lived experiences of other people whose lives differ from their own, that “allow for the experience of crossing into the life of a cultured other” (Styslinger et al., 2019, p. 12). This is one path towards empathy and justice: “By encouraging students to engage with the perspectives of others” I aim “to inspire them to walk through real doors in the real world to promote change on behalf of the others discovered through reading” (Styslinger et al., 2019, p. 12).

I also make “strategic curricular choices” to help students see the ways in which power acts in the world (Picower, 2012, p. 567). I recognize that teaching about “the other” can be problematic, especially if the texts I share essentialize the lives and experiences of marginalized groups (Kumashiro, 2000). I recognize, too, that identities overlap and that we are never just one thing, so I try to ensure that the texts I share bring this intersectionality to the fore. I know that I need to be aware of the pitfalls of partial knowledge (Kumashiro, 2000, p. 32) and be aware of stereotypes (even “positive” ones) and harmful misrepresentations. I am thinking now, too, about how empathy can reinforce an “us and them binary” (Kumashiro, 2000, p. 35) and about ways to transcend

this through my pedagogy. Kumashiro (2000) asserts that we should not privilege empathy as a final goal in our efforts to bring the experience of marginalized others into our classrooms. And so I ask myself, What is the goal? Is it to foster curiosity? An awareness of the value and richness of diversity? To install a desire to question and critique? To develop an appreciation of intersectionality? And what does this look like with Primary-aged students?

(re) Reading and (re) Writing the World

I want my students to read and *write* the world with both words and numbers (Freire, 1970; Gutstein, 2005; Gutstein & Peterson, 2006). I want them to use the tools they have to make sense of, critique, and transform the world around them. I want my class to foster a rich culture of literacy and numeracy. One of the ways I do this is through the juxtaposition of different texts. For example, I can share the UN's Declaration of the Rights of the Child with my Grade 2s and 3s, and then share photos and stories from Indigenous communities across Canada where children are inadequately housed and have inconsistent access to clean drinking water. My students do not need me to spell out the unfairness for them; they can ask their own questions and do their own sense making, which is invariably followed by the question, by some brave and forthright student, of "What can we do?"

I can choose to juxtapose numbers and statistics. For example, I can provide my students with the median cost of rent per month in the town in which I live and ask them to calculate the total wage (minus deductions) of someone working at minimum wage for 30 hours a week. I can provide my students with the tools and resources to do their own research so that they can discover for themselves how this does not leave enough money

for food, utilities, and transport, let alone any luxuries such as movies or Netflix subscriptions, membership to a gym, meals out or new clothes. I can contrast their findings with testimonies and images of youth who are precariously housed and ask them what they think we might do to “make things better.”

I can show students how graphs can be manipulated by compressing or stretching the scale, not starting at 0, displaying bars widely or thinly, not indicating the sample size, or limiting or overextending the range of the data. I can show how these tools are used by political parties to misrepresent election results, by climate change deniers to diminish statistics about climate change, and by housing advocates to highlight (and some might say misrepresent) the cost of homelessness compared to incarceration. I can encourage students to manipulate a graphical representation of a set of statistics to prove or disprove a particular perspective. I hope that this fosters a healthy skepticism and that it challenges the dominant idea that math or numbers are neutral.

I know that text and content matter, and I do my best to select texts and materials that affirm my students, stretch their world views, and challenge their assumptions. I want texts that do not resolve neatly; I want texts that catalyse a quest for understanding, that provoke reactions and deep feelings, and that move my students to ask Why? and How come? and What can we do?

Teaching for Social Justice Through Stance

Underlying my practice and my quest to teach for social justice is a critical equity stance: an approach to teaching grounded in love, curiosity, and an awareness that the worlds in which I live and teach are neither fair nor equitable. I know that opportunity and privilege combine to set some students up for success while others struggle against

systemic racism and poverty. I believe that part of my work as a teacher is to attempt to change this. A critical equity stance transcends teaching: it is about how I want to “be” in the world and in relationship to others. I want to live a life guided by both openness and compassion, one where I embrace difference and explore contradictions and dissonance. Critical equity is a stance accompanied by a healthy dose of skepticism about the information and “truths” that are presented to me by the school board, the ministry of education and society in general, and one that reminds me to question my assumptions and to interrogate “normal.” Taking a critical equity stance is about acknowledging the way in which my unearned privilege provides a protective bubble around my life, and about accepting that I have a responsibility to do my part to address injustice both inside and outside of my classroom. Oyler (2017) refers to a critical equity stance as an activist stance, one which reframes teaching as “an activist profession, rooted first and foremost in human relationships” and in “ongoing dialogue, vigorous debate and principled action” (p. 31) towards the creation of more just, more democratic and more inclusive institutions. Teaching is my activism, and a critical equity stance is at the heart of how, what, and why I teach. It informs and is informed by the work that I do and is an extension of my belief that I have a role to play in the co-creation of a more just, and more compassionate world.

Noticing, Naming and Questioning Power Structures

Teachers with a critical equity stance recognize that schools are hierarchical spaces where power and position are always at play and where “every decision, curriculum or otherwise, is political” (Mundorf et al., 2019, p. 71). They are aware that their status as conferred by their personal identities (often White, heterosexual, middle-

class) has an impact on teaching and learning, and acknowledge that power dynamics are mediated through identities—both theirs and those of their students (Gutierrez, 2009; Nieto, 2000). I am aware that I live and teach within, and am subject to, this reality.

Teachers working from a critical equity stance know that power is unequally shared in the world and that political, economic, and social systems act in obvious and hidden ways to unfairly advantage a privileged minority (Gutierrez, 2009; Gutstein, 2006; Stinson, 2004; Wink, 2011), of which they are often a part. And so, a critical equity stance asks that I continue to “do my work” by interrogating my position and privilege, and that I bring a critical consciousness (Styslinger et al., 2019; Wink, 2011) to teaching by asking questions about my assumptions and biases, and about the ways in which power and position play out in my life, in the lives of my students (Simon & Campano, 2014; Wells 2017), and in the world around us (Styslinger et al., 2019)

Niblett (2017) asserts that teachers doing social justice work need to be cognizant of their social capital (the resources, relationships and opportunities they have that ease the path they walk) and suggests that one way they can promote justice and equity in their classrooms is to use their privilege to distribute power more equitably. It is up to me to listen deeply, and take extra care when planning and facilitating learning experiences to create spaces and opportunities for the voices that are not always heard, and to do my best to ensure that students have what they need (materials, time, assistance) to participate actively even when this looks different for every student.

Acknowledging Biases, Challenging Assumptions

As a teacher with a critical equity stance, I strive to create spaces where students can learn about themselves and about each other (Nieto, 2000). I view diversity as an asset, not a deficit (Gutierrez, 2009; Gutstein, 2006; Nieto, 2000), and work to challenge racism and other biases. Like other teachers working from a critical equity stance, I try to foster the development of relational equity (Boaler, 2008) by trying wherever possible to position my students as equals, and to enact instructional strategies or “teacher moves” that foster respectful communication, inclusion, and shared responsibility for learning (Boaler, 2008; Esmonde, 2009).

Some scholars (Esmonde, 2009; Flores, 2007) working within an equity stance have adopted Gutierrez’s definition of equity as “the inability to predict...achievement and participation based solely on student characteristics such as race, class, ethnicity, sex, beliefs, and proficiency in the dominant language” (Gutiérrez, 2002 p. 153). If we accept this definition, it then becomes my responsibility and that of my colleagues (both fellow teachers and administrators) to ensure that this version of equity is enacted through policy and practice. This is not easy, but it starts with an awareness of the work that needs to be done to unlearn the biases and behaviors that work against this project, and to address the racism, classism, and sexism that are endemic to social institutions, including education.

To teach from a critical equity stance is to be counter-cultural and offer a counter-narrative (Oyler, 2017) to the status quo. It is to be the killjoy (Ahmed, 2017), who questions assumptions and traditions, who speaks up even when it is unpopular. Nieto (2000) writes that teaching should be framed as a lifelong journey of transformation and

that educators need to “take stock ... by questioning and challenging biases and values” (p. 184). She asserts that to take a critical stance is to question “seemingly natural and neutral practices” (p. 185), which may include policies that are disseminated from schools and governments. Jaworski (2006) acknowledges that this is a challenging stance to maintain in the face of the pressures to conform to the status quo and what she calls the “normal desirable states of school.” And it’s true, this is hard work. It is emotional labour layered on top of, or perhaps beneath, the emotional labour of teaching itself.

Love, Joy and Curiosity

This is why taking a critical equity stance has to be grounded in joy and a love for students and humanity that, in the words of Freire (1985), “pushes us to go beyond, [and] makes us more and more responsible for our task” (p. 146). For me, this love is both grounding and motivating, and it helps me to engage with teaching as not only a political and critical vocation, but as a deeply creative, artistic (Freire, 1985) and joyful endeavor.

In the spirit of Freire (1985), a critical equity stance also reminds me to be humble; to respect the knowledge of my students and to recognize all that I do not know and have not experienced; and to see my classes as “site(s) of ongoing learning for teachers and students” (Simon & Campano, 2013, p.6). Critical equity situates me as a co-learner, “learn[ing], alongside [my] students” (Burke & Collier, 2015, p.269), and at times an unlearner (Wink, 2011). Educators with a critical equity stance are researchers of their students and recognize the importance of developing meaningful relationships (Freire, 1985; Gutierrez, 2009; Gutstein, 2005; Niblett, 2017; Nieto, 2000; Oyler, 2017). Therefore, to take a critical equity stance is to see my classroom and my school

community as a place where I am continually striving to develop new connections with, and understandings of, my students and their families (Simon & Campano, 2013, p. 26) that are grounded in compassion, curiosity, and respect. I have been teaching long enough now to know that the more I know, the less I know, and that I need to be a researcher of both my students, myself and my practice.

Taking a critical equity stance is also about praxis (Freire, 1970), which can be understood as the constant reciprocity of theory and practice (Wink, 2011). I read and listen and act and do, and then I reflect and read and listen and act and do some more. My practice informs the theory in which I immerse myself and the theory informs my practice. I am constantly trying to relate the “how” to the “why” and the “why” to the “how” (Wink, 2011).

Inquiry Stance

In this commitment to praxis and openness to new learning, and in the positioning of “teacher as researcher,” a critical equity stance shares much with its somewhat less-critical cousin, the inquiry stance. The terms *inquiry*, *inquiry stance* and *collaborative inquiry* appear frequently in educational policy and trade literature. In Ontario, they appear in a variety of policy documents, from subject-specific curriculum documents at all grade levels to Ministry of Education monographs designed as resources for teacher professional learning. In these documents, inquiry is framed as a professional way of being (Ontario Ministry of Education, 2010a) and as a pedagogical approach focused on adaptive teaching fueled by student interests and contributions, and grounded in a shared responsibility for learning (Ontario Ministry of Education, 2014). It also asks that

teachers scrutinize their own teaching practices to assess the impact on student learning, and that they continually adapt and refine their practice in response to student needs and interests. Inquiry-based classrooms are affirmed as places where a culture of curiosity and reflection help to develop engaged and self-directed students who are intrinsically motivated to learn more about themselves and the world around them (Ontario Ministry of Education, 2011). The role of the teacher in these classrooms is to guide student learning by helping students to ask deep questions and access and critically evaluate information as they seek answers. Teachers who are facilitating an inquiry approach are also expected to work to foster respectful dialogue, and to help students to make connections to the “big ideas” in the curriculum (Ontario Ministry of Education, 2011).

Ravitch asserts that an inquiry stance is “an ethic of everyday practice grounded in reflection” (2014, p.7). An inquiry stance asks that I put my own practice under the lens and question its impact on learning (Jaworski, 2006). For example, it is what impels me to ask what intervention is best suited for a student who is struggling to read fluently. It manifests as a deep curiosity about why some students seem to have more numerical fluency than others, and sends me reading and researching about early math to explore the links between spatial reasoning, numeracy, and language acquisition. It is the stance that has me playing with different tools and models for subtraction so that connecting the process of subtraction with regrouping to the algorithm becomes an adventure instead of an arduous, hair-pulling process. It is a stance that has me refine an art activity so that it is better scaffolded and so that students can be more independent and creative. It is the stance that has me rework a lesson that flopped and try it again, and again, and again. It is the stance that has me thinking about what tools to share with my students so that they

can problem solve more independently, and that has me questioning my own tendency to rescue kids who are struggling instead of allowing them to engage in productive struggle and solve (or come closer to solving) problems for themselves.

Having and developing an inquiry stance is grounded in a constructivist perspective on learning that says that learning is social—it happens with other people—is specific—it is shaped by context, practice and setting (Cochran-Smith & Lytle, 2001; Jaworski, 2006; Ravitch, 2014)—and that it happens when individuals can connect new knowledge to their prior understanding and experience (Cochran-Smith & Lytle, 2001). Teachers working from an inquiry stance collaborate to build knowledge from the ground up (Cochran-Smith, 2015; Ravitch, 2014) and are engaged in a “common search for meaning” (Cochran-Smith & Lytle, 2001, p. 53). Teachers with an inquiry stance have a growth or “curiosity mindset” and work with others (both students and peers) to create spaces where making mistakes and taking risks are recognized as a valued part of ongoing learning (Dweck, 2006; Timperley et al., 2014).

Because Learning is Social...

As a teacher committed to life-long learning, I see the value in collaborating with others to ask questions, pose problems, identify discrepancies between theory and practice, and challenge assumptions based on genuine concerns about “how to best foster the learning opportunities and life chances of all students” (Cochran-Smith, 2015, p. 4). Talking about student learning can be a bridge between colleagues who do not share a critical equity stance but who nonetheless care deeply about their students and want to develop and refine teaching strategies that help them succeed at school. With the

increasing pressures and demands on teacher time, it is sometimes challenging to carve out specific time to have these conversations, and they often happen beside the paper cutter in the staffroom or across the hallway during lunch duty. Conversations tend to be brief, and when we do come together in meetings the mandate from the Ministry of Education (via the board office and our administration) is often so narrow that we fail to address the concerns and questions that are most meaningful to our practice, and our students, at any given time. The challenge, then, is to find those who share a similar stance and are willing and able to collaborate with me.

Teachers who work from an inquiry stance can be good collaborators. However, while it is possible to have an inquiry stance without it being critical or activist, working from this perspective fails to take into account systemic factors such as racism, poverty, and heteronormativity, which have a profound impact on student learning. Both Ravitch (2014) and Cochran-Smith (2015), argue that an inquiry stance is by its very nature critical and transformative: that teachers who take an inquiry stance “challenge underlying assumptions about policies around consequential educational change” (Cochran-Smith & Lytle, 2001, p.56), question the status quo (Jaworski, 2006), and see their work as being connected to larger movements for equity and social justice (Cochran-Smith & Lytle, 2001). This is not always the case. The literature and monographs about inquiry disseminated by ministries of education fail to explicitly address issues of systemic inequality or dominant discourses, and they certainly do not ask that teachers interrogate their own positionality, power, and privilege. This is a point of tension for me.

Part II: Methodology

Memoir and Métissage

This thesis is a fractured memoir. It is a story of hope and despair, a story about teaching and not teaching, a story about idealism and pragmatism, about transgressing and conforming, transformation and stasis. It is a story about one profession, one vocation, and one teacher, among many. It is also a collage, a weaving of poetry and prose, of theory and practice. I am writing in the spirit of arts-based research and embodied, feminist inquiry. I am also writing in the spirit of autoethnography: I am telling stories about my teacher-life and teacher-identity knowing that they are shaped by the contexts, cultures and discourses in which I am immersed. I am writing to find a way through the despair and disenchantment I feel about my own teaching practice, and about the state of public education and the world(s) in which I live and teach.

This thesis weaves together story, poetry and theory. It is a *métissage* (Chambers et al., 2008), informed by my experiences and catalyzed by the critical incidents (Pinner, 2018) and seed moments (Calkins & Kesler, 2006) that are the warp and the weft of my life and identity. Writing and poetry are my entry points into the reflecting, connecting, and analysing that are at the core of research. Methodology is a way of seeing knowledge (Chambers et al., 2008), and I have chosen to shift my gaze: to “focus on relating, responding, and resonating, rather than knowledge, knowers and knowing” (Chambers et al., 2008, p. 11). My writing draws on emails, poems, conversations, journal entries, and experiences shared with students, parents, friends, family, and colleagues. As I write and reflect and write some more, the ideas from other thinkers and researchers are also woven into my work. Through this “layered account” (Ellis et al., 2011) and the collage of

tangled stories (Bochner, 2017), I hope to shine new light on the experiences and relationships, the tensions and pressures, the hope and despair, that are the fabric of my life and identity as an activist elementary teacher working in the public education system in Ontario. Reading *is* thinking (Harvey & Goudvis, 2000), and I invite readers to step into my world(s) and to accompany me as I struggle to make sense of my life and my work. I invite them to visualize, reflect and question as they read, to “attend to the interreferentiality of texts” (Chambers et al., 2008, p. 2), and to make connections to their own experiences and theoretical knowledge. Teaching is messy work, being human is messy work, and in the mixing of methods and motifs I may muddy the waters, expose contradictions, and create more ambiguity than clarity (Bochner 2017). And, I cannot promise that the stories I share offer any verifiable truth. While I strive for verisimilitude (Ellis, 1999) and an “adequate depiction” (Banks, 2008, p. 3) of situations and events, these will always be interpreted and depicted through the lens of my own experience and perspective. But, my stories will be honest, and they will try to capture the beauty and the ugliness of my experience in equal measure. I will try to position myself not as a hero, saviour, or martyr (although these are all mantles I need to work out of my system!), but as a human being: fragile and fractured. Any conclusions I draw will be tentative (Eisner, 2008). I am learning to be OK with what is left unresolved (even as I search, always, for a happy ending).

Stories as Research

I love stories. What I know of the world and, by extension, of myself, has been mostly gleaned through story. From history to biology, teaching to motherhood, it is stories of and about the world that move and inspire and provoke me. They heal hurts and

sow solidarity. They are therapy and philosophy. They show me ways of being better in the world, and alert me to the traps and vanities that make me both more and less human. And so now, I turn to the writing of my own story as an educator, as an activist, as a feminist— —as a feminist, activist educator. I write as a hopeful pessimist. I know that my stories I share will not change the world, but I write hoping that they might change something for someone, somewhere (King, 2008).

Stories are a place of praxis; they are where practice meets theory, where truths unfold and fold in on themselves. We all have stories to share, and this unites us even as our individual, unrepeatable stories are what set us apart (Caverero, 2000). Stories can enhance empathy by revealing the incredible diversity of human experience. Stories about real lives “shake the imagination connecting us to subjects that really matter [and to] each other. [They are] the raw data of life” (Pelias, 2015, p.416). King (2008) writes that stories are “all that we are” (p. 2), and this holds true for me. I am constantly recreating myself, redefining myself and my world through the stories I tell.

Writing as Research

Writing is my method. It is a generative practice (Banks, 2008). While some of the artifacts that have acted as catalysts for my writing (emails, journal entries, poems, conversations) predate this thesis, others are emerging as part of my process. My writing is (unapologetically) performative (Pelias, 2005): I write out of a desire to see and be seen, to understand and to be understood. I write to make myself visible to others, to assert my personhood and come fully into being through the relating (Cavarero, 2000) of my story. My sense of self rests in part on the desire to tell, to narrate my story to another. This is how I know “I am.” I am writing to figure out how it is that I might move

along the path to becoming a better teacher and a better human. My lived experience informs my theorizing and vice versa in a reciprocal process of self discovery (hooks, 1994). I want to use theory towards justice and transformation, but this is only possible if I “direct my theorizing towards this end” (hooks, 1994, p. 61).

It's All Subjective

The word “story” can imply a certain distance from the truth, a fictionalizing of people, places, and events. My words will only ever be “proxies for direct experience” (Eisner, 2008, p. 4). I choose to use my words artistically, and I have no illusions of writing towards any sort of objective truth. However, it is this openness to interpretation that makes stories so appealing—they can inspire imagination and empathy through individual responses to themes that are universally human.

Autoethnography

Mine is a feelingful life (Eisner, 2008, p. 5). I am a relational being, moved by life as I live it, stretched and shaped by relationships and experiences. As part of a feminist project, the work I do with this thesis is both emotional and intellectual (Ahmed, 2017, p. 7). Tuning into my emotions keeps me aware and alert, and reminds me of how passion and deep feeling are linked to engagement, that the myth of the emotionless intellectual is just that: a myth (hooks, 1994). I have chosen autoethnography as my methodology because it places emotional and personal connections at the centre of the research. It acknowledges the researcher’s influence on the research, and as such it is transparently subjective and value centered (Ellis et al., 2011).

I am striving for evocative writing (Ellis et al., 2011): writing rich in detail that strikes a balance between showing and telling. I want the final product of this thesis to be close “in function to deep conversation and insightful dialogue” (Eisner, 2008, p.4). And I hope that this dialogue might lead to transformation—of myself and of my readers and, in some small way, of the systems and communities in which I am embedded. As I write, I hope to capture some emotional truths (Bochner, 2017) that resonate with my readers. One of the goals of arts-based research is to “move readers and researchers towards a more compassionate humanity” (Eisner, 2008, p. 8). And so, I hope that this assemblage of stories, musings, and meanderings will evoke empathetic feelings, and that these feelings inspire action for change.

I Am the Researcher and the Researched

Autoethnography is about self-questioning (Ellis, 1999): I am both the researcher and the researched (Butler-Kisber). It is a research practice that requires me to “confront the less flattering things about myself” (Ellis, 1999, p. 672) and to open myself to scrutiny and critique. Through the telling of my story, I am interrogating my perspectives, beliefs, values, and actions. This questioning is essential because it is a catalyst for the “necessary discomfort” that stops me from becoming complacent (Vass, 2016, p. 91) and it is purposive (Reta, 2010) in that it asks that I explore the tensions, ambiguities, and contradictions (Bochner, 2017) that I encounter within myself and within the position I hold in the education system. This reflexivity (Adams, 2017) also helps me to examine the ways in which I am complicit in oppressive systems, and to examine who benefits and who is hurt by them. Ahmed (2017) writes that “to be a feminist is to stay a student” (p. 11). As a student and lifelong learner I am always asking questions. Sometimes my

questions take me forward and sometimes they cast me backward, but what matters is that I take and “retake steps in a quest for deeper understanding” (Ahmed, 2017, p. 11). To do this work, I need to write from a position of both caring and vulnerability (Bochner, 2017; Ellis, 1999; Ellis et al., 2011). A goal of my writing is to honour the relationships that both sustain and inspire me.

An autoethnographic approach asks that I think critically about my own positionality (Ellis et al., 2011) and reminds me that my story is a product of the cultures that enfold me. Both my story and my identity are shaped by the communities and systems in which I work (Vass, 2016). As I search for understanding, I need to recognize the connections between personal and cultural experiences (Adams, 2017), and situate myself in the broader cultural context (Reta, 2010). My writing should shine a light on different aspects of my identity: my beliefs and my values; my privilege and my power (or lack thereof); and the ways in which these play out in my teaching practice and in my relationships. And my writing should illuminate the ways in which the portrait I am painting of myself shifts and evolves (Adams, 2017; Reta, 2010; Vass, 2016). This means that in my writing I am constantly “moving back and forth between [my]self and others, zooming in and out of the personal and social realm” (Chang, 2008, p. 9).

Seeing Differently

I want to look closely, to zoom in. I want to turn over rocks, hook my fingers under the edges, notice the moss and the sparkle of quartzite, get dirt under my fingernails. I want to take the time to notice the critters that curl up and those that scuttle away from the light. I want to probe the crevices, follow the roots that reach deep into the earth. Some rocks are harder to lift, require both hands, and but for a gentle rocking back on my heels, I may not even turn them over completely, but just peer underneath, head cocked to the side, shoulders straining. I am always careful to place the rock back where I found it, to curve it back into the

space, the crater in which it has settled. I try to set the rocks back down gently without crushing my fingers or disturbing the delicate ecosystems that lie beneath the surface.

I am a romantic, always looking for the light. But sometimes, the beauty and the new growth is located in the cracks and fissures. On the limestone plane at Warsaw, the crevices hold the snow and the cold longer into the spring, but they also nurture life in the drought of summer, delicate ferns unfurling in the refreshing damp, finding a sanctuary in the dark.

I also want to zoom out, climb to the highest point, step out from the treeline. From there, I can clearly see the lie of the land, notice the river, a ribbon of grey to the right, and the line where hardwood forest gives way to wetland. I can see the new subdivision marching across farmland that was once forest. Standing out in the open, it is easier to get my bearings, to make decisions about which way home lies, or which path offers the clearest way forward. Winter is better for this; the trees stripped of their leaves reveal the crests and valleys of the landscape as it rolls outwards. Sometimes finding clarity is like this, a climbing and a stripping away to see things from a new vantage point, to appreciate the scale and the way in which objects relate to one another.

In the Land of Teacher Stories

When discussing teacher identity, Clandinin and Connelly (1996) suggest the metaphor of a “professional knowledge landscape [can be] positioned at the interface of theory and practice in teachers' lives” (pp. 24). They assert that is both an “intellectual and moral landscape” (pp. 25) and that, as with any landscape, it has dimensions of space, time and place, and “a sense of expansiveness and the possibility of being filled with diverse people, things, and events in different relationships” (pp.25).

In some ways, this idea of a professional knowledge landscape can be thought of as the “setting” for the stories I tell about myself and my teacher identity. Clandinin and

Connelly (1996) suggest that teacher identity is revealed through three different types of stories: sacred stories, secret stories, and cover stories.

Sacred stories are the stories that are told by governments, researchers and policy makers about schools and school boards, education, and schooling. They are the stories that manifest in visions, goals, policies, and initiatives; they are the stories to which teachers are expected to respond, adapt, and conform. Sacred stories take place in the professional landscape outside the classroom, where teachers are swimming in a murky soup of prescriptive edicts, achievement standards, curriculum expectations, and “research-informed best practices” rooted in theories and ideals developed and imposed by researchers, administrators, and policy makers.

Sacred Story (i)

I am a technician
 I deliver curriculum, roll out initiatives
 Upload documents, distribute materials
 Monitor levels, assess performance, meet targets
 Leverage strengths, harness potential
 Develop an ASSET based approach
 Build capacity
 Aim for effectiveness, efficiency and excellence
 Refer always
 To the standard, the benchmarks, the goals
 Outlined by
 Others
 Because I am responsible
 For the production of future workers,
 For keeping the cogs turning
 For developing skills and abilities
 Knowledge and Understanding
 Consistent
 Objective
 Professional
 I am counting

And accountable
 For the success of our
 (Joint) enterprise³.

Secret stories are those stories that play out in the private space that a teacher shares with her students in her classroom. Clandinin and Connelly (1996) suggest that inside the classroom is a “safe place” where teachers can be themselves and “are free to live stories of practice” (p. 25). And, of course, there is a tension between the sacred stories and the secret stories.

Secret Story (i)

I am a mother
 In loco parentis
 Making better humans
 Zipping coats
 Tugging on mittens
 Wiping tables
 Tousling hair
 Finding spoons for spoonless lunches
 Offering praise and reprimands
 Yes you can, not in my room
 In equal measure
 And fair is not always equal
 Tough love and soft touch
Je t'aime

Secret Story (ii)

I am an activist
 Pushing boundaries
 Unpacking my backpack
 Biking to school
 Sitting in discomfort
 Walking my talk (or trying)

³ Wenger, 1998

Asking uncomfortable questions
 Offering windows and mirrors⁴
 Revealing ugly truths
 Teaching for justice
 Dissenting, diverging, disagreeing
 Calling bullshit on “teaching tolerance” and “appreciating diversity,”⁵
 Recognizing that a “liberal humanist approach is insufficient”⁶
 Aware of the danger of single story⁷
 Analysing texts, choosing my words
 Noticing gaps
 Creating spaces for other voices;
 Decentering Whiteness
 Working beyond inclusion
 Towards belonging

Clandinin and Connelly (1996) suggest that teachers invent cover stories to navigate between the two to lend credibility to their practice, to “fit in” with the bigger picture, to demonstrate their commitment and their professionalism. I wonder at the word “sacred” in sacred (institutional) stories. I struggle because it is divorced from what is most sacred, most important to me: being part of a movement towards a more compassionate, caring humanity through critical, radical, justice-oriented pedagogy.

Cover Story

I am a scientist
 Curious, excited, analytical:
 Engaging in inquiry
 Asking questions
 Anticipating results

⁴ Gutierrez, 2009

⁵ Oyler, 2011, p. 205

⁶ Oyler, 2011, p. 205

⁷ Adichie, 2009

Collecting data
 Naming and noticing
 Looking for evidence
 Digging deeper
 Searching for the perfect model
 The techno-fix
 For all that is broke

And so, I now come back to my original question: How is it that I define my identity(ies)? How do I capture, describe, and evoke who I am in the world? It seems that for me, the entry point *is* through the roles that I play, the positions I occupy, the landscape of objects, events, and actions that I move through. These worlds, these landscapes, are the settings for the stories I have to tell, and they are not static; they are shifting and evolving as I move through them. They both shape and are shaped by me. They are the world unfolding.

I love metaphors. Through the juxtaposition of seemingly disparate objects and ideas, metaphors can give us new ways to think about things (Efron & Joseph, 2001). Metaphors are a way of representing an aspect of an unfamiliar experience in terms of one that *is* familiar (Hatch & Yanow, 2008; Steger, 2007). They are grounded in the concrete, so they can help to bridge a gap between theory and practice, and take complex ideas and make them more readable (Efron & Joseph, 2001, p. 77).

Metaphors are also a useful tool for self-study. “Our personal attributes are captured in the metaphors we choose or invent to describe them. It is through such descriptions, at least in part, that we enable others to understand how we feel and, indeed, enable us to recognize our own feelings”(Eisner, 2008, p. 5). Metaphors help me to generate and critically analyze data about my teaching and my identity as a teacher

(Hatch & Yanow, 2008). They have both a cognitive and an emotional component (Steger, 2007) and offer a window into the intellectual, social and emotional labour that are at the heart of my work as a teacher. Metaphors evolve with time and experience, they shape and are shaped by practice (Fisher & Kiefer 2001). As themes and images emerge, they shed light on the meaning and purpose I ascribe to my work (Efron & Joseph, 2001; Mikel & Hiserman, 2001), and on the nuances of my teacher identity (Steger, 2007). Metaphors can also work as a lens for my reader, revealing what may be “unexpressed values, beliefs, and assumptions” (Steger, 2007, p. 4).

While some metaphors are affirming, others are less so and reveal the gaps between actual and ideal experiences of teaching (Efron & Joseph, 2001). Popular culture is rife with metaphors about teaching; they often take the form of caricature or myth—the teacher as hero, the teacher as mad scientist, the teacher as drill sergeant, the teacher as matron or miscreant. These images are culture-bound (Fisher & Kiefer, 2001) by role and position and are imposed from the outside. It is important for me to recognize the ways in which these metaphors both enhance my sense of worth and purpose as a teacher and constrain and erode it (Fischer & Kiefer, 2001). As I write about my own experience of teaching, I am writing from the inside, and taking ownership of the images by constructing them for myself (Fisher & Keifer, 2001). In the construction, I hope to come to a new awareness of my conflicting identities and to transform some of the ugliness I feel about teachers and teaching into something hopeful and transformative.

Apron and Thermos.

My friend Diane teaches kindergarten.

At school she wears an apron,

Complete with ruffles and pockets
 And platform heels
 Of a "sensible height".

At lunch, she sits at the yellow horseshoe table near the front of her class,
 Pours coffee from a slender silver thermos
 Into a porcelain tea-cup decorated with flowers and gold gilt edges,
 And daintily nibbles a square of dark chocolate.

Kindergarten is busy
 All that naming and noticing
 Playing and
 Problem
 Solving.

And messy:
 Glue, scissors, paper, markers
 Tears and snot
 Make
 So many
 Sticky
 Marks

Everything is wet and
 Nothing has lids.

It is also loud:
 So many shril
 clamouring
 voices

And god love the block centre:
 Build it up!
 Tear it down!
 Smash!
 Crash!
 Again!
 And again.

And again.

Diane brings apples from the market
And cuts them up for snack
Robin Hood meet Johnny Appleseed
“Because they are always hungry”.

In her apron and her heels
Tea cup in hand
One might think she is
Delicate
A bit--precious
A bit--proper
But she is of her thermos:
Steely
And strong

She counts down from 5 when she needs to
Daring any 4 year old to ask
What happens if you get to 0?
She has been known to use the same trick
With
Unruly
Adults

She waits
Patiently
For parents
Who arrive late
Pajama clad, Tim Hortons cup in hand
Eyes on their phones
Apologetic
Or sometimes just—
Angry

Diane is their

Point of contact

Dorothy to their Oz

She says: School is not a friendly place for them.

She says: Sam is having a really hard time today, I think mom is really struggling.

She knows

Blame

Is NOT the answer

So, she greets them smiling at the door,

Listens, without interrupting

(Despite the constant interruptions)

Is polite

And kind

And curious

At the end of the day

She gently ushers parents and children home to

A different chaos

Words tilted in ways

At which she/we can only guess

She spends Sundays planning

Thinking about how to inspire and engage

Scaffold and support

Every

Child

They are not her children

But she carries them home

Stuffed alongside her laptop and thermos,

Writing samples, wadded hankies

Errant mittens

And remnants of the lunch she didn't finish.

No wonder her back is so sore.

When we talk

She chooses her words carefully

She wonders and questions
 Doubts and despairs
 And somehow
 Remains hopeful

And when I say:
 I don't know how you do it, they are lucky to have you.
 She pauses and then tells me in a half whisper:
 You know:
 I don't even think I like children.

Teaching is physical, emotional work: it is embodied practice. For my teaching to be transformative and maybe even liberating, I know that I need to try to be “wholly present in mind, body and spirit” (hooks, 1994, p. 21). Throughout the school day, I experience a range of physical responses to my work. My stomach clenches in the morning with anxiety. My eyes fill with tears when I read *Stolen Words*⁸. My shoulders tense when yet another colleague says, “Well, they’re sweet but not very bright” or disparages a workshop about reconciliation with the words, “Enough playing the victim already, it’s time to move on.” My face flushes when colleagues in a PLC⁹ about math and measurement are more interested in making jokes about how “size really does matter” than engaging about how to teach math to kids who are struggling. My eyes roll when another class set of Teachers Pay Teachers worksheets rolls off the copier,

⁸ By Melanie Florence, this is the story about a young girl learning Cree and helping her grandfather to refind his words after they were taken from him during his time at residential school.

⁹ Professional Learning Community. PLC is an initialism that has come to stand in for a meeting of colleagues to discuss instructional strategies, student learning, and so on.

accompanied by pictures of cherubic children smiling inanely. I write to make sense of these corporal responses.

Not so long ago, I was speaking to a friend about what impels me to be a better teacher. Ever the pedant, he took issue with my choice of the words. He said, “You situate everything in your body! Like there is some sort of biological drive that is behind your actions.” This was said as a critique, as a challenge. At the time, I thought he had a point, that I needed to strive for a more intellectual, cerebral rationale for being and teaching. Now, less blinded by love, I assert that this drive, these impulses, this way of being in the world, is a strength. It is as essential to my scholarship and my humanity as breathing. And so, I write as a woman, as a feminist, and unapologetically from a place of passion and anger and deep feeling, rooted *in* my body. To be female in this world is to wrestle daily with expectations of nurture and nature, to be carried by the current of patriarchal norms and expectations only to come up against corners and obstacles that poke and pinch at the softest parts of ourselves.

My writing is a form of self-teaching, and writing about teaching is an extension of my practice. And so, my writing must also be embodied to try and capture some of the physical, emotional realities of my work. I write from my experience, from the body, because I am coming to believe, like Ahmed (2017), that “theory can do more the closer it gets to the skin” (p. 10). I reject the mind-body split that has somehow become the hallmark of a good teacher and, in the eyes of some, a good scholar. As hooks writes, “the erasure of the body encourages us to think that we are listening to neutral, objective facts, facts that are not particular to who is sharing the information.” In writing from the body, I acknowledge that mine is a White, able, cisgendered, straight-passing body: one

that moves through the world with relative ease. This ease of movement through systems and spaces shapes how I respond to ideas, experiences, and theory. And so, I “welcome the body into the mind’s dwellings” (Pelias, 2015, p. 417) and embrace the ways in which intuition and gut feelings inform my scholarship and my practice (Bochner, 2017).

Cruel Irony (February 13, 2019)

I am upstairs and glance in the mirror and catch a glimpse of Cruella De Vil
staring back at me

Not so much in demeanor
But in the silver-streaked, bouffant hair
Sweeping up from my face

I can be menacing sometimes
But I am not cruel.
Although I do like black and white
And I recognize the practicality of fur in colder climes
My Inuk friends say “dog is best” when it comes to lining the hood of your
parka

But I love puppies
For their unconditional love
For their unbridled enthusiasm
For their waggy little bums

Tomorrow, I will usher my students (Grade 3s *not* 2s) to the library for 9:30
sharp
There to receive a dictionary
One per child!
For their very own.
It seems the illustrious members of the Peterborough Lions Club
Have decided that this is the gift
That will:
What?
Foster a love of reading?
Promote academic success?
Lift children out of poverty?
Immobilize waggy little bums?

At the very least, ensure that the word “literally” is used correctly?

And this is important because
some of them

literally

can't

read.

And I wonder how this decision came to be made,
At the conversations behind the scenes

And I shake my head.

We might as well be trying to make coats
From the fur of Dalmatian puppies.

Part III: A Memoir

“Finding Myself”, Finding My Way, Finding My Place

Becoming an Activist (Educator)

I came to teaching as an activist. I went to teacher’s college later than most: I was already 28 and had taken a fairly circuitous route towards the completion of my bachelor’s degree in environmental studies at the University of Waterloo. Through the six years it took me to complete my undergrad I was, at different times, deeply engaged with food politics and forest conservation. Eco-feminism, deep ecology and the Brundtland Report on sustainable development were the frameworks for my learning. I also became interested in alternative economic systems, and my undergraduate thesis was a photojournalism essay about the value of women’s unpaid work at home. I tried to live my values through both my engagement in community organizations and through personal choices (militant vegetarianism, cycling advocacy, anti-consumerism, etc.). My friends and peers at university were mostly students in environmental studies at the University of Waterloo with some cross pollination with women’s studies and peace and conflict studies. In my last couple of years I was introduced to popular education and the work of Paulo Freire. Underlying all of this was an interest in global justice and solidarity, the seeds of which were sown during my nine-month stay in India at the age of 19. My time in India was transformative but it was teenage days at the swimming pool that set the stage for my vocation as a teacher.

My Fluid Path to Teaching

I have been involved in education for most of my adult life. At the age of 17, I began teaching swimming lessons at a local outdoor pool. I loved teaching right from the start. I found it easy to build positive connections with children and I loved creating songs and games to help with skill development. Parents asked for their children to be in my sessions, and this made me proud. Even on cold rainy mornings, I had no trouble motivating myself to cycle to the pool to coax and cajole shivering seven-years-olds into the water. I taught mostly in French, and teaching was a fast track to bilingualism. Kids are frank and fearless in their feedback: “*C’est pas comme ça qu’on dit ça, Nansi*” (That’s not how you say that, Nansi) and I credit my experience teaching swimming with my deep-seated belief that children have as much to teach me as I have to teach them. Children let you know when you are communicating effectively and when you have hit that sweet spot of sharing a skill or concept. You can see when your teaching is working because they develop skills and abilities right in front of your eyes.

My love of teaching and learning with children played a part in my decision to go to India. After completing Cegep¹⁰ at age 19, I went to the city of Hyderabad in Andhra Pradesh to volunteer at a home for women and children through the charity Child Haven International.

¹⁰ (**Collège d’enseignement général et professionnel**). In Quebec Cegep is similar to community college. After students graduate from highschool in Grade 11, they choose either a two-year general studies program in preparation for university (e.g. Health Sciences, Languages and Literature) or a three-year technical program (e.g. Heating Systems and Ventilation, Nursing) that prepares them for the job market.

Stepping outside of my comfort zone: Child Haven International, Hyderabad 1990

In 1990 I spent 8 months volunteering for a Canadian NGO called Child Haven International. I lived and worked in a home for women and children with about 75 children and 10 ayahs, or nannies (themselves women without homes) in the city of Hyderabad. Hyderabad is located in the state of Andhra Pradesh which is located in south-central India. It is the sixth biggest city in India with a large muslim population. It is loud and vibrant and dirty and smelly. At the time I was there many protectionist trade policies were still in place and there was very little evidence of western or american influence.

My time at the home was full. And for a while, I did feel “useful”; I taught English, accompanied children to the park and the hospital, attended dinners with wealthy Indian sponsors, and painted a mural on the wall of the dining hall. I sang nursery rhymes and helped with homework. I helped with dishes and toileting for the younger children, and picked lice out of hair, snapping the hard brown insect bodies between my thumb nails in companionable silence with the ayahs.

I wanted to build connections with both the woman and the children with whom I lived but it was tricky to build friendships across language and culture, especially given the polite, conditioned responses of “Yes miss” or “No miss.” I also struggled to really invest in the relationships because of a growing awareness of the gulf between my life and the lives of those around me. It was really hard not to impose my own sense of what life should be like according to the only point of reference I had, which was my own middle-class suburban childhood. It was hard to reconcile myself with a different vision

for happiness and achievement. I also knew that I was only staying a short while, that I was not “fixing anything,” and I was overwhelmed by the magnitude of the needs I perceived (for things to be cleaner, more organized, more just, more honest, less fraught, less poor...). The future of the children beyond their time at the home seemed uncertain at best.

And, my culture shock was very real. In time, I learned to ignore the beggars on every street corner, to resist the advances of misguided men who bumped up against me and asked for “just one kiss,” and to focus on the smell of curry and incense instead of the smell of urine and labouring humanity. But to be confronted on a daily basis by so much beautiful, chaotic humanity was almost more than I could bear.

As time passed, I was vaguely aware that my presence was not really doing anything good in the long term, and that I might, sometimes, even be an imposition. I began to doubt the mandate of the organization and the model of development, but I didn’t really have the understanding or awareness to really articulate my mixed feelings. It took me most of my time at university to process my experience.

Why did I go to India? Looking back, I think it was part of some quest to do something noble and commendable (one that I may still be on). I had some illusion of helping, as if I had anything at all to offer other than a bag of party tricks in the guise of coloured pencils and construction paper and silly clapping games.

Teacher by Default

I started my Bachelor in Environmental Studies in Environmental Resource Studies at the University of Waterloo three months after my return from India. I spent my first year immersed in self-righteous anger and judgement, feeling myself to be so much

older and wiser than other first-year students. I craved connection, but managed to alienate all but the most resilient, compassionate, and equally self-righteous peers—who became close friends. They were smart, committed, engaged, and critical. It mattered so much that they were critical, and smart, and most of all, that they “cared.”

I took courses in journalism, politics, environmental philosophy, ecology, geography, and urban planning. I helped run the local food co-op, organised a lecture series about food security, and travelled to Clayoquot Sound to protest the clear-cutting of old growth forest. I also became immersed in the outdoor education community, and spent several university terms working at different camps and environment centers. Already deeply concerned about “the state of the world,” I found solace and inspiration sharing a love of adventure and nature with kids.

It was never my intention to become a teacher. Teachers always seemed to me to be “bit players” in a bigger game. I wanted a career that would shape ideas and policy, that would have more influence and, if I am honest, more status, than teaching. At different times, I considered medicine, midwifery, architecture, journalism, and environmental law. Throughout my undergrad, I was preoccupied with environmental justice, with how to inspire others to take better care of the planet and protect the world's rich and varied ecosystems. I tried to live this commitment in my own life choices and surrounded myself with those who shared my same commitment. I was aware of justice issues especially as they pertained to the Global South but I was yet to examine the social, emotional and economic injustices that are both the cause and effect of the environmental crisis.

Bronte Creek (Can Teaching Really Look and Feel Like This?)

Two years after finally completing my environmental studies degree, I got a job working as a teaching assistant at the Bronte Creek Project, an integrated credit program with the Halton District School Board. The program was semestered and ran every day from 9:00 a.m. to 4:00 p.m. at a camp outside of Oakville. Students earned four credits: drama, environmental leadership, creative writing and ecology. Meals were provided and meal preparation and clean up was an integral part of the program. I started at the beginning of February and worked alongside a teacher who was a recent graduate of the Outdoor and Experiential Education Program at Queen's University in Kingston. My role was to support his programming, but mostly to design menus, do the shopping, and supervise students as they prepared the midday meal and, eventually, meals for the Grade 5 students who came to do an overnight program called Earthkeepers.

The work at Bronte Creek was *full on*, and it asked that I be organized and that I adhere to deadlines. These both felt like a real struggle for me, but I learned to adapt. My teaching partner was inspiring and compassionate, organized and reflective. He clearly *loved* what he was doing and sought to create experiences for the students that allowed them to challenge themselves and know themselves more deeply.

We had a group of 20 Grade 11 students from five high schools. Some enrolled in the program because they were looking for leadership opportunities and others had been referred to the program by guidance counsellors who were hoping they could be affirmed and inspired by a program whose major focus was on building a caring, compassionate community.

For that first semester, I was almost like a student: I engaged with all the activities as a first-time participant, including daily journaling, which was a mandatory component of the program and counted towards the English credit. Under the leadership of my teaching partner, nothing seemed too radical: we were unapologetically activist and eco-oriented. The learning happened through experience. We did Magic Spots and sharing circles, we found leaves and made them into wind dancers, we did yoga on the edge of a meadow, we wrote “I am” poems and did trust falls, we sang and chanted together and hugged trees. I was completely caught up in an ethos of “nature first,” right down to planning vegan meals and immersing myself in the poetry and writings of deep ecologists and ecofeminists. We invited other activists in to talk about food politics and White Wash and Zoo Watch. In echoes of Joplin’s (1981) model of experiential learning, we frontloaded (introduced goals, expectations, challenges), we were immersed in doing, and then we came back together to talk and share and reflect. We emoted, we struggled together, we found equilibrium, and as we moved through Tuckman’s (1965) oft-cited community formation sequence of forming, storming, norming, and performing. We became a tight-knit community, able to deliver high-quality environmental education to elementary students.

We all had nature names: I was Tamarack, a deciduous conifer. Tamaracks are a nonconformist tree: not quite one thing or the other. I felt it suited me well. Once we had our names, they became who we were for our time together. It helped to contribute to the otherworldly feeling that was Bronte Creek, a sense of being a world apart, a refuge, a movement. During our final few sessions, we received a care package of validations from the omnipresent “M,” the mysterious guide and spirit of the Earthkeepers program. The

package arrived anonymously. One student opened the first layer (there were dozens) and found a message like, “Someone who always listens deeply” or “Someone who has faced a fear.” The student read the message aloud and handed the package to a person who embodied that quality. That person opened another layer, read the new message and passed the validation onwards until there were no layers left. The package was prepared by students from the previous year, who were this year’s co-op students, so the validations were tailored to the group. Both my teaching partner and I were included in the circle: we received and passed on validations in equal measure. I glued the words I received into my journal and felt seen and affirmed in a way I never had before. I knew that I wanted to capture this feeling and share it outwards.

Sometimes I can hardly believe that this counted as school, that teaching jobs could look like this, that my teaching partner was being paid to teach this program.¹¹ The Bronte Creek Project existed from 1984–2019, and in that time it provided foundational and often transformative educational experiences for thousands of highschool students (Jupp, 1995). I naively believed that this was what education could look like.

Sometime in the spring of my second semester at Bronte Creek, we had two students join us on a work placement from the Outdoor and Experiential Education (OEE) program at Queen’s. I struck up a strong friendship with one of them who shared my love of cooking and good food, and who had his own flair for theatre and drama. One day, in between reading Al Purdy poems and buying spray paint to deface a Wonderbread billboard, he suggested that I apply to OEE. My pragmatic self said that I had nothing to lose, and that if teaching could look and feel like this then why not get the certification

¹¹ I received an honorarium that was nowhere close to a living wage, but that’s another story.

that would also get me a living wage? And so, I applied and was accepted to Queen's OEE program in Kingston.

In the Footsteps of Freire and Boal

The summer before I headed off to Kingston, I got a position with a Youth Service Canada project run out of the YWCA in Kitchener. The focus of the project was to do education and advocacy around youth homelessness through creative expression. The project coordinator was a friend and fellow environmental studies grad. She was (and is) a gifted and compassionate facilitator; I watched in admiration as she designed workshops and exercises that helped to create a safe and creative community space for participants in the project. Her training and inspiration drew from popular education and the work of Paulo Freire (1970) and Augusto Boal (2000).

We were a diverse group: some homeless, some queer, some who struggled with mental health challenges and disabilities, some racialized and a few, like me, who were White, middle class, and privileged. We met in the abandoned department store in the basement of the mall in downtown Kitchener. Together, we came up with a project name: IMRU? (as in, *I Am, Are You?*). Echoing the Bronte Creek Project, our first few weeks were spent coming together as a group, peeling back layers, building trust, and creating some common understandings and ground rules. Eventually, we began using improvisation to write monologues, choreograph dances, and draft scripts. It would all become a play called *Out of Order*, which documented the stories of different youth as they came of age and tried to reconcile themselves with the choices they were making. We dug into difficult, crunchy issues including homelessness, abuse, White privilege, mental health and stigma, homophobia, sex work, addiction, and poverty. It was intensely

difficult and intensely hopeful work. *Out of Order* was a forum theatre production, so members of the audience were invited to step into the play to help characters resolve conflict and find a path through difficult decisions.

For the duration of the project, we created a bubble of belonging despite differences in class, education, race, gender, sexuality, and ability. Some of us were more confident than others and took up more space. We were made aware of this by some of our peers, and I began to learn to really listen. I knew that I came to the project with less struggle in my life than many others, and my (mostly subconscious) awareness of my safety net set me somewhat apart.

My time with IMRU brought into sharp relief the privilege that taking an environmental stance involves: It is not reasonable to expect people to advocate for the protection of ancient forests, support local farmers or carry a reusable mug with them everywhere they go when they are living in a shelter, struggling with mental health and addiction and don't have enough money to buy groceries or to find affordable daycare for their kids so that they can go to a service industry job that pays minimum wage with no benefits. Through that summer, my focus turned towards economic justice and a deeper awareness of the ways in which different systems (health, education, financial) work to exclude people who are struggling and marginalized. This new awareness and sense of the world was very near the surface as I headed to Kingston to begin my Bachelor of Education, and has followed me through every subsequent stage of my teaching career.

Theatre for Living

I became even closer with my friend who coordinated IMRU—I think it was helpful for her to have someone in the group in whom she could confide and debrief—

and at the end of August, before I header off to teacher's college, we flew to Vancouver together to do a joking workshop with David Diamond. Throughout the workshop we worked with structures and exercises inspired by Augusto Boal and his books, *Games for Actors and Non Actors* (1992) and *Theatre of the Oppressed* (1979). It was powerful, amazing, provocative work. Every day of the workshop began with whole group games that asked us to pay attention, listen deeply, respond, and react. We then moved into working with partners, doing exercises that asked us to be the sculptor or the clay, the pilot or the co-pilot, the mirror or the mirrored. Some exercises asked that we lead and direct, others, that we follow someone else's lead and relinquish control. I learned things about myself, to recognize my contradictions—including my desire to be in control, and the relief that comes when someone else “takes the wheel” and asserts a vision and a direction. Because we were in the workshop to become future facilitators ourselves, Diamond “thought aloud” and side-coached us all the way through every exercise. Each exercise was frontloaded with guidelines and caveats. We then participated (often in silence), and there was *always* time to reflect and debrief individually, in partners, and together as a group. What I learned about teaching and facilitation in this workshop became foundational for me in my teaching. We also worked a lot with a Boalian structure called “Cops in the Head” (Boal & Epstein, 1990), which explores those voices in our heads that shape our sense of ourselves and, subsequently, the choices we make. This was huge for me: to realize which voices were most present for me, what they had to say, and how to talk back to them.

We spent a lot of time too on tableau work and exploring the barriers to “change making” in the work that we do. Many people in the workshop worked in caring

professions: they were social workers, community organizers, addictions counselors, and health care advocates. We came together over the course of that week to give voice to our despair and to look for the fissures in the walls of oppressive systems where the light gets in. We laughed a lot, and there were tears, too. I still remember, as I was apologizing for crying for the umpteenth time, Diamond stopping the session and explaining that we would never say to someone who was laughing wholeheartedly, Are you OK? Do you need anything? And we laughed. Then he reminded us that tears and laughter are sisters; they are healthy wholehearted expressions of emotion. I come back to this often, even today: permission granted to emote, to feel deeply, and to let it show.

Is This What it Means to Be a Teacher? OEE and My Year at Teachers's College

I arrived in Kingston in August of 1999. As was tradition for the OEE program, we began our year together with a hands-on project. We met at a property north of Kingston to deconstruct an old drive shed ,which we then reassembled on the grounds of an elementary school where it would serve as an outdoor classroom. We shared meals and camped in tents during the five days it took to complete the project. It was a productive, immersive experience, and I was excited (and nervous) to get to know my peers. But it was also challenging: I experienced a culture-shock that I did not expect. My cohort of 24 peers in OEE, many of whom I came to love and admire deeply, were, with one notable exception, White and middle class and the products of a wealth of opportunities that had provided them with the experience necessary to be accepted into the program. I struggled to reconcile the obvious privilege of this cohort of soon-to-be-teachers (myself included) with my new awareness of class privilege and the cycles of poverty, addiction and negative experiences with school that shaped the lives of the

friends and colleagues I left behind in Kitchener. In echoes of how I felt upon my return from India almost 10 years earlier, I had a new awareness of injustice and privilege and I was not sure what to do with it. I was out of sync with myself and had some unresolved sadness and guilt to work out. It took me a while to ground myself and truly connect with my peers and with the course leader. Still, my OEE sessions were a refuge from the rest of the teacher education program; they were the place where I could most be myself.

Outside of the OEE cohort, the broader education program was both frustrating and inspiring. My math professor, Mary O'Connor, helped me to reclaim math as a joyful, creative, meaning-making pursuit. My time in her class continues to inspire me to teach math differently: to construct understanding with my students; to teach through games and discovery; to do explorations that lead to algorithms instead of teaching algorithms from the get go and associating skill in math with the ability to master them and compute quickly. Mostly, though, I was surprised that there was not more critical, justice-oriented thinking in my courses. I felt like I was surrounded by conventional thinking, conventional worldviews, and conventional people. I remember, during introductions in language (English) class, an overwhelming majority of my peers shared that their favourite pastime was shopping and that their biggest pet peeve was being stuck in traffic. I struggled to relate. In my music class, we were introduced to singing games that used the names of fast-food restaurants. When I expressed concerns about corporate influence, childhood obesity and privatization, the response was that I needed to not "over-sanitize my curriculum." I can still picture people in my equity and diversity class cringing during the unit on creating safe spaces for queer and questioning youth, and the queries about whether it was "our place" as teachers to do this work. I began to realize

(although it took me until much later in my career to really come to terms with it) that I lived in a bubble where I took it as given that people were concerned about and actively involved in working for justice, human rights, peace, and environmental protection.

I surrounded myself with a cadre of people who shared my idealism and my desire to make a difference in the world. Conversations about solidarity with Indigenous peoples, wealth redistribution, corporate greed, cycling-friendly cities, support for small farmers, resisting heteronormativity, and so on, were just part of our daily interactions. It was a small group, one that represented a very small segment of society. Faculties of education are a microcosm of the same society in which they are embedded, so I should not have been surprised to find that most of my peers did not share my same preoccupation with justice and equity for all. It's just that, as soon-to-be teachers, I thought perhaps that they might. I still think that they should.

I did revel in the relationships I built with my peers in the OEE program, perhaps so much that I didn't reach out to connect with other really interesting people (some of whom were, ironically, in a social justice and equity program). Despite an astounding amount of busy work, the year flew by really quickly. I did an alternative teaching placement with the Mermaid Theatre of Nova Scotia, a puppet theatre company, and another practicum with a recent OEE graduate who had landed his first job in a challenging inner city school. My time with him and his Grade 7 class helped me consolidate my growing realization that the best place for me to effect change in education was, in fact, in the classroom, as opposed to out in the woods. This has shaped the decisions I've made about teaching for the rest of my career.

Heading North to Cut My Teaching Teeth

Spring came and I attended the Queen's International Job Fair. I applied to the Kativik School Board and was called to Montréal for an interview. I was hired for a job teaching Grade 6 at Innalik School in Inukjuak, Quebec, on the rocky windswept shores of Hudson Bay. So began a new chapter of my education journey.

Inukjuak sits at the 59th parallel, but the cold blasts of Arctic air coming across Hudson's Bay mean that it is above the treeline. Snow arrives in October and lasts till May. Most people living in Inukjuak are Inuit and the primary language is Inuktitut. I arrived with an open heart and an eagerness to learn. I had to set up a whole host of new bank accounts and in a burst of naive optimism, I chose "bridgebuilding" as my internet banking password. I was determined to listen deeply, to be humble, to embrace the culture and the landscape. I was keen to put into practice what I thought was "good teaching," or at least to have a crack at trying.

I became a teacher because I love to learn. I see teaching as an immensely creative vocation, one that asks me to apply skills and knowledge to new situations and to relate to people and ideas with compassion and intelligence. I also see teaching as an adventure, and while I know it to be joyful, I also seek out hardship and challenge because I know that's where the deep learning lies.

I want to challenge the idea that it is a ho-hum profession, one that people default to when they don't know what else to choose. I want to prove to myself and to the naysayers that teaching is noble and worthy of respect. I want to shape a perception of teachers as courageous adventurers and advocates who go where the need is, and respond to challenging situations with skill and creativity, passion and persistence.

This is part of what drew me to the North. And yes, it was a challenging, tricky place to be. I experienced being a minority in my own country for the first time in my life, as well as coming face to face with my settler and class privilege. I threw myself into cultural activities, determined to show my students, my Inuit colleagues, parents and community members that I was keen to learn and adapt.

Teaching in the North was (and probably still is) hard. Teachers were generally well-respected, but also resented, for our settlerness, our wealth, our housing security and our ability to come and go (stay and leave) as we chose. Education and schooling were valued, but while a Grade 3 class might have had 25 students, by Grade 11 there were fewer than five. At the time that I was teaching, many students struggled with school and dropout rates were high. During my time in Inukjuak, the school was broken into and vandalized twice, and my house as well. I was really determined *not to judge*, to situate myself as a compassionate observer of culture and of struggle. But it was hard.

The environment in the North is unforgiving; the stark beauty of the landscape takes no prisoners. As a baseline, you must dress for the weather, know where you are going, take an extra tank of gas and a shotgun when you head out on the land, or risk not coming home. Even my 10-minute walk to school in November would see my eyelashes frosted and my nostrils stuck together.

October 20, 2000

Mary,

Hello, just a quick note at the end of another week. Yay, Friday. I am well, exhausted and consumed, but well. I feel anxious every morning when I wake up and can barely eat breakfast, but I love my kids and by all appearances they care a whole lot about me, too. Funny how much that matters to me but it does. Is this a bad thing? I am working way harder than I ever have in my life. It's manageable but so time consuming. I live and breathe my kids and I would like

somehow to learn how to develop some sort of professional distance. Not necessarily my path though.

It is beautiful here. Rock and lichen and not a tree in sight. The sky is so, so big and the hills are an inland ocean rolling away into the distance. The geese have gone and the caribou are coming. I have tasted beluga and sea urchin and made bannock with one of the wise, wise women of this community; one of those who holds the social fabric of this place together with her teeth.

I am trying hard to teach math the Mary O'Connor way and I confess to not succeeding as well as I might like. This ESL stuff throws a whole different curve in the game. But we are working on it and I am determined to improve as the year goes on. We have struggled in subtraction hell for a while now and are moving on. Apparently it is the most language-based of all the logarithms and I am trying so hard to help them understand the principle of regrouping and borrowing but really, they just want to memorize the steps. Sighhhhhh.

Still, we sing and play and do lots of art and have made rockets and chocolate cake and are exploring measurement and fractions without them even realising it in the kitchen every week. They love silly songs and games and they are so, so, so endearing, even when they are flipping desks over in my class. Funny how that goes.

I think of you often. When I am faced with flying paper and crashing desks, or when I am not moving through curriculum because my kids just can't handle it at a particular moment I remember you asking us to think about whether we teach curriculum or kids. I relax and breathe, and we play a game, and I try to show them that I love and care about them no matter what.

Love to you and a hello to Tanya Green when next you see her.

Thanks for being so inspiring even in your absence.

*As ever,
Nansi*

In the North, my idealism came up against my inexperience, and the cultural disphony in which Inuit kids were (and are) living. I taught with passion and enthusiasm and caring, but my classes lacked structure, consistency and any sort of long-term planning. I was woefully underprepared to work with culturally and linguistically diverse

CLD) learners, and also mostly uninformed about the legacy of schooling in the North. While I had a repertoire of tricks up my sleeve that helped me to connect with my students and deliver engaging lessons, I had no real idea how to teach to learners whose first language was not English. I was unfamiliar with the curriculum I was supposed to teach, aside from a vague awareness of themes and big ideas for each grade. I made things up as I went along. I didn't know *how* to teach reading to non readers, and in spite of myself, made huge assumptions about what my students could and could not do. As new teachers are wont to do, I taught the way I was taught. I used a whole language approach and explored themes that seemed to me to be connected to my students: Polar Bears. Whales. Dog Sledding. We also celebrated every single Hallmark holiday (Halloween was good for a full three weeks). My students were mostly calm and comfortable copying words and sentences off the board and doing mystery number multiplication sheets, so we did *a lot* of both of these things. We cooked every week (there was a full kitchen in the school) and did art (we even went to the dump to scavenge interesting forms and shapes for a giant mural that we constructed with plywood and spray paint). I tried to do as much hands-on science as possible. I was also inspired to teach math constructively and creatively, implementing the ideas and approach shared with me during my B.Ed. But, I lacked the organization and experience to put most of what I had learned into practice. Much to my chagrin, math class was often a time when my students became frustrated and angry. They wanted to do the work, but my unclear instructions and lack of scaffolding really did not set them up for success: papers were ripped up in front of me and on different occasions two of my boys pushed over their desks with a loud crash and stormed out of the classroom.

December 14, 2001

As we act, we not only express what is in us and help give shape to the world; we also receive what is outside us and reshape our inner selves.

—Parker Palmer, 1999 (p. 17)

During my sojourn here in the North, I live in a house provided for me by the Kativik School Board. Apart from the mottled grey carpet found in every room and the lack of counter space in the kitchen, I consider it to more than suit my purposes. Probably the biggest drawback is the Kativik-issue furniture, which is, well, mostly awful. My couches feature a floral motif in various hues of pink and purple. My dining room set, (such that it is), is wood veneer and while it is inoffensive enough, I am already down to three chairs owing to their poor construction and flimsy design. The lamps come in a variety of shades: pink, powder blue or yellow-cream, and are embossed with a floral motif that in no way resembles that of the couch. The vacuum cleaner is forest green and I quite like it. I leave it on display most of the time to compensate for the rest of the ensemble.

In the bedroom I have a standard issue and, I admit, very comfortable queen-sized bed. I also have a vanity/chest of drawers complete with a full-sized mirror. I don't mind the mirror, I use it to make sure my head is on straight in the morning and to check whether the straps of my overalls are twisted. More importantly, it is home to the dog in the mirror. Salix does not sleep on my bed, but she does come up for a before-sleep belly scratching and a morning snuggle. About two weeks ago I was settling down to sleep when Salix, curled in her usual position at the end of the bed, started to growl... a low grumble that ended in a sort of huffing woof... (Dog owners will know what I'm talking about, the rest of you will just have to imagine). I wondered if maybe there was a carver at the door or if there were kids outside my window, but by the time I had finished wondering Salix was on her feet, hackles raised, engaged in a full on stare-down with her reflection.

It took Salix fully a year to recognize herself, or some fragment of herself (whatever it is that dogs see), in the mirror. It took her less than a week to become accustomed to her "other self" and to carry on with life as per usual.

I have been in the North for almost a year and a half now, and I am still not sure which "self" is being reflected back at me when I get dressed in the morning. So many truths that I hold dear are undergoing subtle yet profound changes. Sometimes I think that the North is teaching me to be patient and

tolerant, and that my values are altering accordingly. Other times I feel that I am caving in to some sort of mediocrity—that in my desire to be liked and accepted, I am compromising my idealism and my beliefs. Still, whatever the case, I am grateful to you all for listening and writing, and for taking the bits of myself that I send out and responding with humour, compassion, wisdom and love. You are helping me to see myself more clearly.

much love

n

By Christmas of my first year, I was emotionally spent. I headed home to Montréal and then spent time in Toronto and Kitchener-Waterloo visiting with friends and family. My anxiety about returning permeated my holiday time. I remember a moment sitting in a restaurant in Toronto with my best friend and her partner, each sitting on either side of me holding my hands as I talked about the challenges I was facing and hiccup-crying my way through dinner. I remember saying out loud, “I am not sure that I can do this job.” But it did not occur to me that I would not go back after the holidays; this seemed like a kind of “giving up” to which I was not at all reconciled.

I did go back in January, but each day that passed and each week I completed was a small victory. I tried to focus on the students who were present and positive (actually more than half my class), and set up a reading club for a group of girls that I ran after school at my house. On weekends, I spent lots of time out on the land, skiing or traveling by skidoo. With other teachers, we had card nights and took turns hosting and making dinner for one another. We became close and I am grateful for this Northern family.

February 3, 2001

Hello,

Sighhhhh. Saturday night and I am struggling to relax and take a break from school. It's my inability to separate myself from my kids and their stuff that is my biggest handicap here—or is it? I resolved at Xmas to come back with my metaphorical raincoat firmly zipped up with the hood drawn tight, but somehow I just don't seem to be able to let as much of the psychosocial sludge run off my back as I would like. It's pretty tenacious stuff. And yet, I am laughing more and creating a mental bank of the good moments to guide me through the tough times. Our theme for the last few weeks has been whales. Did you know that sperm whales are excellent divers? Hence the question on Thursday morning, “Nansi, how do you spell sperm?” One of those quiet smiles hovered around my lips while I wrote it on the board and figured that maybe we'll do sex ed some time in the spring. Ignorance is sometimes so endearing. We made yogurt-blueberry muffins this week; baking soda does the weirdest stuff to yogurt. Really, try it sometime, only don't use blueberry yogurt, it might put you off for life.

Salix is in the dog-house (i.e., shut in the front porch) after attempting to wolf down an entire fresh-out-of-the-oven banana bread. I'm not sure who feels worse when I punish her—me or her. Probably me.

Hard to believe that it's February already. I am grateful for the passing of time. Each day that brings me closer to the end of this experience is cause for celebration. The irony is that I know I will regret the passing once it has passed. I wonder if I am destined to always be a consumer of experiences. I wonder when, if ever in my life, I will stop and just live and be joyous and grateful for every day. I want to be completely, totally at peace and happy in my vocation. Is this possible? How much has to do with state of mind and being, and how much has to do with finding “the job” that fits? I think I know the answer, but I'm in denial.

The landscape continues to amaze me. I am amazed that I live HERE amidst the cruelest, most unforgiving beauty that I have ever encountered. Sometimes, when I'm out walking over the crags and wind-sculpted snow, I feel like I am walking on the moon. The fur ruff on my parka limits my peripheral vision and it is easy to imagine that I am the only life for miles around. Oh, the arrogance.

Missing you

Nansi

I tallied the days until summer break, and in my exit interview with the vice-principal of the school, I was naively frank about the things that I thought were “wrong” with how the school was being run. I talked about the lack of accountability or consequences for violent students, and the lack of consistency in rules and expectations. Then, I declined the offer to renew my contract as a Grade 6 teacher (I had asked to teach an older grade). I see now that I was not only naive, but also arrogant to presume that I understood the dynamics and complexities of a school in the North better than those who lived there.

My frankness cost me. Over the summer, I thought about my decision and realized that I would like to return to the school, and that I was willing to work with younger students. Even though there were two jobs posted for the school, I was declined an interview by the school director (who worked in conjunction with the principal and vice-principal), and whom, I think, was deeply offended by my critique. Having decided I wanted to return to Inukjuak, I applied instead for a job teaching high school upgrading at the continuing education school in the same village.

In my second year in Inukjuak, I worked at Pigursivik, the Adult Education Centre, and had much more time on my hands: there were initially 20 students on my class list, but I had only seven regular attendees for most of the year. In late fall, I was asked by a parent from the Grade 6 class of the year before to run a drama project with funding he had received to run programs out of the community centre (for which he was the manager). So, with the help of some local youth and my partner, we ran drama workshops and staged a production of Kusugak and Munsch’s story *A Promise is a Promise* (Munsch et al., 1988). This experience was incredibly hopeful and fulfilling. My

youngest participants were in Grade 4 and the oldest in Grade 11. We did a ton of trust and improvisation activities, we made giant puppets, and all our own sets, and practiced dances to embed in the performance. The lead characters practiced and learned their lines in English (it only occurred to me afterwards that it would have been more powerful to stage the play in Inuktitut). On both nights of our performances, the community centre was full, with many repeat attendees the second night. It felt really good to have seen a project through to its successful completion, and this helped to shore up my confidence about my abilities as an educator and the potential for making a difference to the lives of students. My time working on this project remains one of the most rewarding and memorable experiences over the three years I spent in the North.

Comfort and Discomfort: Quaqtq

In my third year in the North I worked in Quaqtq, a community situated on the shores of Ungava Bay with a population of 300 people. With 2 years in the North under my belt, I had some sense of what to expect from teaching and from life in a remote, Inuit community. I had strategies for dealing with the long dark winter months; get out on the land lots (by skis and snow mobile), light candles, eat fatty food, and play lots of cards and guitar. I also had a better sense of ways to contribute to community life. I ran an Art club after school, wrote a grant to start a cross-country skiing club, hosted Friday night movies and donuts in the school gym. I taught Grades 7-10 and was responsible for social studies, science and some language (English) curriculum. My classes were small: I had only two students in Grade 10, and six each in both my French and English science classes. I taught all students together for English but separately by grade for Social Studies and Science. This had advantages and disadvantages. My older students were

close to graduating and were very motivated to get their credits and see a bit of the world. But it was hard to generate energy for discussion and deeper learning when there were only two of them. Still, we got along well, and in addition to working through the history and science curriculum, we began to plan a trip to Montréal and Ottawa for the following year. Sadly, our year was interrupted by tragedy when one of my student's sister died by suicide (the first in the community that year) and the other student became pregnant.

My younger students engaged keenly with the unit on ecology, especially as we dug into knowledge that they had about the land around them. Teaching a unit about migration with English Grade 7 and 8 students, we had a discussion about beluga whales and why they were endangered. The beluga hunt is a big deal in Quaqtaq, and the idea that the whale should not be hunted at all was not acceptable to most people in the community. I still remember the moment when my student Claudia asked, "Nansi, why do *Qualunat* (White people) care more about belugas than they do about Inuit?"

This question sums up so much of the complexity and poignancy of teaching in the North. It exemplifies the ways in which ideas about the North are still part of a colonial mentality and permeate popular culture: it's a wild beautiful place, home to icebergs, polar bears, belugas, caribou, and the aurora borealis. And then, oh yeah, there are people who live there, too. What do we do with that? How inconvenient. I think what Claudia was asking is, "Why all the fuss and attention about this marine mammal? What about us? Aren't we worthy of attention?"

The right to hunt on traditional territory is about Indigenous sovereignty, and about tradition and autonomy. It's true that hunting is the main threat to beluga whales, but they are also threatened by chemical and noise pollution. Fisheries and Oceans

Canada (a department of the federal government) is working with Inuit communities to monitor populations and to set up a quota system. But even if there is consensus between settlers and Inuit that beluga whales are endangered and worthy of protection, why do we not generate the same passion for the protection of Inuit tradition, language, and culture? I am stopped short by Lydia's question; I know that the answer is uncomfortable because for many settlers, even those who perceive themselves to be progressive and oriented towards justice for all peoples, it is easier to think of the land to the North as mostly empty, and to relegate the Inuit and other Indigenous peoples to a corner where they may be seen, but definitely not heard. You don't need to dialogue or relate to a beluga to ask how to best protect it. But dialogue and relationship are required for reconciliation with Inuit and other Indigenous people.

By April of my year in Quaqtaq I realised that I needed to leave the North. I was comfortable living there, I loved the people and the landscape and the days mostly seemed to slip by. But, I felt isolated and that my teaching was mediocre at best. (The North is a place where it is easy to slip into doing less because there is no-one to really hold you to account for what students are or are not learning). I knew that I wanted to be challenged, I wanted to collaborate with other teachers, I was aware that I needed mentors to help me become a better teacher and that I needed to go South to find them. I also wanted to have a family, to build a life for myself embedded in a community where I would not always be an outsider.

My flight home was in a 12 seater plane with all my belongings stowed in the cargo hold in front of me behind a vinyl curtain. I could hear Salix in her crate whining softly for the length of the flight. Below me the boreal forest rippled by. I could see

caribou migrating through the trees and along the coast several pods of beluga skirted the shoreline, silver ovals in turquoise blue water just beyond the froth of surf. I hoped someday I would be back.

Inexperience Begs Forgiveness

I can even forgive myself, though when I look back at various stages of my life, I groan. What an ass. What timidities. What stupidities. What indecisions and flounderings.

— Frank McCourt (2005, p. 2)

I love McCourt's words here. Forgiveness as a way of being, as a way of moving forward, is compelling for me. It sings deeply to my heart. One of the things I want to address in my writing is how to forgive myself for my ego-centrism, my insecurities, my need for affirmation and validation. How do I let go of my feelings of guilt about my lack of experience and humility, especially when I was teaching in the North? How do I forgive myself for what I did not know? For my judgements and my arrogance, my assumptions about others? I am especially captured by McCourt's phrase, "indecisions and flounderings." Oh, but how much we *do* flounder, flail, and blunder. So much. Is this not part of the dance? Part of the play? How can I not flounder? Is this not where the learning is? But if so, does it happen at the expense of the students I teach and have taught? I think back to my years in Inukjuak and Quataq and about how ill-prepared I was to meet the needs of my students; how little time I spent with the curriculum and how I fabricated and created without any real sense of a bigger picture and, often, delivered the worst kind of banking pedagogy (Freire, 1970), in spite of my best intentions. I was surviving. Forgiveness is one way to deal with the plague of guilt I feel (and I'm not even

Catholic). I do wonder if I am going to spend my whole life reconciling myself with my early teaching failures.

Return to the South: Finding My Way Home

Re-orientation Part 1: These Kids Are Just Fine Without You

I left the North and relocated to Peterborough which has become my home over the last 17 years. I was drawn to Peterborough because it felt a little more wild and closer to nature than other cities I was considering. It is also between Montréal, where my family are, and Waterloo, where I still had ties from university. But mostly, I headed to Peterborough for the ready community: peers from my OEE class who lived and worked here and offered some form of grounding presence as I figured out next steps. In December I accepted a Long Term Occasional (LTO) position for January, teaching Grades 4, 5 and 6 French Immersion (FI) at Hillside Public School with the Kawartha Pine Ridge District School Board (KPR).

Hillside could not have been more different from the North. It was a K-8 school tucked into one of Peterborough's most affluent suburbs. With one or two exceptions, my students were keen and confident. They lacked neither material nor social resources; their lives were comfortable and they were involved in all manner of opportunities that supplemented their learning at school—soccer, hockey, piano, violin, gymnastics, horseback riding, saving turtles. I was to be teaching in a portable, and spent a good part of the Christmas holiday trying to turn it into a space that felt like home.

I taught 16 Grade 4 students in the morning and they were like puppies: energetic, loving, enthusiastic, and eager. They engaged readily with the curriculum and learning

activities I shared with them, and they were supportive of me and kind with one another. I did poetry with them and we delved into a unit on Canada's regions followed by everybody's favourite: Medieval Times. I am not sure whether it would have really mattered what the content was; they were willing to follow me on whatever winding paths I took them on. With them, I could feel myself falling in love with teaching again.

In the afternoons I had 31 Grade 5-6 students. 31 is *a lot* in any classroom, but especially in a portable. There was very little room to move or maneuver, physically or mentally. As a class, they engaged readily with the art projects I set out for them, and somewhat reluctantly with the “get to know you” activities I designed for the first few weeks. Once again, I was not really sure what I was doing: I had never taught French Immersion and found myself calling on my own experiences in FI as a guide. I scrambled for relevant resources and used newspaper articles from French-language newspapers as teaching tools. This was not so effective: the French was too difficult and the topics—conflict in the middle-East, Islamophobia (the spectre of 911 still hovered), and the bombing of the library of a Jewish school in Montréal—were perhaps a little beyond my students. Or more likely, it was my clumsy facilitation. They did get motivated to do a car wash to raise money to replace the books burned in the Jewish school library, but somehow, even though the parent letter was written and the principal had approved the initiative, we didn't follow through. The kids complained to my teaching partner in English that all we talked about was “war and conflict.” I realized that I needed to switch gears and find more balance between fun and serious, so I looked for silly plays and we did a poetry unit.

I dug into the social studies curriculum because it was there that content and themes were most concrete to me. When asked to complete a project about one of Canada's trading partners (Grade 6) and to design their own political party (Grade 5), students produced incredible videos and presentations far beyond the scope of what I had expected. I knew that parents had been involved in the making and organizing of the videos, and the kids were really proud. Now, as I diligently try to avoid projects that require intensive parent input (*Growing Success* says these cannot be used for assessment), I wonder about missed opportunities for both students and parents to learn together. Looking back, I also know that I gave a lower grade to those students whose presentations were simpler because they did not have parental support, or a home video-cam. I know that this was not just or equitable.

I spent several late nights designing centres for a unit on First Peoples. I had some sense that I wanted to teach this unit differently than the limited stereotypes of my own schooling, to do better than "tipis, igloos and totem poles," but I had not yet done my own work around treaties, Indigenous knowledge holders, and reconciliation, and was struggling to find texts to support my teaching. I tried to provide activities that were engaging and that required critical thinking. We analysed Inuit art, looked at language charts from Statistics Canada, and did research about Curve Lake (the nearest First Nations reserve). One day, I showed students slides of my time in the North and of the beluga hunt in Quaqtaq, and suddenly I had a crew of Grade 5 girls crying at the back of my classroom about the "poor dead whales." I worried about parent backlash. Hillside's feisty, counter-culture librarian stood outside with me on the steps of my portable as I

shed a few of my own tears and said, “Nansi, it’s OK, nobody ever learned anything lying on a beach in Jamaica.” I think of these words often.

My year at Hillside ended in a blur of trips and performances and other activities. I really did get quite attached to the students in my Grade 4 class, but still struggled to connect with my Grade 5s and 6s—they did the work that I asked of them, but they didn’t really seem to buy into me or my program. One day, as we were talking after school, my teaching partner (a veteran of the school) said, “Nansi, they just don’t need you the way kids in the North did, and you want to feel needed.”

By May, I was applying to jobs at other schools; I was not even considering looking for a job at Hillside. People had been kind to me, but it just didn’t feel like the right fit for me. Perhaps I did want to go somewhere where I felt more needed, where I felt like the difference I was making in my classroom was important.

I Have My Wand, I Know I Can Work Some Magic...

I applied for a job working with a behaviour class at Munro Intermediate. I figured tough kids were my gig, and it seemed I was still on my quest to be the “Noble Teacher.”

I was interviewed by the vice-principal and principal of Munro Collegiate, the secondary school that Munro Intermediate was part of. I spoke confidently about how every kid is teachable if you just find the way in. I learned later that my current principal at Hillside had told the VP that he didn’t think I could handle the job, it seems that he thinks I struggle with classroom management and that I am “very sensitive”. The VP hires me anyway. She told me later that she could see that I was passionate, that I really cared about kids, and that I was open to learning.

August found me trying to find a way to make my tiny trapezoidal classroom somewhere where a crew of kids who were struggling with regular classes would be happy and comfortable. I put what I presumed to be motivating and inspiring posters on the walls, all about exploring new horizons and pushing one's limits. The posters featured paddlers and rock-climbers, mountains and forests. In hindsight, these did not really speak to my students. I think this is a mistake that many young teachers make: we are so eager to put our own stamp on our classrooms, to take ownership over the space, that we don't leave much room for student voice. I also tried to prepare myself mentally and pedagogically for the work ahead: I read a few books about working with disadvantaged youth, and I met with several special education teachers from different schools. I also went through my student's Ontario Student Records (OSRs) and made notes. I had trouble making sense of the edu-jargon in the OSRs and was overwhelmed by the sheer volume of reports and assessments—it was hard to know what information was important. I also knew that I don't want to pigeon hole my students as “problem students” right off the bat.

On the first day of school, I introduced myself to the kids and had them do a collage to both cover a notebook and show me who they were. They balked: “I dunno,” said Anna. “This is gay,” said Noah. “Got any pictures of Dodge Chargers?” asked Tariq. Sara said nothing and TJ deliberately dumped his thermos of spaghetti on his desk, saying loudly, “Oops, I made a mess.” I abandoned the next activity, which was to do a Bronte Creek-inspired “I am” poem and already, by the end of day one, I was feeling somewhat deflated.

My first few weeks went by in a blur. I introduced card games and tried more relationship-building activities with varying degrees of success. I started a read-aloud: *The Voyage of the Frog* by Gary Paulsen (1988). This they loved, and the read-aloud portion of our days was an oasis of calm amidst almost constant, frenzied conflict. I deliberately chose a story by Paulsen, whose writing for young people piques and holds their interest through fast-paced action and characters with whom teens (especially boys) readily identify.

There is something about a good story read out loud: Stories can help transport the teller and the listeners to another place, one where, instead of being caught up in the frustrations and challenges of the moment, we can settle into a place where someone else is doing the emotional work, and rest.

Aside from the read-aloud, I tried to build other routines into the day. We did daily brain teasers and word games, played cards, and did some simple number challenges: anything to keep them engaged and positive. It was an uphill battle: we were in a small space and they set each other off at the drop of a hat. By the last week of September, we had been moved to a bigger classroom, which provided some relief because it was easier to give students the space they needed. The new room was adjacent to the kitchen, so we began a weekly ritual of baking and cooking together.

Still, it was *so* hard. The first week of October, I realized that I was supposed to write Individual Education Plans (IEPs) for my students. I had only ever helped complete two IEPs in my teaching life so far, guided by my teaching partner at Hillside. My Munro students' IEPs were epic: they were many pages long and contained sections where I was supposed to outline modified learning expectations for everything from math

and social studies to self-advocacy and anger management. I had no idea where to start. At a staff meeting where staff were complaining about the kids (many of them in my class) who didn't follow expectations and ruined things for others, I burst into tears. My principal saw my distress, sent me off on a stress break for three days, and asked the Special Education and Resource Teacher (SERT) to sit with me to work through the IEPs. I felt vulnerable and incompetent, but I had been handed a lifeline. I grabbed onto it with both hands.

Reorientation Part 2: Idealism Meets Pragmatic Reality

Now I think it is time to give myself credit for at least one virtue:

doggedness. Not as glamorous as ambition or talent or intellect or charm, but still the one thing that got me through the days and nights.

— Frank McCourt (2005, p. 2)

During those three days off, I also sat down with my principal, who ran me through what she called her SCAMOS program (I don't remember what it stood for, Social Community And Motivation/Manners Or Something). In any case, SCAMOS was an external incentive program that provided my students with immediate feedback about their behaviour in class.

Reluctantly, I implemented the program on my return to school. To a certain degree, it worked. My students got points for standing quietly during "O Canada," being polite to one another, doing their work, being on time—basically for any behaviour that demonstrated compliance and respect. At the end of the day, they could bank their points to earn bigger rewards like staying in for recess with staff to play cards or extra gym

time. Or, they could trade in their points for food or trinkets from a treasure box. Very quickly, my SCAMOS program turned into a food program: students traded in their points for clementines, bags of SunChips, ice cream sandwiches, peanut butter sandwiches, and apples.

I always swore that I would not give in to external incentive programs (also known as token economies) like SCAMOS. I believed that I would help kids find their own internal motivation by dint of my skill, will, and passion. I thought that my creativity, dedication, energy, and care would inspire my students and impel them forward in their learning. Even after three really challenging years in the North, I believe in the hero teacher myth. My partner had me watch the film *To Sir, With Love* before I began the school year at Munro, and while I knew enough to recognize the trope of the teacher as saviour, I was still sucked into it emotionally. I began my time at Munro determined to “be successful,” to be that “special teacher” who makes a difference when no one else can. I wonder now at my resilience, at my hope and optimism, and at my arrogance.

I also wonder at my doggedness, as McCourt called it (2005). These days we might call this grit, or perseverance but I like the term doggedness—it implies a willingness to see things through, despite hardships and obstacles (some more benign than others). I could also say “resilience”, but I am growing weary of this word and all the ways it gets bandied about, the latest flag waving in the educational wind.

I wonder where my doggedness came from? What have I internalized that makes me think that I can make a difference “this time” with “these kids”? Did I imagine that, because my teaching context had changed from the North (my students were now English

speakers, they were not racialized, I was not isolated, I had access to more support), that things would be easier? Did I think it was because I had matured and changed (learned from past experiences, developed a “bag of tricks”) that my class would run more smoothly, that I would be less tired, that the kids would learn more? I was still looking to prove myself and perhaps to redeem myself from my time in the North. I continued to seek validation for doing the “hard work” of working with the “tough kids.” I think I also didn’t want to be in an ordinary, run-of-the-mill classroom. I wanted to have more leeway to do more creative, experiential learning.

Right around the implementation of the SCAMOS program there was a shift in my support staff. My new Education Assistant (EA) was amazing: calm, funny, pragmatic, and wise. She readily took on the tracking of SCAMOS and made a special connection with several of my more challenging students. This allowed me to focus more on developing programming for the others. I did try to teach some literacy and math, but my principal had given me a decent budget and almost free reign to do with my program as I saw fit. Mostly, I followed my instincts. We walked to Fabricland to buy fabric for aprons, pencil cases, and pillows. We made pizza and chicken fajitas. We baked and did bake sales, and used the money for excursions: we went to Ecology Park, the climbing gym, and the movies. We played lots of card games and did crafty art, marbling paper and tie-dying t-shirts.

There were almost as many adults in the class as students. I had a teacher candidate and a co-op student who were both dedicated and who worked one-on-one with kids playing math games, working on writing paragraphs, chatting, and modeling positive social interaction.

The boys in my class were a motley crew. They shared a love of all things *Trailer Park Boys* (a popular TV series at the time) and I struggled to relate. They really enjoyed the cooking and especially the sewing—getting to have a foot on the pedal seemed to be a real hook!

One of the goals of the program was to find ways for my students to reintegrate, at least partially, into regular classes. For some of the day, different students did placements in auto shop, hair styling, foods, and horticulture classes. During this time, I worked on reading, writing, and math with those who were still in the room. Two of my students were integrated fully into regular Grade 8 classes, still with the chance to earn SCAMOS points and to check in and spend recess with me and my staff. One was fairly successful, the other, not so much.

But I Am Not a Fairy Godmother

Anna stopped attending school sometime in mid-December. Her mom had just been made full-time at Tim Hortons and she often stayed home to look after her baby sister. We contacted the attendance counselor, but it was hard to make any headway. Her mom said, “It’s just until I find childcare.” Anna needed to be in school, but her mom also needed to work to pay the rent. We needed to figure out how to help the family so that we could help the student. But we didn’t, and Anna faded from my class. And I didn’t miss her. I channeled my efforts into the students who were present because at least, when they were in class with me, I had some control over their learning.

In April, we realized that Sara was pregnant. She was a nice kid. According to her IEP, she has a mild intellectual disability. Sara responded really well to positive feedback and worked hard with our staff, and was making progress in reading and writing and

basic number sense. She loved word games and watching her emergent spelling get better and better was a strange marker of progress for the year. We weren't even aware that she was sexually active, but it turned out she got pregnant by "hanging out" with an older boy on a couple of occasions. Ugh. She wore lots of baggy clothes so her pregnancy was mostly unknown to her peers. We made sure she had yogurt and fruit throughout the day, connected her with a "young mums" class and with an EA who had worked as a nurse. But it all felt strangely surreal, and when she had her baby in August, I didn't go to visit. Somehow, I couldn't bring myself to reconnect with her. I did not want to care too much to Sara, or to her baby, or to feel responsible for their life outcomes. It was like I needed to sever ties with her, with the year, with my contradictory feelings of relief and sadness, affection and despair.

Noah was bright and capable. He was one of the students I thought was making progress in terms of finding his way back into "regular school." In the second semester, he was integrated into several regular classes, and for the first few weeks things went well. During our daily check-ins, he shared his projects and talked animatedly about what he was learning. As time went on, though, he refused to put pen to paper, and left his classes to come back to our room, saying, "I can't do it." We spent hours trying to convince him that he could. He came in off-kilter early one day because he had overheard a conversation between his mom and creditors, who called her a chronic debtor and he shared that his mom had asked him to blow into the breathalyzer in her car so that she could drive it. He was angry because (CAS) the Children's Aid Society kept bugging them and oh yeah, they had just acquired a chihuahua puppy that fit in a teacup, (he showed us a picture). Noah was pacing and agitated, wearing the same Maple Leafs

hockey jersey he had been wearing all week. We suggested he have a bowl of cereal or a peanut butter sandwich, but he said he wasn't hungry; his meds had taken away his appetite. He was falling apart. On this day, I finally had a sense of why this was. I just wanted to fix his life... but I couldn't.

By the end of the year, I had only seven consistent attenders and I was looking at other teaching jobs. I cared deeply about my students, but I was emotionally exhausted and feeling once again that I hadn't really "done my job" as a teacher. I was not sure that my students were any further ahead with reading or writing or arithmetic or any of the "basic skills" they needed to make their way in the world. There was no way to really "measure" the progress they'd made in terms of social and life skills and relationship building, so I wasn't sure how to gauge success. Is playing cards teaching? Is it just filling time? When is filling time also about teaching? What about learning to use a sewing machine and follow a pattern? Was that an archaic skill? A springboard to other learning? How could I have students just STOP attending? How could I mitigate the distress experienced by a child whose parent was struggling with addiction? Could I have done something to help prevent an unintended pregnancy? Should I have lead with sex ed right off the hop? Can what happens in a classroom really make a difference to the outcomes of students living in dire socioeconomic circumstances, or was I just a safe place to land for six hours a day? I still don't know the answers to these questions.

Meadowbrook: Learning to Learn to Teach

From Munro I accepted a job at Meadowbrook, a different Peterborough school, teaching Grade 8. I got the job, in part, because the new principal of the school was the same one for whom I had worked at Munro. She believed (more than I did myself) in my

ability to work with tricky kids. I didn't know much about Meadowbrook as I was still new to the Peterborough teaching scene, and there were a number of things that I didn't yet grasp. The first was that some schools in KPR are considered "good" schools and others are "tough" schools. Meadowbrook falls into the second category. The second was that I was lucky to have a job "in town" rather than spending my first five years with KPR commuting to the southern reaches of the school board to teach in one of the densely populated suburbs along the 401 corridor. I also learned that the "French card" is a real ticket: one of the reasons I got the job at Meadowbrook was because it included 0.2 Full Time Equivalent (FTE) French, and I would be teaching French to my own class. This 0.2 French position was actually a permanent need in the building, and my principal advocated successfully for my job to be made a full-time (1.0), permanent position. And so, in my second full year of teaching for KPR, I found myself with a full-time contract teaching in town—something that was almost unheard of for teachers starting with the board.

I was excited to be at a K-8 school and to be a part of a staff team in a way I never really was at Munro. I was eager to learn and to prove myself. The principal, in her first principalship (she was actually a VP at Munro, but in charge of the Intermediate school), was also keen to make her mark. She hoped to bring about changes in staff morale and public perception. She knew that Meadowbrook had a terrible reputation for the behaviour of its students, and she made it her mission to change the tone and culture of the school. She began the year by having us read *Discipline with Dignity* (Curwin et al., 2000). A book study is not a panacea, but it did act as a springboard for conversations during staff meetings, where we set out clear expectations for staff and student behaviour

that were grounded in respect, compassion, and shared responsibility. New to the school, our principal was also wise enough to listen to veteran teachers who had been in the school for some time, so that they felt seen and validated. She was creative and responsive with scheduling, made connections with the parent community, and enlisted their support for everything from refurbishment projects to the breakfast club. Things didn't shift immediately, but students did become aware that staff were pulling as a team, that "the office" would support teachers when they requested assistance. Positive behaviours were noted and celebrated. Staff and students began to take more pride in themselves and the school.

Nevertheless, Meadowbrook was a fairly challenging school. Leadership in the building had been mostly lacking for a number of years and there were a lot of unresolved discipline and behaviour issues. The Intermediate division (Grades 7 and 8) was interesting because it brought together students from Meadowbrook and from Princess Margaret, a K-6 school a 10-minute walk up the hill from Meadowbrook. The Princess Margaret catchment drew from older, more middle-class suburbs as well as from several new housing developments. The Meadowbrook catchment pulled from a number of different housing projects and apartment complexes as well as single-home dwellings from less-affluent neighbourhoods. Many students came from families who were living in generational poverty and struggling to meet basic food and housing needs.

Since Princess Margaret students headed to Meadowbrook for Grades 7 and 8, the composition of classes in our Intermediate division was quite heterogeneous. Some students came from security and wealth and had access to lots of learning opportunities outside of school, while others lived a much more day-to-day, hardscrabble existence.

These students possessed a kind of grit that their more sheltered peers did not. By grit, I am not talking about goal setting and tenacity applied to learning and academics that Angela Duckworth describes in her much-watched TED Talk (2013), I am talking about “street smarts” and the grit that comes with living with insecurity and chronic stress. Many of my students had seen things that I wished they hadn’t: drug use, prison visiting rooms, the inside of a courthouse, domestic violence. They were tough, but vulnerable, too. Their shells were hard to crack; they did not trust readily. When it came to “the road to success” in life and in school, they were mostly going it alone and their parents *did not* swoop in to ease their journey at the slightest indication of challenge or “unfairness.”

Most of the Princess Margaret kids were in my teaching partner’s class down the hall, who was running a de facto gifted classroom. A few were upstairs in the Grade 7-8 split. I found myself with a group of students who, for the most part, had come up together through Meadowbrook. They were a loud, energetic, super-athletic and, by and large, nice group of kids. The previous year they had run roughshod over their Grade 7 teacher, and this had become a point of pride for them.

In my first term at Meadowbrook, my job was to teach visual art to the three other Intermediate classes, and to teach everything else, aside from music and geometry, to my own class. I began the year with lots of warm, Bronte Creek-inspired community building activities. We played around with some math tricks and made collages. I made each of my students a journal and gave them a journal prompt every day. I spent hours in the evenings responding to what they had shared. We had a really good first few weeks, and then things started to get crunchy.

I really wanted the students in my class to like me, and for my class to run smoothly out of mutual respect and engagement. But my expectations were not always clear, I didn't lay down the line when I should have, and by October things were starting to unravel. I was learning the curriculum, struggling to teach math content with which I was not familiar, and struggling to walk the fine line between being a supportive, accessible teacher and a firm disciplinarian.

I had a group of girls who were poised for drama and ready to argue about everything. They were preoccupied with boys and parties. I got a lot of "I don't see why we can't" and "This is stu-u-u-pid." I had another couple of girls who glared balefully at me during lessons. One refused to do any work, complaining that "I didn't explain things clearly" and that she couldn't read my notes. When I sat with her or spent extra time explaining assignments, she refused to put pen to paper. She was transferred to the other class after Christmas and was much more successful with the more structured approach of my mentor and colleague.

I also had several students who struggled with learning and impulse-control challenges. They could not complete their work independently and were often disruptive. One of them was, as part of the board's new inclusion policy, being reintroduced into a regular class after having spent two years in a Special Education class. She was bright and quirky but very immature, and demonstrated many obsessive behaviours: she picked her nose and ate it in front of her peers, made cat noises during work periods, had temper tantrums, and often behaved more like a 5-year-old than a 13-year-old. After a few weeks, my class lost patience and set her up for failure by prompting and provoking her. They were angry with me for not "stopping her from being so annoying."

I also had a boy who was in and out of foster care because his mom was struggling with addiction. He was smart and incredibly athletic, but struggled to read and stay focused. He had some number skills, but my wobbly instruction did him no favours. He was more tolerated by his peers because of his athleticism and because he, at least, knew how to read teenage social cues. Still, when asked to do something challenging or outside of his abilities, he responded with “this is gay,” and when I asked him to change his language, he responded with “OK, this is stupid... and gay.” Cue laughter from his peers (he was clearly skilled at working a crowd).

Added to the mix was a group of boys who had been together since kindergarten. They were quite capable and wanted to do well academically (without necessarily putting in the effort). They were also excellent athletes and had been playing rep soccer together for a number of years. This positioned them as alpha males in the class and in the school. They were unsure what to make of me, of my short hair and eyebrow ring, of my objection to the word “gay” and my justice-oriented curriculum. While they didn’t directly “cause problems,” they did aid and abet other students, were quick to take advantage of disruptions, and stirred the pot when they thought I wasn’t looking.

By Christmas, I was exhausted and close to tears. I had students questioning my instructions and my assignments, girls refusing point blank to do their work, and others complaining loudly that they didn’t understand the point of what I was teaching. Every Sunday brought the Sunday Ugliers, where I tried to figure out how to plan something engaging and meaningful for the following week. I had no clear plan forward, and the marking was piling up. I felt defeated and unsure of myself.

It Is Not a Sign of Weakness to Accept Help

Over the break, I met with my mentor and teaching partner, a 20-year veteran. Together, we planned short story and math units for when I returned to school in January. We talked about laying out clear expectations both for academic work and behaviour.

In January, I also became responsible for teaching history on rotary. In some ways it was much easier to manage than art, as the curriculum is more concrete and there were less materials to prepare during my lunch break or projects to store between classes. My principal had connected me with an experienced history teacher at another school, and this teacher generously shared her lessons and projects with me. I spent the Christmas holiday going through the curriculum, and I was actually familiar enough with the content to make good use of the shared materials and make them my own. I also got to collaborate with the teacher librarian, a passionate and gifted educator who guided my students and I through a historical research project that was rigorous, student-directed, and very well organized. She was another mentor who showed me ways to make my teaching better.

I was also “given” a student on placement from the Educational Assistant program at Fleming College. She was amazing: she helped me coach basketball and volleyball and worked one on one with my most challenging student. She bonded with the mean girls in my class, and on snow days, organized my files into neatly labeled, alphabetized folders.

So come January, things got better. It was wonderful to be teaching a literacy unit alongside my mentor; she was organized, consistent, and had laid out assignments and assessments right up to the end. My collaboration with the teacher librarian also helped

me to realize the power of a clearly defined process and guided questions. It is funny how I had resisted adopting “someone else's program or project” when it really did allow me to focus on instruction and assessment, and making meaning of my own through reflection. (I rebuffed offers of help earlier in the year, and while I left the North for lack of mentors, I think there were teachers—some of the rare few who stayed for more than a few years—who might have mentored me had I been willing to see what they had to teach me). I think I wanted to put my own stamp on things, to feel ownership of the content and the outcomes, and to prove that I could do it myself. So much re-inventing of the wheel, so much arrogance. At Meadowbrook, I began learning to unlearn this quest for ownership and autonomy and to value mentorship and collaboration.

And so, with the new structure and routines, my students and I adjusted and came to a gentler way of being. My class was right next door to the gym, and I took to rewarding good work periods with extra gym time. This helped us to bond and connect, and winter eventually rolled into spring. We had a slew of snow days for which I was very grateful. I had time to catch up, tidy up, work with smaller groups of students, and ease off the pressure of teaching. I coached everything: basketball, volleyball, 3-pitch. And I recruited support from parents and other staff who actually knew how to play each sport. This allowed me to bond with the girls in my class, and helped with management as I was clear that I would not take students to games or tournaments if they were not respectful to me and to their peers.

Where teaching was concerned, I had taken a deep dive into Kylene Beers' 2003 book *When Kids Can't Read*, and it was having a radical impact on my practice. I realized that I needed to be explicit about teaching reading skills, from asking questions to making

connections. I had a class of mostly reluctant readers (with some notable exceptions) and I realized that I could do some of my teaching through the use of films. We watched *Remember the Titans* and *The Snow Walker*, then discussed pivotal moments, explored narrative arcs, did character sketches, and talked about protagonists and antagonists. We also did a whole-class novel study of *Maniac McGee* by Jerry Spinelli (1990). My amazing teacher librarian (who was fast becoming a friend as much as a mentor), pulled my eight strongest readers to read *Roll of Thunder, Hear My Cry* by Mildred Taylor (1976). Both books are coming-of-age stories that highlight the importance of resilience and a sense of belonging in the face of racial and social injustice, and I hoped the themes would resonate. I handed my students piles of sticky notes and, regardless of which book they were reading, told them to add notes as they read, to ask themselves questions, to make connections and predictions, to critique character choices, to exclaim and react. We shared our sticky notes aloud at different times, although I lacked a structure for doing this really well. Still, the sticky-ing process did allow me to highlight the ways in which “reading is thinking.” It was not perfect but they were *all* reading: it was a beginning.

Sometime in April, my students learned that an EA in my class was getting married, and the EA blurted out that I was, too. I had been quiet about this: the staff were aware but I had not shared the news with my students. I was unsure of myself and of their reaction; I felt vulnerable and I didn’t want to disclose my queerness to them. But the questions began: Who are you marrying? What’s the name of your husband? Which church? And when I declined to answer: What’s the name of your wife? I refused to answer. I just said that it was private. They asked for names, they tried to trip me up with questions. It became a sort of game, but I didn’t tell them. I was too insecure, too worried

about their approval and respect, too protective of this careful truce that we had come to, to share anything with them that they might turn against me.

Carving out Space: It Can Feel Like This, Some of the Time

It was at Meadowbrook that I also designed and ran an Outers Club for Grade 7 and 8 students for the first time. The club drew a range of students from the Intermediate classes. I enlisted the help of my non-teacher friends who had outdoor experience, and Fridays after school became a place where I could be the educator I wanted to be, where I could Bronte Creek the shit out of two hours. We did cooperative tasks and trust activities, we went for hikes, did orienteering in a local park, and melted holes in the tarmac building fires in tin cans (oops!). We did first aid training and canoe-over-canoe rescues at Trent University, and at the end of June, we headed into Kawartha Highlands Provincial Park for three-day canoe trips. I tried to make sure any student who wanted to attend Outers could. Even though it was totally against school board protocol, I drove one of my students home to the intersection of Highways 8 and 28, a 20-minute drive from the school, every Friday after Outers knowing that his dad, a single parent, was already taking a taxi to and from Lindsay everyday. This student and his cousin were quirky, artsy misfits in my class: they were into fantasy novels and manga, were decidedly not athletic, and spent lots of time doodling and drawing. They mostly kept out of the way of my soccer playing boys, and I understood. The soccer boys continued to “rule the roost” in the social hierarchy of my class. They were constantly jockeying for position, talking big, and making lewd comments about Paris Hilton or the latest episode of *The L Word*. They made a gaydar ringing sound (ding-ding-ding) around the two cousins, who, to their credit, calmly ignored them. It was immature, sexist, locker-room culture and sadly, I was

not confident enough to address it head on. That these were some of the undercurrents in my classroom made the community and culture of Outers Club all the more special. It was a safe, inclusive place for me, and for students.

The Outers trips were amazing. Kids were appreciative and collaborative and even the tricky ones towed the line. I came alive outside—I could be funny and supportive and I was thrilled, too, about the parental trust in me as we did something that is perceived to be high-risk, in the safest possible way.

The Outers trips ended and we headed straight to Grade 8 graduation covered in bug-bites but smiling ear to ear. To my surprise, a student from my class was chosen as valedictorian, and she did a wonderful job. She was positive and accessible, and made special mention of our principal and the impact she had on the climate and culture of the building. Something had shifted in one year: students felt proud of their school, and of their teachers—the sense of accomplishment was palpable. I became aware at that moment, through the eyes of a student, that leadership and vision do matter and can make a difference.

Reorientation Part 3: Teaching Is Personal and Political

My next year at Meadowbrook was immeasurably better. I had a tricky class with a group of girls already notorious for their defiance and drama. The difference this year, though, was that half of them had played sports with me and were already loyal, keen to prove themselves and to defy the reputation they had earned. I also had several “challenging” students, and one in particular who was notorious for swearing and non-compliance. And I had Sam, a gentle soul with a significant learning disability and who, had either of us had the language or awareness, I suspect would have preferred to use the

pronoun “they” or “he” instead of “she.” Sam came out to me officially later in the year, and I helped to mediate a conversation with their parents about wearing a shirt and tie to grad. They were sporty and kind and generally well-supported by other students in my class. They did not seem to be a target in the same way that my two arty boys were the year before. Added to the class mix were several really strong academic students whose parents had requested the “New Artsy Outdoorsy” teacher, and this helped to create a really interesting class—balanced and heterogeneous in ways I hadn’t seen before and haven’t seen since.

I was teaching smarter that year, and I understood about working with my teaching partner for some of my instruction. We planned a novel study together and also worked closely together to plan the phys ed and French (which I would be teaching) for her class. She was teaching a group of only boys this year as part of a pilot project: our principal, building on the positive trajectory from the year before, was keen to keep innovating and changing the culture of the school. She had read research about “boys only” classes and had separated out a group of 20 boys, all working just below grade level. She had asked my teaching partner, who was truly a master educator, if she would like to design a program for them to see if she could catch them before they slipped through the cracks in the transition between Grade 8 and Grade 9. I would teach these same boys French, phys ed, and visual art, which would allow my teaching partner to continue in her role as science teacher to the other Intermediate classes. The boys were a handful, but it was interesting to design content around their interests, which were, for the most part, very typically boy: We did a unit about moto-cross and one about superheroes. I continued to learn from my teaching partner (who was also my mentor) about the

importance of scaffolding and structure, about the power of a mini-lesson. I was inspired by her learning stance and her willingness to try new things (in her 20th year of teaching) without relinquishing her perfect cursive and her meticulous organization (which she also expected of students: date in top right-hand corner, title underlined twice, subtitles underlined once).

In my own class, I got books from the library at the board office and supplemented these with books I purchased to do literature circles with my students (I presented the books, all YA reads that I had enjoyed, and students chose their top picks). I had a number of reluctant readers in the class, but the books captured their interest and, while some of the structure of the literature circles fell away, they read avidly, discussed the books, and worked with their peers to present book trailers. I had a teacher candidate join the class and tried to be as transparent as possible about my lack of experience. He was a mature student and willing to roll with the learning. It was fun to collaborate and learn alongside someone else.

In February, I had two different girls come to me worried that they were pregnant. At this time in KPR, many Intermediate classes would have a nurse from the local health unit visit to do sex ed. The two women who did this work were practical, competent, and no-nonsense. They were used to handling wrangy Intermediate students. The program itself was very “parts and places,” with a cursory overview of STIs and preventative/contraceptive options. There was no mention of sex for pleasure or as part of a healthy relationship, or about consent and decision making around sex beyond a strong message that it was better to wait. Regardless, our visit was not scheduled until June and I was worried about my girls. And so, I decided that we would do a non-fiction unit about

sex and sexual health as part of our language (English) class. I sourced books from my favourite youth bookstore in Montréal, and also ordered books that I used in a course I taught about sex and sexuality during my time in adult ed in the North. I included books about puberty, sexuality, sex and safe sex, and about queerness and coming out. Some were graphic novels and some were “how to” books. I included more practical, encyclopedic books, and some oriented specifically to boys and others to girls. I consulted with my principal and she was on board with my project, but we agreed that before I brought the books into the class, I should be in touch with parents. So, I drafted a letter, included the booklist, and asked for feedback. I only heard back from one parent, who happened to be a family doctor. She said, “Great! And, here are a few titles you might want to include.” I felt bolstered, and so began my sex ed book study. I had almost enough books for all my students to be reading something. I also tracked down websites that they could peruse that offered insight into relationship dynamics, sexuality, contraception, STIs, and so on.

On the days that we did this reading, you could hear a pin drop. I didn’t ask students to report on what they were reading. I told them I was available for conversation or questions, and that they did not need to read anything if they felt uncomfortable. When some students asked to bring books home to share with their parents, I took a deep breath and said yes. Other students asked to stay in during recess to read privately. Eric Marcus’ *What If Someone I Know is Gay* (2000) circulated between Sam’s friends, while Bronwen Pardes’ 2007 book *Doing It Right* circulated amongst my sexually active girls. Some of my quieter, more studious boys hunkered over their books as they read about masturbation and wet dreams. As a whole, students were incredibly respectful during

these reading periods: they did not tease or rib each other, they understood that what we were doing was a shared project, and that we were all responsible for maintaining a safe space to explore and learn.

This year was also notable because in December, I was super excited to learn that I was pregnant. As is the case with most people, I did not share the news with more than a few friends in my inner circle for the first few months. In March, at the three-month mark, and just before March Break, I decided to tell my students.

Friday afternoon: the sun, lower in the sky as the end of the day approached, cast a light through the row of windows that illuminated my basement classroom. We had made pizza from scratch, part of community building with my Grade 8s. The room smelled faintly of oregano and pepperoni. The desks were smeared with faint traces of grease and tomato sauce. Students were munching and chatting. We were pleased with the food and with each other.

I asked the students to tune in as I had a few announcements to make. I smiled as I looked around the room, and then I said something like, “I know we’re about to have a much needed break and we have been working really hard, so I want to celebrate that and to thank you for all your work. It’s hard to believe it has been nine weeks since Christmas—time must fly when we are having fun.” I paused. “Oh... and I had something else I wanted to share with you...” Eyes looked up, most of them were listening, sort of. I can still picture them sitting in their rows of three, Lily looking at me expectantly from the opposite side of the room where she leaned against the chalkboard; Jack, from his perch at the back, with a look of curiosity and anticipation on his face. I

continued: “So, I wanted to share with you that” (deep breath) “I am pregnant, and I’ll be having a baby in September.”

Lily squealed and a few other kids clapped spontaneously, but most of this was eclipsed by Lily’s question: “But, Ms. Harris, what about tucker? When are you going to tell us about her?”

“I think you know why I have been hesitant to share that with you,” I answered.

“Ms. Harris, we know, and we don’t care!” replied Natasha.

Kylie, talking over her, said, “My mom says the reason that you are such a good teacher—like, you’re so good with us—is cause you’re gay.”

A bit thrown, I replied with something like, “Well, thank you. . . . tucker and I are really excited.”

Sam was watching me, eyes wide, knowing I know what they know. Jack, sitting next to them, asked, “But how did you, I mean what did you...?”

“We asked a friend to help us,” I blurted (oops).

“But Ms. Harris, how did you know?” asked Lily.

“Know what?” I asked.

“You know, know that you...” she trailed off.

“You know, it doesn’t matter who you love, what matters is that you are in a relationship with someone you love and trust, and who listens to you and respects you deeply,” I affirmed.

And somehow my world had tilted. This being growing inside me (it sometimes felt like I’d been invaded by aliens) was somehow providing me with emotional courage, and social capital. Things for me—as a teacher, as a person, and as a queer woman

married to a woman—shifted. It was the beginning of a new phase in my life, but also in my teaching: of being more true to myself; more transparent about who I am; living the personal *as* the political; recognizing that I have the power to be a voice, an example, and a reference point; living “out loud” in more ways than one.

Nauseous for much of the next few months but excited to be pregnant, I don’t fully remember how that year ended. Somewhere there was a play, a history project and two Outers Club trips. As I am every June, I was aware of how much was left undone, the curriculum I had not covered. But I knew, too, that something special was emerging out of my practice: I was figuring some things out, learning how to teach, and how to be myself within my teaching.

Meadowbrook Year 3: Shifting Sands

I returned to Meadowbrook after a year at home with my new baby. I was happy to go back to work, I had a need for another project other than “growing a child” and “being a mom” and did not find it difficult to be away from Tanner. I loved him and thought of him, but was fully immersed in being a teacher once I was at work. I went back to work three days a week, mostly because I was so sleep deprived I couldn’t fathom working full time. And so my job looked a little different as I job-shared with another teacher. We shared responsibility for the library, and I took on one section of core French.

I was really excited to be working in the library after having completed parts 1 and 2 of my Library Additional Qualification while on maternity leave. Unfortunately, while the focus of the library courses was on collaborating with other teachers to help students develop media literacy and research skills, the way schools are funded did not

make this possible in practice. There was no collaborative time, and I was mostly expected to provide planning time for the kindergarten to Grade 3 teachers and to teach some of the curriculum (often easier to do in the classroom than in the library). I had one period a week in which to manage the library collection. I appreciated that this job involved less responsibility than being a homeroom teacher, but I missed having a classroom of my own and forging deep connections with a single cohort of students.

One of my biggest challenges was a change in leadership at the school. The new principal was very supportive of me in my new teaching role and as a young mother. However, she lacked the passion and presence of her predecessor. She was much less of a risk-taker and only approved the Outers Club trip if we would be at a camp—that is, no canoe camping. Our previous principal had high expectations of students and staff and, using a blend of tough-love, compassion, and research-informed insight, she had a special ability to work with tough kids. Our new principal just didn't quite manage to connect with them or to set the bar as high for the school as a whole. Student misbehaviour escalated, the staff were less cohesive, and parents were unhappy.

In May, I applied for a job at the school where my former principal now worked. I wanted to work with someone I trusted and respected, and who inspired me to be a better teacher. It was a French Immersion job, and on the day before my interview, she put me on the phone with the current Grade 1 teacher (a francophone from Quebec) to assess my level of French. We had a great yak and I felt a sudden wave of homesickness for Montréal and the North. This new colleague said out loud, “*Elle parle comme chez nous*” (She speaks like one of us), and already I felt welcome and accepted. Two days later, I

accepted a .67 FTE position teaching Grade 3 at Centennial Public School, which became my home for the next 12 years.

Centennial

Coming Home to Hope and Possibility

Although I was brand new to Grade 3 and to the building, I very quickly felt like I was part of a team. Through some creative organization, our principal managed to release staff several times a month to work together on literacy and numeracy goals. This involved the VP doing special activities with cohorts of students in the gym and us using some (but not all) of our prep time to come together. It was unconventional but it worked, and as a staff, we actually had time to meet and talk to one another (without having to spend the extra time planning for a supply teacher, as we do with the current PLC model). I learned a lot during those sessions. I was paired with two passionate, talented, veteran teachers whose commitment to student learning and wellbeing still stands out in my mind. With them, I learned how to actually assess reading, about the importance of guided groups, about how to scaffold writing for students, and about the importance of oral language to second-language learning. Together, we worked on literacy goals and co-designed prompts and assessment tasks. We talked about Big Ideas in math and important lessons that children might encounter in picture books. With the help of our numeracy coach, another fantastic, seasoned teacher, I learned to actually “look” at my math curriculum document and map out expectations and tasks for the year. We did this the old-fashioned way, with photocopied pages, chart paper, scissors, and glue. It was a great process for me and allowed me to better grasp the continuum of numeracy concepts

and skills through the grades. Grade 3 was an EQAO year, so I felt under pressure to ensure that my students were well-prepared for the test. I accessed questions from previous years and tried to build similar examples into my program.

My class that year was composed of bright, sensitive, artsy students. Their French was excellent, they had stamina for complex tasks, and they were capable and flexible enough to change directions suddenly when I had to revamp and rethink my math program (I had been, as many novice teachers do, following the *Math Makes Sense* (Morrow, 2004) textbook, trusting that it would “cover the curriculum” for me). They loved coming to school and were basically willing to follow wherever I might lead them. Their parents also embraced my style of teaching and my program. They loved the “Peace Soup” poems we wrote on Remembrance Day and were fully supportive of a student initiative to raise money for earthquake relief in Haiti, singing songs at the local mall.

Our principal at that time had a vision of Centennial as an Arts School. She created a pottery room, darkroom and drama studio, and dedicated one of the empty classrooms in the building to host an artist in residence. Classes could sign up to use the different rooms and to do painting or pottery sessions with local artists. Additionally, every Friday afternoon, local artists came to facilitate a program we called Arts in Action, which took the form of workshops for Grade 7 and 8 students. All students participated and were placed in groups according to their interests. Our principal also successfully applied to a program through the Royal Conservatory of Music called Music Champions. This program brought in arts experts from across the country to do workshops with teachers and students. The program ran for three years and we learned how to really

embed music, dance, and drama into content areas as diverse as math, social studies, and science. The games, lessons, and structures I learned in the workshops continue to enliven and enrich my practice today.

The French/English Divide: Bridging Through the Arts

That first year at Centennial, my official workday ended at 1:00 p.m. In the afternoons, I was involved in an initiative to write and produce a play with our Intermediate students. (I was actually volunteering my time for this, but I rarely thought about whether or not I was getting paid.) Our principal had hired two local playwrights to work with students. I was responsible for wrangling the students, and for the choreography and sets.

The play involved about 25 students drawn from both French Immersion and English classes. It was written collaboratively during improvisation workshops, so students built close relationships with one another. This was an important side benefit of the arts program in a school where there was a huge chasm between the English and French Immersion students. Most students in FI at Centennial came from a well-to-do neighbourhood close to the school that was peopled by doctors and professors and other liberal-minded professionals who valued living downtown and also had the means to buy houses in an enclave noted for quiet streets, century homes, beautiful gardens, and block parties. Meanwhile, many students in the English stream lived in rental housing in neighbourhoods outside of this enclave, in apartments or houses facing the local factory, or along many of the busier streets that served as arteries in and out of the downtown core. Many of these students experienced a lot of transience, moving from one place and one school to another. Many of their parents were working in minimum wage jobs, or

living on disability or social assistance, and these students did not have the same access to opportunities as their counterparts in French Immersion. There were exceptions, of course: every FI class had a handful of students who were not as advantaged as their peers, and English classes also had students who came from stable, fairly affluent households. Still, the rift caused by the class divide existed.

Sadly, this chasm was not unique to Centennial. French Immersion programs across Ontario (and likely across Canada) are a mechanism for exacerbating the class divide between students from educated, middle-class families and those who are newcomers or living in generational poverty: a recent study of Ottawa-area schools indicates that French Immersion is “inadvertently creating the conditions to effectively socially sort demographic groups” (Alphonso, 2019, para. 1), where students from low income families and those with special needs find themselves overrepresented in the English stream. A similar study from the Toronto District School Board shows that parents of children in French Immersion have a higher socio-economic status, are more likely to be university educated, and are more likely to have both been born in Canada (Alphonso, 2019).

In her 2018 literature review about equity (or lack thereof) in FI programs, Delcourt makes the case that FI programs are elitist and inequitable for a number of reasons. She notes that in many school districts, entry into FI programs is highly competitive, involving a lengthy application process and a lottery system that can sometimes be circumnavigated by parent advocacy. Further, FI programs are perceived to be the best route to bilingualism via “enriched” programming, which sometimes translates as a lack of differentiation or accommodation for learners with different needs.

Related to this, adds Delcourt, is streaming, or the selection of students from an early age based on their early literacy skills (which often excludes CLD (Culturally and Linguistically Diverse) learners, among others). Furthermore, Delcourt notes that across the province, there is very little Special Education support for students in FI, meaning that students who are experiencing learning difficulties are rapidly shunted out of the program (this is borne out by my own teaching experience). All this combines to create a situation where students in French Immersion classes are more homogenous when it comes to aptitude for school: they tend, as cohorts, to achieve higher on standardized tests and other measures of academic achievement (Delcourt, 2018). This creates a greater demand for the program and fosters the perception that it is “better,” more rigorous, and that it is the “place to be” to ensure the future academic success of children and give them a competitive edge. French Immersion advocates also want to prove that the program is effective, which adds to the pressure to only include students who can “keep up” academically (Delcourt, 2018).

Emerging trends indicate that elitist practices and unequal access to French Immersion programs remain a prominent issue in Ontario classrooms (Delcourt, 2018). In dual-track schools such as Centennial, this had a real impact on school dynamics and culture. Many more students started in French Immersion than finished in the program. As Delcourt notes, “those who have difficulty keeping up with their FSL classmates withdraw to the English program” (2018, p.12). A close friend and colleague who taught in French Immersion for 20 years recently moved to another dual track school in Peterborough to teach core French. She noted that among the students she taught, there was a real antipathy towards French because many students had started in FI only to be

booted out because of their learning needs or behavioural issues. These students certainly felt a sense of failure and resentment (J. Boutin, personal communication, November 17, 2020).

And so, the chasm between the French Immersion and English streams is not just one of social class, but also one of perception, and with it come complex social and emotional undertones that generally mean that the students in the two streams *do not* mix, even on the playground. This is one of the factors that made the arts program at Centennial so rich: in the arts sessions that students did every Friday afternoon, they were in groups with students from other classes *and* other streams. In the drama program, for example, English and French Immersion students formed strong bonds and connections as we co-created the play.

The play was pretty consuming and ate up most of my spare time. At the end of May, we did three performances at the local theatre (two for school groups and one evening performance for friends and family), and it seemed that Centennial was putting itself on the map as an Arts School where amazing things were happening.

I also re-established the Outers Club at Centennial and organized and facilitated my first trip there. It was another place where English and French Immersion students came together. The structure of the club remained the same—we met Fridays after school for an hour and a half and did trust activities, leadership challenges, and outdoor skills building. But the trips were not quite as easy to bring about as the first few I had done at Meadowbrook: I learned part way through the year that the school board policy has changed, and it now prohibited canoe tripping for Grade 7 and 8 students. Both canoeing and camping were allowed, but canoe camping was not. Fortunately, our superintendent

at the time was also the father of an Outers Club member during her time at Meadowbrook, and he advocated for me and for the trip. We changed the destination, minimized the number of portages, and (unbeknownst to our students) made a plan to park an emergency vehicle on a cottage road a 15-minute paddle from the campsites. Because of the support of this superintendent, and of my principal, Outers Club trips continued for another five years.

Red Sky in the Morning: Year Two at Centennial

Partway through my second year at Centennial, I watched as the school board and the union began to dismantle the vision. For starters, the School Board did not renew funding and support for the arts program. We were still doing “Arts in Action,” but the resident artist was no more. And, the artists who came on Fridays to facilitate workshops were paid through funds raised by the parent council. And, in October, the superintendents and other decision makers at the school board broke up a highly functional and balanced administrative team. Our steady, organized, Type A disciplinarian of a VP, who also cared deeply about the Centennial community, was moved to another school. He and our principal were a fantastic team. They shared a deep commitment to improving outcomes for kids and to a culture of high expectations for students and teachers. They provided a balance in terms of approach and temperament. She was the ideas person, who outlined the vision and the expectations for students and staff; he was the one to follow through and, as is often the case in school with a vice-principal, handled much of the discipline. While he was more conservative than our principal, he was also willing to look for creative solutions and workarounds that allowed staff and students to access more collaborative time together. It found it super frustrating

that an administrative team that was so obviously working well together be split up after only two years. Yes, there were needs in other schools, and in fact, our vice principal was sent to Munro Intermediate where (I suspect) his reputation for being a firm, fair disciplinarian was seen to be “just the ticket.” But it seemed that, as is often the case in education, we were robbing Peter to pay Paul.

The teachers’ union also took our principal to task for her “creative organization” of planning time, because union rules did not allow her to dictate what we did with our prep time, even though *much* of our collective planning time was in addition to our regular prep because our students were in assemblies with our VP. I did not see what the big deal was. Shouldn’t I want to be spending some of my prep time collaborating? Is this not how to become a better educator? I get that I need to have autonomy to use my planning time for tasks I deem necessary, but I think it is OK for collaborative time to be mandated, especially if it is in the best interests of students. Besides, I missed about one prep every two weeks—this didn’t seem like too much to me. Not everyone shared my perspective, though. There were some who did not want to meet with their colleagues and who were reluctant to follow through with the high expectations for collecting student data (keeping running records, collecting reading responses, doing math assessments) that were the basis for our work together. I watched as our principal had her wrist slapped for her “unconventional” approach to managing a staff and a budget. She wilted, got sick, and became less present. Our new VP was a “by the book” administrator who I believe never really understood the culture of Centennial (though in her defense, she was often left with the unpleasant job of trying to fill in for the principal, whose orange stilettos were not easy shoes to step into).

Fractures and Rifts: Year Three at Centennial

By year three, our once fiery, passionate principal was barely present. We had another new VP, one who used to teach in the building. She clearly loved the school and the kids, but she was a whirlwind of energy and drama. The wheels seemed to be falling off the bus. Meetings were cancelled, the arts program floundered, we had less time to plan together, and student behaviour was escalating. People asked where our principal was, wondered about her mental health, and grumbled about both her frequent absences and the erratic behavior of our new VP (who was trying to plug the holes in the dyke even as more needs surfaced everyday). As time progressed and the whispers got louder, I sought refuge in connection—with other teachers and with students, both in my class and in the clubs that I ran.

I was teaching a Grade 2-3 split class that year, and I was coming into my own as a Primary division French Immersion teacher. I knew my curriculum and was beginning to have fun with the concepts and content. I knew how to weave math into phys-ed and drama into language (English/French). I was finally managing to work actively on reading with guided groups. I could be more flexible with my schedule, and we did all-day art projects and spent the month of June working on an adaptation of Dr. Seuss's *The Lorax* (1971) to perform for the school. When I focused just on my class and my teaching practice, the days flew by. But stepping outside my classroom door was to step into a quagmire of covert conversations, whispered judgments, thinly veiled frustration and growing divisions between different groups of staff.

In the rest of the building, our principal still tried to set a standard and hold staff to a vision of excellence in teaching, and to a compassionate, collaborative approach to

discipline, but she was not present to follow through. Those of us who counted on her to provide that vision, direction, and a bar to reach for felt abandoned. It felt like all push but no pull, no support. We didn't have the funding or the support of earlier years, and those who "would not be pushed" were quick to vilify her. The factions grew. And so, I needed out. I needed some way to see beyond where we were. Which brought me to a table at a local coffee shop, with my laptop out and the application for an instructional coach position open on the screen.

A friend coaxed me through the application. I doubted whether I was qualified, wondering "what do I know?" What I did know was that I felt tired, that I needed a change, that my feet were slipping on the treadmill. I felt like my teaching practice was stagnant and I wanted to grow and evolve; I just wasn't sure how. I was missing the energy and optimism of my first few years at Centennial, when we had a dynamic, well-balanced administrative team; a ton of arts funding; a fantastic numeracy coach; a strong and cohesive French Immersion team; Intermediate division teachers who were math keeners; and a music program, under the direction of an exceptional musician and teacher, good enough to rival any private school. In those first years, I believed that a school could carve out an identity for itself, that a staff and a principal could have agency, that we could gather resources and fulfil the vision of what I thought a school and schooling could be: inspiring, engaging, collaborative, rigorous, transformative. It is amazing how much can change in three years.

Put Me in Coach, I Wanna Play

Many school boards in Ontario were working with instructional coaches at this time. The idea behind the coaching model was that teachers who demonstrated a learning

stance grounded in curiosity, a desire to grow their own practice, and some mastery over both pedagogical and content knowledge, worked in collaboration with their classroom-teacher peers to “build capacity” in the system. Coaches were placed in schools to work alongside teachers to help implement strategies and approaches that were considered to be best practice. The focus of this work was generally grounded in literacy and numeracy. In practice, it could take the form of helping a teacher plan and implement guided reading groups; co-teaching to create success criteria and anchor charts for reading responses with students; modeling how to do a Number Talk; or planning a unit on growing patterns complete with rich tasks, and formative and summative assessments. I was drawn to coaching because I was excited about the learning. I knew that there would be professional development—workshops, seminars, and book studies—and that I would get a sense of the “bigger picture” of what was happening in schools in KPR and across Ontario. I was excited about meeting and working with different teachers and educational leaders. I wanted to be stretched and challenged, and it felt like a logical next step in my teaching journey.

I was canoeing with a good friend and our kids on the first day of summer holidays when I got the phone call offering me an instructional coach position. I accepted. A colleague emailed me to say that he had heard through our principal that I was leaving the building. “You will leave a positivity void,” he said. I struggled with this feeling of leaving a gap. And yet, I knew that I was not irreplaceable. Important, yes; irreplaceable, no.

And so, my summer felt qualitatively different: I did not know how to plan for this new job, so mostly I didn’t. I did my Math Part 1 AQ and waited. Labour Day

weekend arrived and I had never been so relaxed. I knew that I would be working in three French Immersion schools: Hillside, Centennial and Wenjack. I was excited to maintain a connection with Centennial, and thrilled that my former principal, a known ally, was at Wenjack. I was a little nervous about Hillside, as I knew intuitively that I was not the best fit with the community.

Yay Team! The Upside of Instructional Coaching

Being a coach was an exercise in patience, moderation, and restraint. But it was also a joyful, hopeful time. I met dedicated and inspiring teachers who welcomed me into their classrooms and their practice. The highlights were veteran teachers and new teachers, who showed the most desire to collaborate and infuse their teaching with new ideas. I worked with other “less open” teachers, too, and tried to find non-threatening ways to integrate myself into their classrooms.

In my first year of coaching, the school board hired Marian Small (a big name in constructivist math circles, namely for her books, *Making Math Meaningful* (2008) and *Good Questions* (2012) to do workshops with teachers of Grades 2, 3, 5 and 6. As coaches, we accompanied the teachers from our schools to learn alongside them so that we could (hopefully) help them to implement some of the strategies Small shared). The sessions were very hands-on, there were lots of math manipulatives at the tables, and teachers were asked to do the tasks as Small presented them. She took us through questioning prompts designed to help students to develop critical thinking, problem solving and, above all, number fluency. She was clear that we were all “doers of mathematics” and that as teachers, it was our job to make math meaningful *and* accessible to all students. Small argued compellingly for the use of open tasks that have

multiple entry points and possible answers (e.g., *Show me a number that is very close to but not half way between 0 and 1000*. Students could say 550, 501, 498, 499.9, or $500 \frac{1}{2}$).

The idea with open tasks is that most students can access them but that they can reveal different aspects of math fluency and understanding. Small also demonstrated how to use parallel tasks, which are focused on the same skill or concept but provide choice based on complexity or magnitude. (e.g., Task A: Create as many rectangles as you can that have an area of 120 cm^2 , Task B: Create as many rectangles as you can with an area of 24 cm^2). I loved the sessions, but the teachers did *not* all feel as I did. While most engaged with the activities during the sessions, I could hear rumblings and murmurings: “Yeah but how do you assess this?” “Who has time for all this playing?” “How does this help with reading and understanding a problem?” I began to notice fault lines between constructivist/experiential learning and learning that was focused on improving achievement (i.e., boosting EQAO scores). I didn’t (and still don’t) believe the two are mutually exclusive, but I was aware of the tension. I was also aware that it is difficult to “play with the math” when you are not comfortable with the content and that you have to play to get comfortable—it’s a catch-22. Hattie (2011) identifies teacher content knowledge as being a factor that has a significant effect on student learning outcomes. It continues to be a challenge for elementary teachers, generalists that we are, to develop deep content knowledge in so many different areas. And, because in my experience many elementary teachers *do not* identify as “math people,” it continues to be a content area around which there is a lot of anxiety.

Being Schooled: Drinking the Kool-Aid

Once every six weeks or so, we gathered as coaches at the board office to debrief and learn together. Some of what we looked at was math content, but much of what we talked about was focused on *Growing Success*, the Ontario Ministry of Education's (2010b) guide to assessment, evaluation and reporting. It turns out that *Growing Success* echoes the research that educational scholar John Hattie outlined in his 2008 book, *Visible Learning* and in his follow up 2012 book, *Visible Learning for Teachers*.

Visible Learning for Teachers (Hattie, 2012) is a synthesis of more than 800 metastudies about the conditions, circumstances, practices, and actions that have an impact on student learning outcomes. Hattie sorts these factors into six different areas (home, school, teacher, teacher learning practices, student, and curricula) and ranks factors such as class size, homework, school leadership, and school climate, by "effect size." As instructional coaches, our focus was on the teacher learning practices that, according to Hattie, had the greatest impact on student achievement. At the top of the list was teacher feedback and formative assessment grounded in the clear articulation of learning goals and success criteria. Hattie's argument is basically that students perform better when they know what they are learning, why they are learning it, and when they have a clear understanding of the steps they need to take to be successful. These same priorities are reflected in *Growing Success*, with additional emphasis placed on ensuring that teaching and assessment reaches all layers of the achievement chart (knowledge and understanding, thinking, communication, and application) and happens before, during and at the end of a learning cycle (assessment *for*, *as* and *of* learning) (Ontario Ministry of Education, 2010b). According to Hattie (2012) and *Growing Success* (Ontario

Ministry of Education, 2010b), the most effective way to share the goals and success criteria with students is to co-construct them, and then to help students use these goals and criteria independently to monitor their own learning. And so, it became part of our role as coaches to model planning and assessment around learning goals, success criteria and descriptive feedback, and to help teachers to do this with students.

Visible Learning for Teachers (Hattie, 2012) is written with school administrators and policy makers in mind (and, I suppose, teachers too, though few would actually find the time to read it). However, unlike some trade literature, it is meticulously referenced and I still find the evidence compiled by Hattie to be quite compelling (of course it is, as it is presented to be so). Hattie's critics (Bergeron, 2017; Slavin, 2018) take issue with his statistical analysis and the way individual factors are taken out of context and evaluated in isolation, because teachers have long believed that what makes for "successful" learning involves a whole matrix of factors working together. Nevertheless, his book is a distillation of theory into practice and I read it avidly. I wanted to be a *believer*. I was so, so hungry for a model, a formula, some key to mastery that would make my own teaching better, but more importantly, that would make the teaching in my building better, that would ground, shape and inspire teaching practice so that we could reach more kids, help more kids "do well at school." It seemed like common sense to me that kids should know the why and the how of what they're learning, and that ongoing checkins about their progress would help them to learn. Aware as I was of how often I rescued and corrected, and "did for" my students instead of having them do for themselves, I was captured by Hattie's argument that a clear articulation of goals and success criteria could help students be more independent. Teaching is a complex, messy

process, and the list in my head of what I should be doing to “be a good teacher” was so overwhelmingly long that I had trouble prioritizing (and still do). It was a relief to have someone else tell me what is important. I was ready to jump on the bandwagon, go the whole hog, swallow the pill.

There was no real critique of Hattie’s (2012) work during our sessions. Mostly, we nodded and discussed how best to implement his findings. I think his work has broad appeal for school boards and educational institutions because it puts teachers at the centre of student learning (and of student performance on standardized tests). I like this. I like knowing that I am important. But, looking back, it seems to me that we, as coaches, became mouthpieces for the school board and Ministry of Education. We became emissaries of a system that pretends that if we can just implement certain core changes to teacher practice, then despite under-resourced schools and classes stacked with students who are living with significant life and learning challenges, students will “be successful,” EQAO scores will go up, the school board will look good, and we will have justified our positions. This is all part of drinking the Kool-Aid. And, I really *want* to believe that “good teaching” can make a difference, that it can help students to transcend the difficult circumstances in which they live: the systemic racism, generational poverty, and instability of their lives. How nice would that be, to actualize the promise of school as the great leveler, as the difference maker, the bridge over the opportunity gap? Just get on the bus kids, we are all going to the same magical place! Call me Mrs. Frizzle if you will, and we will have marvelous learning adventures together!

During our PD sessions, we also read Ministry of Education monographs in the *Capacity Building Series*, with titles like: *The Third Teacher*; *Getting Started with*

Collaborative Inquiry; Pedagogical Documentation; and Communication in the Mathematics Classroom. We dug into books about instructional rounds and formative assessment. We debated the differences between anchor charts and success criteria, between checklists and rubrics. We talked about how to plan with mastery of skills and understandings in mind. We also talked about how to foster student independence and self-evaluation, and about how to encourage teachers to overcome their reluctance to use formative assessments to help guide their teaching (it's OK if the kids don't get it/can't do it; they haven't learnt it yet!). We talked about being "asset oriented" and looking for what kids can do before we talked about what they can't. And always, we were reminded, we should position ourselves not as experts but as co-learners, and model an inquiry stance exemplified by a willingness to ask questions and listen deeply, to try new things, and reflect on the impact of our actions. We talked about how to deal with the "rocks," those teachers who seemed immovable and impervious, who would not open themselves or their practice to us. It was a "problem of practice" that we never really resolved. But still, the emphasis on curiosity and reflection really resonated with me. I love learning, and I love learning alongside other people.

The thing I loved most about coaching, though, was that I had *time*. There was no class to organize and maintain, there were no report-cards or IEPs to write, no parent calls to make, or blog posts to create. I was not running choir or Outers Club or coaching, or staying in at recess to help students finish assignments. I didn't even have recess or lunch duty assigned at the schools in which I worked (the assumption being that I would be meeting with teachers to co-plan with them on their breaks!). Time is the scarcest of resources as a teacher, and lack of time is among the greatest stressors. I was so grateful

to have time to absorb what I was learning, to really think about the why and wherefore of a lesson, to mull over new content and make connections between ideas. I could be more generous with my energy, and have more grace in my interactions both at school and at home. I was less emotionally depleted because there was time to fill my cup and take care of my body and my heart.

My first year coaching was far more satisfying than the second year. In year one, math was the primary focus, but there was also a focus on literacy and this was often my way in with teachers. The big ideas around learning goals and success criteria played out just as well with reading and writing, and many teachers were more comfortable sharing their literacy practice because this was where they felt most confident. I worked with teachers across a spectrum of grades, from Kindergarten to Grade 6. With Primary and Junior students, we built “rocking reading responses,” explored poetry, designed scaffolded writing activities, and worked with guided groups to build reading comprehension skills. In Kindergarten, my monster puppets (Gregory and Tyrone) and I worked with students to create Venn diagrams about the ways in which monsters and people are similar and different. The more unruly of the two monsters, Tyrone got encouraging letters about ways to improve his behaviour (he really struggled to follow expectations and was always shouting out), to which he diligently responded.

Come on Folks, We Can Do It... Year Two of Coaching

In my second year of coaching, the focus shifted to math (in particular, Junior math) every day and all the time. This was challenging from a scheduling perspective, and also because it was harder to find a way into the teachers’ classrooms. Many teachers feel insecure about their math practice, and even though research tells us that professional

development has more impact when teachers determine the area of need, we were imposing the focus and the subject area—no wonder teachers were resistant. I found an entry point into classes through what I called MART (Math ART): I designed a series of lessons that mixed visual art, dance and music with math. I did perimeter and area dances with Grade 2s and 3s, and had a series of lessons about angles, rotations and tessellations that I shared with some Junior and Intermediate classes. It was hardly co-planning, but it did give me a foot in the door.

One of the highlights of my second year of coaching was working with the Grade 5 teacher at Marie Curie Public School. We bonded over a love of math and a shared commitment to learning—our own, and that of our students. Hands-on experiences and lively conversations were at the heart of his math program, and he had drunk as much, if not more, of the Kool-Aid than I had: he was posting success criteria, giving his students constant feedback, and trying to assign grades across different layers of the achievement chart. He had great content knowledge *and* a great handle on his class, gentle with the kids who struggled and firm with his cohort of sporty boys. His practice was an open book, and he managed to be both humble and confident. I am super glad to have met him and to know that such teachers are out there.

For the most part though, Junior teachers were resistant to working with me. I am still curious about why this was. There were the teachers who said, “I’m just too busy” and others who said, “I’m fine, thanks.” Some stated frankly that they didn’t really believe in learning goals and success criteria, or complained to me that really, “playing games” was fine once in a while, but kids just needed to learn their times tables. There were others who approached me with a “What have you got for me?” attitude which,

while it was an invitation of sorts, was also an expectation that I would take some of the teaching load off of their plate. Which was fair enough: teaching in the Junior division is time consuming, the content is more complex, the gaps between students are wider, the volume of work students produce is greater, and unruly behaviour that is border-line cute in Primary is now just disruptive. I did witness a lot of math anxiety, and teachers resorted to their comfort zones, which often involves rote learning and algorithms. Sadly, I also witnessed some real disengagement and a lack of rigour, planning, and care. I know the work is hard, that people are worn out and don't have enough support for students who are struggling. I know the content is overwhelming. But it was hard not to judge.

I did love being able to work with other teachers. I loved seeing how people teach, soaking up ideas and inspiration. I loved wandering the halls in different schools and noticing bulletin boards with wonderful art or writing.

I loved not having to manage and maintain a physical classroom, although I missed this too. My classroom is a sanctuary and a reflection of who I am. This includes everything in my classroom: the way I choose to organize furniture (I choose tables instead of desks, and have a huge carpet space where we gather for much of our learning); the colour of my bulletin boards (I choose blues and greens and kraft paper to mimic the palette of the natural world); the carefully selected books that fill my reading buckets and line the shelves; the artifacts of learning, from art projects to student writing that cover the bulletin boards; and the other objects that are catalysts and anchors for our inquiries (plants, caribou skeletons, buckets of math manipulatives and whiteboards, a portable stereo, blocks and Lego, markers and well sharpened pencils). I like knowing that I have the tools I need at my finger-tips. I like knowing where the reference points

are for our learning. I like knowing where we will gather for learning. In my classroom, we are co-authoring a story that is evident to anyone who steps into our world. We show it and share it through the work tacked to bulletin boards and through our classroom norms that shape the words we use and the ways we interact with one another. I am not always sure how the narrative will unfold, but at least in my own classroom I know the lay of the land, am familiar with the landscape of learning, and the backstory of the characters. As a coach, I am always stepping into someone else's story and I always have one foot out the door. I am less sure of the lay of the land, and it is to my car that I retreat at the end of the day to reflect and regroup and plot the next chapter.

As much as I miss my own classroom, it takes a tremendous amount of energy and time to keep a classroom organized and to make all the learning visible. And, at the pace at which things move in my classroom, it is always a challenge to maintain some control over the chaos that joyful learning seems to produce. I spend a good half day every other weekend tidying and organizing.

So, I loved having weekends to myself. Yes, I often spent Sunday afternoons planning, but I didn't have to spend hours writing IEPs and report cards, or planning for an occasional teacher because I was going to be out at a volleyball tournament. I had time to read journals and trade books. I had time to go through EQAO questions and distill them into themes and strands to share with teachers. I had time to make games and Smartboard files, math problems and lesson prompts for other teachers. It was fun to be a "bearer of gifts," to be thanked and appreciated. I was aware, though, that I sometimes "did for" instead of "doing with." I am really comfortable with "The Nansi Show," and I realized that perhaps I deprived teachers of "building capacity" themselves when I

planned and taught lessons for them (even if this felt easier for both of us). I know that there is a part of me that likes performing, and that I relish the opportunity to showcase my knowledge, my ability to work with kids, and my pedagogy. I also have a low tolerance for what I perceive to be a poorly delivered lesson, and for poor teaching in general. Teaching a lesson myself kept me “in control” and ensured that the content and concepts were delivered in a way that I believed engaged kids and helped build understanding. This may have been good in the short-term, but it hardly helped other teachers develop skills or confidence for the long term.

As I approached the end of my second year of coaching, I was feeling less inspired and engaged, and I was aware that many teachers were weary of the constant focus on math. Coaching leadership had changed, too, and the principal who was now responsible for coaches I believed was less insightful than his predecessor. It made for lacklustre meetings and a general decline in the quality of conversation.

Why It's Dangerous to Care Too Much (Part 1)

My second year of coaching at Centennial, my home school, was especially challenging. There was a lot of discontent about a lack of clearly defined vision or expectations for teachers and students in the building. The current principal, now in her second year, was explicit about her lack of expertise around instructional leadership. She preferred to situate herself as a “co-learner” alongside teachers, but somehow this rang hollow (even to me). She ran very few staff meetings and made no effort to hold teachers to account for implementing any of the “best practices” that were a focus of the school improvement plan (like using number talks every day, posting learning goals and success criteria, working with guided groups, etc.). It was really tricky as a coach to encourage

teachers to take up these practices without any push from the principal. While she was very present in the school, there was also a sense that she was “soft on discipline” and that students were not being held accountable for their choices. Some teachers with whom I had established good relationships were burning out or splitting off into factions of disenchantment and discontent. They were frustrated by the lack of cohesion, and also felt that the principal was failing to hold less competent teachers to account. Over the year, their critiques became increasingly personal and derogatory. I was really uncomfortable with this. When I refused to jump on the principal-bashing bandwagon, I was perceived to be a pawn of the admin and “those people” at the board office who were “out of touch with what was really happening in schools.” Other allies had left the building and I started to feel like an outsider in a place that used to feel like home.

I am someone who always looks for the cracks where the light gets in. Right up to the end of my time as a coach, I tried to find ways to build community and a coherent vision at Centennial. As an instructional coach, I worked harder on these things at Centennial than at my other schools because it was my home school, and I still had a picture in my mind, from my first few years in the building, of what it could feel like to be a part of a team with a vision. I cared a lot—perhaps too much.

In the last month of school, I invited the board lead on assessment and evaluation to come and work with a group of teachers. Our focus was on developing some school-wide goals for intentional, accountable talk, an initiative that centers rich conversations, alongside vocabulary building, at the heart of learning (Glass et al. 2015) in our building. I had been doing lots of reading about the importance of dialogue and conversation in our classes, about the role that talking in authentic, meaningful contexts has in developing

literacy skills (Glass et al. 2015; Hyde 2006). It seemed to me that taking time to plan, scaffold and guide students through intentional conversations had great relevance across both French Immersion and English classes, and it also had lots of relevance for mathematics learning. I really hoped that our sessions with the board consultant might bring us together as a community. We were about two thirds of the way through our first session when the rupture happened. We had done some sharing about student strengths and needs and were trying to come up with a goal that would work across grades and languages. I remember thinking that the goal was not rigorous and that it was not going to push our practice or our thinking. I felt that it was a goal that allowed teachers to say, “Yeah, no problem, I am already doing this in my teaching” instead of a goal that asked them to do some reading, reflecting, and rethinking. As we were discussing the goal and the wording, I shared that I thought it was too vague and didn’t challenge teachers enough, and made a suggestion for a modification. At that point, the Grade 6 teacher, with whom I had worked quite closely, interrupted and said (forcefully), “You are just not happy with the goal because we are not using your language or following your exact vision, and you just want to be in control.” There was a pause in the room then I said, “Oh. Maybe you’re right, I need to think about that.” I felt absolutely pierced, cut to the core. I knew that I did have a bigger vision and a goal that was more ambitious than what we had arrived at. Was this about control? Conviction? Rigour? Idealism? Regardless, I know that I was pushing from a good place, from a sense of wanting more for the students in the building.

Later, as we paused wrapping up the session, the consultant looked at me and asked, “What was that about?” “Honestly, I don’t know,” I replied. I could feel the tears

pricking behind my eyelids. After the break, I smiled brightly (my default mode) and agreed quietly to what was on the table. Several of my colleagues came to check in with me after, but none said anything in the moment, which I took to mean that they agreed with the critique. My sense of myself as a leader and as a member of a community of teacher-learners took a hit that day. My sense of my place at Centennial and my trust in my relationships with my colleagues began to erode.

I was increasingly aware that the “ideal practice” we discussed in our coaching meetings was far removed from the pragmatic realities of classroom teaching or of the learning climate in schools. In all of the schools in which I worked as a coach, I encountered more resistant teachers. Some were settled in their practice and unapologetically rejected school board mandates and initiatives. Some were new teachers who were prickly and hard to help. They reminded me of me in my first few years of teaching, when I just needed space to figure things out and needed time to get used to the idea of accepting help from someone else. The singular focus on math was increasingly hard to sell. I was tired of trying to persuade resistant teachers to work with me, and wary of the cynicism about my role that seemed to be creeping into schools (and into my own subconscious). I was also aware that as just one person, I could not change the culture of a building or enact a vision for learning without the support and collaboration of principals and other teachers. When I was asked to consider coaching for another two years, I declined. I figured that if I returned to the classroom, I’d at least have control over my own practice and environment.

Return to the Classroom, Round 1

Back at Centennial: Silo and Sanctuary

My first year back at Centennial after coaching was a year of magic and inspiration that protected me from significant trauma in my personal life. It was the year where I felt the strongest connection with a group of students—we “got” each other. We were on a journey together and were running breathlessly through the forest of learning, marveling at everything. My instruction was not perfect, but we dove deep: Why do we write? What is an essential question? What does it mean to have empathy? Why does math matter? What is art for? We grappled with ideas about inclusion and assumptions. We did a banned picture book study and talked about freedom of speech, censorship, and “isms.” We looked at the art of Keith Haring and put on 80s hip-hop and drew each other in poses, searching for gestural lines to transform our poses into figures that we later printed. Spearheaded by a couple of straight teacher allies, this was the first year that Centennial joined the Peterborough Pride parade as a school (the first elementary school in KPR to do so) and to declare openly and proudly (ha!) that we are a safe and inclusive school. My students turned out in full force. We were a community and we were on fire. I felt safe and inspired, well represented, and even celebrated for who I am and how I am in the world.

It was funny to head back to my own class after two years of floating around as an instructional coach. In my absence, the culture of the building had changed. When I left, despite some unhappiness, the staff team still felt mostly united and connected to a vision of Centennial as a tough school with dedicated teachers, high standards and a kick-butt arts program. The vision was now less clear and the sense of community disintegrating.

In the absence of a strong leader, teachers had been left to their own devices. Some continued to deliver excellent programs and to have high expectations of themselves and their students, but others were happy to ease off and do less. When I expressed frustration to a friend about the lack of expectations around instructional practice, she responded with, “Nansi, we are professionals, it shouldn’t be up to the principal to ‘make us’ do what is in the best interests of children.” Perhaps she was right, that the admin had created a space for more “distributed leadership.” But this model presumes that everyone has the same commitment to learning (their own and that of their students) and the same passion for inquiry and reflection, which of course, they don’t. Some divisions continued to work and plan together, but the Junior and Intermediate teams, which I straddled, rarely met, and collaboration was rare.

Cliques formed; it felt like high school. One particular group of teachers were mercilessly critical of those whom they perceive to be bad teachers or to have bad classroom management. They were also quick to blame parents, other teachers, and the principal for poor student achievement and behaviour. What was hard was that this group of teachers were very strong teachers themselves: they have excellent classroom management, related well to kids, and their instructional practice was pretty good, too. They also did lots for the school, including organising events and coaching teams. But they were not team players, and their negativity began to permeate the building. When I stepped back and looked at the staff in the building, I could see so much potential for us to build on the previous vision for the school and make it our own in spite of (or, ideally, alongside) our principal. But aside from doing my best to reach out to people who did want to learn together and collaborate, and to engage in conversations about instruction

with people who wanted to have them, I found myself mostly on my own and unsure of how to take my vision of what was possible for the school to a wider audience.

Still, I was excited about my return to the classroom, and about tackling a new curriculum, and about showing my math chops. I also knew that people would expect me to fall flat on my nose after my return from coaching to “the real world.” In fact, I was warned about this by several principals: that people would scrutinize my practice, take quiet pleasure in my failures in a “see, it’s not as easy when you have to do it every day” kind of way. It was never the intention of the coaching model, or my intention personally to situate myself as an expert or even as a master teacher. But the perception persists, along with the attitude that it’s easy to teach the perfect lesson when you don’t have to manage a class all day, do recess duty, and have lots of time in the evenings to plan. I was keen to prove the haters wrong, to kill them with kindness and optimism, to be a team player, to do my thing and hope that I could keep learning and collaborating—that maybe I would inspire, and be inspired.

I had a new classroom that year. It was downstairs, which meant it didn’t get so hot in the fall and spring, and it had a sink! Yay! The room was big enough that it readily held the 26 desks I needed with room to spare. I could arrange flexible groupings and a workstation in the centre. Large windows lined one wall of the classroom facing the front of the school, and along the opposite wall was an uninterrupted stretch of chalkboard. In the weeks leading up to the first day of school, I searched and scavenged to find cork bulletin boards and whiteboards to actually make the chalkboard surface useful. I knew that I wanted to be able to showcase student work, to make our learning and our thinking visible, so I wanted surfaces with which they, and I, could readily interact.

These old classrooms at Centennial are special, with polished honey-brown wooden floors, much scuffed and smoothed after almost 100 years of use. The ceilings are high, the wood trim is stained a darker brown, infusing the classroom with a warm glow. The rooms are spacious, with tons of natural light. But they are also highly impractical: much of the available space for posting anchor charts or student work is high up (requiring a ladder to access). And with all the space above our heads, sound bounces and echoes. Combined with the echoes of the hallway outside the classroom door, it was sometimes a wonder any of us could hear ourselves think. And so much dust! My pants, my hands and my face all had a thin film by the end of the day, no matter how often I wiped down surfaces with a damp cloth. Still, I loved this room: I loved the cosiness and the history.

As the first day of the new school year approached, I prepared my classroom. This time of nesting and readying for the year is always when I do some of my best thinking, when *that would be cool* and *I can't wait to try that* jostle for space in my brain, and I feel hopeful and inspired. Time seems to stretch infinitely in front of me and I can, for a short while, dwell in the realm of what is possible instead of what is not. I was nervous but excited to be working with my own students again, and glad to be able to focus my emotional energy on building relationships with one group. I also knew from my colleagues that this cohort of kids were a pretty special crew. They were keen and quirky and positive. Some of them were familiar to me, as I had taught them in Grades 3 and 4. Others, I know from choir or because I had taught their older siblings. I had six Grade 7s and 20 Grade 6s, so it was definitely a Grade 6-heavy class.

What was perhaps unique about this class is that there were a significant number of students who were keen to really explore social justice issues. They came from homes where local and global issues were part of dinner-time conversation, and they loved to discuss, debate, and question. These were students who already, at ages 11 and 12, had had many opportunities to learn and grow outside of school: they took piano and violin, did March Break camps at the local art school and science camps in the summer. Many were avid readers, and a good number had traveled within Canada and beyond. They were also quite athletic—I had some serious soccer and hockey players, a couple of dancers, and a baseball player. It is unusual to have such a balance of artsy and athletic in the same group. They were a class of mostly extroverts, but who were compassionate and really did try to create space for their less-vocal peers.

And so, we started the year already enamoured with one another. We knew we were all on the same team. They handled community-building activities with grace. Our first math talks about mindset and resilience were funny and interesting. My first writing task (*If math were a vegetable, what would it be?*) yielded some hilarious and poignant answers, and then we used their writing to talk about what writing is for and what good writing is. It was a lesson that anchored our entire year. And, as with many lessons that year, it seemed to spiral off in interesting and productive ways. It felt as though this was how learning was always meant to be. Around the time of the Terry Fox Run, we had a conversation about what makes a hero and why we need them in our lives. When one of my more introverted students piped up and said, “I don’t think we need heroes, we just need to find that strength and inspiration in ourselves,” our wall of enduring questions was born with “Why do we need heroes? Or do we?” as the first question.

We did *a lot* of math. I engaged earnestly with the project of constructing understanding with students. We created our own misleading graphs, we did area quilts and built patterns with tiles to explore linear functions. We designed chocolate bar boxes to accommodate a certain volume of chocolate. We used interlocking cubes to explore how averages level out outliers and two-coloured counters to understand positive and negative integers. We did much of our work in pairs—students know that they are each other’s teachers and best supports. We consolidated questions when we were done, and they were delighted to learn from each other. I introduced the idea (borrowed from a teacher I worked with as a coach) of “favourite no”, where, as a class, we looked at a mistake or a misconception in a student’s work and tried to figure out how and where they went off track. We noticed cool patterns, talked about pitfalls and explored why it is that strategies that might work in some cases but not in others (for example, 1 hour and 30 minutes is not 1.30 hours because one hour is 60 minutes, not 100). This really helped to promote risk-taking and original thinking in math class, and also to frame mistakes as essential to learning. I knew what resources were out there, I was able to pull from different math guides, texts, blogs I loved, previous EQAO questions, and the work of Van de Walle and Folk (2007) and Small (2008). It was *so* fun! I was also able to embed other subjects within my math, like art, social studies (looking at graphs of migration patterns to predict significant events), science (plotting correlations between deforestation and various species for our study of biodiversity), and media (making a jingle to sell the chocolate bars we made boxes for).

Put on Your Beret (I Wear This Hat Too)

This was a French Immersion class, and I was also passionately engaged with the project of authentic, rigorous French instruction. I believe fervently in multilingualism and in the potential of French Immersion to promote this goal. For me, multilingualism ties into an idea of global citizenship where, through the study of other languages, young people can discover new perspectives on the world. I also believe that the focus of any second (or third, or fourth) language program should be on communication skills. How else do we build bridges between people and cultures? So my French program focuses a lot on building oral skills. I also believe that if students can “speak it” they can “write it,” and that a strong foundation in oral language will help students write more clearly and read more fluently. I want my students to be able to discuss and debate in French, fluently and passionately! With this class, I tried to create discussion structures where building on the ideas shared by others was the focus, and to develop group work where speaking in French counted for marks. That year, we presented different texts to one another. We watched videos in French and checked for comprehension. We used *Infos-Jeunes* (a French news feed designed for students) *a lot*, and I developed a routine where students worked in groups to read, explore vocabulary and present three key ideas about a current issue to their peers using a slide show and images. I know that pictures can act as powerful prompts and that using metaphors can help students to make deep connections, so in January, I brought in an assortment of pictures and asked students to choose which best represented their learning (for example, standing at the top of a diving board, a path through the woods, a roller coaster, a sparkler, etc.), and then we worked through the process of writing a four-paragraph essay. With scaffolding and peer support, what

students wrote was thought-provoking and reflective, and actually provided me with a lot of insight into how they thought about themselves and their learning.

I was also responsible for teaching my own English language program. This was a lot, especially because in French Immersion, I needed to report and comment on four strands of French as well as on the four strands in Language (English). But it was exciting, too. As my read-aloud for the year, I chose *Out of My Mind* by Sharon Draper (2010). It is a story about a Junior school student who is non-verbal, non-mobile, trapped in a wheelchair, and intellectually and emotionally brilliant. It is a powerful story about inclusion and biases. It moved us all. I also used picture books to explore themes, metaphors, perspective, and enduring questions. We read *The Composition* by Antonia Skarmeta (2003) and talk about that fragile time in adolescence when you realize you have responsibility for others and that the adults in your life will not always be there to keep you safe. We read *Erika's Story* by Ruth Zee (2013) and talk about the nature of a mother's love through sacrifice.

Because Nothing is Neutral!

We also dug into ideas about censorship, representation, and appropriation. We read about and discussed the decision of public libraries in Winnipeg to put *Tintin in America* in the restricted section, and about the McGill Redmen and Edmonton Eskimos changing their team names. I read them different iterations of *Little Black Sambo* by Helen Bannerman (1923), a clever story with incredibly racist images, right up to the beautifully illustrated reclamation of the story: Lester and Pinkney's *Sam and the Tigers* (2000). We talked about who writes history, and who has the right to represent the stories and art of a given culture. I tried to handle these conversations with grace and gentleness,

especially with my hockey-playing boys who were opposed to changing the names of franchises because of tradition. I loved that these boys were really engaged with the conversation, so I was careful not to shut down their responses, to ask gently whether they thought they would feel differently if they were Indigenous themselves. When one of them answered, “I don’t know,” I nodded and said, “Well, that’s something to think about.” I knew that I had to be careful about being too strident, too pushy, too political, but I wondered whether the conversation would have been different, or if we would have even have had them at all, if there had been any BIPOC students in my class. How would the conversations have looked different if my class had been more (or even at all) racially diverse? I also wondered, as I tried to create space for different points of view in my class by engaging in respectful dialogue and honouring where my students were coming from, when is it OK to just say, “That’s racist, or sexist, or homophobic”? I would never allow space to a student who claimed that the Holocaust didn’t happen or that White people are superior to people of colour. I do not accept the use of the word “gay” as a slur or derogatory comment. How, then, is colonial privilege any different? To what degree am I upholding what DiAngelo has coined “White fragility” (2011) or, at the very least, tacit racism? The professional sports team names were racist, period. So why was I protecting my students as they defended a racist position?

Around the holidays, a number of students asked if we could do a Secret Santa gift exchange. I was resistant, but asked them to write me letters to convince me, and we used this activity to learn about the structure of a good persuasive letter (because every moment is a teachable moment!). The letters were funny and interesting. I told them I would *not* read their letters unless there were at least three reasons for, or against, doing

the Secret Santa. Most were in favour, but several students were opposed—one because he didn't get a good gift the year before (wah wah), and another because she felt it fuels consumerism and unnecessary consumption. (Yes, this is what she wrote at age 11!) I shared some of the balance of letters with students and they decided to do the exchange, but that they would make or find their gifts.

This was the first year that I experimented with a class blog to document and make visible some of the learning we were doing together. I wrote it for my students, for parents, and mostly for myself. As the year started to slip away and I struggled to fit everything in, I recorded myself reading the chapters from our novel, posted the audio and related questions on the blog, and asked students to respond in the comments. The blog became a place to extend conversations from inside the classroom.

We did a unit about banned picture books. Students worked in groups to look into the history of different picture books that had been banned over the years (for example, *The Lorax*; *And Tango Makes Three*; *Where the Wild Things Are*; *The Rabbit's Wedding*; and *The Dirty Cowboy*). I asked them to write two pieces, one arguing for the inclusion of the book in school libraries, and the other asking for them to be removed. Many students struggled with the latter assignment because, for the most part, they disagreed with the reasons for censoring the texts. It was a good exercise in arguing from a point of view that is not your own.

While I felt fairly confident about my math and English and French programs, I was worried about how to get through all the content of my science and social studies curricula without defaulting to quizzes and fill-in-the-blanks about dates and definitions. Both the Grade 6 and 7 social studies curricula are focused on different aspects of human

geography, settlement and Canadian demographics. I knew I wanted my students to be exposed to lesser-known stories, “hidden histories,” and suppressed voices (in Canada and around the world), so I scanned websites and blogs in search of books that challenged the status quo and that shared stories of those who have been “othered” by history. Once I had my list, I placed an order with Another Story Book Shop in Toronto. I also ordered books about teens dealing with mental health problems, bullying, and peer pressure. I ordered “boy books” and books “for girls.” Many of my students read across these binaries, but my goal was to appeal to as many students as possible. My collection reflected the norms and divisions that are out there in the teen book-reading world. I also ordered graphic novels, fantasy, sports, and dystopian series to try to hook my more reluctant readers. I posted a list of books by theme and students read avidly. They actually began to place checkmarks next to the books they had read. It became a sort of competition.

Spending my Social Capital

Yes, I ordered these books out of my own pocket. I believe so very strongly that children need ready access to books that will open new worlds to them, and I believe in the power of story to move and inform and change perspectives. My ability to spend so much of my own money on my classroom (I also buy art supplies and picture books) is a spin-off of my privilege. I am not struggling to pay off my own student debt, and I only have one child, so am not struggling to pay daycare fees. My partner was also well employed. I am by no means a spendthrift—I don’t drive a fancy car, I don’t eat out much or own lots of pairs of shoes. So, I choose to spend much of my disposable income on books for my classroom (I am a bonafide bibliophile; my bedside table is stacked with

YA books), on Sharpie markers, and on acrylic paints (good tools make for better art!). I know that I could ask my principal for money for my classroom library, but I have done so in the past only to be told to check in with my colleagues to see if they would be interested in co-creating a list and sharing a collection. This involves effort, and time, and an alignment of priorities and... compromise. I know what books I want and why I have selected them, and I want them for my students *tomorrow* because I don't want to miss a moment. I also know that I am spending way more money than would be allocated to my division should a book buying project be approved. I try not to spend too much time thinking about this, but I do know that deep down, by not going through "official channels" and spending my own money to furnish a classroom with books and other materials, I am propping up a system that continues to under-resource schools. I am also perpetuating inequity between my class and other classes, where teachers don't or can't spend as much of their own money.

The French/ English Divide: Bridging Through Experiential Education

This was also the year where Centennial students were selected to go to Tim Hortons Foundation Camps for the first time. The mandate of Tim's Camp is to provide outdoor and leadership experiences for disadvantaged youth. Students participate in a range of activities from kick sledding and snowshoeing, geocaching, low ropes course and games of survival, to campfires and stargazing. All expenses for camp are paid, including transportation by bus to and from Parry Sound, where the camp is located. Schools qualify to go to Tim's Camp based on the average socio-economic status of the school. Despite the very privileged students in my class, Centennial qualified easily for this experience. Through the efforts of our vice-principal and a local Tim Hortons

franchise, we took 48 students to camp for an experience many of them will never forget. We went for the first time in January, for four days and three nights. While a good number of students were nervous about attending, when we returned to Centennial they were already asking when we could go back. Being at camp with my students and with students from other classes as they spent time outside and worked in groups to learn new skills, overcome challenges, and build community confirmed what I already knew: that these are opportunities that all kids deserve, and as long as I am an educator, I want to be a part of making this happen in whatever ways I can.

Another positive outcome of Tim's Camp was that it brought students from English and French Immersion together. They were in activity groups together and sat together at mealtimes, and we also mixed up dorm rooms in the hopes that they would connect during their down time. Our time at Tim's Camp did not fix the rift between the French and English students, but it did break down some barriers. Students at least knew one another's names, they shared laughs and challenges, and came to have some sense of each other. I hoped that this would bring about a shift in school culture, but in the absence of teacher follow up, I am not sure it really did.

I really wanted to build bridges between my class and the Grade 6 English class across the hall. I worked a fair amount with their teacher during my time as coach, so I had high hopes that we could bring our students together to do some learning. Our classes had very different profiles: many of the students in her class lived in generational poverty; she had 14 students with IEPs to my three; she had a boy in her class who had serious delays and a full time EA who worked with him and supported other students, too. In late September, I organized a trip to see an exhibition of Norval Morriseau's work

paired with a trip to Petroglyphs Provincial Park. We took both classes and they mostly enjoyed the art and a 5 km hike in the fall colours, although some of her students struggled with stamina. I thought it was a good day, but my colleague was pretty exhausted at the end of it. We did attend Tim's Camp together, but when I suggested other joint activities, she declined. I felt sad because I worked with her students when they were in Grade 5 and some of them were *really* capable. I worried that they were missing out on opportunities because of all the needs in the class.

Safe Harbour

In February my personal life imploded and I spent the next year supporting someone I loved and cared for deeply as we navigated the criminal justice system. I kept on teaching in order to cope, to distract myself, to avoid thinking too much. A chronic oversharer, I learned for perhaps the first time in my life to become more private. My open-book policy no longer held. It was strange and unsettling as my personal life lurched into *The Twilight Zone*. I do not want to tell the story here, but suffice it to say that it was truly awful and the trauma of the whole thing was not helped by the blow-by-blow reporting in the local newspaper. My principal offered me the rest of the year off, but my classroom was actually a refuge, and I retreated there to forget and heal.

When I think back to the last half of that year, it was like I was on autopilot. My overwhelming feeling was one of gratitude for my class and for my work, which offered reassurance that some things were still right in the world. My colleagues, too, were compassionate and caring. My principal extended her caring to the rest of my family, including my partner by always asking how she was, and to my son, who was in Grade 2 at the school, by ensuring that different staff check in casually with him from time to

time. I had a lovely, hard-working teacher candidate, and we worked together to design an interesting project around non-governmental organizations (NGOs) and the important work they do in the world. We designed math quizzes together and dug into formative assessment, designing a geometry unit that was constructive and creative. On days that I went to Toronto for counselling appointments, it was comforting to know that she was taking the reins and planning the day with an occasional teacher as support.

In March, I chaperoned the second sojourn at Tim Horton Camp. It was a bit of a blur. I both trusted and did not trust the colleague who attended with me, but she had a good rapport with the students and was clear about expectations so I did not have to play the “heavy”—it was nice to share the responsibility for managing students equally. What stands out from this time at camp is the student who refused to wear snow pants because, she said, they would “make her look fat,” and who worried about being singled out as “that Asian girl”. I tried to support her as a young human who was wrestling with her own sense of herself and her identity. Doing so took a lot of emotional energy, but it was a relief to focus on someone else’s emotions other than my own.

I somehow made it through to the end of the year. It helped to know that I would be on leave the following year and did not have to face the public shame of what had happened in my personal life, and could process the trauma more privately. At the end of the year we had a class pot-luck lunch with food inspired by early Canada. We had wild rice and strawberries and a whole host of other delicious entrees. I coached Junior Boys 3-Pitch and Junior Ultimate Frisbee. I also ran two Outers Club trips, and it was a pleasure to be working with students whom I had taught in Grades 3 and 4 and who are now in Grades 7 and 8. They were smart, funny, and wise. Some were aware of what was

happening in my personal life, and they were gracious and compassionate. Outers was another harbour in the storm.

One of the Grade 7s in my class and in Outers Club was Dan. He was super bright and competitive, but not used to being pushed. I spent the year trying to build him up and inspire him to work to his potential. When we had to do a whole class debrief about his poor sportsmanship during soccer, his peers managed to be direct but also compassionate. It was uncomfortable but, I thought, a good lesson for him. A few classes later we did some “shout outs,” and several students consciously named him for being supportive and helpful. I *loved* and *marvelled* that they knew that he needed their positive reinforcement. At the end of the year, Dan was one of the few students whose end-of-year card to me alluded to the trauma in my personal life. He wrote, “I appreciate how you were there for us even when your own life was challenging.” (Dan was living with his own trauma: His father died by suicide the year before, so I knew he understood about pushing through and carrying on). I cried.

I made mistakes that year. Lots! But it didn’t seem to matter because my students and I were so bonded and in sync with one another as a group. Students were forgiving of my changes in direction and sometimes, when my instructions lacked clarity, they were able to work with me to make a lesson or a project better. I was incredibly grateful to have a job I loved, one that provided meaning and hope and stability. It was that year that I was most aware that teaching and working with children is a force for good in my life, something that keeps me tethered when the storm blows through.

Somewhere in the maelstrom, I also applied to do a Master’s in Education at Trent University, and was accepted.

Graduate School, Teaching, and Academia

In July of 2015 I began my year of graduate studies. It was fun to moonlight as a student again and to have a year to myself to be immersed in theory and educational research. This year was possible because I was in the fifth year of a “four over five”: A self-funded leave program where I earned 80% of my salary for 4 years and then used the banked salary (4 X 20%) to “take a year off” in the fifth year.

Rapunzel, Rapunzel: A Return to the Ivory Tower

I was excited about graduate school, about new learning, about having time to think about my teaching and frame it in new ways. I had a vague sense that I wanted to do something math-related—I knew that it was an “area of concern” in education. Also, my own journey from math mystification to magic had inspired me to think about resilience, content knowledge, and teacher learning.

My first master’s course began in July of 2015. Diving into a new group of people and into the reading and thinking required in a graduate level course was a welcome distraction from the messiness of my personal life. The first course, Interdisciplinary Critical Approaches to Educational Theory, was a revelation. It surpassed my expectations in terms of content and approach. I was especially surprised by the justice orientation of the course. In the schools in which I had been teaching, conversations about critical pedagogy and justice only happened in the margins, and when it came to teacher practice, justice had been co-opted by equity and platitudes about “achieving excellence for all” and “we welcome, we include, we learn.” In my elementary classroom, I try to teach for justice through my content, my approach, and by being self-

reflective about my privilege—but mostly I feel like an apologist for having such a “radical” and socially conscious stance. So, being in this class was a sort of homecoming. I felt, for the first time in a long while, that a vision of education focused on democracy, justice, and transformation was (and is) possible. It turned out that I was hungry for dialogue and debate about these possibilities. I revelled in the critical conversations and in the insights shared by my peers, although I was struck by the fact that only five of us were K-12 classroom teachers and I myself was the only elementary teacher.

I am (still) irked by the density of some of the course readings, of the disconnect between the “academy” and what I continue to call, the “pragmatic realities of teaching.” The more academic readings poked at my “imposter syndrome” and the cops in my head suggested that maybe I just didn’t have the intellectual capacity for theorizing. My “but I’m a good teacher” self said, “Yeah but how is all this theory applicable? In real time? With real kids?” I felt a quiet need to prove that I was smart enough for this program, or for graduate studies in general. Reading is something that has always been easy for me, especially if there is a narrative through-line. But I really struggled to dissect and distill ideas in more academic papers. I read with the Merriam-Webster online dictionary open on my computer and took copious notes, but struggled to figure out what was important or relevant. I was on the edge of my comfort zone. I felt real empathy for the students I teach who have trouble making sense of what they read. I hoped that this would make me a better, more patient teacher.

False Start (Why Expediency and Learning are Rarely Compatible)

In the fall, I took the required methods course. It was practical-ish but not very inspiring. I found the different research models, approaches, and considerations to be

interesting, but very few examples (if any) involved research with teachers in K-12 schools. I dug for meaning and resonance where I could find it, but it all seemed somewhat abstract to me. The discussions with my peers continued to provoke and ignite, but by-and-large, the readings did not speak to me. I did not see myself or my practice in them. Feedback on my papers was limited to my inability to master APA protocols. Nevertheless, I used the final assignment for the methods course to write the initial proposal for my thesis. This was a useful process and the guidelines were actually quite clear. I spent a lot of time on my literature review and methodology to ensure that the proposal would actually work for the thesis I intended to write. At this point in time, I was trying to take a pragmatic approach to my thesis and my “year off.” I was thrilled that Cathy Bruce had agreed to be my advisor, as we shared a passion for math and math education and the resources she has produced for teachers are some of the best I have ever used. I respect her research and that her scholarship is grounded in classroom practice (she was a teacher in an elementary classroom just like me!). When I first talked with Cathy before applying to graduate school and shared my interest in equity, resilience, and math learning, she suggested I look at teacher self-efficacy in mathematics. I did some preliminary reading and there was a case to be made for a connection between teacher self-efficacy and both resilience and equity. When Cathy suggested I tie my thesis to a project she already had on the go that was looking at teacher efficacy, collaborative action research, and the teaching of fractions, it seemed too good to be true. I convinced myself that looking at teacher efficacy was a great entry point for digging deeper into my preoccupation with “good teaching” and with “teaching for justice.” Jumping into an existing research project seemed like an awesome way to do

some learning and also to just “get my thesis done.” I knew I would be back in the classroom the following year and that when I am teaching, I don’t have a lot of energy or brain power left over for anything else.

And so, in early September, I was already writing my ethics proposal to do research with a team of teachers at Highlands High School, in the Trillium Lakelands District School Board, as they explored how to help students develop a deeper conceptual understanding of fractions. The project involved teachers from several different disciplines including music, foods, and tech, as well as a lead teacher who was a math specialist. Most of our work would be with Grade 9 students, but as some of the tech courses were open level courses, some of the participating students were in Grades 10 and 11. The project also involved a math specialist from the Ministry of Education and a research team from Trent. I acted as a sort of liaison for this team in Haliburton. My research questions asked whether involvement in a collaborative action research project would bring about improvements in individual and collective teacher self efficacy and student achievement; and a shift in teacher stance about the teaching of fractions (and math in general). I wanted to find out if teachers who were actively meeting to plan, design, assess, and reflect on student learning would build individual and collective efficacy around the teaching of fractions, and also, hopefully, help students to more easily and skillfully solve fraction-related math problems.

I wrote my proposal with the research in Haliburton in mind and got ethics approval to do the interviews and to administer surveys. I consulted with the tech specialist at the university library about how to encrypt the interview data and, several days a week, I drove to Haliburton to do my research.

At the same time, I began an independent reading course about math and equity. I read *Mathematics for Equity* (Nasir et al., 2014), about Jo Boaler's work with Railside Academy; and *Teaching and Writing the World with Mathematics* by Eric Gutstein (2005), and I was fired up. I read a paper by Indigo Esmonde (2009) about relational equity, and was especially moved by the work of Rochelle Guttiérrez (2002, 2007, 2009, 2013) and her research matrix that frames math and equity as an intersection between power, achievement, access, and identity. Guttiérrez (2007) also writes about windows and mirrors to talk about how students from minority backgrounds come to see and understand themselves through and beyond math learning. I found the metaphor a powerful one through which to examine my own practice and understanding of the world.

My time in Haliburton was rich and inspiring: It was a small school and the teachers with whom I worked were really invested in the students they taught and the community in which they lived. They willingly filled out the self-efficacy questionnaires and administered a pre-test, developed by a research team at Trent, that looked at student understanding of fractions. They readily allowed me to hang out and sometimes guest teach in their classes. They were kind and patient and curious about me and about the research. My routine was strangely reminiscent of my time as an instructional coach, a role I slipped into as it was familiar. I found myself in the staff room behind the secretaries using the paper cutter to cut up coloured paper into strips to build fractions towers with kids in wood-working and cooking classes. At first, I was nervous about working with older students, but teaching is teaching and I realized that no matter the age, they are still just kids. Upon reflection, I wonder if I needed to spend less time doing

and more time observing and documenting, but that has never been my strong suit. In the end, it didn't really matter.

This happened to be a school year where teachers in the Trillium Lakelands board were without a collective agreement and they were in a dispute with the board about their contract. As a result, and as part of a modified work to rule (they were still coaching and running clubs) they were not meeting or engaging in any board- or Ministry-directed professional development. This meant that teacher conversations and learning, which were supposed to happen collectively as part of the action research process that I was supposed to be observing, did not happen. Even when we scheduled covert meetings, we were foiled by ice and snow days that seemed to happen in record numbers that winter. And so, measuring the effectiveness of collaborative teacher learning became sort of a moot point, as the collaboration was not happening. I was aware that this was a flaw in my plan and a serious limitation to my study, but I was already "on the train" and not sure how to get off.

I continued to build relationships and to work with teachers in their classrooms. I noticed what was possible in a small school where teachers were close friends as well as colleagues. I also wondered about which students' needs were being met and whose weren't. I forged a strong connection with the math division chair, who had four sections of Grade 9 math, including a locally-developed section and an all-boys applied level class. I was inspired by her quest to make math real, by her belief in early intervention, and her frank assertion that she liked teaching Grade 9 because she was more concerned about the students than the curriculum. She was a quiet leader, liked, respected,

intelligent, organized, hardworking, critical, intentional. She opened both her practice and her home to me without hesitation.

In the meantime, I took another course, entitled Community Learning: Relationships, Creativity, Action. For my seminar, I dug into Wenger's (1998) work about communities of practice. I was intrigued by the idea of "border-brokering" (Wenger 1998), being a conduit between worlds, perspectives, and hierarchies. I wrote a paper about how my community of practice involved two former colleagues (who now work in different schools) and about how they were the critical friends and sounding boards who helped me to reflect on and grow in my teaching. I also wrote about how I shared more common language and values about social justice with parents in my school than with colleagues. This was interesting to me. I started to explore ideas about how teachers can form communities of practice with a goal, a joint enterprise (Wenger, 1998) of improving student outcomes. This led me to explore articles about the conditions that are necessary for teachers to support and engage with one another's learning. The conditions that stood out most for me were the ones that say that teacher learning needs to be grounded in an inquiry or learning stance (Cochran-Smith, 2015; Dweck, 2006; Jaworski, 2006; Ravitch, 2014) and centered around the collaborative, critical examination of student work (Ball & Cohen, 1999; Fishman et al., 2003; Kazemi & Franke, 2004). Yes! Be curious, be open and start with the kids. Look at their work, use it to inspire thinking and questions and next steps. I knew from my own practice that this is really important and powerful, and what I was reading resonated with many of the discussions and workshops I attended as an instructional coach. As I came up against the criteria for what is an acceptable text to support my research (some of the trade literature is okay, much of it is not), it was

reassuring to find this point of intersection in my reading. I was excited about the possibilities to be part of a professional learning community and to learn alongside my peers as we work to support students once I returned to Centennial.

At the end of April, I headed to Ecuador for six weeks with Tanner (my son) for him to connect with family, and to see a part of the world that is outside of our experience. We returned in mid-June and I headed back to Haliburton to do my final interviews. And then it was summer.

Tangles and Tensions: Peeling Back Layers

I took my second methods course: Critical Narrative Inquiry. Throughout the course we looked at the power of story to transform and inform, and at the ways different discourses can frame perceptions. We looked at ethical implications involved in the telling of stories, and we each led a seminar that captured the story of our research. This course marked a turning point in my understanding of myself as a teacher and researcher. It was also a catalyst for a real crisis in confidence about the direction and validity of my thesis. As I was trying to put together my final seminar presentation, I realized that I had lost faith in my project and my methodology. I was not compelled by the research instrument; the survey questions seem facile and limiting. And my interviews, as lovely as the interviewees were, felt shallow because many of my questions were about a collaborative research process that did not happen. Also, my faith in teacher efficacy as a viable path to equity was eroding. I had read dozens of papers that made the case for teacher self-efficacy as an indicator of effective teaching that promotes equity, but something didn't feel quite right. Was it that the same four or five papers were cited over and over? Was it that efficacy studies didn't seem to clearly address socio-economic

disparities or systemic racism? Was it that I am uncomfortable with trying to “measure” something as nebulous as “good teaching?” Was it that the teacher self-efficacy survey instrument depended on teacher self-reporting? (I know some teachers who perceive themselves to be highly efficacious, when this is not my perception). Maybe it was just that the research about how to improve teaching self-efficacy all seemed so, well, obvious: Your sense of your own teaching effectiveness increases when you have positive teaching experiences and receive positive feedback. Well, duh. I also realized that I didn’t want to code and sort responses as “data.” I wanted to tell stories. I wanted to revel in the anecdotal, be inspired by the exceptions that make the rule.

Regardless of the cause, a bubble had burst. While I recognize that the bursting was important to my learning, it felt a little like my course instructor had handed me the pin and then withdrawn. I would have liked some guidance about a new direction for my research, but he seemed unwilling to be prescriptive. As independent and critical as I am, I really would have liked, at this point, for someone to say: *Nansi, actually, what you really want to write about is this*. Of course, this is not how it works. I felt lost and that I was an imposter posing as a grad student.

My instructor did steer me towards an exploration of the neoliberalization of education and the accompanying preoccupation with standards and assessment. He led me to interrogate the word “measure” as applied to learning. This provoked me deeply because, while I resent testing (the cost; the point-in-time measure of a narrow wedge of student content knowledge and competency; the hidden factors that are assessed, like wealth, class and learning opportunities, or lack thereof), I also resent those teachers with whom I work who do not have the same expectations of students that I do. I am highly

critical of those whom I perceive to let themselves off the hook by situating the locus of control (Rotter, 1966) in our notoriously “hard-to-serve” population of students, outside of their reach (“*Well, there’s no parent support. Who knows what they see at home? You know, no one is going to read with him. The only decent meal they eat is at Breakfast Club,*” etc.). I recognize that many students in my school face significant challenges in their lives that affect their ability to learn. And, I also believe that teachers can help students overcome these challenges. I believe that it is our job to bust our butts to help *all* students to develop skills and abilities that will help them be successful in the world. So, I want there to be some sort of *standard*, I do want teachers to be *accountable*. But both of these words are so loaded and embedded in audit culture, and in the increasingly commercial model of education, that it is hard to not want to abandon them altogether. Trying to quantify any specific aspect of what good teaching is or looks like is like trying to fit a square peg into a round hole. Teaching is such a complex matrix of skills, abilities, experiences, and dispositions that I am not sure any of it is really measurable. When I was an instructional coach, one of the principals I worked with developed a checklist of “look fors” for teachers; some had to do with what was posted around their room, others had to do with the content, structure, and orientation of their lessons. Some teachers liked the checklist, others felt they were being too closely scrutinized. I am not sure what effect the checklist had on teacher practice, but at it’s best it was a guideline with goals to strive for, and at its worst it was a sort of “Big Brotheresque” performance tool that policed and commodified teacher practice.

I am conflicted. I recognize the danger of teacher blaming, of situating the responsibility for addressing inequality in opportunities to learn solely at the feet of

teachers. As much as I desperately want to believe it exists, there is no “magic instructional bullet” that will enable a teacher to completely overcome the systemic injustices grounded in poverty and racism that are real and significant obstacles for many students. I am very aware that while I judge and evaluate other teachers *all* the time, that it is not politic to do so. Maybe not ethical either? But there has to be room for critique, for asking hard questions about whether we are fulfilling our obligations and doing our best by the students we teach so that we can get better at what we do. So, what does this process look like? How does it happen? Whose job is it to make it happen?

While taking the Critical Narrative Course, I also took my Math Specialist course. The math course was a good antidote to all the theorizing and academic-speak. It positioned me as someone with wisdom and useful knowledge at a time when I was feeling like a complete idiot about my grad studies. I got some positive feedback from the instructor, who suggested that someday I might teach a course like this. This was a good morale boost. But the course was a *lot* of work and I was really tired. *Really*. And school was just around the corner.

And then there were two weeks left of the summer and I started thinking about my return to the classroom. Ever the optimist, I hoped that somehow I might salvage some of the learning from my thesis project and engage in a collaborative action research project at Centennial. I spoke to some Junior Intermediate colleagues, talked to my advisor, wrote a proposal, and dreamt of creating a community of teacher-learners who worked together to teach math collaboratively for the benefit of *all* students.

I left my work in Haliburton on the back burner. I submitted my final paper to the graduate course instructor and dug into planning and preparing for a new crew of students and a return to Centennial.

Fall from Grace

This quote by Nelson Mandela (1994) is oft repeated, but it bears inserting here because I think, in some ways, it captures what it felt like for me to head back to the classroom after a year of grad school: “There is nothing like returning to a place that remains unchanged to find the ways in which you yourself have altered.”

September found me back in the classroom teaching Grade 6-7 again. I knew a few students from choir and Junior soccer, but for the most part they were quite unknown to me as I had been away from Centennial for all but one of the last four years. I knew that a good number of them were Harry Potter-obsessed in Grades 4 and 5, and that four of the seven boys were keen math students. I also had several boys who barely spoke French and one who refused to do so, answering any task I put to him in English. I felt frustrated because his refusal to speak French was not about ability but about attitude, about not seeing learning French as valuable, and about resisting the work and risk-taking necessary to learn a new language. As I wrote in the section on “The French/English Divide”, there is often inadequate support for students with learning difficulties in French Immersion, which means that most are funneled into the English stream—especially if they do not have strong parent advocates. The flip side to this is that there are some students, like this one, who are quite vocal about “hating French” but who remain in French Immersion because their parents want them to be with the kids from “good families.” Having a child in French Immersion then becomes less about valuing

bilingualism and more about social class. Another part of the problem is the reluctance of some teachers to give French Immersion students grades that indicate their lack of progress, especially when a student is perceived to be capable but underperforming in French. This, too, has to do with parent pressure, and it seemed with this student that I had inherited a veritable hornet's nest.

There were some really bright, quirky students in this class, and by all accounts they were a "nice" group. But, they were decidedly *not* forthcoming. I was not sure what this is about: in part it was because a number of them were quite introverted, but there was something else, too. They were perhaps more self-sufficient than previous groups of students I had taught. They were focused on their own interests, and I had the sense that they were waiting for me to convince them that what we were doing at school, in class, was worthy of their attention. Whatever it was, something was not clicking. Maybe it was just me.

Especially at the beginning of the year, it was my Grade 7s who were my saving grace. There were six of them, all girls, and they demonstrated leadership when it came to participation and engagement. They were all with me in Outers Club, so we bonded quickly and solidly. I was glad for their presence. Mostly, though, I noticed the relationships that I was *not* building, the awkward gaps in conversation, the lack of response from different students. I felt like I was spinning my wheels, trying to spark something, cross a threshold, but I just didn't seem to be getting anywhere.

I launched my math program with what Jo Boaler (2016) calls "low floor, high ceiling" tasks. These are math problems that can be explored in different ways and at different levels of complexity. At the end of one such task, the Smartboard was covered

in a happy collage of student thinking, when one of my boys (bright, and very mathy) said snarkily, “What's the point of all of this if you are not working towards a specific answer?” I smiled, and talked about the importance of learning from one another and that there are always different ways to see and approach a problem. He responded with, “Well I don’t see how that helps us learn.” I held him back at recess and we had a chat. I told him that I was concerned about how his attitude was affecting less-confident students who engaged readily with these tasks. He was quiet but did not apologize. We did get over this hiccup as the year progressed, but this one interaction was sadly emblematic of the year as a whole. Shared learning and community building are central to my practice, but I was never sure if we truly came together as a community. We shared space, we shared experiences, but somehow we were all in our own worlds.

In spite of this lack of connectedness, or perhaps because of it, I threw myself into planning a justice-oriented curriculum. Buoyed by my year in graduate studies and the reconnection I had made with my critical-pedagogue self, I was less apologetic about having a justice agenda. I made it explicit in my newsletter home to parents and in my class blog. It felt really good to be explicit about my stance and to give up the pretense of being neutral. Where previously I had been concerned about “pushing an agenda” onto students, I now felt confident that the texts and perspectives I shared that highlighted injustice in the world were a tiny wedge when juxtaposed against the ensemble of perspectives to which my students were exposed at home, through the media and in the world at large. I diligently recorded many of our conversations on the class blog as a way of being transparent about my process to parents and of taking engagement outside of the classroom.

I created a new subject block I called MfSJ (math for social justice), and every few weeks we engaged in a math project inspired by David Stocker's book, *Math Matters* (2006) and Bob Peterson and Eric Gutstein's book, *Rethinking mathematics: Teaching social justice by the numbers* (2006). We applied our understanding of surface area and scale to calculate the areas of different continents using the Mercator projection map, and then compared our calculations to the actual areas, revealing a bias in favour of Europe and North America (which appear bigger) and against Africa and South America (which appear smaller). We talked about colonialism and Eurocentrism, and contrasted the Mercator projection with the Gall-Peters projection. What we discovered was powerful and, for some students, quite literally earth-shattering. We did some explorations of proportion and ratio using Barbie dolls and action figures, then read about body image and eating disorders and discussed the role that toys and other products play in projecting body ideals. We also examined infographics and statistics about homelessness in Canada and Ontario, after which students asked if they could "do something," and so we held a bake sale to raise money for three different organizations: the local youth emergency shelter, a women's shelter, and the local hospice (palliative care centre). Students also wrote letters to the staff of these organizations, thanking them for their work and wishing them well. We baked together as a class and students brought in their own baking. The bake sale raised over \$800 and students were really proud of their accomplishment.

I tried to balance heavy issues with candy-math and linear function questions that asked things like, Will a human running at a given speed arrive home safely before the vampire 10 m behind them and running at a slightly faster given speed catches up? I also experimented with trying to make my math teaching practices more student-focused and

equitable. Inspired by the Railside Studies documented in *Mathematics for Equity* (Nasir et al., 2014), I tried some group quizzes, which asked students to review a concept and then respond together for a shared mark. Group quizzes intrigue me because all students in a group must answer at least one question. More-confident students are asked to support their less confident peers by explaining, re-teaching, and modeling. Less-confident students need to advocate for themselves, ask questions, ask for clarification, and work with their peers towards understanding.

I love using picture books with Junior and Intermediate students. As Carrie Gelson (2017) writes in her blog post for the Nerdy Book Club, “There is a certain magic contained in picture books. They draw us in. More importantly and more powerfully, they draw us together” (para. 3). Listening to a story builds community through shared emotional experience and can catalyse explorations of themes and symbols, values and choices. They offer rich opportunities for provocation and reflection and for a shared experience of literary analysis. I was more deliberate this year about my choice of books than ever before. I drew on books that fostered empathy and that provoked deep discussions about inclusion, racism, peace and conflict, sacrifice, courage, and responsibility. At the beginning of the year, students were somewhat reluctant to be read to, but as the year progressed, they began to ask, “Are we going to read a story today?” I felt like I was making progress.

I continued to add to my independent reading collection, which highlights stories about youth around the world, including Canadian history from “outsider perspectives.” But with a few exceptions, students this year didn’t engage as avidly with the collection and themes. I couldn’t seem to get the “book buzz” going. Many of my students did

engage, including some reluctant readers, but I noticed those who didn't— in particular, several really academic students who were avid readers. These students were more interested in reading the latest dystopian and fantasy series, and I understood the appeal, but I wanted my reading program to supplement my social studies program. When I did a reading inventory at the beginning of the year, I learned that several of my boys mostly wanted to read books about sports. So, I did some research and added books themed around basketball and hockey to my collection. I wonder why I was resistant to adding the dystopian lit? Perhaps I've missed an opportunity to explore the world we live in today and the world we hope to build for the future through the stories of worlds gone badly wrong?

Fresh from doing the *DEL F (Diplôme d'études en langue française)* examiner training the previous summer, I was keen to keep developing the authentic communication component of my French Immersion program. Thanks to a school board technology grant, I now had 9 iPads to use in my classroom and could embed video projects into my teaching. Students put together introductory videos and used the iPads to record dialogues, comical debates, mock interviews, and poetry. I also worked hard to bring more contemporary French culture into my teaching. I introduced French musicians and we did song analysis. I also spent hours searching for news clips and videos about different topics that I thought my students would find interesting.

I was aware that the previous year, this group of students did not speak as much French, so I decided that our first week of school would be exclusively in French, even during the community building challenges that I used to launch the year. It was difficult for students to support one another and solve-problems in French. I wonder now whether

the power of the initiative tasks to help students establish positive relationships and to build trust was hindered by their struggle to communicate spontaneously? I realized later that some students found the experiences more stressful than fun. Sigh.

After the first week, I continued to set high expectations and to be strict about speaking French. I coached and cajoled and encouraged and reprimanded. We did conversational challenges where students earned points in their groups for speaking French, and I rewarded the winning groups at the end of each week with homemade cookies. I knew it was my job to inspire and encourage and enforce French speaking, but I also wanted them to be motivated internally, to buy into the value of learning and speaking another language. And so I decided to make speaking French real. I reached out to the principal at a school in Lachine, Quebec, the town where I grew up, to inquire if there might be a teacher in her building who would be willing to be part of a pen pal project. Before I knew it (and with the support of family and friends in Montréal), the pen pal program was up and running, and I was organising a four-day exchange to Montréal. Kids were excited and so were parents. We spent much of the new year planning and fundraising so that the exchange would be affordable and accessible for all of my students. I arranged for us to stay at the local United Church, I planned a behind the scenes visit to the Biodome and to do a scavenger hunt around Old Montréal. We walked to the nearby fur trade museum (a 30-minute walk from where we were staying) and I connected with a local outdoor pool so students could go swimming. I corresponded with my partner-teacher in Lachine and we organized a day for our students to get to know one another in person. We visited their class and played improv games, walked together to the local Dairy Queen and did some group initiative tasks in the park. We travelled to and

from downtown by public transport, and to and from Montréal by VIA train. The whole trip cost around \$300 per student. I managed spending money for students and ensured that they all, regardless of income, had enough to buy lunch out, ice cream treats, and the occasional popsicle. We used the church kitchen to prepare and serve breakfast and pack brown bag lunches. I travelled with four parent volunteers, one of whom drove to Montréal to ensure that we had a car at our disposal.

The greatest challenge of the trip was sorting out the finances with the school secretary. Parents did a tremendous amount of fundraising to support the trip, including a fundraiser with the local cheese shop (selling Quebec cheeses of course!) and put a great deal of time and energy into a garage sale that raised more than \$1,000. This helped to offset the cost of the trip and meant that I was able to subsidize three students.

Aside from filling out all the requisite paperwork required by the school board to have the trip approved, I worked really hard to make the logistics for the trip transparent. I made up a budget, planned itineraries, and completed safety plans. I made copies of receipts in duplicate and hosted two parent meetings. But this trip was the first of its kind, so some details were hard to pin down. The grassroots design of the trip meant there needed to be some wiggle room: I wanted to be sure that if it was pouring rain, we could call taxis instead of walking to the fur trade museum or, it being the season of outdoor concerts and plays, we could pay for admission to local performance should one present itself. My principal was supportive of both me and the project. However, the school secretary was uncomfortable and disapproving of the trip right from the outset because it did not fit the mold of most school-related trips. She refused to allow me any autonomy with trip finances. She was also reluctant to hand over the school credit card to allow me

to book and pay for the tours and events, and I had to do this with the principal at my side. Nor would she allow me to travel with the school credit card for emergency use, which meant that I would have had to rely on my own funds had the need arisen. This was completely contrary to experiences I had had in other schools: at Munro, we opened a separate account for my behaviour class so that we could deposit and withdraw money from fundraisers to use as we saw fit; at Meadowbrook I spent money for Outers Club and kept track of expenses and receipts in a spreadsheet, and was reimbursed without question. But this was not my experience for the Montréal trip. The school secretary questioned my judgment and objected to the “imprecision” in my financial planning. I kept smiling, said thank you often, and carried on.

At the end of this trip, we had under-spent by about \$70 per student. Parents had agreed that this money could go towards a literacy project in Haiti, one that was supported by the United Church in Montréal that had kindly let us stay in their community hall (for a nominal fee). Our secretary put me through the ringer about the fact that my budget did not match my expenses and refused to allocate the extra funds to the Haitian charity. Instead, she insisted that parents be refunded, saying, “You can’t just make up the rules.” I was not happy and I let her know it.

The trip was an overwhelming success (minus a fight between two hot-headed boys on the last night), but I did not do one the following year, mostly because of the work involved and because my overwhelming feeling was one of not being supported, and of “creating work for other people.” I found myself wondering why it is *so* difficult to think and work outside the box, even when it is in the best interests of children. Working within an atmosphere of passive or active resistance is exhausting, whether it is

from colleagues, students, administrators, or the system itself. I recognize the need for policies and procedures to “keep things on the level,” to keep students safe, and to ensure some form of control over how resources are allocated in schools, but there has to be room for innovation and creativity.

I also wonder if, in fact, the whole trip was an over-compensation for my inability to feel connected to my students. I wonder who I was trying to engage—my students, or myself?

I began that year immersed in reading and research about math education and critical pedagogy. Despite a lack of support from either the school board or Trent, I really hoped to act on the proposal I had written the year before to collaborate with my colleagues to try some equity-oriented instructional strategies in our math classes. I hoped to engage in a cycle of inquiry *with* my peers in the interest of maybe changing the math culture in our building. But, I realized very quickly that this was just not where people were at. Despite expressing some interest in the project the previous spring, my colleagues in the English stream resisted my overtures to collaborate, mostly on account of how “low” their students were and because, in their own words, they were “more focused on the hidden curriculum.” By this they meant working on kindness and positive social interactions. When I talked with my divisional co-chair (who also had ties to Trent and the fraction research) about learning together, she reminded me that “things are pretty busy and people just want to get home at the end of the day.”

I also hoped to stay connected with the fraction research happening at Trent as the team extended their work into the Intermediate grades. I did manage to encourage my Grade 8 colleague to volunteer, and was keen to get my Grade 7 students involved even

though there were only six of them. I can remember the moment sitting on the pool deck at Trent watching Tanner (my son) swim, when I got the email from the research team saying that they were not going to run the project. It was not personal, but I felt abandoned by a project to which I pretty much gave a year of my graduate studies. I wanted to be part of some sort of teacher learning. I wanted to continue having conversations about pedagogy and ways to help kids learn. And it seemed that I just couldn't make it happen.

At the school level, in terms of learning together as a staff, we were paused. The principal was the same one whom I had come to know during my time as a coach: kind and present, but who preferred to let us “lead ourselves.” There was no coherent school vision and no money from the board for professional development. Our acting VP, who became a friend and ally during my time at Marie Curie, did his best to fill the void. He was smart and mathy and organized, and incredibly hard-working. He took on the mantle of organising the Tim Hortons camp trip without missing a beat, and also ensured that the school breakfast and snack programs ran smoothly. He was supportive of teachers and of students who struggled, was present on the yard, and generally did his absolute best to meet as many of the divergent needs in the building as possible. In general, staff appreciated his presence and his efforts, but there were a number of people in the building (in particular, a pod whom a number of my colleagues had quietly dubbed “the mean girls”) who perceived that he got the job because of “the penis factor” (that is, because he is male). They felt that one of their peers, a woman who also had her principal qualifications, should have been asked to be vice-principal before him. I understood the frustration; I have watched, on more than one occasion, as less competent male teachers

“scooped” jobs that I felt should have gone to more-capable female candidates. There is a belief out there that we need more positive male role models in elementary schools and, true or not, this does create a bias in hiring. However, in this case, the person who had been selected for the job was clearly well-qualified for the position. This same group of teachers were relentlessly critical of the administrative team and continued to frame them both in derogatory and contemptuous ways. There is a certain bonding that happens when you share your complaints and frustrations with other people, and I get this. In fact, whole communities can be created around a culture of malcontent. Michael Fullan (2001) warns of the dangers of teacher communities underpinned by close relationships, noting that they are powerful but that “unless they are focusing on the right things they may end up being powerfully wrong” (p. 67). A part of me would actually like to belong to a community of strong, dedicated teachers, but not, I realize, if what brings us together is a shared frustration that manifests as smallness and negativity. I was well-respected by this group of “mean girl” teachers, but I found myself increasingly avoiding their company because I didn’t want to be a part of the toxic culture they were perpetuating. The more I removed myself, the less they sought me out. While I was relieved, I also felt a sense of loss and isolation. I took some comfort through all of this from the words and wisdom of a long-term friend and colleague who teaches kindergarten (the same one who argued that we shouldn’t really need a principal to set goals and expectations for us, that part of “being professional” is to do this for ourselves). She said, “Nansi, they are excellent teachers, but they are not who or how you want to be as a teacher, or a person.” I tried to see the positives that my principal brought to the building and continued to appreciate her

kindness and calm presence. But I also felt frustrated that she wasn't standing up for the rest of us, that her passive approach to leadership had created a vacuum for others to fill.

I was also careful about my friendship with our current VP. I did not want to cause grief for him, nor he for me. Knowing he was there helped me to feel somewhat less isolated, but I was aware that he was trying to accomplish a ridiculous number of things in a single day and being my sounding board was not one of the most pressing. It was good that he was in the building, but like my friend and ally who taught Grade 5/6 on the second floor, he was not able to be actively a part of the learning community I was trying to create for myself. I did help myself to handfuls of jujubes he kept in his office and bumbled to him about exciting or successful math lessons, but I tried to not burden him with too much angst. He had enough on his plate.

And so, I pressed on. I kept teaching, continued to coach and run Outers Club, wrote thoughtful updates on the class blog and did my best to nurture and engage the students in my class. My students continued to be fairly reserved. They participated, but not with energy and enthusiasm. I started to wonder whether the problem was me? Maybe I was expecting too much? Maybe I was unable to see that they were present and that they were as invested in learning and connecting as I was? The thing about being siloed, about teaching in a vacuum, about spending too much time thinking and reflecting *by myself*, is that I had lost my ability to know whether I was doing a good job or not. In the absence of student feedback or affirmation, I felt deflated and insecure. I am still looking for some sort of affirmation that all this effort is worth something not only here, but in the bigger picture.

It is hard, looking back, to figure out why that year was so challenging. I do know that I felt lost and out of place, almost invisible at times. Even the students with whom I had felt such a strong bond two years previously did not hesitate to say how much “harder” they were having to work in the Grade 7/8 class. This rankled: somehow it seemed there was a hierarchy for them where hard = better, more enriching, more satisfying. Or maybe this was just the cops in my head speaking—comparison is indeed death by a thousand small cuts. Later in the year, when the grade 7/8 teacher left on maternity leave, these same students were mercilessly critical of her replacement. They were unhappy with his lack of repertoire and with what they perceived as a lack of challenging content. I had some sympathy for them but not for the way they expressed their discontent: they were rude and dismissive and borderline belligerent. It was hard to witness a group of students for whom I had a deep love and respect behave as spoiled brats. More static, more discord—nothing seemed as it should have been.

I realized that I needed to reach out to people outside of my building to be the sounding boards and inspiration I could not seem to find amongst my direct colleagues. My weekly walks with good friends Josée and Diane, begun in the year when my life turned upside down, became the anchor for my professional practice. I walked with them to unload, to feel seen, to process. Initially, we walked and talked about how I was finding my way through my family crisis, but as this resolved into a strange “new normal,” our conversations became more focused on problems of practice and lessons and experiences that we were finding exciting and inspiring.

I continued to meet with friends from graduate school. They helped me to continue thinking about my process. One in particular helped to remind me that my

dissatisfaction was perhaps not with myself, my students, or my colleagues, but with the system itself—that it is not serving anyone well and that try as I might, I will not bend it to my will or to my intentions. Lurking in the back of my mind was regret about my thesis and an awareness that I needed to rethink and reconfigure. I also felt bad about abandoning my project in Haliburton. It felt strange to have divested myself. It was not the research that mattered but the relationships I had forged with teachers, and I felt some guilt about having closed the door.

Despite the successes of the year, I was struggling to see that I was doing a good job, that I was “effective” as an educator. I remember a conversation with a peer from graduate studies whose son happened to be in my class. I remembered her saying how engaged and stimulated her child was, how what was happening in the classroom was inspiring their whole family. And I couldn’t see it. I didn’t believe it because I didn’t feel it. I am curious now about why? I am not sure if I have ever worked harder than I did that year, and yet it never felt like enough. I did not feel that my students were engaged; I felt that my practice was failing; that school culture was becoming increasingly toxic and dysfunctional; that kids were not being well served; and that the teacher community on which I had once depended to inspire and support me was beyond my grasp.

Echo

I know that memory deceives
 That a mirror does not always
 Reveal
 The truth
 And teaching
 Is a funhouse
 Reflections of the self
 Some times
 Hilarious

At others
Grotesque
and
Disconcerting

Perhaps it is not a fun house
But a house
Of horrors
Where I confront
Fears
And
Insecurities

The feeling that
Someone
Is always
Watching
The fear
That
In reality
No one
Is

Sometimes
The empty rooms
Are the scariest
Silence and psychoses
Amplified
In the absence
Of response.

I crave interaction
I throw invitations and provocations
Out
Into space

Is it ever OK to lie?

What is a pirate's favourite letter?

*How many dots, and how do you see
them?*

Tu ne peux pas faire d'omelette sans casser des oeufs.

Questions, conjectures, critiques

Wonderings, and witticisms

Radiating outwards

In

ever

widening

circles.

And I hover.

But

Nothing

Comes

Back

I turn my attention

Inwards

To my classroom

Hello?

Bueller? Bueller?

Is

Any

Body

Home?

Is
This
Thing
On?

I cavort, I clown
I coach and cajole
I implore and impel
Spend
Hours
Designing experiences
Consumed in
Minutes

I am
Still
Looking for reassurance:
For some affirmation
Of my practice
Of my teaching
Of my
Self
My students

Duck
And
shrug

Repelled, I think
By my frantic flapping
Determined
Not to fall
Prey
To my
Hunger
Unsure
About how not
To become ensnared

In my search
For
Sustenance

A small brown bat has a voracious appetite
She consumes half of her body weight in insects per night
She finds her food through echolocation
Sound waves bouncing back to her ears
She must dip and dart to eat what she has ensnared in her tail and wings
Making her flight erratic
And unpredictable

The end of the school year arrived. I did an Outers Club trip during which it rained the whole time and students were still awesome. For the first time, I navigated accommodating a non-binary student who asked to stay in a tent with students who did not share their assigned gender. My initial response was, “Of course!” although I was aware that I needed to check in with the other students and their parents. With good communication and very little drama, we made it work. I love that Outers is my domain, and that the culture within the club is inclusive and accepting.

In the last weeks of June, I learned that my vice-principal had been posted to a new school for his first principalship. I knew he would be awesome, but I already felt his absence. On a more hopeful note, a friend and colleague who had co-facilitated Outers with me for the year was making the move from teaching Grade 3 to the Grade 5/6 classroom opposite mine. This would make him my teaching partner, and I was excited about having someone with whom to collaborate. Ever the optimist, I was already leaving this year behind, looking forward to a break, and hoping that next year things would look different.

Unravelling (But not Because of the Kids)

“When I look down, I miss all the good stuff

And when I look up, I just trip over things”

— *Ani DiFranco (1998)*

The 2017 school year arrived, and with it began a long denouement of my time at Centennial. I continued to try to be explicit about my social justice orientation, and this commitment led to many pivotal stories, both in terms of my own self-reflective internal narrative and also in the interactions I had with students and colleagues. My Grade 6/7 class and I began the year talking about the land and unpacking the daily land acknowledgement. After checking in with our First Nations Métis and Inuit (FNMI) consultant, I shared the teachings of Muskrat and Turtle Island that had been shared with me. I also read *I am Not a Number* (2016) by Jenny Kay Dupuis and Kathy Kacer, and we talked about the legacy of residential schools, the sacredness of learning, and language and culture. I also read *Each Kindness* by Jacqueline Woodson (2012), and we talked about dignity, compassion, and the ripple effect of both kind and unkind gestures.

Teaching and learning about the land and colonial history on Turtle Island helped connect me with one particular student, Ma'iinganens (Little Wolf), whose insight and understanding of the impacts of colonialism on not only Indigenous people, but women and people of colour, was pretty astounding for an 11-year-old. Early in the year, we had a conversation about him staying seated during “O Canada”; he could clearly articulate his reasons for doing so, which were tied to the failure of governments to take serious action on missing and murdered Indigenous women. He was also a fierce advocate for queer and trans youth. Ma'iinganens was feisty and fierce, impulsive and easily

distracted. He struggled with task completion and there were huge gaps in his math understanding. His peers found him challenging to work with, and the year before (his first year at Centennial after having been transferred from another local school, where he was basically treated as a pariah) earned him the moniker “Ming-man” (because nobody could pronounce his name). I worked really hard to support and celebrate Ma’iinganens, to acknowledge his gifts, but also to try to get him to “knuckle down” and do some of the school work that he had a-million-and-one strategies for avoiding. Ma’iinganens had witnessed some real ugliness in his life, and this had also left a mark on him. When he was called out on behaviour that was disrespectful or invasive, he often defaulted to an “I suck” and “My life sucks” attitude, which allowed him to avoid taking any responsibility for his actions. I wanted him to be successful, I wanted him to feel seen and valued, and I think he did, but I also didn’t want him to retreat into playing the victim when things did not go his way. This was a tricky line to walk.

I talked often to his mom, and together we worked to figure out how to best support him. One of the first things I made a point of doing was learning to pronounce his name. It took some time to get the inflection right, and he was impatient with me, saying “just forget it, Ming-man is fine.” But Ming-man was so *not fine*, especially because I most often heard it being said with exasperation and frustration by other students. So, I persisted in using his name. Once, after asking him to be patient and let me keep trying, he responded, “It doesn’t matter.” “It matters to me,” I said, and he began to cry. I felt terrible. I called his mom and explained that I was trying to figure out how to be an ally, to honour his name and who he is. We both cried. I said that I was sorry if I caused

embarrassment, if I made a mistake. And she said she was thankful that this was part of the process of learning together. It was a good moment—one of the best of the year.

One of Ma'iinganens's classmates was Jordan. She was in the Grade 5/6 split the year before and struggled academically. Jordan lived with her grandparents, and while she was self-sufficient and good at looking busy, she struggled in French (she basically failed any oral activity and was unable to really write or produce a response to texts she read or heard). We worked together as best I could and, as her attendance started to fall off, I was in touch with the attendance counsellor and talked to her grandma ,who said that Jordan missed the bus and had no other way to get to school. Later in the year, Jordan complained about her grandfather looking at pornography in the living room (they lived in a small, two-bedroom apartment) and also expressed that she was depressed, so I set her up with the school board counsellor. I was worried about her. I wanted to advocate for her, to help her to seek out opportunities, but it was harder to do than I thought it would be. I knew that Jordan had loved Tim's camp when she attended in Grade 6 (she begged to go back as a Grade 7, but the rules stated clearly that the camp was for Grade 6s only), and when I returned to the camp that year with the current group of 6s, I talked to the office staff at the camp and got all the application forms for Jordan to apply to the summer youth leadership program. When I got back to Centennial, I shared the forms with her. Together, she and I filled out the part of the application about her strengths, goals, interests, and so on, then sent the forms home with her to be completed by her grandparents. I collected them and mailed them for her over March Break to ensure that they arrived before the application deadline, and we learned a month later that she was accepted. Hooray! I was super excited that Jordan would spend three weeks of her

summer learning leadership skills, swimming, camping, and canoeing with great staff in a beautiful place. But when I followed up with Jordan about camp when I saw her the following school year, she hadn't attended. When I queried her, she said something vague about "rides and stuff." I didn't press because I didn't want to make her feel bad. I wished that I had followed up in the summer, ensured that she had everything she needed to be ready for camp, found out where and when she needed to catch the bus and made sure she got there. But going to her apartment to collect the application package already felt like I was crossing a line; where were the professional boundaries here? When was I advocating, and when was I invading privacy? Where did my duty of care begin and end? I think I sit too easily with the barriers between a student like Jordan and myself. I didn't see her or her grandparents at the local farmers' market (where I run into many of my French Immersion students and parents); I didn't see her on the sidelines of the soccer field or at the dance performance in the park. I don't know if this is about what I knew about her living situation and my own discomfort about the class difference between us, or about dignity (wanting to protect her privacy), or about simply finding it easier to "care from a distance."

Writing about Ma'iinganens and Jordan makes me think about Spencer, a student from the previous year. Spencer also struggled with academics, especially in language (English and French), although his math thinking was awesome. Spencer struggled with decoding new words and with syntax; his sentences somehow came out sounding funny and choppy, almost like beat poetry. It wasn't until he said, "My father thinks it's because of my mom, because she speaks bad English," that the shoe dropped and I realized that his mom, who was Jamaican, spoke to him in Patois, and this was the English that he

brought to the classroom. I had not done enough reading about this, but I knew to say to him that Patois is not “bad English,” that it has rhythm and beauty and that he should be proud of this. I told him that our project was to figure out how to add another dialect to his repertoire. It is tricky, I think, to be the only Black kid in a classroom of White kids, to be surrounded by cultural norms that are not your own. Spencer and I worked together one day a week after school, learning to use Google Read&Write, deconstructing texts, and organising ideas into paragraphs. He was the only Grade 6 boy to come out for Junior mixed volleyball, and he also worked with his mom to make lots of cookies for our fundraising bake sale. When I took students to the arena near the school for group skating that year, Spencer had never skated before. It was amazing to see him making his way unsteadily across the ice; he was wobbly but persistent, an absolute model of perseverance and determination for other students. And he was by far the most appreciative of all students for the trip to Montréal and at the end of the year. When I recommended to Spencer’s parents that it was likely in his best interests to switch to the English stream, I felt some sadness about this but also some resolve that this was the “right thing” to advise for his confidence and future success in school.

The Let Down (The Meeting is NOT the Learning Community)

Students, as individuals and as a collective, are what bring life and joy to my teaching, but I also crave dialogue and community with my colleagues. The following school year, we had a new principal and a new VP. I was hopeful that perhaps there would be a shift in vision and cohesion in the school, perhaps a clearer sense of goals and expectations for both staff and students. Both would be welcome.

On a PA day before school started, the Junior teachers gathered in my teaching partner's room. I was unaware that they were meeting, but as his classroom was opposite mine, I walked in to ask him a question and noticed that everyone was there. When I stepped into the room, what was a steady buzz turned to silence. "Hey, are we meeting?" I asked, chipper and pretending not to notice the sudden quiet. "Well not formally..." someone responded. "Since we're all here," I said, "did we want to talk about division meetings and the division chair?" Looks were exchanged and someone else responded, "We figured we don't need to have a division chair, you know, because we all talk, so we can just share when we need to." "Oh, OK," I said. Cue more smiling and brightness. Looking back on this incident, I wonder why I didn't push more to have a division chair, or more specifically to be the chair myself. I saw a this role as being key to good organisation and planning for divisional learning; it was the model I was used to; and, in my experience, having a "chain of command" in a hierarchical organisation such as a school helps ensure that we seize opportunities, explore initiatives, and establish coherence between colleagues. But I think I was leery of seeming bossy or overbearing—I didn't want my peers to think that I thought that I was somehow better, or that I was the "mouthpiece" of the new administrator. I could also sense the resistance and wanted to avoid confronting it head on.

Fast forward three months to our first PLC (which has somehow come to mean the divisional teacher meetings that happen during school hours, rather than the learning that happens amongst a group of education professionals). I arrived late (because the principal had neglected to book a supply teacher for me), and when I got there the other Junior teachers asked, "So Nansi, you're the math person, what are we doing?" I didn't

know what to say. I had some sense of how I might have structured the meeting had I been the division chair, but in the current circumstance I did not feel that I had the power or authority to set an agenda, nor was I ready with tasks or questions. I did make some suggestions about what we might want to talk about (Did anyone bring a pre-assessment? Anyone want to share what's working?). I looked to my teaching partner for some support in focus and intention, but he was either not interested and/or was reluctant to be seen as my ally. I tried to keep the conversation focused on coming up with a common learning goal and maybe some key ideas for the measurement strand, but my colleagues were resistant and talk quickly devolved into jokes and innuendo about size and length. I didn't want to impose, and so I swallowed my words, didn't push, kept on smiling and taking notes, and waited for the meeting to be over.

At the end of the day, I sat in my car and called one of my walking friends. I was in tears. I felt defeated and discouraged. I resented my colleagues and felt somehow betrayed. I also felt like a failure: I had failed to catalyse any sort of learning for myself or my peers.

From: Nansi

To: Mike

Date: Thursday, November 2, 2017 8:54 p.m.

Division

Meetings

Are a special hell

For people

Who care

Too much

And try

Too hard.

And yet...

I do not want
To learn to care,
or try...
Less.

Not sure whether to loathe myself, my colleagues, or my job.
At least if I situate the problem with me then I have some control over what to do about it.
Happy almost Friday.
n.

From: Mike
To: Nansi
Date: Thursday, November 2, 2017 9:01 p.m.

Oh no???? Really??? I guess it didn't go well then?

Mike

From: Nansi
To: Mike
Date: Thursday, November 2, 2017 9:05 p.m.

It was fine.

Ish.

Really, I think the problem is me and my ideas about what it should look like and the pragmatic reality.

No coherence, no goal, some new awareness, lots of talk about what kids "can't do."

Folks have decided to focus on the problem-solving model... No talk actually about the content, our own knowledge, progression... etc.

I smiled, asked questions. People humored me.

I will shut my door and hope to have actual real conversations about math some other time.

Fuck I hate teachers.

From: Nansi
To: Mike
Date: Thursday, November 2, 2017 9:05 p.m.

What I meant to say was I need to readjust my expectations and be more patient.

From: Mike

To: Nansi

Date: Thursday, November 2, 2017 9:16 p.m.

Nansi Harris... you make me smile!

From: Nansi

To: Mike

Date: Friday, November 3, 2017 6:40 a.m.

Better smiling than crying I suppose.

I just wish it could look different somehow.

In talking to Josée... she suggested that what is hard is that I can't go back to where I was...

Wondering about taking Principal Part 1.

Any advice for me on this one?

N.

This particular PLC meeting (the meeting is not the learning, but anyhow) was another nudge towards isolation and my decision to silo myself, to retreat behind a closed door to the sanctity of the classroom. I had high hopes for finding either a community of practice or a PLC in the Junior division at Centennial. In their ideal incarnation, PLCs are supposed to be about a collective effort to improve student achievement through: the clear articulation of measurable goals; the co-construction of criteria and ongoing collaborative assessment to monitor student learning; and focused intervention through supported changes in instructional practice (Dufour, 2007; Dufour et al., 2008). The way I see it, PLCs should bring teachers together to reflect deeply and to plan meaningful learning experiences that help kids to develop and deepen knowledge and skills. PLCs have the potential to be transformative, to impel teachers to rethink and refine their practice and their attitudes, and in doing so increase student achievement (Dogan & Adams, 2018). But as Burke and Collier (2017) note, the term has become so ubiquitous

that it has become diluted. I had such high hopes about collaborating with my peers, about being a part of a group of math teachers who were going to bust out all the moves to teach passionately, constructively, and hopefully. I wanted to be part of something that echoed the Railside Study (Cabana et al., 2014) and the deep commitment to questioning the status quo and positioning all learners as mathematically capable. Instead, we were mired in deficit framing and I was hesitant to interject because I knew that my French Immersion students, by-and-large, demonstrated more competency in math (because they have had *so many* more opportunities to learn) which meant that I “don’t get what it’s like” to teach the English-stream kids. But even my teaching partner in French Immersion was not on board: he did not want to dig more deeply, he was happy with his math instruction, and was still focused on the importance of multiplication and basic facts so that kids could “tackle more challenging problems.” He was also not willing to push or rock the boat in any way. He echoed the negative comments made by others, talked about issues with behaviour and the kids with no number-sense, and was also quite happy to maintain the divide between “your kids” (that is, students in the English stream) and our kids (those in French Immersion). Perhaps I expected him to join me in my commitment to looking at the learning of all learners, to working as a division across class lines (both scholastic and social), but he did not. In fact, he pushed back on my gentle interjections more than anyone else.

Maybe I should have spoken up, maybe I should have more forcefully voiced my disquiet and my concern about our lack of focus or commitment to our own learning or to the learning of our students. But I didn’t. (“You just want to be in control” echoed in my head). Communities of practice can be an awesome way to inspire and motivate teacher

learning, but as Eschar-Netz and Vedder-Weiss (2020) note, they can also be undermined by socio-emotional dynamics, especially “when power relations and hierarchies are involved” (p. 368). Teacher learning in communities of practice can also stall because of what Lisa Ain Dack and Steven Katz (2013) call the culture of “supafice,” where unspoken norms see teachers avoiding disagreements (Eschar-Netz & Vedder-Weiss, 2020), or critiquing each other’s stance or practice.

Whatever the reason, I did not speak up. I preferred to pretend that things were OK even though they were absolutely not. I adjusted my expectations, took my distance, took my prep and ate my lunch in the tiny cubicle off the office instead of in the staff room, and withdrew into my own practice. I continued to walk with my critical friend-colleagues, and I tried to find other ways to connect with my teaching partner. I got caught up in being the point-person for Tim’s Camp; I half-heartedly mentored the Grade 2-3 teacher whose students were our “reading buddies;” I tried to build a relationship with our new VP and to make my classroom practice more visible by posting diligently to the new online learning management platform . I felt, though, that my teaching lacked focus and coherence.

Despite my passion for math and feeling like I had experience and ideas to offer, I was not asked to share during staff meetings, nor was I asked to be the person to accompany our principal on board-mandated math learning. We continued to get half-day release time every six weeks or so to talk about math with the Junior division, but these meetings continued to be unproductive and frustrating. I tried not to have an agenda and did not rock the boat.

Even through my metaphorical cocooning into my classroom sanctuary, I was still hopeful that I could find a teacher community with whom to learn. In the spring I decided to apply for a Teacher Learning Leadership Program (TLLP) grant. I put out the call to other teachers whom I thought might be interested in doing some co-learning, and a colleague at another school responded. Together, we decided to focus on math learning and the Grandfather Teachings¹², and we recruited three other teachers to join us. This built on the earlier anti-colonial, land-focused work I described in my own classroom practice. We spent several Sunday afternoons doing research and putting together a proposal that was approved. Hooray! This meant some good PD, some money for resources including technology, and that we would have release time to work with other teachers. As the leads on the project, my colleague and I had three days of PD in Toronto, which was really exciting. As this was being organized, my principal queried why it was me that was going, and not one of the other teachers who I invited to be part of the project. I got the impression that she felt that teacher was more deserving than I was, as she has been attending the math PD with the admin and had run several sessions at staff meetings. “I just want to be sure that it's fair,” she said. Still, I was excited about the project and about having the opportunity to learn with other teachers. At around the same time, I asked to move to the Primary division to teach Grade 2/3 for the next school year.

¹² The Grandfather Teachings, also known as the Seven Grandfathers or the Seven Sacred teachings, are teachings that are important to many native people across Turtle Island (North America). The teachings or virtues (Courage, Humility, Truth, Respect, Honest, Wisdom, Love) are associated with different aspects of the Medicine Wheel as well as animals who embody the different teachings. (Ontario Native Literacy Coalition, 2010). Each teaching relates to both intra and interpersonal qualities—how to be with ourselves and with others. In our project we worked with the Anishinabe interpretation of these teachings.

I was hopeful that the change would help me to feel more positive about my colleagues, my school, and my work environment.

Hooray for the Little People: Can My Students Be My Community of Practice?

The new academic year began, and I knew by the second week of school that this switch to Grade 2/3 was a good choice and that working with younger students was filling my cup. They felt more present in the learning, and I think this is because they were just less guarded and less worried about appearances than the typical adolescent. They were not an “easy” group, but they were loveable and beguiling. They were game to try just about anything, and were willing to follow me wherever I went. I was in my element and happy to play the part of mother hen, clown, drill sergeant, magician, mad scientist, or intrepid explorer depending on what the day or experience required. Even when a lesson flopped or an activity was too challenging, we figured it out together and they were very forgiving. Student feedback about my teaching, about what worked and what didn’t, was pretty immediate, and I was so grateful for the mirror they held up to my identity and my practice. Sometimes I worry that I am too dependent on feedback and affirmation from my students. But on the other hand, these are both hallmarks of a caring relationship; the reciprocity (Noddings, 1984) that I felt with these students helped to sustain me and replenish the energy I put into caring for them and for their social, emotional, intellectual, and physical well-being. I felt like a member of a tight-knit team. In many ways, I felt more supported by this group of 7- and 8-year-olds than I had felt by my peers or administrators over the last three years.

Reaching Outwards: Towards Reconciliation and a Learning Community

My TLLP project with the goal of embedding the Anishinaabe teachings about the Seven Grandfathers into my program was ongoing amid my move to the Primary division. This was part of my own path towards reconciliation and towards enacting some of the 94 calls to action from the Truth and Reconciliation Commission (2015), especially those relating to education. I had spent my summer reading and gathering resources. I read a couple of books by Richard Wagamese (2007, 2009) as well as *Seven Fallen Feathers* by Tanya Talaga (2017), *Marrow Thieves* by Cherie Dimaline (2017) and *The Back of the Turtle* by Thomas King (2014). I put together a collection of books for children by Indigenous authors and also searched out Indigenous artists (musicians, dancers, and visual artists) to learn from and with. It was exciting to be doing this learning alongside other educators, to feel like I was part of something bigger than just my class. It was wonderful to plan and reflect with my peers. We made each other better (humans, and teachers).

Within the TLLP group, we took to heart the mantra “nothing about us without us,” and as we delegated tasks, I spent the weeks before school started reaching out to Indigenous consultants and knowledge keepers connected to the school board. I set up visits for all four classes; it was tricky, but we managed. We began the year with a visit from Susan Smith, who shared the teachings of the medicine wheel and helped to situate our learning more broadly within Anishinaabe culture. In October, we had a visit from Shauna Eagle, who shared the origin story of Turtle Island as well as some teachings of the Seven Grandfathers, including the teachings of Bear (courage) and Bison (respect).

Shauna brought a drum with her and spoke to us about the heartbeat of Mother Earth. Students were enthralled.

One of the things that struck my students about the teachings that Shauna shared with us was the emphasis on “living in a good way” and of finding balance—ideas that circled back to what we were learning about the medicine wheel. We talked about how the earth needs winter for rest and renewal, and about how death is important for life, as the bison knows when it offers its life for food. This is a perfect segue to conversations about the Day of the Dead, which we celebrate at the beginning of November. Javier’s mom comes in to talk about the Indigenous and Spanish traditions that are a part of the Day of the Dead celebrations in Mexico. After her presentation, we set up an altar of remembrance, and students bring in photos of loved ones who have died and talk about them. It is poignant and I love that students are able to talk about death as part of the cycle of life.

The year continued to unfold this way, with the teachings of the medicine wheel and of the Seven Grandfathers embedded into our learning. As we introduced different teachings, we tried to connect them to stories we were reading and to “I” statements about how we wanted to be in good relationships with ourselves, each other and the planet. As the December holidays approached, members of the TLLP team decided that we would focus on the teaching of Eagle, or *zahgidiwin* (love), which is expressed as love for ourselves, for our friends and family, for our community, and for our planet. A colleague created an interactive kindness calendar for the Smartboard, and every day we challenged our students to show love in small and big ways, from sharing and eating a healthy snack to writing a thankyou letter to someone in the school. One day, as we

looked at some of the paintings of Norval Morriseau and introduced some “I” statements that accompanied the teachings about love, my Syrian student Tariq piped up, “We have this, too, in Islam, and it is called *zakat*.” I was excited about the connections he was making and that night I did some reading of my own. *Zakat* is one of the five pillars of Islam and is the one that speaks particularly to charity and to helping the needy.

The next day during our morning meeting, I explained *zakat* to the class and asked Tariq to share what it looked like for his family. He talked about making food for people, helping others, and about making donations to the poor. In the conversation that followed, a number of students asked if we could do something like this, too. “What a good idea!” I said. I told them that at the end of the week we would brainstorm ideas about who and how we might want to help, but that I wanted us to do some thinking together first. That night, I planned some lessons about human rights and quality of life (a nice tie to the Grade 3 social studies unit on communities). After some small group discussions, we came together to create a giant mind map that spoke to all the things we need to live a “good life,” from love and family and peace to food and shelter and clean water. Next, we brainstormed a list of challenges that people face when trying to meet these needs. Students are so *wise*! They talked about people not having enough water and not having homes; Tariq spoke about having to leave one’s country because of war; others spoke of pollution and about not having enough food, or about not being able to go to school. Then I asked them what they thought we might be able to do. They had incredible ideas, ranging from finding homes for homeless people and refugees (if only it were that easy), to donating to the foodbank, to helping provide clean water. That night I took their ideas and selected four different organizations that they might want to support:

the local youth emergency shelter; the local New Canadians Centre; a Canadian charity called Water First, whose mandate is to provide infrastructure and training to provide clean drinking water for First Nations communities; and Free the Children (now known as WE Charity).

Students voted for working for clean water, so we jumped into a mini-unit about water and why we need it (Grade 2 science!) and we looked at the clean-water crisis in Indigenous communities. Students were outraged by what they saw and we channeled this into letters to Prime Minister Justin Trudeau about why clean water matters and about how he needed to honour his responsibility to Indigenous communities. We also planned a bake sale (I am the queen of bake sales, it seems) to raise money for Water First. We baked cookies together at school, and students also brought in baking from home. This became the focus of our weeks leading up to the December break, and I was glad to be channelling energy into thinking about others instead of Santa and presents. I did make space for silly math questions about Santa and his toy-making elves getting tangled in lights and building reindeer enclosures. I knew it was important for my students to revel in the magic of the season. Many of my students also sang in the Primary–Junior Choir, and we performed at the inaugural Centennial Festival of Trees. Our final song was a beautiful version of “Feliz Navidad” with verses in French and Anishinaabemowin (which a colleague had written in consultation with one of our FNMI consultants). Students sang about “being grateful for all the love in their hearts” by the light of fairy lights to a standing-room-only audience. It felt like some things were just right in the world.

After the holidays we had another parent visit, this time from Michael's dad to tell us about Chinese New Year and teach us some different Chinese characters. In March, Tariq's mother came in to talk to us about Ramadan and Eid al-Fitr. What was most striking to me about her presentation was how students made deep connections to other traditions and beliefs that had been shared with us throughout the year. They were able to see the beauty in all of them and they focused especially on the themes of thankfulness, right-relationship, and sharing.

I had never before had so many parents come to my class to help and share. It felt good, and I was not sure why this year felt so different in this way. Maybe it is because I had created a more inviting space for parents? Perhaps it was because I was more comfortable with my practice so I did not fear judgement and scrutiny as much as I once did? I knew that the judgement was still there: One day as Michael and I were printing a beautiful cityscape he had designed and carefully carved into foam onto a watercolour sunset he had painted, he said to me, "Nansi, my dad says if I was still in China, I would be more smarter." I paused and said, "Well, Michael, would you do art like this in China?" When he shook his head I said with a smile, "There are different kinds of smart."

As first term report cards approached, my colleagues and I brainstormed ways to embed the Grandfather Teachings into our learning skills comments. In my class, I wanted students to be a part of this process, so I created a series of cards with "I" statements on them that I placed at the centre of a circle on the carpet. Some of the statements were more generic, but others spoke specifically to individual students: *I don't always have to be the boss; I share my thinking even when I'm not sure; I play a game to learn, not to win; I tidy up even when it's not my mess; I keep trying even when things are*

hard; I ask for help instead of sitting and waiting for help to come to me; I am confident but I don't say "this is easy for me" too loud when I know other students are struggling.

We read the card together and students used our talk moves (thumbs up to agree, down to disagree, pinky thumb waggle for emphasis) as we went through them. After we had gone through the cards together, I handed students two different coloured stickies and asked them to write their names on them and then attach the sticky to one "I" statement they did well and another they would like to work on. They had great insight into their strengths and areas for growth; some asked for more stickies. I was especially moved by the choices made by two of my trickier students, as they showed a wonderful awareness of the positives they brought to our community while also recognizing the ways in which their actions (hitting, crying or flying into a rage when they lost at a game or were struggling with a task) impacted others. This process became a reference point for me and for their peers in our efforts to support these students in regulating their behaviour. We put all the statements and stickies up on a blackboard and it became the most important anchor chart for the entire year. These stickies also became the foundation of my learning skills comments, which felt especially relevant because they were deeply grounded in student experience.

As is always the case, the year flew by. A teacher candidate (TC) from Trent joined us in March and students loved her energy and her enthusiasm. It was fun to co-plan with her, and centre-time was so much more effective when we could both work with small groups. It was hard to step back and allow my TC to teach: she struggled with pacing and with keeping the content manageable for students; and she produced *a lot* of fillable worksheets, which students dutifully completed as she explained different types

of soils and soil structures, or different verb conjugations. I was not sure how much they actually took in, and I tried to be supportive by circulating to help those who weren't following along. Even though I tried to guide this TC (and others) towards a more hands-on, three-part lesson approach that involved co-creating anchor charts and the shared discovery of big ideas, she didn't seem to be able to do it. This kind of teaching is really difficult because it requires a responsiveness and flexibility that is more possible when you know your content and your curriculum. So maybe it is an unreasonable expectation? I do understand the need to "make something" and to have students put pencil to paper. I remember my first few years of teaching and how I felt most "in control" when my students were quiet and filling out worksheets. The sheafs of paper spewing out of the photocopier were a sort of protective armour with which I approached my days, and the filled out worksheets seemed like concrete evidence of learning. My TC did experiment with some digital tools for data management, and brought in succulent buds for students to plant. She also designed an animal mask project that we matched with poetry writing and a dramatic presentation to the kindergarteners. Working with a TC is a lot of work, but I was glad to have the infusion of ideas and energy. It also compelled me to put my own practice under the lens.

One of my biggest struggles with teacher candidates is to allow them enough space to experiment and mess up. I struggle to relinquish control of my class. I get caught up in the urgency of what we are learning and, having spent my last eight years teaching EQAO-testing years (Grades 3 and 6), I worry (too much) about covering content and ensuring that my students have had lots of exposure to the concepts and skills they need to know and demonstrate on the test. It has taken me years to admit that I have bought

into all of this, to acknowledge my own competitiveness and need to do well, to admit that I want my students to perform well on a test that I *know* is problematic in many ways. Sigh. In my own defense, how well my students handle the test writing, and how well they do, does provide me with some of the only feedback I receive about my instruction from anyone other than my students. As flawed and limited as it is, it is still feedback.

The time after March Break whirled by and before we knew it, the “Junado” was upon us in all its swirling, whirling, sweltering chaos. Somewhere in there my students wrote EQAO and we celebrated it being over with ice cream sundaes and a water sponge fight. We attended a pow wow at Springwater Public School, which was a very special culminating activity for our year of learning about Anishinaabe ways of being and knowing. I loved watching my students get right in and join the dances; we danced together and the drumbeat carried around and around the circle. Students also reconnected with their penpals at this same school, to whom they had been writing all year. We returned there two weeks later to visit our penpals for a separate day of learning. We did a scavenger hunt and some initiative tasks, and shared stories, songs, and popsicles. Two days later and the year was done, report cards were sent home and I sat in my classroom surrounded by the echoes of our learning, sad and exhausted and excited for summer, but happy, too, to have lived the year I had, and happy to know that I would have a chance to build on the learning the following year.

The 2019-2020 school year began fairly well. I was more settled in my classroom and I was excited to welcome a new crew of students. I once again had a Grade 2/3 split, with nine Grade 2s and 11 Grade 3s. Two of my Grade 3s had been with me the year

before (my two students with safety plans due to their occasionally non-compliant and explosive behaviour) and I had kept them for another year to continue building on the relationships and learning we had been doing together. I had some hope that by the time they headed off to Grade 4, they would have more confidence and be better able to “play the rules of school” that would enable them to be successful. I also had a student who had many academic and social needs who had been placed with me as a “strong teacher.” Once again, I had a group of students whose reading, writing and math skills were all over the map, and I was glad to have a repertoire of lessons and activities to draw on, even as I continued to modify them and create new ones to meet the needs of this group of students.

One of the highlights of the year was working with our *grands amis* in the Grade 6/7 class downstairs. This was a project that a colleague and I started the previous year where we brought our students together to provide an “authentic opportunity” to speak French. They either taught and played a game (often math-related), participated in mixed-grade teams to complete an initiative task, or headed outside or to the gym to play cooperative games. In many ways it was a twist on the traditional “reading buddies” model, and we were really pleased with the results. Students spoke lots of French (the older students because they were built up as mentors, and the younger students because they wanted to impress the big kids), and we built community connections within the school. It also meant that when I was doing a more ambitious art or science project that there was a pool of students to whom I could turn to come and help out, provided their own learning wasn’t interrupted.

This year, our principal, with prompting from her superintendent, set up a Positive School Climate Committee to help build community and coherence within the school. At the request of a colleague who wanted someone in his corner when he brought up the need for more consistent rules and expectations for both staff and students, I joined the committee. During our first session we brainstormed ideas about how to build community between staff and students.

One of the ideas was to have divisional community assemblies every six weeks or so to celebrate accomplishments, remind students of expectations, introduce fun facts about staff, and allow students to present projects and clubs. We also agreed to introduce a Grandfather Teaching during each assembly, along with some ideas about how to enact the teaching. I volunteered to coordinate the assemblies. It was an opportunity to try to have a positive impact on the school as a whole and I felt vaguely hopeful that it might bring about some changes in school cohesion and culture. I spent several preps touring the school to take pictures and interview staff for the staff profiles, and then spent several evenings putting together two Google Slides presentations (one for K-3 and another for 4-8). During the assembly, I shared pictures of students doing their best work, introduced fun facts about three staff (both new and old), reviewed expectations, and celebrated individuals and classes that were being kind/respectful/collaborative and generally awesome. Several students shared projects and clubs and a few teachers did “shout outs” for special achievements. Our first assembly corresponded with Orange Shirt Day, and so I searched for appropriate clips to share and we included a moment of silence and reflection.

The assembly went really well; there was a palpable buzz within the staff and student body. There was a sense that the reviewed expectations would help us all to be on the same page when it came to dealing with conflicts and other behaviour issues. It felt like maybe we were onto something. However, there was no follow up from our administration, and without a nudge or encouragement or reinforcement, the energy fizzled. I did another assembly and another teacher stepped in to do a third. It was the same teachers whose classes engaged actively in the first assembly who stepped up to share and participate in the second and third. I approached the Intermediate classes about taking a leadership role in the assemblies, but they declined. The fourth assembly was canceled due to two back-to-back snow days, and then COVID ended our year of learning and building community together, at least within the school walls. Even if we had been able to continue with the assemblies, though, they were feeling like a sort of window-dressing—they were not enough in themselves to create a coherent and positive school culture, at least not without more presence and support from school administration and a concomitant buy-in from all teachers.

In my own class, I tried to carry on with the Grandfather Teachings, but it was really difficult to do this “in a good way.” I left lots of phone and email messages but could not find an Indigenous knowledge keeper to come and share traditional teachings with my class. I did my best to continue on my own, but somehow it didn’t feel quite right. I did not have the same wisdom or presence as the elders who came to share teachings with us the previous year. Ontario’s Ford government had canceled the TLLP program, so while I still talked with my colleagues who were involved in the project, there was no money to allow us to plan and conduct activities and reflect together.

I did have a number of students (in particular my Grade 2s) who were really keen to dig into environmental and justice issues. Several of them missed school to attend climate rallies with their parents, and they were also keen to take up the Grandfather Teachings in their own lives, especially the teachings that have to do with respect and love. As a result, our Christmas project became about making stone soup and a community meal to share with all the other Grade 2s and 3s in the building. A good friend volunteered his time to make stock out of chicken bones donated by a local restaurant. We created a recipe list together, and students volunteered to bring in ingredients ranging from carrots and pasta to salt and pepper. The same friend supervised the soup making and taught students (under the watchful eyes of several moms and grandparents) how to safely chop vegetables. We also baked bread and made gingerbread cookies. Students wrote invitations to the meal for other classes and for the custodians and administrative staff, made simple decorations for the tables, and signed up for the serving- and dish-duty roster. Our goal was to develop the skills we would need to help prepare a meal at one of the local shelters. This extension of the in-school project felt like an important piece of the working-for-justice model, transcending the walls of the school to take learning and caring out into the community.

By January of 2020, we were on work to rule and all extracurricular activities were on hold. Like many teachers, I feel ambivalent about this aspect of job action. In French, the expression for “work to rule” is *grève du zèle*, and this captures the essence of this sort of job action: it really does take the zeal and joy, which for many teacher is rooted in all the extra activities we do to make school fun for students, out of our work. I, like many teachers, was upset about increases to class sizes and the withdrawal of

funding for special education. I was ambivalent about a pay raise, especially given my pension and benefits package. Still, I walked the rotating picket lines with a carefully crafted home-made placard proclaiming that well-funded public education is an essential bridge to joy, compassion, responsibility, and a healthy society. I walked and chatted with my colleagues, and was moved when students and parents joined us to walk for a while. It felt like, this time round, we were winning the PR battle with a government that denigrates the work of teachers.

After several months of work to rule and rotating strikes, and the unexpected gift of three free weekends during which I would normally be writing report cards (which were a casualty of the work to rule campaign), the unions settled with the government and we headed back to class. It was almost March Break and there were low murmurings about the corona virus in the media, but I didn't pay much attention. Then, listening to the news as I drove home on the last day before the break, I learned that March Break was being extended. Several weeks later, the government announced that we would be teaching virtually for an indefinite period, which turns out to be until the end of the year. Teaching virtually was a whole learning curve in and of itself, and a very strange way to finish the year. I tried to maintain some sense of community through the online platform but I lost a few students every week. By the end of the year, I had eight students who were sort of present in our remote schooling engagements. It felt sad and empty and anti-climactic to end our year of learning this way, and when June arrived, I was not even sure I had earned the break.

Empty Agency (June 17, 2020)

Today the class is packed up
 Books sorted by series and reading level
Alpha Jeunes 9-10 et 11-12
GB+ 16 à 17
 (It sure as hell has been a strange 19-20)
 Remnants of guided groups
 When there were groups
 To guide

Boards erased
 Anchor charts torn down
 Learning goals recycled
Nous apprenons:
À utiliser des stratégies de lecture (to use reading strategies)
À reconnaître et à classer les solides géométriques (To name and classify
 geometric solids)
À étirer nos idées en ajoutant des détails et des mots riches (To stretch our ideas
 by adding détails and juicy words)
À persévérer pour résoudre des problèmes (To persevere to solve problems)
À voir des différentes perspectives (To see things from different points of view)
À vivre en communauté... (To live as a community)

Eloignée... (Remotely)

Recycling bin filled with work not handed back and templates no longer needed
 Was that really a file folder of last year's unreturned work I just found?
 Feedback in green pen—
 Journal entries to myself

Math manipulatives sorted and stored neatly in the cupboard
 Pockmarked erasers—once a valued commodity, thrown unceremoniously into
 the trash

I lug tote bags and plastic baskets to the car
 Fill a Rubbermaid with art supplies and math games
 I barely stop to look back at this space that was my domain,
 My refuge,
 My habitat.

Dust bunnies lurk in the corners
 Tacks dot the bulletin boards
 Constellations suggesting work
 Now light years distant

And this feeling:
 Not the usual euphoria tinged with exhaustion
 More a malaise, a creeping doubt
 About what it is all for anyway
 About a summer coming
 And much longed-for rest and respite
 But from what?
 What have I earned?
 The usual cycle of mania and détente
 Disrupted

(Usually)
 This is the time of year where I relinquish control
 Give over to what I have not accomplished:
 Unit plans and classroom routines
 Give way to
 Water fights
 All-day art projects
 Wacky dance routines
 Freezies and watermelon
 And picnics in the parc
 (And a whole science unit crammed into three days because
 I have already written the report card comment)
 Bring on
 The marshmallow catapults

This is when September's optimism makes way
 for June's exhaustion
 Junado
 The raging storm of report cards and runaway projects, of fun fairs and final
 trips, of sticky heat and stinky shoes

And underneath it all the swirling undercurrent of topics not covered,
expectations not met...

I give myself permission
To almost believe
That I did what was possible,
That I did my best

The end of the 2019-2020 school year brought me to another year of self-funded “4 over 5” leave and so, mercifully, I was spared the frustration of teaching through the provincial government’s disastrous and seemingly ever-changing patchwork of COVID-19 protocols in schools. I watched closely as my son and teacher-friends navigated changing directives and expectations. I learned to loathe the word “pivot” and to become suspicious of words like “flexible” and “resilient” when wielded by school board officials and the Minister of Education.

Time away from the classroom allowed me to sink deeply into this thesis again, and also confirmed that my experiences over the past few years had led to a fraying, an unravelling of my sense of hope that I could work with other educators at Centennial to make a real difference in the lives of not just students in my own class, but of students and families in the school community. I was no longer feeling nurtured or inspired and witnessing the dysfunction in school culture was breaking my heart. Between neoliberal system priorities and dire student needs I was losing my way and there did not seem to be anyone to help me find a way forward. I needed to choose a different path.

Part IV: Coda

Quiet friend who has come so far,

*feel how your breathing makes more space around you.
 Let this darkness be a bell tower
 and you the bell. And as you ring,*

*what batters you becomes your strength.
 Move back and forth into the change
 What is it like, such intensity of pain?*

— Rilke, 1989

Dark Spaces

Movement through pain
 Reverberations, resonance
 And the residue of hurt.
 Can I still sing?
 (Could I ever?)
 Perhaps
 Sometimes
 A dusky alto at best
 Hardly ringing tones.

I have lived pain as transformation
 Searing in its knife edge of grief and shame
 And I would chose it again
 Over the dull ache of disillusionment and disappointment.

I do feel battered,
 Worn down,
 World
 Weary

But I am not sure that this makes me stronger
 Unless there is strength in compromise
 And complacency.

Breath held
 I search for joy
 And wonder if it is the dark
 That allows me to see the sparks

That flicker
Briefly
Brightly
When I exhale.

So why is it, as I document all these ways that my practice is both critical and oriented towards peace and justice and equity, along with examples of how I am enacting critical pedagogy and an activist stance in my classroom, that I feel so ineffective and so defeated? For the last four years I have started most days with a pit in my stomach, often crying in the car on the way to work. Then the days begin and I am swept along in the joys and challenges of teaching: I buzz around my classroom and dash up and down stairs to the music room for choir or to the gym to coach volleyball and I feel fine, buoyed by the busyness and by my interactions with students. But the end of the day arrives and I find myself collapsed on the couch, barely able to generate the energy for a conversation.

I feel fragile. I am plagued with insecurities, I do not know where I fit, I do not know how to belong and I am not sure how to make change. And, because all of this matters so much to me and to my sense of myself, I feel increasingly lost and unsure.

Is it possible that some of this has to do with my being so porous? No water off the duck's back here: I absorb. I shoulder. I feel—deeply. I have always prided myself on being willing to adapt to different situations, groups, and expectations; it is a strength that allows me to be responsive and inclusive. But is there such a thing as too much flexibility? Am I too malleable? Too porous? Am I weakened in the absorption? Made more vulnerable to hurt and disappointment and loss?

People say, “But Nansi, you are so passionate and positive, you put so much energy into what you do; I would never know you were feeling that way.” Smiling and

positivity are part of my cover story (Clandinin & Connelly, 1996), part of what I perform for others. I soft-pedal my convictions and my critiques. I tone down my passion and my outrage, and keep my emotions in check. I don't want others to feel "judged." I don't want to be preachy. I don't want to be the recipient of the eye rolls that are reserved for my more "out there" equity-oriented colleague.

Meanwhile, my inner dialogue of critique and outrage is just that, an inner dialogue—one that I share with a few trusted critical friends. And even then, when I share it, I feel mean-spirited and small. I work to convince myself that being kind, calm and accepting is a viable route to change. It's not. As Ahmed (2017) writes, "Those who are trying to transform the world are required to modify themselves in order to proceed within that world" (p. 100). I see myself in her words. And, is this about fitting in? Is this about "wiggle room" and easing my own passage? Is it about, as Ahmed says, "passing as willing, in order to be willful" (p.77)? It seems my professional and discourse identities (Gee, 2000) are in tension, and the stretch is killing me.

In *Living a Feminist Life*, Sara Ahmed (2017) describes how women working to challenge patriarchy and systemic racism modify how they respond to situations in order to not appear too extreme. Like them, I am engaged in the labour of "image management" (Ahmed, 2017, p. 99). I am being both accommodated and accommodating, managing how I appear to maintain a certain sort of "happiness" for the benefit of others. Ahmed (2017) notes that, ultimately, these accommodations shore up the status quo and allow organizations to "talk the talk" and write seemingly-progressive policies without actually doing any of the hard work that is involved in "structural transformation" (Ahmed, 2017, p.98).

This emotional labour contributes to my feelings of exhaustion. I am constantly trying to make my stance and my passion more palatable and more accessible to others. Inside I am bubbling over with ideas, with passion, with anger, with despair, with incredulity. On the outside, I smile. A lot. I “go gently.” I *do* manage how I appear: the words I use, the tone I adopt, the subjects I broach, and the ways in which I phrase my questions. And sometimes, I just don’t speak at all.

And yet I stay silent

I sit quietly as a teacher new to the school makes an impassioned plea for support to the United Way, notice when the “old school” staff barely respond. Contribute chili and salads to a fundraising lunch, reach out to individuals to encourage participation but don’t challenge those who pointedly “opt out.”

I grit my teeth at the tired, dated, unilingual, “all our son’s command” version of “O Canada” that is trotted out every day before announcements.

I do not interrupt peers who trash-talk parents, who denigrate kids and parents for where they come from.

I say nothing about the Tim Hortons cups that fill the staff room recycling (they are not fucking recyclable) or the fleet of trucks and SUVs in the parking lot.

I don’t highlight the Whiteness of so many of the texts that we still use, or challenge the White middle class child images of Teachers Pay Teachers printouts that spew daily out of the photocopier in the staff room.

I do not say anything about teachers clearly punching in and punching out, whose “do the minimum” approach to teaching does a disservice to the children in their classes and to the teaching profession generally because it feeds the public perception that teachers are fundamentally slackers who are “only in it” for the summers off and the pension.

I participate in “community” activities—Secret Santa (oh, yay, more consumerism and shit I don’t need!), staff parties and Friday treat days (Are we really still using styrofoam plates and plastic cutlery?).

I contribute to fundraisers and sunshine funds, I compliment people on their bulletin boards, and I make small talk (which I hate) with the best of them.

I organize an assembly for Orange Shirt Day and post videos, book titles and other resources about Grandfather Teachings, reconciliation and residential schools to Edsby. I check in with other teachers and offer to loan them books. I try to frame suggestions as an invitation, an opportunity for learning:

We might want to...

It could be good if...

I am wondering how we might...?

Inside I am judging and critiquing and lamenting the fact that “people are not doing their work”, and then checking myself because: Who made me judge and jury? And so I stay silent, and nothing changes.

Sometimes it is just easier to go with the flow, to resist swimming against the current. But like the rocks in the river, I am a site of tension with swirling emotional eddies. I am struggling to figure out how to parse my vocation from my profession, to figure out how to be “professional” without losing my sense of myself, my values, and my commitment to change.

My silence does not protect me. Neither does my sunny disposition. In fact, I think they contribute to my feelings of guilt and complicity in a system that isn’t working—that is oppressive and hurtful. Why? I think there is a voice in my head that says: If I speak and act like the people who surround me then I can blend in, I can belong. And I do want to belong. I want to be at the centre of a community of practice. This pull to the centre is powerful, even when I know that, as Wenger (1998) argues, it is on the periphery that deep learning happens. Maybe I am weary of “deep learning.” Maybe I just want to circle the wagons to buffer myself from the discomfort and dissonance that comes from questioning the status quo.

I feel stuck. I am struggling to feel positive about teaching, to find enthusiasm for different projects and initiatives. I feel disconnected from and increasingly critical of my colleagues. And I feel sad and tired—all the time. These are all classic manifestations of burnout: depersonalisation and cynicism, a decreasing sense of efficacy, and emotional

exhaustion (Chang, 2009; Driscoll, 2020; Fiorilli et al., 2017; Maslach & Jackson 1981; Nagoski & Nagoski, 2019; Oberle et al., 2020; Pines 1994).

I want to understand where my sadness and my disquiet sit. What is it that feels so fragile and so precarious? Yes, I know that some of this is because teaching is a complex, messy, emotional endeavor. I, like most teachers, am constantly working to manage my emotional responses to situations involving students, parents, colleagues, and administrators. But all teachers do this emotional work. It is inseparable from the job that is “teaching.”

I know that some of my morning tears are about anxiety, born of the high expectations I have of myself and the subsequent pressure I feel to do my job well. But this is not the whole story.

What feels vulnerable is not so much my teaching practice but my confidence, my sense of purpose, and my belief in the value and impact of my work. I know that I am a “good” teacher. I know that I can bring about student learning even with “difficult” or unmotivated students and in spite of some external factors. I know that students in my classes are engaged and challenged, that they are participants in the co-construction of meaning and understanding. I know that they feel happy and safe: I see this by the way they come into my class in the morning and by the stories they share with me throughout the day. I enjoy the challenge of teaching and learning, I am not afraid to try new things, to fail, to rethink and to relearn. I am confident about many aspects of my practice and about both my content and pedagogical knowledge. In the language of educational research, I have high teacher self-efficacy (Bandura, 1997; Bruce et al., 2010; Ekmecki et al., 2015; Patterson, 2012; Ross & Bruce, 2007; Tschannen-Moran & Hoy, 2001). My

practice is not perfect, but I know rich learning happens in my classroom, that there is joy and struggle in equal measure.

I also possess many of the qualities that are the hallmarks of resilient teachers: I am intrinsically motivated, determined, altruistic, and flexible (Mansfield et al., 2012), and I am not afraid to try new things (Mansfield et al., 2012; Meister & Ahrens, 2011). I also have well-developed coping skills: I am pretty comfortable with myself and I laugh often. I am self-reflective and I have a rich network of friends who share my passions and interests. I accept that failure is necessary for learning, I am not afraid to ask for help, and I can think on my feet to solve problems (Lowe et al., 2019; Mansfield et al., 2012). I build strong, positive relationships with students (Admiraal et al., 2019; Mansfield et al., 2012) and feel a strong sense of self-worth and accomplishment when I get to share in their learning and see them grow and develop (Admiraal et al., 2019; Day & Gu, 2009). I have also really sought to keep my practice fresh, to not grow too stale or comfortable. I change grades often, I have worked in different roles, I seek out grants and opportunities to push my learning. I continually look for opportunities for renewal and am on a fairly constant quest for relevance (Lowe et al., 2019).

Resilient is the opposite of fragile. It is a word that implies strength and endurance, an ability to stay positive (Lowe et al., 2019) and to see things through despite challenges. Research suggests that high teacher self-efficacy also helps to mitigate burnout (Fiorilli et al., 2017; Skaalvik & Skaalvik, 2009). So, the question then becomes, if I have a high degree of teacher self-efficacy and embody the qualities and attitudes of resilient teachers, why is it that I feel so much despair about my work? Why do I feel so

fragile? Why now, when I am a veteran teacher and I am supposed to be at the top of my game?

I am trying to figure out what has changed between the beginning of my career and now. I think some of it is because the idea of gaining teaching mastery is a paradox. The more you know, the less you know. The more you feel success, the more you are aware of the gaps in your knowledge and your practice, and of the ways in which you are not meeting your goals.

When I first started teaching, I believed that public education could be a vehicle for justice, a fertile soil in which to grow compassionate, informed, engaged, and capable citizens. I thought that it could be the great equalizer, a site of repair and renewal, of redress. I couldn't see the cracks and failures in the system because I was too busy trying to become a good teacher to notice.

Early in my career I was just focused on surviving. I was aware of not being the best educator I could be for my students, but I put this down to inexperience and to the situations in which I found myself. In the North there was the geographical and cultural isolation. I was new, inexperienced, and bound to make mistakes. My students were also living in a culture in transition and facing challenges that were bigger than me. When I came back to Ontario, I could tell myself that I was adapting to new students, new expectations, and new curriculum. I was still finding my feet when it came to classroom management. Many students I worked with faced challenges and obstacles that I recognized (at least intellectually) were not all mine to own or fix. I could externalize (to an extent) the failures in my program and my practice. And I am an optimist: there was always the next year, and the next class. I trusted that as time passed and I gained

experience, I would be able to fulfil my goal of being a critical, compassionate, responsive educator who “made a difference.” I learned to seek out mentors who could help me to grow and improve my teaching. It was enough for a while to just focus on my class and my students because that in itself was a huge project (I had so much learning to do).

When things started to feel wobbly at Meadowbrook, I thought it was situational, not systemic. I moved to Centennial following a principal whose vision and approach I trusted. It was at Centennial that I began to feel like I “had a handle on teaching” and, not surprisingly, this coincided with a sense of belonging, pride of place and shared purpose. Yes, most of our work was geared around improving our EQAO scores and I *know* there is a huge problem with this, but there was also a huge emphasis on clear goals, high expectations and coherent, rigorous instruction. I was happy to be working with a principal who believed that good teaching could make a difference in student outcomes, and who did everything she could to create a positive identity for a school many derided and looked down on, and to prove that “those kids” were teachable. I was happy to be part of a team. I also found myself immersed in a parent community whose values often mirrored my own and who celebrated my social justice stance. I felt seen and valued, affirmed and inspired.

In the early years at Centennial, my sense of the collective efficacy (Pajares, 1997) in the building was high. I felt like I was a part of something positive and productive. As a staff, we believed in our collective capability to teach in a way that helped kids develop and learn (Goddard & Goddard, 2001; Goddard et al., 2000; Klassen et al., 2011). We had rising test scores, the arts program, and an infusion of motivated,

passionate staff along with support from the board office in the form of instructional coaches and extra funding: we felt like we were making a name for Centennial as a school on the move—a place of intention, action, and impact. We were embodying the most hopeful research about efficacy, which suggests that “teachers in schools with high collective efficacy do not accept low student achievement as an inevitable by-product of low socioeconomic status, lack of ability, or family background. They roll up their sleeves and get the job done” (Tschannen-Moran & Barr, 2004 p. 192).

Being part of a community of practice did buffer me from burning out. Whether or not I think our focus was in the long-term interests of social justice, we were all working together to be some version of the best possible teachers we could be, and to change the culture of the school and reshape its reputation. While at heart I might have wanted to “change the game” called public education, I was happy to settle for playing the game if we were all playing together. Inexperience and being less aware of the deficiencies and injustices of the school system also helped to shield me from the doubts and disappointments that also wear me down.

But that sense of collective efficacy was sadly short-lived. In the years after the principal I’d followed left, the school slowly began to lose focus and coherence. Some of this had to do with the leadership of administrators, some of it had to do with a lack of funding from the board for professional development, and some it had to do with changes in staff. In my role as an instructional coach, I tried to stay true to a vision for the school that situated teacher practice as the most powerful factor shaping student achievement. But it was not my place to set expectations or to enforce them. I believe that subsequent principals did not have a vision for the school. They did not seem to be focused on

academics or arts but on “keeping a lid on things,” and the culture of high expectations quickly disintegrated as the building split off into factions. There was no clear articulation of goals for teachers or for students.

Those first years at Centennial did prepare me well for my time as a coach. Schooled as I was by my mentors and superiors at the board office, I willingly “drank the Kool-Aid” and jumped in with both feet to embrace the Ontario-wide push to implement learning goals and success criteria, in tandem with Ministry-approved standards, assessment, and “best practices” to propel an improvement in student achievement and outcomes. I was starting to see that not all teachers and teaching were as rigorous, intentional, or effective as they could be. I really wanted to believe that the approach promoted by the school board and educational gurus like John Hattie (2008, 2011) would be a panacea to addressing inequities and to ensuring all kids got the rigorous and dynamic instruction that would make a difference in their learning and life outcomes. Ha! What’s even funnier is that I thought we could measure the effectiveness of this strategy with the rise or fall of EQAO scores and data walls.

It is perhaps not surprising that some of my greatest feelings of isolation and frustration came in the years following my first year of graduate studies, where I reconnected with my earlier teacher-self and a more idealistic view of teaching as liberatory, transformative, and critical. Graduate studies allowed me to step back a little to examine more critically the system in which I was embedded. I began to see how I had been seduced by an audit culture of education (Halpern-Laff, 2020) and an increasingly corporate approach to teaching that was all about “building capacity,” “levering strategies,” “feeding learning forward,” and “measuring outcomes.” I readily adopted the

ideas of “distributed leadership,” “SMART goals” and “asset-orientation.” I also jumped onboard with “guided inquiry”, “reflective practice” and “critical literacy”. But as I read and think and reacquaint myself with the critical educators who inspired first my activism and then my teaching, I realize that many of these ideas are corruptions of Boal (1979, 2000), hooks (1994), Freire (1970) and other critical pedagogues. Their visions and values have been sanitized, generalized, and co-opted. What were once transformative ideas have been made palatable and accessible so as to shore up the status quo. I know that the spirit of their ideas is still there, in the background, but they are like the marks of a dry-erase marker on a whiteboard: with the brush of a sleeve or a simple smear of a finger, the work is gone.

When I returned to the classroom a few years ago after a year away, this shock of idealism, along with a lack of coherent or dynamic vision at my school and my inability to create a learning community for myself (even around more conventional, board-endorsed learning), meant that I was vulnerable to burnout and the associated feelings of hopelessness and aloneness.

At a time when I have some teaching mastery and am looking beyond my classroom practice to try and effect change more broadly, my idealism makes me particularly susceptible to burnout (Chang 2009; Driscoll, 2020; Dunn, 2017; Gorski & Chen, 2015; Pines, 1994). Mine is a radical social-action ideology (Pines, 1994), with goals tied to a broader vision for society that is incredibly hard to achieve, especially in isolation. Idealists seek change, struggle against systems, are dedicated, committed, and passionate. We throw ourselves into our work, which we see as a “calling” (and for me, teaching in public school is a calling) and the stakes are high (Chang, 2009; Gorski &

Chen, 2015; Pines, 1994)! When we do not see the changes that we hope to see (a likely outcome given the monolithic systems in which we live and work), we feel a sense of failure and experience a loss of spirit (Pines 1994). This loss is characterised by a sense of disillusionment and hopelessness. My activist identity is not separate from my teacher identity (Dunn et al., 2017), and this causes a schism because it is hard to reconcile working within the system when I am fighting to change it.

Friends and family exhort me to let go of the big picture and focus on the children in my class, on the ways I am making a difference in *their* lives. But this is not enough to assuage the feelings I have of not living up to my own expectations about the power of education to advance the causes of peace and justice and to offer every child a fair chance to become an active and empowered participant in the world. I can still see the potential for change and “difference making,” but where I once thought I knew what the path to this difference making was, I am now unsure of what steps are necessary and overwhelmed by the obstacles.

Those two years I taught in the Junior division after my year in graduate studies were incredibly difficult and isolating. I had no one in whom to confide about the challenges I was facing in my classroom, either in terms of my relationship with students or areas of the curriculum where I knew my practice was weak. Determined as I was not to be a part of any conversations that involved personal attacks and negativity, I also found myself avoiding most of my Junior colleagues, which removed another layer of social support and camaraderie which helps to buffer against the pressures of teaching. I was left wide open to the “wear and tear of exposure to policy and social reforms” (Day & Gu, 2009, p. 442). This reinforcement of what is already the isolated culture of

teaching (Chang 2009) exacerbated my feelings of despair and alienation, as burdens not shared become heavier and harder to bear (Fullan, 2001, as cited in Chang, 2009).

I need positive relationships to help me to stay grounded, to balance my idealism, to help me to focus on what is achievable, and to help ward off feelings of insecurity and failure. I need the protective buffer of community and mentorship to maintain some perspective about my role (no one is irreplaceable; I am just one person). Critical conversations provide me with feedback about my practice, which helps me to stay centered in learning and growing, and these are both hopeful antidotes to despair and frustration. I know that a sense of shared responsibility helps to dissipate my anxiety and helps to buffer me from the pressure I put on myself. I also need guidance and support from my administration. First, I need them to outline a vision and goals, because if left to my own devices I become overwhelmed by all the ways I want to improve, all the needs I see, and my inability to meet them all. It seems obvious, but I have come to understand that teacher resilience depends on the quality of the relationships in which teachers are embedded, and it is sustained (or not) by the social and intellectual environment in which teachers work (Gu, 2014).

Relationships grounded in reciprocity, shared appreciation, responsibility, and purpose can reduce feelings of vulnerability and help educators to stay engaged and inspired (Gu, 2014). In the absence of critical, compassionate, constructive relationships or schoolwide goals and expectations, I struggle to feel “effective” as an educator. When I returned to teaching after my year off for grad school and parents told me how engaged their children were in my classroom, I couldn’t see it. Perhaps I was unable to believe the feedback about my practice or to feel satisfied or fulfilled (despite never having worked

harder) because the teaching community I had come to love and depend on to be as engaged and committed as I was to the interests of students was fractured and dysfunctional. So instead, I desperately sought feedback and affirmation from my students themselves, and when they were reluctant or unable to provide it my feelings of inadequacy and doubt deepened.

My move back to Grade 2/3 did help somewhat, because 7- and 8-year-olds are more effusive and animated in their responses. There was reciprocity in my relationships (Noddings, 1984) in the exchange of energy and emotion and care—I felt seen and valued. And in the Primary division, I had colleagues with whom I could chat, share ideas, or even shed a few tears. But I still found it hard to really connect or foster deeper relationships. I want more than a community built around sharing art supplies, partnered gym periods, exchanges of math games, and commiseration about how long it takes to write report cards. For me, belonging to a community is also about a shared purpose and a shared vision: it is about a culture rooted in high expectations, and centered in ongoing learning and interrogation of stance and practice. This is what both reassures me and inspires me. Otherwise, I just feel like I am going through the motions.

In his writing about why long term activists dropout and burnout, Daniel Driscoll (2020) notes that activists who have weak ties to other members of the social movement in which they are involved, and who are already feeling isolated, are much more susceptible to burnout. I wonder if I have done this to myself. How much of this is my own stubbornness? My own overthinking? My own dissatisfaction? Am I the author of my own frustration and alienation?

In my own defense, I am confronted daily by the cult of individualism and inherently conservative White, middle-class biases that most Peterborough teachers bring to the table. These biases are also heteronormative, presume that we live in a meritocracy (we don't), are inclined towards parent-blaming, and do not acknowledge structural factors (such as lack of affordable housing and a paucity of mental health and addictions support services) that have a profound impact on the lives and learning of the students with whom we work.

Perhaps my frustration is justified. Because I am. Frustrated. I am frustrated that teachers aren't more critical, that administrators aren't more critical, that this culture of blame and conservatism is still so prevalent (and that in my own frustration I too am caught in a web where the line between critique and blame is gossamer-thin) . I am frustrated by poor leadership, I am frustrated by teachers who are "just putting the time in" or who don't demonstrate an inquiry stance. I am frustrated by a school board that, as the mouthpiece of the Ministry of Education, consistently asks schools and teachers to do more with less (less support staff, less funds for psychological assessments, less funds for special programs, less release time for teachers) and a mandate that is so focused on investment and returns that I think we have lost sight of the care, the joy, the curiosity, the passion, the advocacy and the love that I think should be at the heart of any child's education. And, I am frustrated with myself, for not speaking up, for my smiles and my silence, for my unwillingness to be willful (Ahmed 2017), for my compliance with a system that is unjust and hurtful.

How can we actually teach for change if we are not actively involved in challenging the systems that disadvantage some kids over others? Proponents of cultural

relationship theory argue that neither true empathy nor respect (both foundational to healing work and counseling) are possible unless counsellors are actively engaged as allies who acknowledge, and are working to challenge, the systems that cause hurt and trauma (Jordan 2014; Rector-Aranda, 2019). Surely the same is true of teachers? Can we truly educate if we are not working to dismantle and re-envision systems that make it difficult for kids to learn? We know that housing and food insecurity impede learning; we know that mental illness impedes learning. Why are we not working more actively to find longer-term solutions to these stressors in a child's life? Why are we not actively involved in advocating for housing subsidies, guaranteed annual income, and subsidized child care? Why am I not?

I know that my frustration and anger about what is not working should really not be directed at teachers or administrators, but at the oppressive systems and contexts that underpin public education. And I know (thank you Ferne) that teachers as a demographic are just a sample of the broader society, and my expectation that they “do their work” when it comes to evaluating their own privilege, critiquing the status quo, and working to dismantle oppressive systems is naive and not realistic. Still, I thought that this is what teaching was about, that teaching would attract at least a few more people who were willing to question and challenge the systems that are hurtful to those we are purported to be helping.

Regardless of where we sit on the political spectrum, no good work in schools is possible without good relationships. By good relationships, I mean relationships that transcend caring for the child in the moment, and that transcend pity and charity. As Michael Fullan writes (2001, p. 55), “Schools, especially elementary schools, are known

for their culture of caring, but can they get tough about bottom-line results? Are they really all that caring if they cannot show that students are learning?” I take some issue with Fullan’s focus on standards and testing as proof of student learning, but I agree with his point that schools that are truly caring are those that have high expectations for children regardless of their race or class, and which put practices, norms, and resources in place to help both teachers and students meet these expectations.

I think about my most recent principal bringing in someone from city social services to do the *Bridges out of Poverty* work—based on the book of the same name (Payne et al., 2001)—with our staff. I think about what was shared, especially about class differences, the danger of assumptions, relationships, and register. On paper and to the ear, the ideas were important, relevant, even transformative. But they were consumed passively and there was no follow-through or follow-up. Some staff seemed genuinely interested, others not so much, but people did say that it made them think. Several copies of the book were distributed to staff, but they sat on the staff room table for months, lost amidst forgotten photocopies of word searches and multiplication problems. I occasionally pulled the book out from under a pile and glanced through the table of contents, but mostly it sat unopened, a reminder of our collective apathy or, perhaps more fairly, of our own paralysis in the face of the real work, both emotional, intellectual and social, of really addressing the structural inequalities that were at the root of so much of the dysfunction at Centennial.

I am fragile and frustrated because my identity and my work as a critical, activist educator teaching for social justice—the identity that I enact in my classroom—is also nested within the school, school board, and school system I work in, like Russian dolls or

concentric circles. The further I work my way outwards, the more cracks and fissures appear. Somehow, instead of protecting me, these cultures and contexts and the norms they impose penetrate through the layers to challenge me. They challenge my belief that I am doing good work, my sense of joy, satisfaction and fulfillment and, ultimately, my sense of myself.

So why do I bother to stay? Why do I keep working within the system? Maybe it's because of the "golden handcuffs." As a teacher working in Ontario, I have an excellent salary, great benefits, a securely-protected contract position, a strong union, and the best performing-teacher pension plan in North America (Lorinc, 2013). But it is more than that.

I am listening to Paul Farmer talk about social determinants of health in his interview with Chelsea Clinton (2019). They take as a given that we need to address poverty to address health inequity. I think this is also true in education. One of the points Farmer makes about health is that we can't focus solely on root causes and forget about treatment and the equitable provision of services; people need care now. We need to treat the symptoms while we look for the causes of illness. This resonates because I know that the education system is broken and that we need to do more, collectively, to tackle the root causes of injustice. As I have expressed before, I worry about being complicit in a system that hurts both kids and teachers. But to give up and stop teaching does not feel like the solution. Dare I say that schools, and kids, need people like me? What would they be like if teachers like me were not present?

So the new question becomes, can we do both-and? Can we teach in the system *and* change it? If enough teachers took a radical, critical inquiry stance, could we make

schools a locus for positive social change through education? It's a nice dream, but I am not sure how we can get there.

Farmer (Clinton, 2019) also says that if you are going to address the inequities of health care, if you are going to try to make access more equitable, then you need to put the people affected at the centre of both the work and the conversation. Schools are still an unwelcoming place for *so* many parents and families, especially those who are marginalized. How can we change this?

I know that some of what makes a difference for kids is *amazing* teaching—teachers who have the energy, the passion, the commitment, the rigour, the love, the humility, and the creativity to create learning experiences that engage children in deep learning. And I know that doing this work has to be grounded in the same humanizing pedagogy and growth-fostering relationships (Jordan, 2014) that are central to my pedagogy, my peace and justice stance, and my life. These relationships need to be enacted with my colleagues, with my administrator, with parents, and with the community in which schools are situated. Schools need to be places where people feel seen and valued, where they feel inspired to make and create, where they feel a sense of purpose, and also where they feel welcome enough to want to develop more and deeper connections.¹³

I know that nurturing good relationships matters because broken connections and fractured relationships lead to a lack of authenticity and a retreat from relationships and

¹³ This is my interpretation of the “five good things” that Jean Baker Miller, founder of relational cultural theory, outlined and highlighted as the markers of growth-fostering relationships. The original five good things are “(1) an increased sense of zest, (2) greater clarity, (3) a sense of worth, (4) increasing productivity and creativity and (5) a desire for more connection” (as cited in Jordan, 2014, p. 3).

connections. It's an adaptive feedback loop that affects people's sense of focus, commitment and self-worth (Jordan, 2014) and "chronic disconnections [can drain] individuals, relationships and communities of vitality, stability and creativity" (PAGE). I know too that (in spite of my attempts to prove otherwise), a principal (and administrative team) can make or break school culture. Schools are hierarchical and principals do have the power to shape the relationships that underpin teaching and learning and, consequently, can support or undermine teacher resilience (Gu, 2014). As Michael Fullan (2002) writes,

We have found that the single factor common to every successful change initiative is that relationships improve. If relationships improve, things get better. If they remain the same or get worse, ground is lost. Thus leaders must be consummate relationship builders with diverse people and groups especially with people different than themselves. Effective leaders constantly foster purposeful interaction and problem solving, and are wary of easy consensus. (p. 7).

In their study of "positive veteran teachers," Lowe and colleagues (2019) emphasize the role that school leadership plays in sustaining and engaging veteran teachers. They note that head teachers or principals can have a profound effect on how veteran teachers perceive themselves and their work by providing affirmation, encouragement, constructive feedback, and opportunities to lead. Being positioned as competent and as having something to offer matters a lot to me, as does working in a building where the goals and expectations for staff and students are clearly expressed, enacted, and supported. In my first years at Centennial and when I worked as a coach, I felt like a confidant and trusted colleague of the principals with whom I worked: I was asked to present at staff meetings; was consulted about school-related decisions; and was positioned as capable, competent and trustworthy. I was not afraid to make suggestions

about hiring, or to advocate for other teachers and for students. My passion was celebrated, as was my instructional geekiness. But the last few years have seen me positioned differently, and while I have created opportunities for learning for myself, they have been in spite of, not because of, the administrators with whom I worked. Pines (1994) suggests that when an environment is not supportive, individuals “cannot get the resources, opportunities, or authority they need to achieve their goals. As a result they achieve a painful feeling of failure” (p. 383). I am the case in point.

So, I have recently accepted a teaching position in a new school with a principal whom I know and trust and who values me as an educator and as a colleague. I am leaving a place I love, a place where I came of age as a teacher and where I have been most able to enact a critical- and justice-oriented stance and pedagogy. Sadly, it is a place where school culture is increasingly frayed and fractured and where the relationships no longer sustain or inspire me. My identity and my sense of myself have become vulnerable. Without these relationships to insulate me from the perils of my idealism or to fuel my joy in learning with others, it is hard to believe in myself and my work as an educator, to be who and how I want to be in the world and in my work, to find the balance between my cover story and my secret story, and to push boundaries and dwell at the points of intersection where deep learning happens. I am heading to a place where I hope I can build new relationships and where I trust in the leadership to foster the kind of pedagogically rich and justice-focused school culture that I envision, and to which I want to contribute. I know no school is perfect, I know no principal or teacher is perfect, but I know that relationships matter and that good relationships, growthful ones, help reconcile us with our imperfections and maybe even find the beauty in them. I do walk a path of

privilege, and my privilege allows me to choose hard: to choose to invest energy and care and love in my teaching and in my own learning and unlearning as a critical educator. I accept that sometimes I will walk this path alone (not everyone wants to slog through the muck or feel the burn of the climb). But I do *so* want to walk with others; the view from the top can be so beautiful, the lush darkness of the forest so magical and mysterious. I want to invite people to share in my journey and for others to agree to walk alongside me, at least some of the way. I don't mind being the leader, I don't mind being led, I don't mind if people cheer from the sidelines or if they are present only to listen to the stories after the fact. Maybe together we can ease the path for others, I still believe this is possible. However we go, I know that the journey is not one that I can undertake without support and love and care. This is what gives me hope, feeds my soul, and keeps the despair I feel about the injustice and dysfunction of public education at bay. Ultimately, I hope that I will find a way to take my teacher activism out of my classroom and into a school and beyond. Perhaps it is possible; I need to believe that it is so. Onward.

Veteran Teacher

When I think of a veteran
 I think of poppies
 Dark green uniforms
 Black boots
 And the haunting notes of the "Last Post"
 I think of the hospital near my parents where
 (mostly) Old Men convalesce and are fêted every November 11
 For their service
 To queen
 And country
 I think about how somehow,
 Returning from a war
 Confers
 A hero's status.

I think of the women's Olympic soccer team
 Of those players who have played the game longer than the others
 They are older, more experienced
 Valued for their skill,
 Their calm
 Their experience.
 They are used to the pressure;
 Are less fazed by the crowds, the hype, the rivalries.
 They can tune out the chaos, the noise, the rhetoric
 And focus on
 The game.

They know how to play within the lines
 And can adapt their style of play;
 They know when to play defensively
 And when to go on the offence.
 They have seen coaches come and go,
 Players too.
 And they have experienced their share of "bad calls."
 But, they are in it for the long game.
 They have endurance,
 They are resilient.
 And always,
 They keep their eye
 On the ball.

When I hear the word "veteran"
 What I don't think about
 Is teaching
 Or teachers.

In their survey of the research
 On Veteran Teacher Identity
 Carillo and Flores tell us that
 Veteran teachers
 Are those teachers who have been teaching for 20 years or more
 They are older,

They have served the profession for longer
 In schools (where else?)
 And they (usually)
 Maintain “a high degree of motivation and commitment towards the
 profession.”¹⁴
 They are notable for their resiliency
 Their experience
 Their confidence
 And for their ability
 To reconcile:
 The personal,
 The situated
 And the professional.

When I think of the older, more experienced teachers I have known
 I think of long-haul truckers,
 Travelling roads, shipping goods (precious cargo)
 Traversing landscapes: fields of sunflowers, swaths of spruce,
 Report card dates looming in the distance
 Always on the lookout for deer and moose and that one math quiz that was
 handed in late and has somehow
 Vanished.
 Long days
 Longer nights
 Slugging coffee
 And camomile tea
 A camaraderie with others
 All traveling in their separate cabs

Alone

Sometimes we call them: “lifers”
 As if school and teaching were a sentence they could not escape
 Golden hand-cuffs
 And all that.
 There must be a reason for all those tally marks

¹⁴ Carillo & Flores, 2018, p. 640.

Beyond teaching children to count to 5

I think of a cycle through maiden, mother, crone,
 Accumulated wisdom borne of caring and nurture
 And of exposure to the elements
 Rocks worn smooth
 From tumbling
 With the wind and waves
 The encroaching and receding
 Of this reform and that initiative,
 This method and that vision.
 In
 And
 Out
 Skirting the shores
 Sometimes stooping to fling a starfish back into the ocean
 "It made a difference to that one."¹⁵

I think of those who are more "traditional," who cling to cursive writing
 And *Chalk and Talk*
 Who insist that children should know their multiplication tables,
 Or else...
 They wear glasses and just a little eye make up,
 And heels on Fridays to offset the jeans.
 And I think of those whose energy and enthusiasm belies their years in the
 system
 It is like they have drunk some sort of elixir that makes them impervious
 To cynicism
 And despair
 They wear smiles and cheerfulness
 And running shoes so that they can
 "Keep up with the kids"

I think of the mentors I have had
 Those who have helped me to adapt:
 To moderate idealism with pragmatism

¹⁵ A reference to *The Star Thrower*, the oft quoted and adapted story by Loren Eiseley (1907-1977)

To be firm yet flexible
To jump through hoops
And trust my heart.
And to set good boundaries
All the better to shoulder the weight
And conserve a sense of self
To reconcile the personal
The situated
And the professional

Except that mostly they/we don't.
We persist in spite of
Or maybe
Because of
The load.
We bend our knees
Straighten our backs
Lift with our legs.
We open our hearts
Bleed love and energy and time
In service of
Child
And Community
Whose cares and concerns
Become our own

Returning home,
We are
Mothers
Partners
Carers
Friends
But
We are not
Heroes.

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