THE PAST, THE PRESENT, AND THE PRACTICE: 
AN EXPLORATION OF THE RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN 
BEGINNING TEACHERS’ CHILDHOOD LITERACY EXPERIENCES 
AND THEIR LITERACY TEACHING PRACTICES 

by 

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This research investigated the influence of the childhood literacy learning experiences of 6 beginning elementary teachers on their literacy teaching practice. This qualitative case study employed 5 interviews and classroom observations of each participant over the first 3 years of his or her teaching. Three main findings emerged from the research. First, participants’ early literacy experiences shaped their identity as students. The participants’ images of themselves as students, in turn, influenced their images of themselves as teachers. Second, the participants’ early literacy learning experiences influenced the types of literacy environments and literacy activities that they provided for their students. Participants employed teaching approaches that had worked for them, or that they believed would have worked for them as students. Third, participants’ early literacy experiences influenced how they understood their students’ learning. The participants who had struggled as students were more focused on detecting and addressing the needs of their students who struggled.

Implications for school literacy teaching include understanding and valuing the literacy knowledge and skills that young children bring to school and systematically addressing the needs of students who struggle with school literacy. Implications for preservice teacher education in literacy include an increased focus on supporting student teachers to reflect on how their early literacy learning affects their attitudes and assumptions about learning and
teaching, more instruction on how to address the needs of struggling literacy learners, and the provision of a coherent teacher education program that combines theory and practice more effectively. Implications for in-service teacher education in literacy include providing induction programs that are tailored to meet the needs of individual beginning teachers, an expanded range of professional development options, and ongoing opportunities to engage in effective reflective practice. Implications for further research include investigations of the influence of early literacy learning on student achievement and on literacy teacher educators’ practice.
Dedication

This dissertation is dedicated to

my husband, Paul,

and children, Mairead and Eamonn.

Without their love, support, and patience,

this dissertation would not have been possible.
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Chapter 1:
Introduction

Introduction to the Study

Through 20 years as an elementary classroom teacher, secondary school principal, and post-secondary educator, including 15 years conducting and publishing funded research with the Developing Inquiring Communities in Education Project (McGlynn-Stewart, 1996, 1998, 1999, 2001a, 2001b, 2003a, 2003b; Bell-Angus, Davis, Donoahue, Kowal, & McGlynn-Stewart, 2008), I have witnessed beginning elementary teachers struggle to teach literacy effectively to their students. The pervasiveness of this struggle, and the foundational position of literacy within the curriculum, demands that we strive to understand how to better prepare new teachers for the complex and demanding role of the literacy teacher. In spite of teacher preparation programs that include courses on current theories and practices in literacy learning and teaching, and opportunities to practice teaching literacy in school classrooms, many beginning elementary teachers have great difficulty meeting the literacy learning needs of their students. Research has shown that preservice teachers’ childhood literacy experiences affect their reading habits and attitudes as adults and their ability to both act as positive role models and to employ effective reading strategies in the classroom (Applegate & Applegate, 2004; Nathanson, Pruslow, & Levitt, 2008; Sulentic-Dowell, Beal, & Comprano, 2006). Those with positive early experiences and attitudes were more likely to provide positive literacy learning outcomes for their students. Furthermore, Benevides and Stagg Peterson (2010) found that early positive literacy experiences were positively correlated with higher scores on tests of reading and writing ability among preservice teachers. Due to the clear connection between teachers’ early literacy experiences, their adult attitudes, practices and
abilities, and their classroom teaching practice, it is imperative that we have a greater understanding of the ways in which teachers’ literacy backgrounds affect their literacy teaching.

**Background**

Reports on literacy levels for children and adults in Ontario and throughout Canada continue to be of concern. A provincial report (EQAO, 2009) indicates that one third of elementary students are not meeting provincial standards in reading and writing. According to The Canadian Language and Literacy Research Network (CLLRN, 2009) one in four Canadian children enter Grade 1 significantly below expectations in terms of the skills and knowledge needed to learn school literacy. Adult literacy levels are equally concerning. The OECD International Adult Literacy Survey (2005) reported that 40% of Canadians were found to be below suitable minimum skill levels in literacy. What is the best way to address this concern? Research tells us that effective teachers can make a bigger difference in a child’s educational success than most other school variables such as class size and composition (Darling-Hammond, 2006). As Darling-Hammond (2006) reports:

> Students who are assigned to a succession of highly effective teachers have significantly greater gains than those assigned to several ineffective teachers in sequence; the influence of a good or bad teacher affects a student’s learning not only in that year but also in later years. (p. 19)

How then do we prepare teachers to become effective educators in the area of literacy? Wolf, Fallentine, and Hill (2000) argue that in order to respond to the literacy needs of their students, teachers need to examine their own beliefs and literacy histories.
Purpose of the Research

The purpose of this study is to explore the influence of elementary teachers’ literacy history on their literacy teaching identity and practice. Six beginning teachers were invited to share in an inquiry to help them to explore the role their early literacy experiences play in their understanding of themselves as literacy teachers, and in their literacy teaching practice. This study investigates the complexities of teaching literacy, including the teachers’ experiences of successes and challenges, and their perception of the extent to which their understanding and actions are influenced by their personal literacy history.

Through an examination of the relationship and influence of literacy life histories on their identity and practice as literacy teachers, the teachers made connections between their past, present, and future directions to find out what they already know and need to learn as an educator. As a researcher, I engaged in this process with the teachers, reflecting their ideas back to them, so that together we co-constructed the meaning of their literacy teaching (Wells, 2001). This form of collaborative inquiry served as a form of professional development for the researcher as well as for the participants. Together, we created new knowledge about the role of literacy life histories on identity and practice.

Research Questions

My research questions flow from my intention to examine how literacy history influences teachers’ identity, and how history and identity influence teachers’ practice and understanding of their students’ learning. The following three research questions guided my inquiry.
1. How do teachers’ literacy histories influence their image of themselves as literacy teachers?

2. How do teachers’ literacy histories influence the types of literacy environments and literacy activities that they create for their students?

3. How do teachers’ literacy histories influence how they understand their students’ literacy learning?

Theoretical Framework

Language and context.

This study will be conducted from an understanding of language as contextually and socially constructed (Vygotsky, 1978, 1981). Both the teachers’ early language learning and their current language teaching will be viewed from this perspective. In order for the teachers’ identity and current practice to be understood, it must be considered from the perspective of their personal history, social context, and cultural context. Vygotsky placed a strong emphasis on the importance of history, context, and social interaction when considering individual learning and development (Wells, 2001). In this study, stories of teachers’ literacy experiences both in childhood and in their current teaching can provide this context and perspective. The degree to which a child achieves academic success may be determined by the match between the cultural practices at home and at school. This study will look at the cultural alignment of the home literacies of the participants with the literacy expectations they encountered in their early schooling, and with the literacy experiences of the students they teach.
In addition to this focus on social and cultural context, Wertsch (1985) explains a second general theme in Vygotsky’s writing, “the claim that higher mental functioning in the individual has its origin in social activity” (Wertsch, 1985, p. 141). Through engaging in collaborative learning relationships with others, people have the opportunity to construct their individual understanding. In this study, I explore the role that others including family members, community members, teachers and colleagues play in the participants’ literacy learning and teaching stories.

Thirdly, Wertsch (1985) identifies what for Vygotsky is the essential role played by language in growth and learning. When people are given the opportunity to speak about their experiences, and to reflect upon and refine their emerging understanding both verbally and in writing, their learning is enhanced. This study explores the participants’ early literacy experiences and offers them the opportunity to reflect their on-going literacy learning and teaching through engaging in a collaborative relationship with the researcher.

**Experience and narrative.**

This study was designed on the assumption that providing opportunities for beginning teachers to explore their literacy experiences through narrative accounts of their learning and teaching will be instructive for both the participants and a wider academic and professional audience. What we learn from the teachers’ stories, and the reflective process they engage in to construct and understand them, has application for many stakeholders. The participants themselves will have the opportunity to come to a greater understanding of how their knowledge and understanding of literacy learning and teaching is constructed and enacted. The wider audience has much to gain as well. Teacher education and literacy researchers will gain insight into the influence of early learning on teachers’ growth and development.
Teacher educators will have the opportunity to learn about which teacher professional development approaches may be most valuable in the area of literacy teaching. In addition, education ministries and boards of education will be able to use the findings of the study to inform professional development policy and in-service learning opportunities.

In order to understand issues in education, researchers must take into consideration the life context and the experiences of those involved. Isolating education from life and experience will not give an accurate picture of the complex nature of education. As Dewey explains “education, experience, and life are inextricably intertwined” (Dewey, 1938, as cited in Clandinin & Connelly, 1998, p. 154). Teachers telling their stories of their experiences, both personal and professional, allows for this integration of education, experience, and life. In this way, teachers have the opportunity to organize and reflect on their experiences in a way that is meaningful to them and to their practice as literacy educators. As Clandinin and Connelly (1998) write, “Experience, in this view, is the stories people live. People live stories, and in the telling of them reaffirm them, modify them, and create new ones” (p. 155).

Teachers’ knowledge and experience is personal and unique, therefore each teacher’s story is personal and unique. In order to capture the complexity of each teacher’s story, it is important that the researcher be involved with the participants as they construct their stories (Cohen & Manion, 1994). Close collaboration with a small number of participants is more likely to allow for meaningful construction and analysis of the teachers’ stories. The aim is to create a narrative that represents the meaning that each teacher brings to his or her teaching. As Cohen and Manion (1994) state, “The principal concern is with an understanding of the way in which the individual creates, modifies and interprets the world in which he or she
finds himself or herself” (p. 8). In this study, I worked closely with six new teachers over 3 years as they reflected upon and analyzed their literacy learning and teaching stories.

Teacher stories, formulated from interviews, observations, reflections, and feedback, can help teachers understand their particular history and how it relates to the kind of teacher they are and want to become. As Polkinghorne (1995) states, “Stories express a kind of knowledge that uniquely describes human experience in which action and happenings contribute positively and negatively to attaining goals and fulfilling purposes” (p. 19). In the on-going process of teacher education and development, the starting place is the teacher himself or herself. As Bullough (1997) says: “Teacher identity--what beginning teachers believe about teaching and learning and self-as-a teacher--is of vital concern to teacher education; it is the basis for meaning making and decision making….Teacher education must begin, then, by exploring the teaching self” (p. 21).

In this study, as the teachers constructed and reconstructed their literacy stories, they came to understand themselves and their teaching in complex ways. This gave them new perspectives on the types of literacy learning experiences they offer their students (Benson, 2003). They also came to a better understanding of their relationships to the curriculum and to the communities to which they belong, including their classroom community (Sunstein & Potts, 1998). In the following section I explore my personal learning and teaching story, and how reflecting upon it has helped me to better understand my teaching practice.

Personal Background

In this doctoral study I asked beginning teachers to tell stories of their early learning and current teaching. I believe it is important that I begin by telling my learning and teaching
stories, and illustrate how I analyzed them to come to a better understanding of myself as a teacher. In my coursework during the first year of my doctoral studies, I was asked to write the story of how I have constructed my professional knowledge as a teacher. Over the course of a school term, my professor asked our class to reflect on key incidents in our learning and teaching lives. We wrote about and discussed these incidents, and then looked for themes that helped us to understand our identities and practice as educators. This process was very powerful in that it helped me to understand my teaching in new ways, even though I had been teaching for 20 years and had conducted several teacher action research projects on my own practice over that time. I began to wonder if I could have gained some of these insights earlier in my career. In 2008, I had recently joined the research team on the longitudinal project Teacher Education for Literacy Learning led by Dr. Clare Kosnik and Dr. Clive Beck. In this research project, we interviewed beginning teachers about their preservice education in literacy, and their current literacy teaching. I wondered if these beginning teachers would benefit from reflecting on their early learning as I had.

My search for learning and teaching communities.

In the following narrative I document my personal exploration of the influence of my early learning experiences on my identity and practice as an educator. The valuable self-knowledge and understanding that I gained through this exploration was the impetus for designing and conducting my doctoral study. I will discuss three themes that I identified in my learning and teaching life. The first theme is my longing to be heard as a child. I will explore this theme through two stories that occurred when I was 8 years old; one takes place at school and the other at Brownies. The second theme is my desire to create learning communities in which my students can be heard. This theme begins in my early 20s when I
decided to become a teacher and enrolled in a teacher education program. This theme is explored through a story that takes place in a day camp staff room, and another that occurs in a preservice classroom. The theme continues into my 30s when I became a teacher educator in a post-secondary education program. At this point in my life, I was still trying to create communities in which my students could be heard. This is illustrated by a story from a preservice class that I taught. The third theme is the importance of collaborative teacher action research as a form of formal reflection on my practice. This theme spans my later years as a classroom teacher and school administrator, and includes my present role as a teacher educator. It includes three stories about classroom teacher action research that I have carried out. It begins with a story about faxing a publisher’s form, continues with a story about interviewing my elementary students, and ends with a story about my reflections on a high school leadership lab that I taught.

In addition to these three themes, I will discuss how three mentors have been instrumental in my learning and teaching history. Brown Owl, my Brownie leader, taught me as a child that I could be heard. Zoe, my supervisor at a day camp and later my teaching colleague taught me how to take a child’s perspective. Jennifer, my teacher educator in preservice, taught me how to nurture preservice teachers by being encouraging and non-judgmental. These three women play a prominent role in the stories I tell to illustrate the themes in my learning and teaching history. My narrative begins with a key story from my early days as a classroom teacher.

**Marcus and the Beautiful Junk**

Every time I finish a roll of toilet paper, I think of Marcus. The pleasure he would find in it. The things he could make with it. Marcus was a junk genius. In his hands,
cereal boxes became video cameras with buttons, electronic readouts, and moving lenses. Old bits of cardboard box became water skis and old used chart paper, a lake. Each creation became the prop for a complex, usually hilarious, play. Marcus was a genius, but a genius with the cards stacked against him. Marcus was one of the most talented and creative children I have ever met. He was also living one of the most challenging lives I had encountered. The combination of the talent and the resilience, with the facts of his life, made knowing Marcus a delightful, heartbreaking experience. When I knew Marcus, aged 6 turning 7, he had spent more than half of his life in foster care. His mother abandoned him, regularly. His father was in jail for sexually abusing him and his half brothers who were subsequently sent to live with their father. At the time he was living with an aunt he barely knew, and her children. Marcus was told that this was his new family, but he didn’t speak their home language.

Marcus delighted in fantasy. I think it was his salvation. He seemed to live for creative expression. He made so many connections and had so many ideas, he hardly had time to breathe. He drove us crazy. He made us laugh. He was delightful.

In my second year of teaching, Marcus joined my Grade 1 class early in the year. At first he would not let me or anyone else say anything positive about his ideas or creations. If we tried, he would argue or destroy what he had made. He would not play with the other children. He kept us all at a distance. He would rarely attempt academic work, saying, “I can’t.”

Slowly, torturously, things began to change. The focal point of the change was the beautiful junk-- a counter with baskets full of empty bottles and boxes, used greeting cards, telephone wire, ribbons, sticks, glue, many types and colours of paper, and toilet paper rolls. This creative arts centre was available to the children during their free-choice activity time. Although Marcus tried to hide it, he could not stop the
others from noticing his creative talent. He drew others to the table. They watched, they marveled, they questioned, they tried to imitate. In the class, we had a sharing table and a sharing time. At first, Marcus refused to be a part of it. In time, Marcus contributed so much that we had to have more sharing time in order to get through it all. Marcus began to accept his leadership role in this area and to smile at praise. The children found something in him with which they could connect and they sought him out for other activities, and he began to accept.

Marcus’ success at the junk table began to extend to other areas. His “I can’t” when faced with academic tasks became, “maybe,” and by the end of the year, “I can!” The change in attitude and behaviour and academic achievement from one end of the year to the other was remarkable (McGlynn-Stewart, unpublished story, 1993).

**A search for personal, professional, and scholarly connections.**

Why is the story of Marcus so vivid in my memory, still capable of making my eyes sting with tears after nearly 20 years? In many ways I identified with Marcus, a troubled child whose talents did not fit into the traditional way of doing school-- sitting still, following directions, and filling in the blanks. I was so gratified, and somewhat mystified, that I could help provide for him the things that I didn’t have at school-- an outlet for his creativity, a way for him to use his talents to help make sense of his world, to join a supportive class community, and to begin to be heard and to heal.

I tell this story, and the others that follow, to search for the links that connect the many different parts of my learning and teaching, and to connect the personal, professional, and scholarly aspects of my life. Through examining meaningful moments at different parts of my learning history, I have discovered the themes that intrigue me. I feel compelled to continue to seek to understand the possibilities in these learning/teaching moments and to use
my new found understanding to improve my practice as a teacher educator. I want to understand the components of the learning communities that I have been a part of, so that I can try to recreate them for myself and for the students I teach. Through reflecting on these moments, I have come to see that I am always trying to create communities in which my students of all ages and I together can develop relationships that allow us to be who we are and to grow and learn without fear. I have also learned that in my eagerness to create communities that would be meaningful and empowering for me, I sometimes forget to check in with my students to ensure that the learning community is meeting their needs. Although it is important for me to draw on my own experiences, I also need to recognize that my students may have different goals and needs.

Beattie (2007) writes, “The ability to reflect on experience and to learn from it is an essential aspect of becoming an ethically based professional” (p. 4). Loughran (2004) emphasizes the importance of teacher educators “paying attention” (p. 154) to their experiences and trusting that, “learning through researching these experiences will help them to better understand how to approach teaching about teaching in order to enhance students’ learning about teaching” (p. 154). He also highlights “the value of learning to see from a student’s perspective” (Loughran, 2004, p. 160). Samaras (2002) points to the necessity of getting to know one’s students in order to better meet their needs, and of situating student learning in contexts that are rich in problem-solving opportunities and meaningful feedback. As Beck, Freese, and Kosnik (2004) argue, “in order to learn, [preservice] students must, as far as possible, experience what is being discussed” (p. 1262). It is important for me to see my practice as emerging, and as an ongoing discovery (Bass, Anderson-Patton, & Allender, 2002). I have conducted several action research projects, as I will discuss later, but I am also
always researching myself as an educator. As Samaras and Freese (2006) point out, “Viewing research as a process of discovery leads the researcher to focus on the complex interactions that occur during the learning and teaching process” (p. 83). In addition to researching my practice, I am conscious of the importance of being a model of reflective practice for my students (Fitzgerald, Forstad, & Deemer, 2002; Loughran, 2004; Samaras, 2002; Samaras & Freese, 2006).

**Three themes in my learning and teaching story.**

In order to write this reflection, I constructed what Clandinin and Connelly (1998) call an annal and chronicle of my life. I marked out significant events in my learning/teaching life, and then wrote chronicles, or stories around the points marked on the annal. Through reading and reflecting upon these stories, as well as my professional journal, my published and unpublished papers and conference presentations, I recognized that there were three pervasive and interconnected themes. The first is a personal theme: my own longing to be heard, to find my voice. As a child in school, I was punished and silenced for stepping out of the teachers’ idea of what a good, compliant student should be. My creativity and unique view of the world were not heard or respected. I felt shut down. The second theme is a professional one that arises from the first one. As a teacher, one of my on-going goals is to create learning environments in which students can be heard, and can learn and grow in their unique ways, as Marcus was able to do. I want to create for my students the type of learning experiences that I longed to have as a child. The third theme connects the personal, professional and scholarly in my life. It is the importance of collaborative research on learning and teaching. For the past 14 years I have had the privilege to be part of a collaborative learning community of teacher action researchers. Through this group, I am
able to be heard, and to hear, my fellow teachers in a reciprocal, collegial, mentoring relationship. Throughout my learning and teaching life, mentors, particularly three women, have been instrumental in helping me to believe that I have something worthwhile to say to the world and something of value to contribute to it. They have helped me to believe in myself as a person, and also to see the life-affirming possibilities in the teaching profession.

Theme one: Longing to be heard.

I have chosen to represent these themes through a series of stories from different parts of my learning and teaching life. The story of Marcus represents a period in my early teaching when I learned that it is possible to create a learning community in which a child could find his voice. In Marcus’ case I was able to provide the time, materials, and a supportive learning community that enabled him to embrace his talents. The next two stories illustrates the first theme of my longing to be heard. They are from nearly 40 years ago, when I was about Marcus’s age. In the school story, I am not heard, nor am I encouraged to embrace my talents. I feel that I have no voice.

Monica and the Supply Cupboard

It’s dark in here and I am afraid of the dark. I mustn’t make a sound or I will have to stay in here longer. I am surrounded by shelves of our usual white paper and pencils, but also coloured paper and paints that I don’t remember ever being allowed to use. I am also afraid of what Sister will do next. Will I get the strap? How long will she keep me in here? Will she tell my parents? Am I so wicked? All I did was ask Susan what we were supposed to do with our worksheet. I was telling myself a story in my head when Sister gave the instructions. I hate Sister. That means I am going to Hell. Hell is for people who hate. It is a mortal sin. I can’t help it. I hate her. Why can’t I
be like Lori? She colours so beautifully between the lines and always has her work on
the “Our Best Work” board. I try but I just don’t know what to do with my lesson
sheets. Can I pretend I am sick again so I can escape? The others will laugh when
Sister lets me out of the cupboard, and tease me at recess. I wish I could disappear.
How long until I can hide in my own room with my books and lose myself in stories?
(McGlynn-Stewart, unpublished professional journal, September, 2008)

In my early school memories I am a failure, regularly humiliated and made to feel
inadequate for the sins of messy printing, inaccurate spelling, poor computation,
talkativeness, and daydreaming. There is no recognition that I ask interesting questions, or
make-up interesting stories, or love to help others. The classroom is not a supportive
community, but a battleground in which the children either vie for the teacher’s approval, or
try to escape her often unpredictable vengeance. The art cupboard experience was symbolic
of the way in which school alienated me from my interests and talents and yearning for
connection. Schools may no longer put children in a cupboard, but sadly they still have ways
of isolating and alienating children.

For Marcus, the art table was an opportunity to grow and heal and connect. Why was
it that Marcus grew to be more of his glorious self, and I longed to disappear? What were the
components of my primary learning community that gave him the space and courage to
embrace his talents? How can I recreate learning communities in my preservice classrooms
that give my students this same sense of space and courage? I realize that my intense desire
to know these things comes from both my personal devastating early learning experiences
and my glimpse of the positive possibilities that Marcus showed me early in my professional
life.
In this next story, my Brownie leader, the first of my three key mentors is able to help me to believe that I have a voice worth hearing by honouring my learning and speaking styles. In this story, I am the same age as I was during the cupboard punishments at school.

**Brown Owl**

My Brownie sash is covered in badges: storytelling, needlecraft, artist, babysitting, naturalist, first aid, cooking, writing, and many others. I am standing at the front of the church, on a chair so that I can see over the lectern. I am giving a speech I wrote so that I can earn another badge. This one is public speaking. I am a little nervous, but Brown Owl is smiling at me from the front. She nods as I begin to speak and I know that I can do it. When I finish, the audience claps and I feel a glow of pride.

Things are different from school here at Brownies. We can talk, and move around, work together and make things. The leader, Brown Owl, speaks to me as if I am smart and capable of doing just about anything. She encourages me to look through the Brownie book for badges that interest me. She doesn’t seem to notice that I am a poor speller and that I always colour outside the lines. She finds so many things that I can do, and celebrates them (McGlynn-Stewart, unpublished professional journal, September, 2008).

How can it be that I was the child in the cupboard who wants to disappear and the child who is proudly speaking her own words in front of an audience? How is it that I could see myself so differently at the same stage of my life? Why weren’t my school teachers able to see what Brown Owl saw in me? Brown Owl was my lifeline. When I reflect on my experience in Brownies, I know that it is possible for a teacher to create learning communities in which a child with all types of interests and abilities and learning styles can
feel valued and have a voice. Having one educator in my life who saw me as competent and capable was enough to motivate me to explore and showcase my talents. I can be that person for some of my students.

**Theme two: Listening to students’ voices.**

My second theme concerns my desire to create environments in which my students’ voices can be heard. The following three stories explore this theme. In the first story, another important mentor in my life, Zoe, is modeling how to listen to a child. In this story, she gives me a glimpse of a new type of relationship that is possible between educators and children.

**Check-In Time**

The campers have gone home for the day. We lounge in chairs and on the floor in the camp office for our daily check-in time with Zoe, the day camp director. Zoe asks us about our day. There are jokes, and anecdotes; I then ask for advice about one of my children who is being uncooperative. Zoe asks me to say a bit more about the child and the situation. She asks the others if anyone knows this child or has any suggestions. She thoughtfully acknowledges all input and then wonders if the child is unhappy or uncomfortable with something at camp. I am intrigued by this approach to a discipline problem. Surely what is called for is a time out, or a stern talking to by the director, or some other form of punishment.

At Zoe’s prompting, I remember that the difficulties do seem to revolve around swim time. I think out loud that perhaps the child is worried about swimming. Zoe suggests I find out, and we move on to other counselor’s questions and observations. Zoe models the same thoughtful, child-centred approach. We then move on to planning for the next day at camp. This daily time of communal reflection binds us as a community of counselors, and also gives us the opportunity to
plan engaging activities and rituals that will embrace the children in the whole camp community (McGlynn-Stewart, unpublished professional journal, October 2008).

We are all university students, except Zoe, who has just finished her teacher education program at The Institute for Child Studies, University of Toronto. Although I have worked with children in summer programs for years to help pay tuition fees, I have never seriously thought of becoming a teacher. Why would I want to enter a profession that terrorized and humiliated me as a child? Zoe makes me believe that there is a different way to be a teacher. Her modeling shows me that I can try to take the child’s perspective, and meet his or her needs. I can try to create an atmosphere that respects children’s feelings rather than trying to make them conform without knowing the reasons for their resistance. She also models a community of educators who support each other and their learners. Many years later, Zoe and I will be part of creating a similar learning community for teacher researchers. After abandoning a Master’s degree in English, and working for a year, I contact Zoe again to find out more about how I can become a teacher like her.

The next story in my theme of enabling student voice takes place during my teacher education program at The Institute for Child Studies where I met my third significant mentor, Jennifer. The way in which she supported me as one of my teacher educators during a difficult personal time gave me a wonderful model of compassionate teaching.

**Block Time**

Crash! With great satisfaction I knock my tower onto the tile floor. The coloured blocks scatter over a pleasingly large area. I gather them up and begin to build again as high as I can. When the last block is teetering on the top, I sweep them off the table, and smile at the wreckage. The noise and destruction of the falling blocks
match so well how I feel inside. My teacher, Jennifer, looks over inquiringly at me. She hasn’t seen this side of me before. I am not 4. I am 24. I am not in kindergarten, but a teacher education program. Jennifer, our teacher educator, comes over to where I am working and asks how it feels to knock the blocks over. “Therapeutic” I say. She smiles and nods and walks on (McGlynn-Stewart, unpublished professional journal, October 2008).

Our class at The Institute for Studies in Education is playing with the blocks to try to get a sense of how block play could contribute to a child’s learning. We had been discussing how block play can contribute to mathematical and scientific understanding, promote oral language and socialization between peers, but I have discovered something else. Block play can help a student work through personal pain, if she is lucky enough to have a wise and understanding teacher like Jennifer.

Marcus needed to create art and stories, to work through the difficult issues in his life, and he needed a supportive teacher and community to do that. That day, I needed to knock things down and make a great deal of noise and mess to work through my issues. I was fortunate that I had a supportive teacher and supportive learning community that allowed me to have healing as well as personal and professional growth.

Later, at our regularly scheduled individual meeting time, Jennifer refers to the block class, and then listens to whatever I want to say. She asks me to relate my feelings and new understanding to my work with children. She is so gentle and wise and encouraging, so non-judgmental. Then she tells me about what she is studying in her Ph.D. program. Even before I have finished my teacher education program, I have a role model for what I hope to
become—a teacher educator like Jennifer. Many years later when I am hired to teach my first undergraduate education course, it is Jennifer I turn to for advice and support.

Two years ago, a former fellow student from that ICS class emailed me. He was then the director of a teacher education program at York University. Several of my former students from the Ryerson undergraduate Early Childhood Education (ECE) program in which I teach were in his class. He wanted to tell me how often the students speak of me and of my teaching. He said I am their Jennifer. He could not have given me a more meaningful compliment.

The third story that illustrates the theme of listening to students’ voices comes from a recent incident in my post-secondary teaching. It reinforced the degree to which I am still influenced by my three mentors. I faced a crisis in my undergraduate classroom, and as I struggled to understand what was happening and how best to deal with it, I looked to the examples of Brown Owl, Zoe, and Jennifer.

**Angry Faces**

Closed faces, angry faces. Some stare down, others look at me then look away. Still others have turned their backs and are whispering to one another. I am not used to this in my teaching career. Students like me and I like them. I know these students. I have taught them several times during their undergraduate program. What has happened to our relationship, our learning community? My students are angry at me, saying the math test was unfair. They feel betrayed. How did this happen? How can I find out? What can I do? I don’t want to be the kind of teacher who betrays her students’ trust (McGlynn-Stewart, unpublished professional journal, October 2008).
Recently I was teaching a new course that I had helped to create called “Concept Development in Mathematics: Kindergarten to Grade 3.” I had advocated for this course, arguing that the limited amount of time I had to teach mathematics in the curriculum survey course was inadequate. I was so excited to have the opportunity to spend the whole semester exploring the learning and teaching of mathematics for young children. I knew from teaching these preservice students in a survey curriculum course that they were anxious about teaching mathematics, and I had helped to devise a course that would address their anxiety. I wanted to create a learning community that would meet their needs. They would be able to relearn early mathematics concepts in a supportive environment, collaboratively create lesson plans, and then practice what they had learned in their school placements. It was meant to be a non-threatening, supportive way to teach my anxious students to teach children who were also often anxious about mathematics. It was what I had needed at their stage of learning to teach.

I knew as I was marking that first test that something had gone terribly wrong. Several students failed and others barely passed. And these were good students. They must have had a very different idea of what was going to be on the test than I did. The next class, as I faced the angry students, I decided to use a “Feelings, Assumptions, and Plans” exercise that I had used when I was a consultant. Although I knew it was going to be hard to hear, I needed the students to see that I was willing to listen to their feelings. I wrote the heading “feelings” on the board, and because of the trust we had established over the years, they told me how they felt—angry, betrayed, confused, tricked, worried, anxious. It was hard to hear. I had never wanted students of mine to feel those feelings that I had experienced as a child. As Jennifer had modeled for me when I was knocking over the blocks, I listened, and nodded, and accepted their feelings. Next came their “assumptions.” The students had assumed that
the test would only be on the mathematics content for kindergarten to grade three, not on theory or pedagogy. “How could they think that?” I wondered. Lastly, we discussed our plans. The students were so upset they didn’t have any idea where we could go from there. As Zoe had modeled for me in the day camp “check-in,” I tried to really listen for the source of the problem. As my Brown Owl had done for me, I wanted to focus on what these students could do, and to build on that. As I struggled to understand what was happening and to respond to my students, I realized how important the modeling of these three women are to me as I face each new challenge or dilemma in my teaching.

The “Feelings, Assumptions, and Plans” exercise helped me to realize how fearful my students were of the mathematics content, and how tenuous their knowledge of the content was. They were not ready to deal with issues of theory and pedagogy. They needed more time and hands-on experiences to learn the mathematics that they hadn’t understood as children. I had been making assumptions about the kind of teaching strategies and activities that would create a supportive learning community for my students. As I have been doing throughout my teaching career, I was creating for them what I wished I had had, and what worked for me in my learning communities. I wanted to give them a voice, but I realized that I had not been listening closely enough to what my students needed, and what they were feeling. I had assumed that their feelings and needs were the same as my own.

I reflected on what they had told me, and made a plan based on what they told me they needed. We would slow down and spend more time on each concept and I would give them more time to experiment with each other and with mathematic materials until they felt comfortable. Then we would move on to the theory and pedagogy. I decided it was better to “cover” less material, but to do so in with more depth of understanding. We began to heal
and rebuild our community. By the end of the term, most students were feeling good about their mathematics learning and teaching, as I learned from their end of term reflections. One student wrote,

> Before this class I was anxious about my abilities in teaching math to children, but through practical opportunities in class using manipulatives as well as opportunities to create real-life math lessons with classmates, I feel much more confident in my capabilities (student reflection, December 2006).

I was also gratified to see that the students valued the cooperative and collaborative learning community that we had created together. As one student said,

> Working with others and sharing ideas opened up a lot of creativity that I found I was lacking. Jigsaws allowed us to work co-operatively to come up with lesson plans. We were able to use what we learned in class, and translate it into a lesson (student reflection, December 2006).

**Theme three: The importance of collaborative learning communities.**

The third theme that I identified through reading and reflecting on my journals, stories, papers, and presentations was the importance of participating in, and co-creating, supportive, collaborative learning communities. This theme incorporates all of the others, and connects the personal, professional, and scholarly in my life. I have been a member of a collaborative teacher action research group for the past 14 years. Through this group I have been supported to find my voice as a person, teacher, researcher, writer, and presenter. I have also had the support and mentorship of my colleagues as I continually strive to create learning environments in which my students can find their voice within a supportive learning community. The following is another story from my professional journal.
The Fax Machine

I punch in the numbers and listen for the beeps. The paper begins to feed into the machine. Somewhere in The Netherlands, the form is spitting out of another fax machine. It is the final step. The Consent to Publish form has been signed and delivered to Springer Press. Our chapter on the DICEP community will be published this month. How did I get so lucky? For 14 years I have had the opportunity to be part of a positive, supportive, encouraging community of teachers who have challenged me to stretch both professionally and personally. Without them, would I have ever given a conference presentation, or had my teacher action research published? Would I be teaching in a preservice program now? Or pursuing a Ph.D.? (McGlynn-Stewart, unpublished professional journal, October 2008).

The Developing Inquiring Communities in Education Project (DICEP) has provided me with the supportive learning community that I lacked as a child in school, and that I strove to create for my students as a classroom teacher, and still do today in my undergraduate classes. I feel appreciated for the talents and perspectives I bring to the group, and feel that I can contribute to the learning of others in the group. Here is how we described ourselves in this recent publication:

The Developing Inquiring Communities in Education Project (DICEP) was formed in 1991 under the leadership of professor Gordon Wells, who at that time taught at the Ontario Institute for Studies in Education at the University of Toronto. Since then the group has undergone substantial change in its organization and membership. What began as a university-school based partnership to explore learning through talk in the science classrooms of three elementary school teachers has evolved into a self-directed, collaborative group of six teacher-researchers committed to promoting inquiry as a key mode of learning and teaching at all levels in education.

The goal of our learning community is to provide a safe, supportive and intellectually stimulating place where group members can get feedback about and ideas for the inquiries they conduct in their particular settings. Our
group is collaborative in nature and we bring a focus on making meaning through talk to our meetings, as well as to our work with our students. (Bell-Angus et al., 2008, p. 19)

The teacher action research that I have conducted on my own classrooms within the supportive community of DICEP over the past 14 years has allowed me to inquire into teaching and learning issues that continue to intrigue me. DICEP has given me a forum to connect my personal, professional, and scholarly interests. I began with an investigation in my Grade four and five classroom. I wanted to know how my students perceived our classroom. Did they long to escape the classroom as I had in school, or did they feel accepted and encouraged as I had at Brownies?

At the time, DICEP had as one of its members a research officer who would come to our classroom and conduct interviews with our students. I prepared interview questions to try to better hear my students’ voices. The children were hesitant at first, thinking that this “interview” was some kind of a disguised test. They had never been asked these kinds of questions by a teacher before. They warmed up quite quickly, however, and began to give me a picture of how they saw our life together. Here is a short excerpt from two interviews:

Interviewer: Whose classroom is this? Who makes the decisions? Who owns the classroom?

Clara: Well, the kids do, because Mrs. Stewart always asks us questions like, do you want to do this, like she doesn’t decide for us, she like asks us, like she gives us a choice, options.

Interviewer: What does it feel like to be a student in this class?
Andrew: It’s fun being in her class because when someone does something, like if they do something to make the class laugh like, instead of getting mad at them, like she just laughs too.

Through this research, I saw that the students, too, valued the opportunity to make choices in their learning that reflected their interests and learning styles. I was relieved to hear that they found our classroom community to be joyful and encouraging. I was motivated to continue to try to implement an open-ended, child-centred program in a school in which this was not encouraged or well understood.

A few years later I had the opportunity to explore my interest in the creation of supportive learning communities through the co-founding of a new independent high school. My co-founder and I wanted to create an accepting and vibrant community in which the students could embrace and share their gifts. We had a vision of a school for bright students who, for whatever reason, did not fit into the public or private school systems. It was to be a place for misfits, like we had both been as children, a place where Marcus could have thrived. Furthermore, we wanted to help prepare the students to be compassionate leaders in whatever field they chose. We set out our vision in our school calendar:

Those who emerge as leaders in their fields share many traits above and beyond a broad knowledge. Whether they are politicians or business people, artists, scientists or community activists, they are people who have the ability to think creatively, to plan, and to establish goals. They are self-confident and able to motivate others as well as themselves. They look upon life as a series of challenges, not as an accumulation of obstacles. They are risk takers, who are willing to fly in the face of tradition without ignoring the lessons it has to teach. And they have a drive that is balanced by compassion.
We were committed to following through on this vision throughout the school, but planned to focus on it more particularly in a course that we developed called *The Leadership Lab*. Through this lab, we studied leadership theory, examples of leaders in many fields, and interpersonal skills. We also co-ordinated student participation in volunteer activities and mentoring partnerships. We provided a great deal of choice with regards to assignments and leadership experiences. With the encouragement of my teacher action research group DICEP, I decided to conduct an action research project on the *Leadership Lab*. We planned the course based on our vision, and what we learned about our students during their initial interviews. We were so excited to be able to offer, what seemed to us, this wonderful opportunity to reflect on and practice leadership as a school community. The students, however, appeared to be less and less interested in what we were doing. We asked for feedback and were quite stunned and humbled by what we heard. Although some students were enjoying and clearly benefiting from the course, a significant number of students reported that the course was causing them to feel anxious and overwhelmed. We had underestimated how threatening the interpersonal skills activities could be for teenagers, and how intimidated they would feel when asked to initiate their own volunteer activities in the community or to approach professionals for mentorship opportunities. What we saw as freedom and choice, some of them saw as a series of frightening and seemingly insurmountable obstacles. With the support of DICEP, I was able to work through my feelings of disappointment and, I must admit, my anger (“don’t those students know how lucky they are to have this kind of experience?”). My DICEP colleagues helped me to really listen to what the students were saying, and to craft changes to the course which would meet the students’ needs and still meet the vision for the course and school.
I realize that this dilemma has the same roots as the angry faces in the undergraduate mathematics class I taught years later. In both cases, I created the community that I imagined I would have benefited from, and that I assumed the students would benefit from. In both cases I was shocked and hurt when I learned that my students did not share or appreciate my vision. Fortunately, in both cases I had my supportive DICEP community to help me work through both the feelings and the practical implications of what my students were telling me. Through discussion with the group, and the opportunity to write a book chapter about the experience, I was able to explore what I had learned from the experience.

In addition to conducting action research on my own teaching, I became the self-appointed chronicler of DICEP as a learning community. Three times over the last 14 years I have conducted interviews and facilitated focus groups with our members to try to find out how we saw our community, and if it was meeting our needs. Just as I desperately wanted my voice to be heard as a child, and as I have been learning to listen to the voices of my students, it was important for me to be heard by, and to hear, the voices of the members of DICEP (McGlynn-Stewart, 1996, 1998, 2001a, 2001b, 2003a, 2003b; Bell-Angus et al., 2008). My need to hear and be heard, to be able to be creative in a supportive atmosphere, and to enable others to find their passion and voice in an invigorating learning community continues to be met in DICEP. Although there were tensions and growing pains along the way, as I learned through my research, DICEP has also been a significant learning opportunity for the other members as well:

We have grown not just as practitioners of action research, but in our confidence as teachers, as authors, and as conference speakers. We have found our voice both in DICEP and in the wider educational community, and have found a place from which to critically examine both theory and practice in educational thinking. (McGlynn-Stewart, 2001a, p. 200)
**A study is born.**

This process of reflecting on stories set in significant moments of my learning and teaching life has made me realize how fortunate I have been. Exploring the themes of my longing to be heard, my desire to create learning communities in which my students can be heard, and the importance of collaborative teacher action research as a form of formal reflection have helped me to understand the rich learning experiences I have had. My role models Brown Owl, Zoe, and Jennifer helped me not only in the past, but they continue to inspire and instruct me. I have had opportunities to be heard, to grow, and to celebrate my learning in the supportive communities of Brownies, my teacher education program, and DICEP. In turn, I have been able to contribute to the creation of empowering learning communities in elementary, secondary, and post-secondary classrooms. I have learned of my need to slow down and listen to the needs and feelings of my students, and not to rush to create communities based on my needs and my assumptions of my students’ needs. In addition to influencing my teaching, my learning experiences have influenced my research. The questions I ask and the ways in which I collect and analyze data arise out of my experiences as both a student and a teacher.

What I learned from this reflective course project was so powerful that I wished I had engaged in it much earlier in my career. I wondered if teachers could benefit from reflecting on their learning and teaching as early as their first few years in the classroom. A review of the literature revealed that very little research had been done on the influence of preservice teachers’ early learning, and even less on the early learning of practicing teachers. I decided to design a study that would enable new teachers to reflect upon and discuss their early learning and teaching over the first 3 years of their practice. My hope was that this would
help the teachers develop professionally through understanding themselves and their teaching more fully, but also that it would help researchers, teacher educators, education ministries and school boards to provide relevant and meaningful professional development opportunities for all teachers.

Through conducting this study I have had the opportunity to read, research, reflect, discuss, and write about teaching/learning issues that matter to me. I have worked with classroom teachers to explore with them how they experience their teaching and learning. I have discovered with them how they understand their practice and how their early learning experiences have influenced the teachers they have become. I believe that it was important that I studied my own learning and teaching before I studied the beginning teachers in my study. Throughout the research process I have also sought to continue to understand my role as an educator and researcher, and to improve my practice as I help to create the conditions for the next generation of teachers to reflect and grow as they continue on their learning/teaching journeys.

**Significance of the Study**

There are three ways in which this study contributes to the scholarly and professional practice of literacy education. The findings increase our understanding of:

1. the complex ways teachers learn and develop;

2. the role of preservice, in-service, and induction programs in teacher development;

and

3. the supports and challenges that beginning literacy teachers encounter.
Deeper understanding through reflection.

This study has been designed to fill the gap in the research literature that currently exists with respect to the relationship between beginning elementary teachers’ childhood literacy experiences and their literacy practice. Through this study we gain a deeper understanding of how the teachers’ own early literacy experiences are related to their role as literacy teachers, the literacy teaching practices they employ in their classrooms, and how they understand their students’ learning. The knowledge gained through this study will advance our theoretical and practical understanding of teaching in three important ways. Firstly, it helps us to understand the complex ways in which teachers develop. The process that the participants in the study were involved in created a deeper understanding of how teachers create and enact their professional knowledge and identity in the area of literacy learning and teaching. This was beneficial for the participants, but will also contribute to scholarly literature and to the teaching profession more generally. As Beattie (1995) states,

Narrative methods provide us with different kinds of knowledge and different ways of representing it and have the potential to bring new meaning to the experiences of change, of growth, and of professional development in a teacher’s life. (p. 8)

The teachers in this study were given the opportunity to reflect on their learning and teaching through interviews and discussions over a 3-year period. This process enabled them to take the time to reflect and become aware of what is influencing them in their professional practice. With this knowledge, they became equipped to become more intentional in their teaching decisions and practices.

In discussing the literature that examines the questions of the essential qualities of a good teacher, Korthagen (2004) maintains that it may be impossible and undesirable to have
a definitive example of a good teacher because teaching is such a complex and context specific endeavor. Furthermore, there is no generic answer to the question of how to help people to become good teachers. What Korthagen advocates, at both the preservice and in-service levels, is a focus on reflection on professional identity and personal inspiration or mission. This study contributes to the literature on teacher reflection and teacher development in the areas of literacy learning and teaching.

**Teacher preparation and development.**

There is much debate in the literature about the best methods to prepare and support teachers. This study helps us to understand the role of preservice, induction, and in-service programs in the lives of six beginning teachers. Furthermore, we see how these formal learning opportunities intersect with their early home and school learning, and their on-the-job learning. The struggles that beginning teachers face in helping their students learn effectively demand that we strive to understand how to better prepare teachers for the complex and demanding role of classroom teacher. As Feiman-Nemser (2001) states, “If we want schools to produce more powerful learning on the part of students, we have to offer more powerful learning opportunities to teachers” (p. 1014).

Beyond their formal preparation, we must also help beginning teachers to learn how to integrate their theoretical and practical knowledge, and their experiences once they are practicing teachers. As Munby, Russell, and Martin (2001) explain, teacher education continues over the first few years of practice. They call for teacher education that helps teachers to construct a constructivist view of their own teaching. Through representing the stories of six beginning teachers as they construct their understanding of their literacy learning and teaching, this study contributes to growth in the understanding of teacher
knowledge, how it is acquired, modified and elaborated through experience (Munby et al., 2001).

**Understanding supports and challenges.**

Thirdly, this study helps us to understand what supports beginning elementary teachers in their literacy teaching, and what challenges they face. In particular we will come to understand how teachers’ own literacy history and profile may affect how they are able to benefit from formal and informal literacy learning opportunities. Teachers who experienced struggles in their own early schooling may face similar challenges in preservice and in-service teacher education. They may need to have their teacher education modified to meet their learning needs. Teachers who did not face any struggles in their early learning may face a different challenge. They may find it difficult to understand and program for their students who do experience struggles with school learning. They may need help to recognize their assumptions about learning, and to become more sensitive to the needs of students who have a different learning profile than their own. Understanding the impact of teachers’ early learning experiences is key to providing appropriate and effective teacher education that will result in effective literacy learning for students.

**Definition of Terms**

In this section I define terms used throughout the dissertation. The terms are defined in terms of how they are used in the Canadian context.

**Preservice program:** The preservice program which the participants in this study attended is a university-based program for the preparation of teachers. Upon successful completion of the program, the participants were qualified to teach in publically funded
schools in the province in which they studied. This preservice program is a 1-year, post-baccalaureate Bachelor of Education program consisting of university-based coursework, two 4-week practice teaching placements in elementary schools, and one 6-week internship placement.

**Preservice teacher:** Preservice teachers are individuals who are enrolled in a preservice teacher education program and are learning to become teachers. When they successfully complete the preservice program, preservice teachers become qualified to teach in either the Primary/Junior grades (K–6), Junior/Intermediate grades (4–10), or Intermediate/Senior grades (7–12).

**Practicum or practice teaching:** As part of the preservice program, preservice teachers spend a total of 14 weeks in a classroom setting. Under the guidance of a qualified teacher, preservice teachers engage in the typical duties of a classroom teacher such as planning and implementing lessons, and evaluating student work.

**In-service teacher education:** Teachers engage in in-service teacher education throughout their careers when they continue their professional learning through workshops, courses, mentoring, professional reading, etc.

**Induction program:** An induction program is a special type of in-service learning for new teachers. It is typically offered during the first 1 or 2 years of teaching, and consists of mentoring, professional learning opportunities, and new teacher assessment.

**Literacy:** In this dissertation, literacy is referred to as a concept that transcends particular school subject areas, and also as the name of a school subject. Literacy as a school subject is also referred to as “Language,” “Language Arts,” or “English.”
**Organization of Dissertation**

This dissertation is organized in seven chapters. In Chapter 1, I introduce the problem to be researched, as well as the scholarly background and my personal background related to the research issue. Chapter 2 outlines the relevant literature pertaining to literacy education, teacher education, and teachers’ lives. In Chapter 3, I present and justify my research methodology, data collection methods, and methods of data analysis. In Chapter 4, I begin my presentation and discussion of my findings through individual case studies of the six participants. Chapters 5 and 6 continue the presentation and discussion of findings through a cross-case analysis of nine key themes. Chapter 5 presents themes one through five, and Chapter 6 presents themes six through nine. In Chapter 7, I summarize the key findings of the study in terms of answers to my three research questions, discuss implications and recommendations for school literacy, preservice teacher education, and in-service teacher education, and offer suggestions for future research. I end the chapter with a reflection on my learning as a teacher, teacher educator, and educational researcher.

**Chapter Summary**

In this chapter I present a rationale for studying the influence of early literacy experiences on the teaching of beginning classroom teachers. The background and purpose of the study is described, and the research questions are outlined. Following this, I describe the theoretical framework that underpins the study. I include my personal interest in the research, and my own learning and teaching history as it relates to the research questions. In the final two sections of the chapter, I argue that there are three ways in which the study contributes to our scholarly and professional understanding of literacy teaching, and provide definitions of
key terms in the study. In the next chapter, I review the theory and research that have informed this study.
Chapter 2: Review of the Literature

Introduction

Literacy and literacy education are complex and contested fields of study and practice. For the purposes of this literature review I have chosen only a few specific aspects of these fields to explore. The focus of this study is the childhood literacy experiences of six beginning teachers, and the influence these experience have had on their elementary classroom literacy teaching. For this reason, the literature review concentrates on emergent and early literacy learning and teaching. The review begins by outlining the importance of literacy in Canadian society. Definitions and history of the terms literate and literacy follow, including the emergence and significance of new literacies. The chapter continues with a brief history of literacy instruction in Canada. Emergent and early literacy are explored through an examination of the work of a pioneer in the field of literacy research and education, Marie Clay. The chapter then turns its attention to selected issues in teacher education in the area of literacy, including preservice and induction professional learning. Finally, the importance of attention to the personal learning and teaching experiences of teachers is discussed. The chapter concludes by emphasizing the need for more research on the preparation and on-going education of literacy teachers.

The Importance of Literacy in Canadian Society

The acquisition of language and literacy skills is so significant that it, “impacts a child’s lifelong cognitive, social, and emotional attributes” (Dietze & Kashin, 2012). According to the 2009 National Strategy for Early Literacy Report prepared by CLLRN (2009), literacy is “foundational” (CLLRN, 2009, p. 5) for positive health outcomes, success
in school, and lifetime employment and income. This recent report emphasizes that, “Health status, SES, and literacy are strongly interconnected and interrelated” (CLLRN, 2009, p. 5) in Canadian society. The report further states that, “The relationship of literacy to educational outcomes, economic outcomes and the requirements for social supports is apparent. This growing recognition is only a beginning: Canadians need to care much more about low literacy” (CLLRN, 2009, p. 5). This concern about the fundamental nature of literacy is shared by Lyon (1998) who says, “If a youngster does not learn to read in our literacy-driven society, hope for a fulfilling, productive life diminishes. In short, difficulties learning to read are not only an educational problem, they constitute a serious public health concern” (p. 7).

Considering the pervasive influence of literacy throughout the lifespan, and the dire consequences of low literacy achievement, it is sobering to consider, as McCracken and Murray (2009) report, that 20–40% of current Canadian students do not meet the standard for literacy skills necessary to compete in a global economy. Low literacy is more prevalent in certain vulnerable populations, particularly Aboriginal children, English as a second language/French as a second language learners, children with special needs, and children in rural areas (CLLRN, 2009). Moreover, if parents have weaker literacy skills they may not provide home conditions that are conducive to their children’s literacy development (Canadian Council on Learning, 2008). Children in low SES neighbourhoods may face particular barriers such as parents’ low literacy, lack of access to services, limited access to transportation, and language barriers (Hertzman, McLean, Kohen, Dunn, & Evans, 2002). However, as Willms (2002) points out, 60% of Canada’s children who are vulnerable to literacy learning challenges come from middle class and affluent families. Therefore, there is a need to pay attention to the literacy learning needs of all children, regardless of the
socioeconomic status of the family. Clearly, literacy learning and teaching need to be strong priorities in our society. Moreover, the many factors that influence the successful learning and teaching of literacy need to be well researched and understood so that we are able to prepare our children to be healthy and successful throughout their lives. Currently, there is still much to be learned about the diverse literacy learning needs of our students, and the most effective ways to prepare teachers to meet those needs.

Definitions of Literacy

Literacy is a complex field, so it is not surprising that there is a range of understandings and definitions of literacy. A traditional definition is represented by McVicker (2007), “The ability to read and write printed text that represents spoken language” (p. 18). However, this idea of print being a direct representation of spoken language, and reading and writing being simply a matter of decoding and encoding, has long been challenged. This skill-based definition of literacy has been challenged by a view of reading and writing as a meaning-making process which has comprehension as its ultimate goal. For example, Goodman (2005) says of his view of literacy, dating from the 1970s, “my own view of comprehension is that it is as much a product of what the reader brings to the text as what the author has tried to say through the text” (p. 2). Smith (1979) echoes this view. He sees reading as far more complex than decoding or simple word-level comprehension. He writes of the, “inadequacy of definitions such as ‘reading is the identification of written words’ or ‘reading is the apprehension of the author’s thoughts” (Smith, 1979, p. 103). He further asserts that:

The basic skill of reading lies more in the non-visual information that we supply from inside our head rather than in the visual information that bombards us from the print. Reading is asking questions of printed text. And
reading with comprehension becomes a matter of getting your questions answered. (Smith, 1979, p. 105)

More recently, the 2003 Adult Literacy and Life Skills Survey conducted by the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD) and Statistics Canada, defined literacy as, “The ability to understand and employ printed information in daily activities at home, at work and in the community – to achieve one’s goals and to develop one’s knowledge and potential” (OECD & Human Resources and Skills Development Canada [HRSDC], 1997, p. 47). The 2009 National Strategy for Early Literacy Report defines literacy in two ways. The first is more traditional, “the ability to read, write, and perform simple numeric calculations” (CLLRN, 2009, p. 10). The second definition is broader and includes, “multiple literacies required to succeed in a knowledge economy” (CLLRN, 2009, p. 10). Kress, a noted author in the field of multi-literacies also recognizes two ways of defining literacy. In a recent interview, Kress proposed both a narrow view of literacy, and also a very broad, encompassing one. He says:

Literacy would refer to what I regard as mode: mainly the mode of written language….The second option would be to use literacy as a term for all aspects of representation: all forms of representational means or representational resources. In that case you would have the term covering things whenever representation is made, whether it’s sensory, as image or writing or through gesture. (Kress, as cited in Bearne, 2005, pp. 287–288)

In this second option, literacy is multi-modal. That is, it is not restricted to print, but encompasses many modes, such as visual or auditory modes. In addition to being multimodal, literacy today is recognized as existing across a variety of media including a wide range of technological media. All of these modes and media come into play in Canadian homes, workplaces, and classrooms. As Peterson, Booth, and Jupiter (2009, p. vii) state, “We believe that there is a place in today’s classrooms for both literacies--reading the new digital
media and multimedia texts and reading traditional paper-based forms (books, magazines, and newspapers).

Finally, a further use of the term literacy is as a metaphor for competency, for example, through the use of terms such as physical literacy, emotional literacy, or financial literacy to indicate competency in those fields. The proliferation of the term literacy across so many fields illustrates our expanding notion of what it means to be literate in the 21st century.

A Brief History of the Terms “Literate” and “Literacy”

Gee (1986) traces the history of the term “literate” in his essay Orality and Literacy: From The Savage Mind to Ways With Words. He notes that the term “literate” replaced the older term “civilized” when describing different cultures. Thus, the civilized/primitive dichotomy became the literate/nonliterate dichotomy. However, the latter terms were also used to describe different social groups within modern technological societies (Gee, 1986). Those with “full literacy” were assumed to possess, “higher order mental skills, such as analytic, logical, or abstract thinking” (Gee, 1986, p. 719). Those with “restricted literacy” were not considered to possess these higher order skills. Modern social anthropologists, however, have shown that so-called primitive societies are not primitive in their thinking or actions (Gee, 1986).

In What No Bedtime Story Means: Narrative Skills at Home and School (Heath, 1982) and Ways With Words (Heath, 1983), the author argues that the literate/non literate or literate/oral dichotomy is false. Heath suggests that different societies and groups within societies have different types of literacy. Furthermore, there are many ways to use language
to make sense both in speech and writing. Groups within modern society, such as lower socioeconomic levels of Black culture in the United States, have historic ties to a rich oral culture. Children from this group often come to school with a sophisticated set of oral skills, but they are not the skills that are necessarily recognized or valued in school. In contrast, children from middle-class homes bring to school forms of speech that enable them to more easily succeed in the school system. Heath studied patterns of language use related to books in three communities, a White working-class community, a Black working-class community, and a middle-class or mainstream community. While the parents in all three communities wanted and expected their children to succeed in school, only the mainstream children did so. Heath determined that all three groups of children came to school with significant literacy knowledge and skills, but only the mainstream children had been exposed to, “school-expected patterns of book reading and reinforcement of these patterns in oral storytelling” (Heath, 1982, p. 50).

Emergence of New Literacies

In addition to the existence of many ways of being literate, there are also many roles that literacy must play for individuals to experience success in modern society. In 1990, the four resources model emphasized the multiple roles of a literate individual and provided a framework for thinking about a broader global definition of literacy (Freebody & Luke, 1990). The four resources model posits four necessary roles for the reader in a postmodern, text-based culture. However, none of these roles are sufficient in isolation:

1. Code breaker (coding competence)
2. Meaning maker (semantic competence)
3. Text user (pragmatic competence)
The first role, code breaker, refers to the basic skills of reading and understanding at the word level. This is a precursor to the second level, of meaning maker, in which an individual makes sense of the composition as a whole. Once this has been accomplished, the next role, that of text user, enables the reader to use the text for specific purposes. The final level of text critic enables the reader to analyze the values and perspectives underlying a particular text. For a reader to be truly literate, according to this model, he or she must be competent in all four roles.

The New London Group (Cazden, Cape, Fairclough, & Gee, 1996) built upon this notion of multiple or multiliteracies to address the growing understanding of the multiplicity of linguistic and cultural differences in society. These literacies are situated in, and constructed through participation in, particular social, cultural, and linguistic contexts. In addition, literacy is no longer restricted to the printed word, but encompasses multiple modes such as image and gesture, and is often created and disseminated using new technology. As the authors explain:

We attempt to broaden this understanding of literacy and literacy teaching and learning to include negotiating a multiplicity of discourses. We seek to highlight two principle aspects of this multiplicity. First, we want to extend the idea and scope of literacy pedagogy to account for the context of our culturally and linguistically diverse and increasingly globalized societies, for the multifarious cultures that interrelate and the plurality of texts that circulate. Second, we argue that literacy pedagogy now must account for the burgeoning variety of text forms associated with information and multimedia technologies. (Cazden et al., 1996, p. 60)

The implications for literacy education are far reaching. The authors contend that, “the very nature of language learning has changed” (Cazden et al., 1996, p. 61). In particular, with the contexts and forms of literacy being so diverse and changing so rapidly, there can no longer
be one set of standards for literacy learning, nor are traditional means of assessing literacy valid (Cazden et al., 1996).

In recent years, the related field of New Literacy Studies has specifically addressed sign-making practices using digital technologies (Mills, 2010, p. 246). This field views literacy as, “A repertoire of changing practices for communicating purposefully in multiple social and cultural contexts” (Mills, 2010, p. 247). This sociocultural perspective corresponds with the work of Vygotsky who saw language as “influenced and constituted by social relations” and as a “tool for shaping, controlling, and interacting with one’s social and physical environment” (Mills, 2010, p. 247). New Literacy Studies does not hold the view that literacy is an “ideologically benign set of context-free skills that can be taught without regarding children’s background experiences and prior cultural knowledge” (Mills, 2010, p. 255). Therefore, it resists the move to formalized universal standards for literacy learning.

Given the importance of literacy in our society, and the diverse cultural, linguistic, and technological backgrounds that children bring to school, it is imperative that we embrace a complex view of literacy. Heath (1982, 1983) reminds us that we need to widen our understanding of literacy so that children from non-mainstream homes are not disadvantaged at school. Kress (2003) makes it clear that literacy is no longer confined to print, but encompasses multiple modes and signs. Freebody and Luke (1990) emphasize that to be a reader, one go beyond the traditional code breaker role, to undertake the roles of meaning maker, text user, and text critic. Finally, the New London Group (Cazden et al., 1996) and New Literacy Studies (Mills, 2010) make the important point that reading and writing are not isolated activities, but must be considered within larger discourses that are socially, culturally, and politically situated. Therefore, traditional standards and traditional methods of
assessment are no longer adequate. It is this broad, encompassing understanding of literacy that we must bring to our understanding and education of the children in our schools.

A Brief History of Literacy Instruction in Canada, as Influenced by The United States

In the early 1900s, the “look-and-say” or whole word approach to learning to read was common. Mosher (1928) defined this method as:

Teaching reading so that the pupil immediately attaches meaning to the written symbols (words). The instructional procedure is one in which the pupil reacts to a word, or group of words, as a unit. Analytical means for aiding in the correct response are discouraged, i.e., [italicized in original] selecting and trying in order the characteristic consonant and vowel sounds, one by one, discarding each until the desired or correct one is finally hit upon. (p. 185)

As is evident by the latter part of the definition, there was a competing approach to teaching beginning reading: phonics. Phonics is an approach to teaching reading by focusing on associating letters or groups of letters with sounds and blending the sounds together to decode words. At the time of this article in 1928, a phonics approach was relatively new. Proponents of the phonics approach claimed that it promoted independence in beginning students (Mosher, 1928). Mosher argued the opposite, that it promoted an over-reliance on individual sounds. He argued that a whole word approach developed “efficient and economical silent readers” (Mosher, 1928, p. 637) by promoting habits such as “rapidly moving the eye across the page, thereby reacting to larger visual units” (Mosher, 1928, p. 637).

In spite of the protests of Mosher and his colleagues, a phonics approach became commonplace in the teaching of beginning reading for almost 60 years. By the mid-1990s, the phonics approach faced a serious challenge by what came to be known as “Whole Language.” According to Goodman (2005), Whole Language began in 1987 when he and
Brooks Smith developed a language-centred curriculum that focused on how to develop language and literacy and also on, “the role of language in human thought, communication, and learning” (Goodman, 2005, p. 5). Teachers took this holistic perspective and incorporated it into a pedagogy that became a grass roots movement. In What’s Whole in Whole Language, Goodman (2005) examined the movement and the knowledge base upon which it was built. He describes what he and his wife, Yetta Goodman, constructed:

Yetta and I built a view of language learning as personal invention within the social context. Language is shaped by two opposing forces at work, like the centripetal and centrifugal forces in physics. Personal invention expands language outward to express new experiences and ideas, but the need to be understood by others pulls language back into the conventions of the language of the community. (Goodman, 2005, p. 8)

This view of reading challenged some basic tenets of the phonics approach. In direct opposition to the phonics approach, Whole Language posited that learning to read is as natural as learning to speak. Phonics advocates, such Stanovich (1993) vehemently opposed this idea:

That direct instruction in alphabetic coding facilitates early-reading acquisition is one of the most well established conclusions in all of behavioral science. . . . The idea that learning to read is just like learning to speak is accepted by no responsible linguist, psychologist, or cognitive scientist in the research community. (pp. 285–286)

According to Dombey, the Whole Language approach led to “passionate” responses because it challenged traditional beliefs held by those who advocated a phonics approach. Goodman (2005) paraphrases Dombey’s assessment of the legacy of the Whole Language approach to include these challenges to traditionally held beliefs:

the conception of the learning and teaching of reading as straightforward, orderly processes, proceeding through a hierarchy of skills from small, simple units (letter/sound relationships) to larger, more complex units;
the idea that one’s competence as a language-user can be developed by focusing on the component parts of a text;

the idea that to read well one must attend to every word and every letter;

the underlying assumption that control over form must precede control over function;

the view that the teacher should be in charge of the student;

the view that a centrally devised program should direct the teacher;

the view that the goal of the process is to fit individuals into the existing societal structure. (p. 8)

By the late 1990s a “balanced literacy” approach (Fountas & Pinnell, 1996) was being advocated by many. This approach includes aspects of the phonics approach coupled with perspectives and approaches advocated by Whole Language. “Balanced literacy” includes shared, guided, and independent reading and writing activities, as well as “minilessons” on letter and word study (Fountas & Pinnell, 1996). The Ontario Ministry of Education’s publication A Guide to Effective Instruction in Reading, Kindergarten to Grade 3 (2003), illustrates that a balanced literacy approach has made its way into public policy:

The knowledge and skills that children need in order to read with fluency and comprehension include: oral language; prior knowledge and experience; concepts about print; phonemic awareness; letter-sound relationships; vocabulary; semantics and syntax; metacognition; and higher-order thinking skills. These are not isolated concepts taught in a lock-step sequence; they are interrelated components that support and build on each other. (Ontario Ministry of Education, 2003, p. 14)

Most recently, in Foundations for Literacy: An Evidenced-Based Toolkit for the Effective Reading and Writing Teacher (CLLRN, 2011), the CLLRN addressed the long standing “language wars” and the “myths” that they believe are commonly held about reading in Canadian homes and classrooms. The goal of the CLLRN 2011 report is to replace the myths
with evidenced-based knowledge and practice. According to the CLLRN, these myths include:

#1 Learning to read, like learning to talk, is a natural process;

#2 With time, all children will eventually learn to read;

#3 Genetics rule: If the child has dyslexia, he or she cannot be helped;

#4 If you start at a disadvantage, you will never catch up;

#5 After Grade 3, children are done learning how to read;

#6 Children can learn to read by relying heavily on context cues;

#7 Students can master reading comprehension if they just read, read, and read;

#8 English has so many irregular spellings and inconsistencies that it is impossible to teach. (CLLRN, 2011, pp. 13–14)

The report contends that all of these statements have been refuted by research and maintains that all children can learn to read, but researchers and teacher educators must do a better job of helping teachers and parents understand how to effectively help children to become literate.

**Emergent and Early Literacy at Home**

Parents are a child’s first literacy teachers, and the home is a child’s first literacy learning environment. It is therefore crucial that we understand and support early pre-school literacy development. Children who come from homes in which the literacy learning practices are a close match for the types of learning activities and behaviours that they will encounter in school are well placed to succeed in school. As Cunningham and Allington (2007) point out, “Children from high-literacy homes come to school with over 1,000 hours of informal reading and writing encounters, from which they develop an understanding about
print that is essential to success in beginning reading” (p. 290). They define “high-literacy homes” as those in which children have been read to regularly and whose early attempts as writing have been encouraged (Cunningham & Allington, 2007, p. 290). These experiences equip children with, “crucial print conventions and jargon” (Cunningham & Allington, 2007, p. 290) that set them up for success when they enter Kindergarten. Conversely, children who have not had these early reading and writing experiences enter Kindergarten at a disadvantage. They are often lacking in print concepts, phonemic awareness, letter names and sounds, and a desire to learn to read (Cunningham & Allington, 2007). Cunningham and Allington maintain that it is imperative that educators provide these children with activities that will help them to acquire the concepts that their mainstream peers have brought to school.

Woolf (2007) echoes the view of the importance of the pre-school literacy environment. She argues that human beings were never born to read. Reading is a human invention that reflects how the brain rearranges itself to learn something new. If children have the appropriate early learning environment and experiences, they are well prepared to continue to learn to read when they enter school. For those without these early experiences, school literacy learning can be very challenging. As Woolf (2007) states:

Children who begin kindergarten having heard and used thousands of words, whose meanings are already understood, classified, and stored away in their young brains, have the advantage on the playing field of education. Children who never have a story read to them, who never hear words that rhyme, who never imagine fighting with dragons or marrying a prince, have the odds overwhelmingly against them. (p. 20)

Lyon (1998) contends that children who have stimulating literacy experiences from birth onward have an edge in vocabulary development, understanding the goals of reading, and developing an awareness of print and literacy concepts. Children who enter Kindergarten
without these experiences are at risk of reading failure (Lyon, 1998). He cites the importance of early language play which develops an awareness of sound structure and language patterns, as well as bedtime and laptime reading (Lyon, 1998). Children who come to school without these essential stimulating literacy experiences are at increased risk of reading failure, according to Lyon (1998). He identifies particular groups who may have increased risk factors, “Children raised in poverty, those with limited proficiency in English, those from homes where the parents' reading levels and practices are low, and those with speech, language, and hearing handicaps are at increased risk of reading failure” (Lyon, 1998, p. 7).

**Emergent and Early Literacy at School- A Focus on Marie Clay**

Marie Clay (1926–2007) was a pioneer in the exploration of the concepts of emergent and early literacy, and the implications for schooling. Moreover, she has had a profound impact on the theory and practice of early reading and writing. A quick Google search of her name, or of the program she designed, Reading Recovery, generates thousands of results. A search of the scholarly literature produces an equal number of results. The impact of her theories and her practical teaching programs can be seen on websites, at conferences, in journal articles and dissertations going back decades and in thousands of schools around the world.

**Clay’s key areas of research and research methods.**

Clay began her career as a classroom teacher, and later became a clinical child psychologist, but she continued to focus her attention on interactions between teachers and young children in schools as they learn to read and write. For her dissertation in the mid-1960s, Clay observed 100 children weekly through their first year of school as they learned
to read. She was interested in trying to understand how children learn to read, and the types of support that teachers can give them as they learn. What she found was that reading was a complex behaviour involving many processes, and that a small but significant percentage of children failed to make much progress in their reading and writing over their first year in school. In much of her later research she continued to try to understand the reading and writing learning process, and to design teaching practices that would help these lowest achieving children. Throughout her research and writing, Clay emphasized the importance of close observation of children, as she writes in *The Early Detection of Reading Difficulties* (Clay, 1985), “I have tried to observe individual children at work reading and writing, and to capture evidence of the progress they make” (p. 1).

Close observation led Clay to the realization that all children do not learn to read and write the same way. In her book *By Different Paths to Common Outcomes* (Clay 1998), she argues that children come to school “attending to different aspects of literacy and enter kindergarten with islands of knowledge that are highly specific with surprisingly little overlap from child to child” (p. 225). Because children come to school by “different paths” and continue to pay attention to different aspects of literacy learning, it is unlikely that one prescribed teaching approach would be effective for all, particularly for the lowest achieving children. In *Becoming Literate* (Clay, 1991a), she claims that a theory of reading continuous texts cannot arise from a theory of word reading. Children begin to read, she argued, by paying attention to many different aspects of written texts including letters, words, pictures, language, messages and stories. Over time, children’s learning about each of these areas expands, but also the ways of working on the interrelationships of these areas develops. She
developed her theories through her observations of successful children learning to read (Clay, 1993).

Clay’s concern for the prevention of reading difficulties in children led to the creation of the Reading Recovery program. Reading Recovery involves a survey of the reading behaviours of children after 1 year of formal schooling. This is done through a series of short tests (Clay, 1979). For those children who are making slow progress in reading and writing, an individual program is designed and delivered by a trained Reading Recovery teacher. For 12–20 weeks, daily for 30 minutes, the child meets with the teacher for individually designed reading and writing lessons. Because she believed that what is difficult about reading differs for each child, no general or prescriptive program is offered. The teacher starts with what the child can do and follows the child’s lead, building upon the child’s strengths. As Clay writes, “the teacher’s role is to keep the learner at the cutting edge of his or her competencies (where Vygotsky would have said the learner should be)” (Clay, 1991b, p. 272). The goal of these sessions is reading books and writing stories, not teaching details such as letter knowledge for its own sake. The children read and write as Clay believed that both reading and writing contribute to learning about print, and in fact learning to write can help a child learn to read (Clay, 1993). This program was not meant to replace classroom instruction, but to intervene with struggling readers early enough to prevent students from entering a cycle of failure.

Impact on theory and practice.

Marie Clay has had a huge impact on both the theory and practice of teaching reading and writing. The most obvious impact would be the Reading Recovery program which operates in most English speaking countries, and has also been redeveloped for use with Spanish and French learners (Gaffney & Askew, 1999). There are Reading Recovery
institutes in many countries, with thousands of teachers trained to deliver the program. In Canada, it was first introduced in Ontario and Nova Scotia in 1987. Today it is implemented in almost every province and territory. In 1993, the Canadian Institute of Reading Recovery opened at the University of Toronto.

In his forward to *Stirring the Waters: The Influence of Marie Clay* (Gaffney & Askew, 1999), Anderson suggests that more attention needs to be paid to the theoretical underpinnings of the Reading Recovery program. He calls Clay a “major theorist of child literacy acquisition” for her “ideas of alternative routes to literacy acquisition and the child as a self-extending system” (Anderson, in Gaffney & Askew, 1999, p. vi). In the introduction to the same volume, the editors outline the extent and nature of Marie Clay’s work:

> Her research has influenced international communities of scholars in early literacy; early childhood, bilingual and special education; developmental, cognitive and school psychology; assessment; teacher education; professional development; systemic implementation; and research design. The constant in her perspective has been viewing the complexities of learning through an unfettered lens-- the eyes of children. (Gaffney & Askew, 1999, p. 1)

As a result of Marie Clay’s work, we have an expanded understanding of the complex process of becoming a reader and writer, an awareness that different children learn to read in different ways, a re-conceptualized notion of instruction as an interactive conversation, a model of early intervention and prevention of reading difficulties, and a revitalized image of the teacher as keen observer, knowledgeable decision maker, and curriculum designer. Clays’ theories and practical approaches to teaching young children to read and write have found their way into public educational policy, teacher resource books, and the curriculum of teacher preparation programs of many countries, including Canada.
Literacy Teaching Practices

As has been discussed, practices at home that are beneficial to children’s later literacy learning at school include repeated exposure to a wide range of oral language use and language play, lap and bedtime reading, and encouragement of early writing attempts. For those who come to school without these experiences, teachers must find ways to help them acquire the elements of school literacy. There is considerable debate about the practices that children should engage in at school to continue the process of becoming literate. Clay (1979a, 1985, 1991a, 1993, 1998) advocated close observation of children in order to tailor literacy programs that build on their strengths, knowledge, and skills. However, with the No Child Left Behind Act (2001) in the United States, and standardized provincial testing in many provinces in Canada, including Ontario, there is increasing pressure to standardize curricula and to focus on narrow academic goals as defined by test scores (Genishi & Hass Dyson, 2009). Genishi and Hass Dyson (2009) argue that rather than hurrying and standardizing children’s early literacy learning, educators need to provide:

Time and space to explore the complexities of the written system, to make personal connections with those rather dull-looking lines and curves, to ease into the rhyme and rhythm of matching voice and print, and most basic of all, to sense the relevance of written language as a communicative medium, a means to some end. (p. 140)

Morrow (2009) interprets the Genishi and Hass Dyson (2009) concept of “time and space to explore” (p. 140), as including a variety of approaches including whole class direct instruction, small group and individual differentiated instruction, and family involvement in the classroom literacy program. She emphasizes that particular attention must be paid to children who are learning to speak English, and children who have special learning needs.
These children may need more time with the teacher in small group or individual lessons that are both systematic and explicit (Morrow, 2009).

Both Graves (1991) and Atwell (1991) promote the importance of a literate environment in the classroom, and the teacher as a literacy role model. Through reading and writing workshops, in which teachers and students write, share, and edit their work together, students come to see that reading and writing can be personally meaningful and that they can be useful in the world outside of school (Graves, 1991). In her observation of many reading and writing workshops across North America, Atwell notes that the most successful ones are those in which the teacher is meaningfully engaged. She describes a successful literacy teacher in this setting as someone who, “demonstrates what it means to be immersed in literacy and invites students to share a rich, compelling version of the power of writing and reading” (Atwell, 1991, p. 104).

**Teacher Education in Literacy**

In is clear that teaching literacy is as complex as its history and component parts. Research tells us that effective teachers can make a bigger difference in a child’s educational success than most other school variables (Darling-Hammond, 2006). How then should we prepare effective teachers? There has long been a debate about the best ways to prepare literacy teachers for the classroom. Shulman (2005) claims that teacher education programs in the United States, in contrast to professional preparation in other professions, are in “chaos” (p. 7). He advocates an approach to teacher education that is more similar to the other professions, namely a focus on depth of preparation in the content areas, systematic preparation using multimedia cases of teaching and learning, supervised clinical practice, and rigorous assessments (Shulman, 2005). Ball (2000) deals with a fundamental problem in the
field that she calls the, “fragmentation of practice” (p. 241). This occurs in teacher
preparation programs when subject matter and pedagogy are taught separately. She calls for
the profession to continue to address the question of effective ways to prepare teachers who
can, “sufficiently know content flexibly so that they are able to make use of content
knowledge with a wide variety of students across a wide range of environments” (Ball, 2000,
p. 246).

While Canadian teacher preparation programs are less varied than their American
counterparts, the challenge of preparing candidates to teach literacy and other subjects is the
same. In their on-going longitudinal study of beginning teachers, Kosnik and Beck (2005,
2009, 2010) have followed the professional development of two groups of new elementary
teachers. The first group of 22 teachers has recently completed their seventh year of teaching
and the second group of 24 teachers has recently completed their fourth year of teaching. The
original focus of the study was to determine the types of subject specific knowledge acquired
during preservice programs, induction opportunities, and other professional development
activities that increase teachers’ capacity for literacy teaching. The researchers are now also
charting the growth and change the teachers’ undergo in their understanding and practice of
teaching more generally as they move beyond the new teacher phase and enter mid-career. In
their recent book Priorities in Teacher Education (Kosnik & Beck, 2009) which is based on
both a review of the literature and the findings from their study, they call for a reorganization
of teacher education around seven priority areas: program planning; pupil assessment;
classroom organization and community; inclusive education; subject content and pedagogy;
professional identity; and a vision for teaching (Kosnik & Beck, 2009).
With respect to the task of preparing literacy teachers specifically, Kosnik and Beck (2008) note that one of the problems with preservice literacy courses is the tendency for instructors to aim for breadth rather than depth. The new teachers in their study reported that they had learned, “disconnected bits of information” (Kosnik & Beck, 2008, p. 124) in their preservice programs and did not feel prepared to take on a class of their own. The CLLRN (2009) agrees that Canada must improve its system of teacher professional education and support. Their findings indicate that many student teachers complete their preparation without learning, “the basic scientific principles behind the development of reading skill and effective reading instruction” (CLLRN, 2009, p. 27). Furthermore, they argue that there is a large body of knowledge regarding how to teach children to read, how to identify children who are struggling to acquire reading skills, and how to effectively intervene to improve learning. However, because of inadequate teacher education, this knowledge is not being applied in many Canadian classrooms (CLLRN, 2009). Spear-Swerling, Bruker, and Alfano (2005) note that the rapid growth in scientific understanding of how children learn literacy has the potential to benefit many children, particularly those at risk, but it also increases the challenge for teacher preparation because, “the knowledge base required for teaching beginning reading skills effectively, especially to at-risk or disabled children, is extensive” (Spear-Swerling et al., 2005, p. 266).

**Apprenticeship of observation.**

Even if teacher education programs were systematic and rigorous, combined deep knowledge of content with flexible use of pedagogy, had clear priorities, and provided a sound scientific knowledge base, they would still encounter the challenge of what Lortie (1975) calls the “apprenticeship of observation” (p. 61). He argues that preservice teachers’
many years as students provide them with a type of apprenticeship into the profession in that they have observed and interacted with teachers for many years before entering their teacher preparation. Their individual experiences with particular teachers inform their image of teaching. However, because of their perspective as students, they are not privy to teachers’ goal setting, preparation, or analysis (Lortie, 1975). Moreover, they do not, “perceive the teacher as someone making choices among teaching strategies” (Lortie, 1975, p. 63). Lortie is concerned that teacher preparation does not do enough to dispel the individual, simplistic, and often traditional notions of teaching with which many new teachers enter the profession (Lortie, 1975). Loughran (2006) exhorts teacher educators to help preservice teachers overcome these limitations by allowing them to “see and hear the pedagogical reasoning that underpins the teaching that they are experiencing” (p. 5). He argues that making the tacit knowledge of teaching explicit (Loughran, 2006, p. 9) is essential if preservice education is to move from “teaching as telling” to “teaching for understanding” (Loughran, 2006, p. 10).

Darling-Hammond (2006) further argues that in addition to their “apprenticeship” experiences in teaching, preservice teachers bring other personal attributes and experiences that may get in the way of learning to teach effectively. Ironically, one of these may be their strong academic abilities. It may be more difficult for high academic achievers to support student learning because they have few personal experiences of academic struggle (Darling-Hammond, 2006, p. 30). Bullough and Gitlin (2001) remind us that preservice teachers, as well as practicing teachers, always filter what they learn through “a set of biographically embedded assumptions, beliefs, or pre-understandings” (p. 223). Some of what is learned in preservice education will be discarded because it does not conform with previous understandings, while some less significant content may be taken up too eagerly. Bullough
and Gitlin (2001) caution that, “Ignoring the past does not make it go away. It lingers, ever present and quietly insistent. (p. 223). Given the impact of teachers’ experiences, assumptions, and beliefs on their understanding and practice, it is imperative that more attention be paid to teachers’ lives in preservice and in-service teacher education.

**Induction.**

Teachers’ professional education does not end with the completion of a preservice program. When teachers are hired to teach in a school, they are introduced to their new context through a more or less elaborate induction program designed to support them personally and professionally. This is an essential part of a teacher’s professional development as teacher education continues over the first few years of practice (Feiman-Nemser, 2001, Munby et al., 2001). In their review of recent international studies of teacher induction programs, Anthony, Haigh, and Kane (2011) have found that comprehensive induction programs include a variety of integrated components such as:

- carefully selected and trained mentors; a curriculum of intensive and structured support and professional development opportunities; regular meetings with mentors; opportunities to observe experienced teachers; formative assessment tools that permit evaluation of practice; and outreach to wider educational support. (p. 861)

They also note that research shows that this support should continue for at least 2 years, and should be reinforced through policy documents (Anthony et al., 2011).

In Ontario, the province-wide induction program is known as the New Teacher Induction Program (NTIP). It is mandatory for all school boards to offer this program, and for all new teachers who are certified by the Ontario College of Teachers and who have been hired into permanent positions to participate. NTIP is comprised of three elements, orientation by the school and school board, mentoring by experienced teachers, and
professional development and training. New teachers are also required to have two teacher performance appraisals within their first 12 months of teaching (Kane, 2010). In her December 2010 evaluation of NTIP, Kane notes that the program is implemented to different degrees across the province. In general, new teachers found the orientation portion useful, although they call for it to be differentiated to meet the needs of teachers who have some teaching experience in the school or board. They also found aspects of the professional development opportunities useful, particularly those on assessment, giving student feedback, and reporting. However, the NTIP element that was most highly rated by new teachers was the mentorship component. Unfortunately 10% of new teachers were not offered a mentor, and only half of those with a mentor participated in the most highly rated activity: having their mentor observe and give feedback on their teaching. Clearly induction programs, including NTIP, have the potential to be effective sources of teacher learning and development if they are implemented fully, and take into account the individual learning needs of new teachers. It should be noted that NTIP and other induction programs tend to be general, and therefore do not address literacy teaching and learning specifically. In the next two sections, the importance of new teachers’ individual learning and teaching experiences will be explored, with particular attention given to their literacy experiences.

Teacher reflection.

Reflective practice is advocated in both preservice and in-service teacher learning. Teachers are often encouraged to reflect on their current teaching and context. Rarely are they asked to reflect on their own learning as students, and to connect their learning to their current teaching context as the participants in this study were. As Marcos, Sanchez, and Tilema (2011) note in their review of the teacher professional development literature on
reflective practice, reflection is frequently recommended as a form of professional development. However, there is a lack of agreement about how to conduct reflection and a wide variety of types of reflection being advocated (Marcos et al., 2011). Reflection is defined as a, “cyclical and recursive process that includes problem-solving, awareness raising, and construction of professional knowledge” (Marcos et al., 2011, p. 21). Their review of the literature revealed that these three aspects of reflection are not explicitly addressed, nor are the specific methods of how to reflect, how to gain awareness of what to reflect upon, or how to implement the results of reflection explained. In order to scaffold teachers’ reflective practice the authors call for evidence-based research on teacher reflection that highlights how teacher reflection works.

**Teachers’ Lives, Experiences, and Stories**

This study is based on the assumption that providing opportunities for beginning teachers to explore their own literacy learning and teaching experiences through discussion and reflection will be instructive for both the participants and a wider academic and professional audience. Dewey (1938/1974) believes that we need to look for “the organic connection between education and personal experience” (p. 25). In order to understand issues in teaching, researchers must take into consideration the life context and the previous experiences of teachers. Teachers, like everyone else, are, at least in part, products of the experiences that they had as children. These experiences were instrumental in forming their attitudes and beliefs, and continue to influence their understanding and enactment of their teaching. As Dewey (1938/1974) writes, “every experience enacted and undergone modifies the one who acts and undergoes, while this modification affects, whether we wish it or not, the quality of subsequent experiences” (p. 35). Isolating research on teaching from the life
experiences of teachers will not give an accurate picture of the complex nature of teaching and learning.

When teachers tell stories of their experiences, both personal and professional, it can lead to the integration of education, experience, and life that Dewey advocates (1938/1974). Furthermore, it may help us to understand why teachers make the decisions that they do. When they tell their stories, teachers have the opportunity to organize and reflect on their experiences in a way that is meaningful to them and to their practice as educators. As Clandinin and Connelly (1998) write, “Experience, in this view, is the stories people live. People live stories, and in the telling of them reaffirm them, modify them, and create new ones” (p. 155).

Teachers’ knowledge and experience are personal and unique, and each teacher’s story is personal and unique. Close collaboration with a small number of participants is more likely to allow for meaningful construction and analysis of each teacher’s story. The aim is not to arrive at a rigid set of principles to guide teaching and teacher education, but to increase our understanding of the meaning that each teacher brings to his or her teaching and the factors that influence that teaching. As Cohen and Manion (1994) explain, “The principal concern is with an understanding of the way in which the individual creates, modifies and interprets the world in which he or she finds himself or herself” (p. 8).

Although teachers telling or writing their stories can be a powerful form of personal and professional development, because of the demanding nature of their job, teachers rarely do it. This study gave beginning teachers the opportunity to reap the benefits of this practice. Teacher stories, formulated from interviews, observations, reflections, and feedback, can help teachers understand their particular history and how it relates to the kind of teacher they
are and want to become. As Polkinghorne (1995) states, “Stories express a kind of knowledge that uniquely describes human experience in which action and happenings contribute positively and negatively to attaining goals and fulfilling purposes” (p. 8). In the on-going process of teacher education and development, the starting place is the teacher herself. As a result of his year-long study of teacher in her first year, and then 8 years later, Bullough (1997) concludes:

Teacher identity--what beginning teachers believe about teaching and learning and self-as-a-teacher-- is of vital concern to teacher education; it is the basis for meaning making and decision making…Teacher education must begin, then, by exploring the teaching self. (p. 21)

When teachers are given the opportunity to discuss and reflect upon their literacy experiences, they come to understand themselves and their teaching in complex ways. This can give them new perspectives on offering rich literacy learning experiences for their students (Benson, 2003). They may also come to better understand their relationships to the curriculum and to the communities to which they belong, including their classroom community (Sunstein & Potts, 1998).

Researchers in the field of life history research methodology have important insights about the significance of research on teachers’ lives. Life history research is concerned with the early development of novice teachers, including the personal belief systems they bring to the profession. This belief system is an accumulation of a life-time of interactions with family, peer groups, and schooling. Life history methods are grounded in teachers’ personal stories, but emphasis is also placed on the social and historical contexts that influence the values teachers hold and how teachers interpret educational issues and situations (Carter & Doyle, 1996).
Personal history studies suggest that student teachers use their own experiences as students to generalize when interpreting and making decisions about their teaching (Carter & Doyle, 1996). Carter and Doyle call for teachers’ personal history narratives to be given a prominent place in teacher education, because if left unexamined, new teachers are likely to perpetuate conventional practice. Furthermore, Wolf et al., (2000) argue that in order to respond to the literacy needs of their students, preservice teachers need to examine their own beliefs and literacy history. Feiman-Nemser (2001) considers teachers’ own schooling and early teaching experience to be far more influential than the typical preservice program. She states, “The typical preservice program is a weak intervention compared with the influence of teachers’ own schooling and their on-the-job experience” (Feiman-Nemser, 2001, p. 1014).

Knowles (1988) emphasizes the importance of examining the relationships between early childhood learning experiences with family members and teachers, teacher role identity, and classroom actions. Schubert (1991) comments that teachers’ narratives are often neglected in studies of teaching practice. His work with teachers examining their life stories revealed that as teachers came to know their own stories, they were able to develop more positive relationships with their students. He concludes that the benefit of this type of work is not limited to the participating teachers and their students, but extends to all who interact with their stories, as it helps us all to know our own stories better.

Benson (2003) studied how teachers conceptualize the relationship between their life experiences and their pedagogy. Four elementary teachers in the U.S. participated in a qualitative research study designed to explore how teachers use their life experiences, particularly racial and cultural experiences, as a framework for their teaching. Benson concluded that teachers who understand themselves and their history in complex ways are
better able to establish positive relationships with students and to offer enhanced opportunities for learning for their students and themselves (Benson, 2003). In his qualitative study of a high school English teacher, Muchmore (2001) also found that when his participant began to teach according to her beliefs about literacy that had their origin in personal life experiences, rather than what she had learned in preservice, she was better able to meet the literacy learning needs of her students.

**Teachers’ Literacy Histories**

Johnson (2008) comments that very little has been written about teachers’ literacy stories. She had preservice teachers examine their stories of learning to read and write, and found that this was beneficial in helping them to understand their own learning process and attitudes towards literacy learning and teaching. Sunstein and Potts (1998) advocate the use of personal literacy portfolios in preservice programs. The authors emphasize that remembering personal literacy stories is not enough. Preservice teachers need to analyze these stories to discover what they say about themselves, their goals, and their relationships to the curriculum and to their communities.

Nathanson et al. (2008) found in their recent survey of the reading habits and attitudes of in-service and prospective teachers that many of the participants were not active readers. For those who were enthusiastic readers, early role models were significant in their early and on-going reading. As enthusiastic readers, these teachers, in turn, were role models for their students. Sulentic-Dowell et al. (2006) had a similar finding in their preservice teacher survey. They chose to explore eight of the preservice teachers in depth. They were looking for the relationship between reading practices and the ability to promote reading across the curriculum, particularly in mathematics word problems. They found that those who engage in
and enjoy recreational reading were able to employ effective reading strategies more readily when teaching mathematics word problems.

Morrison, Jacobs, and Swinyard (1999) found a similar relationship in their survey of 1874 elementary teachers in the U.S. Those who were positive about books and reading were more likely to use recommended literacy practices in their classrooms, such as modeling reading and providing time for children to read books of their choice. Applegate and Applegate (2004) surveyed preservice elementary teachers in two different U.S. institutions about their reading habits and attitudes. Because they believed that teachers who were motivated readers themselves were more likely to promote engaged reading in their students, they sought to determine the level of enthusiasm that the preservice teachers had for reading. They found that nearly half of the participants were unenthusiastic about reading. Of those who were enthusiastic readers, successful experiences in early elementary school appear to be a key factor. In response to their findings, the authors conclude: “It is vitally important that we identify and address teacher attitudes and beliefs about the nature of reading, particularly because our data suggest that early negative reading experiences can have long-lasting, harmful effects on children” (Applegate & Applegate, 2004, p. 561).

In an effort to help her 39 Canadian elementary preservice students identify and address their beliefs about reading and writing in her language arts methods course, Asselin (2000) had them engage in a range of reader response activities including literature circles and reader response journals. She found that these activities were successful in helping preservice teachers recognize their own beliefs and attitudes. The experiential learning opportunities also helped them to develop new more positive beliefs as well as new knowledge and skills in delivering an engaging reading program.
Ciuffetelli Parker (2004) worked collaboratively with a Grade six teacher to tell the story of her knowledge, identity, and development as a literacy teacher. Through letters, conversations, interviews, and journal writing, the teacher was able to come to a clearer understanding of her identity and practice as a literacy educator and thus develop professionally. Ciuffetelli Parker advocates this approach for other teachers to enhance their development as educators, but also for the benefits it can afford their students:

By writing their own stories of literacy learning and teaching, teachers will better know the stories of their students, because teachers’ own knowledge and learning is relationally linked to students’ learning. By unveiling teachers’ personal narratives of literacy, students’ learning and literacy needs are also unveiled. (Ciuffetelli Parker, 2004, p. 10)

As we have seen, the research illustrates that many teachers have had negative literacy learning experiences in elementary school, have poor attitudes towards reading, and do not engage in much reading for pleasure. There are some studies (Asselin, 2000; Johnson, 2008; Sunstein & Potts, 1998) that point to preservice program initiatives that may help address negative attitudes including having preservice teachers write and analyze their own literacy learning stories, create literacy portfolios or engage in reading response activities. Although there is a growing body of research on teacher stories and teacher life history (Carter & Doyle, 1996; Wolf et al., 2000), very little has been written about elementary teachers’ early literacy stories, both inside and outside of school, or about how these early experiences influence their understanding and teaching of literacy. Of the few studies that do address teachers’ early literacy learning (Johnson, 2008; Nathanson et al., 2008; Sunstein & Potts, 1998), the focus is on preservice teachers.
Chapter Summary

Both literacy and teacher education are wide ranging and complex fields. The importance of the acquisition of strong literacy skills for children and adults is well documented. Given that one of the main ways that children develop their literacy skills is through school, it is imperative that teachers provide appropriate and effective opportunities for students to learn literacy. It is clear then that the question of the best ways to prepare effective literacy teachers must be addressed. According to Opfer and Pedder (2011), much of the research that has been done on teacher professional development has been unsuccessful because it has employed “simplistic conceptualizations of teaching professional learning” (p. 376). They call for research that recognizes that teacher professional learning is embedded in teachers’ professional lives and working conditions. Furthermore, they emphasize the need for researchers to recognize the complexity of teacher learning, and the uniqueness of each teacher and context (Opfer & Pedder, 2011).

This study heeds that call and helps to fill the gap in the literature by paying closer attention to the experiences, attitudes and beliefs of teachers (e.g., Benson, 2003; Bullough, 1997; Bullough & Gitlin, 2001; Carter & Doyle; Clandinin & Connelly, 1998; Darling-Hammond, 2006; Dewey, 1938/1974; Lortie, 1975; Loughran, 2006; Sunstein & Potts, 1998; Wolf et al., 2000). It extends our current knowledge of the impact of teachers’ lives on their teaching practice in four important ways. First, as has been discussed, the few studies that address teachers’ literacy learning experiences have focused on preservice teachers. The focus of this study moves beyond this period to address beginning teachers in their first 3 years as classroom teachers. Second, because this study spans 3 years, there is more time for teachers to discuss and reflect on their experiences than is typically provided in research
studies. Third, the five interviews in the study allowed for complex topics to be addressed in depth. Finally, the study explored a wide range of the participants’ early learning experiences at home and school, and the influence that these have had on many aspects of their preservice and in-service learning, their pedagogical practices, and their understanding of student learning.

Research has shown us that there are many factors that influence the learning and teaching of literacy. The importance of literacy for all people in society compels us to continue to research literacy in order to develop our understanding of this fundamental issue. This study contributes to the research literature by exploring factors that influence teachers’ thinking and practice with respect to effectively meeting the literacy learning needs of their students. In this chapter, I present an overview of the broad fields of literacy and literacy education. I begin by reviewing definitions of literacy, and the history of literacy teaching approaches. Important issues in teacher education are presented, with a particular focus on the importance of teachers’ lives. In the next chapter, I present my justification for the research methodology I employed in this study, and describe the data collection and analysis methods I used.
Chapter 3: Methodology and Research Design

Introduction

The purpose of this study is to explore the influence of elementary teachers’ literacy history on their literacy teaching identity and practice. Six beginning teachers were invited to participate in a research study which examined the role their early literacy experiences play in their understanding of themselves as literacy teachers, and in their literacy teaching practice. This study investigates some of the complexities of teaching literacy, including the teachers’ experiences of successes and challenges, and their perception of the extent to which their understanding and actions are influenced by their personal literacy history.

Research tells us that literacy levels for children and adults in Ontario and throughout Canada are a concern (CLLRN, 2009; EQAO, 2009; OECD, 2005). Research also tells us that effective teachers can make a larger difference in a child’s educational success than most other school variables (Darling-Hammond, 2006). It is therefore, important that we continue to search for the most effective ways to prepare literacy teachers. Teachers’ early literacy experience is an important factor that can influence the effectiveness of literacy teachers (Applegate & Applegate, 2004; Nathanson et al., 2008; Sulentic-Dowell et al., 2006). Little research has been done on the influence of early literacy learning on beginning teachers’ literacy practice. This study will explore this influence using a qualitative methodology.

In this chapter, I begin by outlining the main features of qualitative research methodology and why I believe it is the appropriate methodology for this study. I then discuss how I identified my research problem and formulated my research questions. The research design is then described. Within the research design section, my use of case studies...
is described, including information on both participant and site selection. The data collection section follows in which I discuss my data collection strategies including interviews, observations, and document analysis. Following this, I explain my use of Grounded Theory to analyze my findings. The final two sections of the chapter cover research limitations and ethical considerations.

**Qualitative Research Methodology**

Merriam (1998) points out that qualitative research is not a single approach to research, but an “umbrella concept covering several forms of inquiry” (p. 5). She outlines five key aspects of qualitative research. The first is that qualitative research assumes that reality is constructed by individuals as they interact with their social worlds. The goal of qualitative research is to understand how people make sense of the world and of their experiences. It seeks to understand the topic under study from the participants’ perspective. Secondly, Merriam (1998) emphasizes that the researcher is the “primary instrument for data collection and analysis” (p. 6). That is, the researcher’s experience, beliefs, attitudes, and perspectives inform what is studied, and how the data is collected and analyzed. It is not possible or desirable to be completely objective in the research process. Thirdly, Merriam notes that qualitative research usually involves fieldwork. This allows the researcher to observe behaviour in its natural setting. Fourthly, qualitative research is often chosen as a methodology when there is a lack of theory about a phenomenon, or when the theory is inadequate in some way. An inductive research strategy is often used to create new theories or to enhance existing ones. Finally, qualitative research is “richly descriptive” (Merriam, 1998, p. 7).
Many prominent qualitative researchers echo Merriam’s (1998) main points. Patton (2002) describes qualitative research as being grounded in a social constructivist framework. He posits that human beings construct reality and this reality is shaped by their cultural and linguistic contexts (Patton, 2002). Researchers are concerned with how people in a particular setting have constructed reality, what their perceptions, explanations and beliefs are, and the consequences of all of these on their behaviours and relationships (Patton, 2002). The qualitative researcher’s job is to study, “the multiple realities constructed by people and the implications of those constructions for their lives and interactions with others” (Patton, 2002, p. 96).

Guba and Lincoln (1989) point out that qualitative research reflects the values of the researcher, and is dependent to some degree on his or her beliefs. Eisner and Peshkin (1990) also emphasize the importance of the researcher in the process. They remark that qualitative research demands sound judgment on the part of the researcher and “attention to detail, sensitivity to coherence, appreciation of innuendo, and the ability to read subtext as well as text” (Eisner & Peshkin, 1990, p. 12).

Denzin and Lincoln (2005) emphasize that qualitative researchers study phenomena in their natural settings in an attempt to understand the meanings that people bring to them. They define qualitative research as, “a situated activity that locates the observer in the world. It consists of a set of interpretive, material practices that make the world visible” (Denzin & Lincoln, 2005, p. 3). Bogdan and Biklen (1998) point out that researchers go to the natural setting because they are concerned with context and with attempting to understand how participants’ experiences work together to form a whole. They consider the qualitative researchers central task to be the quest to understand the question, “How do people negotiate
meaning?” (Bogdan & Biklen, 1998, p. 6). As we can see, qualitative research methodology is a complex and nuanced approach to inquiry that requires researchers to take into account the perspectives and experiences of both the participants and the researcher.

**Qualitative Research Methodology in the Present Study**

I chose to use a qualitative research approach in this study because it matched the goals of my inquiry. Merriam’s (1998) five key elements of qualitative research that I have discussed are present in my study. I was interested in studying how beginning teachers make sense of their own childhood literacy learning experiences, and how those experiences influence their teaching practice. I sought to understand how the participants constructed their ideas, values and beliefs about literacy learning and teaching. Since I was seeking to understand this from the participants’ perspectives, a qualitative approach was most appropriate.

I understand that this approach is not value neutral or objective. My experiences and perspectives inevitably influence the types of data I collect, how I collect it, analyze it, and how I tell the stories of the beginning teachers in my study. My attitudes and beliefs about literacy learning and teaching have been influenced by my experiences as a young student who struggled with many aspects of literacy learning. My experiences as an elementary classroom teacher and teacher educator have also been influenced by my early learning. Reflecting on my own learning and teaching practice has been instrumental for me in coming to understand my motives and decisions in teaching. In this study, I wanted to understand more fully how other teachers have experienced early literacy learning and how it may be influencing their practice. I decided to design a research study that would both gather
information from the participants’ perspective, and give them an opportunity to reflect on their own literacy learning and teaching.

It was important to situate this study in the context of the participants’ work: their classrooms. Observing and interviewing the participants in the context of their daily work added richness to the data collection process. Participants were observed while they taught in their regular class and were interviewed immediately following their teaching. Giving participants an opportunity to reflect after teaching, and while being surrounded by their materials, resources, and their students’ work enhanced the depth and detail of the data collected.

As discussed in Chapter 2, there is little research on or theory about the influence of early literacy learning on the attitudes and practices of beginning literacy teachers. Therefore it is appropriate to use an inductive research strategy. In this study Grounded Theory (Glaser & Strauss, 1967) was used to inform both data collection and data analysis. Finally, through observing and interviewing over 3 years I was able to gather a significant amount and variety of data that allowed me to create qualitative case studies that are “richly descriptive” (Merriam, 1998, p. 7).

Research Problem

In order to frame the context for a research study, a researcher must indentify a research problem to investigate and choose appropriate research questions. Straus and Corbin (1990) identify three sources of research problems in qualitative research. The first source is the suggested or assigned research problem. Choosing this source may involve joining an ongoing research project and being assigned a particular aspect of the project to pursue, or
following up on a suggestion by a professor or colleague that a particular problem could be interesting to pursue. Alternatively, a researcher may learn that there is funding available for research on a particular topic and pursue it for that reason. Straus and Corbin (1990) note that this is a legitimate source of identifying a research problem to study, as funds are often made available for topics that are in need of more research.

A second source of research problems identified by Straus and Corbin (1990) is the academic or professional literature. Through reading the literature, a researcher may discover an area that has not been sufficiently explored. Alternately, there may be “contradictions or ambiguities” (Straus & Corbin, 1990, p. 35) in the literature that could be resolved by further study. In addition, reading the literature may bring to light the need for a new solution to an old problem that has been studied in the past.

The third source for a research problem could be the researcher’s own personal or professional experience (Straus & Corbin, 1990). Straus and Corbin suggest that this is a common source of research problems in qualitative research. A personal difficulty or a problem in the workplace may lead to questions about how others experience the same phenomenon. Professional experiences may lead to the conclusion that some aspect of the profession is “less than effective, efficient, humane, or equitable” (Straus & Corbin, 1990, p. 35). In this case, the motivation for research may be to reform some aspect of the profession.

The source of the research problem in the present study is a combination of all three sources outlined by Straus and Corbin (1990). In 2008, I was asked to join the longitudinal research project Teacher Education for Literacy Learning being conducted by Dr. Clare Kosnik and Dr. Clive Beck. Through participating as a graduate assistant on this project, I learned a great deal about the preservice program and early teaching experiences of
elementary literacy teachers. I began to search the research literature and discovered that very little research had been conducted on beginning teachers’ early literacy learning. I began to reflect on my own personal and professional experiences with literacy learning and teaching. These reflections on my own experiences revealed the important role that childhood literacy experiences have had on my literacy learning and teaching. I became curious about the role that early literacy experiences play in the teaching lives of the participants in the Kosnik and Beck project. I sought and received permission from the principal investigators and the Ethical Review Board at my university to conduct a study-within-a-study on the intersection of early literacy experiences and teaching practices in the lives of six of the participants. I continued to be a graduate assistant on the Kosnik and Beck research team while simultaneously functioning as the principal researcher for this doctoral study.

**Research Questions**

In qualitative research studies, research questions need to provide flexibility and freedom to explore a phenomenon in depth (Straus & Corbin, 1990). Research questions need to be asked in such a way that will enable us to, “find answers to issues that seem important but remain unanswered” (Straus & Corbin, 1990, p. 37). The questions should specify the subject to be studied, and what aspects of the subject you are seeking to better understand. They need to be narrow enough to define the subject, yet not so narrow that it, “excludes discovery” (Straus & Corbin, 1990, p. 38).

My research questions flow from my intention to examine how literacy history influences teachers’ identity, and how history and identity influence teachers’ practice and understanding of their students’ learning. The following three research questions guided my inquiry.
1. How do teachers’ literacy histories influence their image of themselves as literacy teachers?

2. How do teachers’ literacy histories influence the types of literacy environments and literacy activities that they create for their students?

3. How do teachers’ literacy histories influence how they understand their students’ literacy learning?

**Research Design**

**Case study approach.**

The purpose of case studies in qualitative research, according to Patton (2002), is to “gather comprehensive, systematic, and in-depth information about each case of interest” (p. 447). The data is then organized by specific cases in a way that is in-depth, holistic, and context sensitive. Cases are units of analysis and can be individuals, groups, neighbourhoods, programs, and organizations (Patton, 2002). Qualitative case studies typically involve interviewing, observation, and document analysis (Merriam, 1998). These three data collection strategies are typically used because case studies are concerned with both an overall understanding of the phenomenon studied as well as close analysis of specific details. As Merriam (1998) explains, “Understanding the case in its totality, as well as the intensive, holistic description and analysis characteristic of a case study, mandates both breadth and depth of data collection” (p. 134). In addition to being both broad and deep, data collection in a case study approach involves a recursive process (Merriam, 1998). That is, data collected using one strategy may inform subsequent data collection through another strategy. Given this recursive data collection approach, it is not surprising that Stake (2005) argues that case
studies are as much an approach to research as the way in which research findings are presented. As Stake (2005) explains, “Case studies can be defined as both a process of inquiry about the case and the product of that inquiry” (p. 444).

There are three types of case studies that are most frequently employed in qualitative research (Stake, 2005). These are the intrinsic case study, the instrumental case study, and the multiple or collective case study (Stake, 2005). Researchers often choose the intrinsic case study when they want a better understanding of a particular case. There is no attempt to build theory with this approach. The second type of case study, the instrumental case study, is chosen by researchers when their purpose is to explore an issue or theory. The details of the case are of lesser interest than the insight or knowledge gained about the issue or theory under consideration. The third type of case study, the multiple or collective case study is comprised of two or more instrumental case studies. These cases within a multiple case study may be very similar or quite different. Through comparison and contrast across the cases within a multiple case study, the researchers hope to gain greater insight into phenomenon being studied.

In the present case study, multiple or collective case study was the type employed. The stories of six beginning elementary teachers each form a case, and the six cases were compared and contrasted. I chose this approach because I wanted to explore the phenomenon of the influence of early literacy learning on literacy teaching in beginning teachers. While I was very interested in particular teacher’s stories, I chose to research six separate teachers so that the analysis across their stories might inform our understanding of teaching and learning more generally. Data was collected through classroom observations, interviews, and document analysis. My data collection was comprehensive, systematic, and in-depth because
each participant was observed while teaching in his or her classroom and interviewed five times over 3 years. My goal was to explore the “big picture” of the teachers’ early learning context and their literacy teaching context. In addition, I also explored the details of specific early learning experiences, beliefs about learning and teaching, and specific teaching strategies. My approach to data collection was recursive: classroom observations often prompted specific interview questions; and review of interview data, in turn, often prompted further interview questions, observations of particular aspects of practice, or review of particular documents such as lesson plans and resource books.

**Participant selection.**

The six participants in this study were chosen from a group of 22 beginning elementary teachers who were already participants in the larger longitudinal study *Teacher Education for Literacy Learning*, now in its ninth year, being conducted by Dr. Clare Kosnik and Dr. Clive Beck. All 22 teachers were graduates of the same large urban university preservice program and were in their first year of elementary classroom teaching in the same large urban centre. After receiving ethical review approval for my study from the Research Ethics Board at my university, I sent out invitations to participate to six of the 22 teachers on the list. I chose to invite these particular six participants because they were all accessible and I thought they might be willing to participate in the study. I was prepared to invite other participants of the larger group if any of the first six declined, but they all readily accepted my invitation.

As Creswell (1998) notes, it is not typical to choose more than four cases when using a case study approach. Because I planned my study to span 3 years, I choose to start with six participants in case two teachers decided not to continue with the process until the end. All
six teachers were eager to remain part of the study for the whole 3 years so I decided to include all six cases. Although I did not choose the six participants for reasons other than that they were in their first year of teaching in the same urban centre, they embody several interesting similarities and differences with respect to time spent working in other careers, first language, gender, and family literacy practices. This biographical data is explored in more detail in the individual case studies found in the next chapter.

**Site selection.**

The teachers all taught at urban schools which differed in terms of size and the socioeconomic and cultural backgrounds of their neighbourhoods. They were all classroom teachers of grades ranging from Kindergarten to Grade 8. Three remained at their schools for the length of the study, two were moved to different schools during the study due to declining enrolment, and the sixth teacher worked as a daily supply teacher or long-term supply teacher in many schools. Five teachers taught in public schools and one taught in a private school. Five teachers taught in English, and one taught in French for half of the day. More information on their schools and programs can be found in Chapter 4 in the individual case studies.

**Data Collection**

**Qualitative data collection.**

The process through which qualitative researchers carry out their inquiries involves collecting and studying a variety of materials that help them to understand the lives of individuals (Denzin & Lincoln, 2003). The process also involves the active involvement of the researcher in deciding what data is relevant, and what it means. Researchers are never
impartial. What they see and hear and how they interpret it depends on many things including their experiences and relationships (Charmaz, 2005). Charmaz (2005) reminds us that as researchers, “We share in constructing what we define as data” (p. 509).

Qualitative researchers use a number of means to better understand their subject matter including case studies, personal experiences, introspection, life stories, interviews, artefacts, cultural texts and productions, observation, and historical and visual texts (Denzin & Lincoln, 2003). Wolcott (1992) refers to the process of data collection as systematically “watching,” “asking,” and “reviewing” (p. 19). Denzin and Lincoln (2005) remind us that although qualitative researchers use multiple methods in an attempt to gain an in-depth understanding of a phenomenon, they can never capture an objective reality. However, qualitative research can add, “rigor, breadth, complexity, richness, and depth to an inquiry” (Denzin & Lincoln, 2005, p. 5). According to Strauss (2003), “The basic question facing us is how to capture the complexity of the reality (phenomena) we study, and how to make convincing sense of it” (p. 16).

In this study, data was collected through interviews with classroom teachers, classroom observations, and a review of documents related to literacy teaching and learning. The use of these three data collection methods allowed me to triangulate the findings (Merriam, 1998). My goal was to present an in-depth picture of the literacy learning and teaching experiences of six beginning elementary teachers. I understand that I can never capture a complete picture of the reality of my participants’ experiences. My goal is to examine the complexity of the intersection of the participants’ early literacy learning and their literacy teaching practice. I know that my experiences as a student, teacher, teacher
educator, and parent of elementary-aged children influenced the questions I asked, what I chose to observe or review, and how I made sense of the data.

**Interviews.**

Interviews are a common means of collecting qualitative data (Merriam, 1998). Indeed, they may be the dominant data collection strategy in qualitative research (Bogdan & Biklen, 1998). Merriam (1998) notes that person-to-person interviews are the most common form of interview, but interviews can also be in a group or collective format. The purpose of an interview is to obtain a “special kind of information” (Merriam, 1998, p. 71). Patton (2002) expands on this idea by asserting that the purpose of interviewing is to “enter into the other person’s perspective” (p. 341). Through interviews, we can learn about the experiences, feelings and opinions of participants through their own words (Patton, 2002). Interviews also give us access to information about behaviours, feelings and events that we cannot observe, including past events (Merriam, 1998).

Punch (2009) sees flexibility as one of the great strengths of interviewing. As he states, “The interview is a data collection tool with great flexibility which can be adapted to suit a wide variety of research situations” (Punch, 2009, p. 146). He further states that interviews are, “One of the most powerful ways we have of understanding others” (Punch, 2009, p. 144). Bogdan and Biklen (2005) emphasize the importance of the role of interviews in gaining insight into how the subject interprets the world.

Types of interviews in qualitative research range from the highly structured or standardized to unstructured or informal, with semi-structured interviews falling in the middle (Merriam, 1998). Qualitative interviews tend to be more open and less structured
This openness allows the researcher to respond to situations as they unfold, and to introduce new ideas as they become relevant (Merriam, 1998).

**Rationale for interviews in this study.**

In this study, interviews were chosen as one of my data collection strategies because my research purpose was to understand the participants’ perspective on their literacy learning and teaching, and to gain insight into how their early literacy experiences influence their literacy practice. I was interested in learning more about their current attitudes, beliefs, and practices about literacy learning and teaching as well as their childhood literacy learning experiences, attitudes and beliefs. Some of their current teaching practices could be observed, but many of the other aspects that I wished to better understand could not be observed. In order to come to a better understanding of the participants’ attitudes and beliefs in the past and present, and their early experiences, I decided that interviews would be the most appropriate research tool.

I chose to employ semi-structured interviews in my study. Semi-structured interviews allowed me to have a common structure and common questions for all of the participants. The data from the common elements in the interviews allowed me to compare and contrast the experiences and perspectives of the participants. The flexibility inherent in a semi-structured approach allowed me to add probe or follow-up questions to respond to unique situations or interesting and unexpected participant responses. For this study, the participants were interviewed once in the spring of their second year of teaching, and once in the spring of their third year of teaching.
Interviews in the larger study.

The six participants in this study were also part of a larger longitudinal study entitled *Teacher Education for Literacy Learning* which also employed semi-structured interviews. The participants in this larger study were comprised of two groups, teachers who began teaching in the 2004–2005 school year, and those who began teaching in the 2007–2008 school year. My participants came from the latter group. The participants in my study therefore encountered a consistent interviewing approach whether I was interviewing them for the larger study, or specifically for this study-within-a-study. The data from the interviews in the larger study were also used in this study to add depth to the findings.

I joined the research team as a graduate research assistant during 2007–2008 when the second group of teachers was in their first year of teaching. The interviews took place, when possible, in the teacher’s classrooms after the researcher had observed the teacher teaching. This was significant because the researchers could refer to aspects of the teacher’s strategies, activities, or resources during the interview. All of the participants were asked the same questions during the interviews but additional prompt questions by the researchers and participant comments were encouraged. In the first annual interview, which took place near the end of their first year of teaching, several topics were covered. The participants were asked background information about the school and classroom in which they were teaching, their own undergraduate and preservice education, and any previous work experience they had had either in education or other fields before becoming a classroom teacher. They were then asked to describe their literacy program in their classrooms and their level of satisfaction with it. Following this there were interview questions on program planning, assessment, classroom culture, and classroom management. In each of these sections the teachers were
asked to describe what and how they had learned about these concepts in their preservice program, and how they were enacting them in their classrooms. The final sections asked about the types of induction support the participants were receiving, how similar or different their classrooms were from those that they encountered during their preservice practice teaching, and their reflections on the highpoints and challenges of their first year teaching literacy. In the second and third years of the study, the teachers were asked questions in similar categories, but with some differences. In the second year, there were additional sections on their vision for teaching, their attitudes toward and use of technology in the classroom, and their on-going learning about literacy teaching. In the third year, the teachers were asked to compare their literacy teaching with their mathematics teaching, how they foster inclusion in their classroom, about their motivation as a teacher, and their professional identity and development (see Appendices A, B, and C for a samples of these interview protocols).

**Birth of the present study.**

In my role as a research assistant on this larger study, I interviewed two teachers near the end of their first year of teaching. I was struck by the differences in their responses to the interview questions. One teacher, Kendra, answered many of the questions by referring to her own early learning at home and at school, although none of the questions specifically asked about this. The other teacher, Kelly, never referred to experiences before her undergraduate degree or to her life outside of education when answering the questions. I became intrigued by this difference. I wondered why one teacher believed that her own early learning was a significant contributor to her approach to teaching and the other didn’t mention it. I decided to design a study-within-a-study in which I would interview a small number of the
participants about their early literacy learning and the influence it has had on their teaching practice.

After receiving approval, I sent emails to six participants in the larger study during their second year of teaching, including Kendra and Kelly, to invite them to participate in my study. I had established a relationship with Kendra and Kelly during their first year interview for the larger study, but I had not previously met the other four participants. However, in my invitation I told them that I was a member of the research team of the larger study. This was likely a factor in their quick acceptance of my invitation, and the ease with which we established a rapport.

**The first interview in my study.**

For the first interview specifically related to the influence that participants’ early literacy experiences may have had on their teaching, I divided the interview questions into several sections. I began by asking them about their earliest memories of literacy experiences at home, in the community, and at school. I asked questions such as “Who was influential in your early reading and writing experiences at home before school?” “Did you engage in reading and writing anywhere else in the community such as a place of worship, clubs such as Brownies or Cubs, music lessons, theatre?” and “What was easy and what was difficult about your early literacy experiences at school?”

These sections were followed by questions about their current identity as a teacher, their literacy teaching practices, and their understanding of their students’ literacy learning. Sample questions in these categories included “How is your role as a literacy teacher similar or different from the roles that your teachers played in your early learning?” “How does your teaching reflect your early learning experiences at home and in the community?” and “In
what ways do your own learning experiences help you to understand your students’ learning?‖ I concluded the interview with questions on the role that reflection on their early learning plays in their teaching practice. The following is a sample question from that section, “Have you thought about your own literacy learning history, and how it affects your identity and practice as a teacher before today?” (see Appendix D for a sample of this interview).

The second interview in my study.

After reading and reflecting upon the participants’ responses to the first literacy experiences interview, I began to have more questions about their experiences, both as students and as teachers, and about their interpretations of those experiences. Also, during the few months after the first literacy experiences interview, some of the participants emailed me to tell me about incidents from their early lives that they had suddenly remembered, or that other family members had remembered and wished to share with me. One participant, Mike, was concerned that he did not have many detailed memories from his early childhood, so he asked his mother to write to me. She not only did this, but also sent Mike samples of his early childhood writing that she had saved. For another participant, Gail, the first interview was so thought provoking that she called her family together for a meeting to discuss the reasons why she struggled with literacy as a child. I decided to conduct a second interview at the end of the participants’ third year of teaching to capture these memories and experiences, and also to determine if the opportunity to reflect for a year on the questions from the first interview might change or deepen their awareness of the influence of their early literacy learning on their literacy teaching. I asked the participants if they would be willing to participate in an additional interview, which I anticipated would take less than one hour.
They all readily agreed, and this second literacy history interview took place in the spring of their third year of teaching.

In the second interview for my study I was interested in learning more about the memories and experiences the participants had had since the first interview, and if their teaching practice had been affected in any way. I asked questions such as, “Have you thought any more about your early literacy experiences since our last interview? If so, have your memories and reflections resulted in any changes to your literacy teaching practices or your understanding of how your students learn?” I asked these questions because of the communication I had had with some participants after the first interview. I wondered if these new memories would prompt new or enhanced reflections on their teaching practice.

The interview also included questions about their preservice program. I asked the participants if in their preservice program they had been asked to reflect on their own early literacy learning, and on the effect that may have on their attitudes toward teaching reading and writing. I asked this because I knew that it was common to ask preservice teachers to reflect on their own schooling, and yet in the first interview the participants had reacted as if no one had ever asked them these types of questions before. I wondered if the questions seemed new because the participants were now reflecting in the context of being second year teachers, rather than as preservice teachers.

A third section of this interview concerned the participants’ perspective on whether their own strengths and weaknesses as a student were reflected in their teaching. I asked these questions because my initial analysis of the first interviews seemed to point to participants focusing their teaching on areas which had been weaknesses for them, and being most effective in teaching areas in which they had most struggled as a student. I was
interested to hear if the participants shared this analysis of their literacy learning and teaching (see Appendix E for a sample of this interview).

**Observation and Document Analysis**

Observation provides another means for the qualitative researcher to attempt to understand the phenomena under study. In contrast with interviews which provide a second-hand account of an event, observation provides an opportunity to have a first-hand experience (Merriam, 1998). The data obtained from an observation is different in nature than the data obtained from an interview. Patton (2002) describes observational data as consisting of, “detailed descriptions of people’s activities, behaviors, actions, and the full range of interpersonal interactions and organizational processes that are part of observable human experience” (p. 4).

Patton (2002) describes three advantages of observation as a research strategy: it allows us to better understand the context; it encourages us to be “discovery oriented” (p. 262); and we may see things that the participants are not aware of, and therefore don’t speak about. Merriam (1998) discusses another important advantage of coming to understand a participant’s context. Through observation, a researcher may notice specific incidents or behaviours that can be used as “reference points” (Merriam, 1998, p. 96) for further interviews.

Like interviews, observations range from highly structured to unstructured, with qualitative observations at the more unstructured end of the continuum (Punch, 2009). Qualitative observations tend to be open-ended, allowing for a recording of actions and events as they unfold (Punch, 2009, p. 184). In addition to interviewing and observation,
Document analysis is one of the main methods that qualitative researchers employ (Denzin & Lincoln, 2005). Researchers collect and analyze artifacts, documents, and cultural records in an attempt to gain a fuller picture of the researched phenomenon (Denzin & Lincoln, 2005). Document analysis, in combination with interviewing and observation, can be used to triangulate findings (Merriam, 1998; Punch, 1998).

In this study, participants were observed while teaching in their classrooms in order to have a first-hand experience of their literacy teaching context and practice. While I observed in the classrooms, I took notes about the physical setting, the resources, the teaching and management strategies employed by the teacher, the types of activities, and interpersonal relationships. This first-hand look at the participants’ context often provided opportunities for me to learn about events, routines, resources, or interactions that the participants may not have mentioned in their interviews. This often raised new questions that could be incorporated into future interviews. The observations in the study were all semi-structured, with the first one having the most structure and the later ones being more open-ended. Like the semi-structured interviews, the semi-structured observations allowed for observation of consistent categories across participants as well as opportunities to note unique or unexpected material.

The documents that were analyzed in the study were those that the teachers used or referred to in their literacy teaching. They consisted of Ontario Ministry of Education curriculum documents, other Ontario Ministry of Education documents relating to literacy teaching, school board documents, teacher resource material in print or on-line, long-term plans, lesson plans, charts or posters in their classrooms, and children’s and adult literature in their classrooms. Data from interviews, observations, and document analyses were used to
triangulate my findings. In addition, participants reviewed both their interview transcripts and drafts of their case studies for accuracy. The participants’ corrections or suggestions were incorporated into the final versions of their case studies.

**Observation protocols.**

The participants were observed teaching in their classrooms where possible. These observations occurred on the same days as the interviews. All of the participants in this study except one were observed while they taught in their regular classrooms. One participant, Darren, worked as a daily supply or long term supply in many classrooms in the city. Because he did not have a “home” classroom, he did not feel comfortable with a researcher observing his teaching.

For the first observation, a fairly detailed observation protocol was used. The protocol covered several aspects of the class observed including the demographics of the classroom, the lesson, the classroom, the teacher’s approach, and the students’ response. Some of the items were very open-ended, for example the first one, “Briefly describe the lesson.” Other items such as “How attentive were the students?” were rated on a four point scale from “a great deal” to “not at all.” At the end of the observation period, the protocol directed the observer to reflect on the participant’s general approach to teaching, and to literacy teaching specifically (see Appendix F for a sample of this observation protocol).

In the subsequent observations that took place during the teachers’ second and third years of teaching, a simpler observation form was used. This was because it was decided that more observational data was being collected than was needed for the research purpose. The simpler form served our purpose better. It had a similar demographics section, for example,
the grades the participants were teaching, but in other respects it was quite different. It had only three other questions which were very open-ended. They were the following:

1. What did you note/observe about the teacher’s work?

2. What did you note/observe about the students’ work? Their participation? Their behaviour?

3. What were the highlights of the observation? (What impressed you? What was special? What was interesting?) (see Appendix G for a sample of this protocol).

Data Analysis

Grounded theory.

Grounded Theory, as Punch (2009) explains, is not a theory, but a strategy used to generate theory that will be grounded in the data. It is often used when a satisfactory theory on the topic does not exist. Theory is developed inductively from the data using a set of techniques and procedures for collection and analysis (Punch, 2009). Strauss (2003), one of the originators of Grounded Theory along with Glaser in 1967, describes it as a “style” of doing qualitative analysis that includes theoretical sampling, making constant comparisons, and the use of a coding paradigm (p. 5). The use of Grounded Theory involves, “finding conceptual categories in the data, finding relationships between the categories, and conceptualizing and accounting for these relationships (Punch, 2009, p. 183). Grounded Theory has been adopted by many qualitative researchers because it is compatible with the concept building orientation of qualitative research (Merriam, 1998). For Patton (2002), the foundational question is, “What theory emerges from systematic comparative analysis and is grounded in fieldwork as to explain what has been and is observed” (p. 125). Charmaz
(2005) advocates the use of Constructivist Grounded Theory which locates the researcher as part of the reality that is being studied, and does not assume that there is an objective truth awaiting discovery by the researcher. What the researcher sees and hears depends on many things including biography, experiences, and relationships. As she states, “We share in constructing what we define as data” (Charmaz, 2005, p. 509).

In this study, I read the transcripts of interviews, observation notes, and field notes several times during and after the 3-year period of data collection. Each piece of data was identified by participant, data type, and date. After the first round of interviews and observations, I began a process of “open coding” (Strauss & Corbin, 1990, p. 61). I began to label events and ideas and then to group these concepts together into categories (Strauss & Corbin, 1990). For example, I developed and used the open codes “family literacy practices,” “transition to school,” and “literacy teaching strategies.” These emerging categories influenced subsequent rounds of data collection. As the study progressed, I also engaged in “axial coding” (Strauss & Corbin, 1990, p. 96). Using the analytic principles of constant comparison (Glaser & Strauss, 1967), I began to make connections between categories, and to develop larger themes. For example, I created the axial codes, “connection between home literacy and school literacy” and “connection between early school experiences and teaching focus.” I created a chart for each participant in which I listed the emerging themes and the data that supported those themes. From my analysis, I created a common set of categories for the individual case studies which encompass the main findings in the study. Each case study begins with an overview of the participant’s personal, educational, and work background. The next set of categories in the case studies concerns influential early childhood learning experiences at home and at school. The final set of categories is comprised of preservice
program learning and early teaching experiences. The results of this analysis can be found in Chapter 4.

Following the creation of charts for the data on individual participants, I created another chart in which I compared and contrasted the themes from the six individual case studies. Throughout the data collection and analysis period I continually reviewed the materials for clarification, continuing to add, delete, modify, and establish themes. Finally, I integrated the categories and themes using “selective coding” (Strauss & Corbin, 1990, p. 116). Straus and Corbin (1990) refer to this stage as formulating a “story line” (p. 119) for the study. An example of a selective code that I used is, “teachers who struggled as students focus on their struggling students as teachers.”

My cross-case analysis revealed that the participants could be grouped into two categories: participants who struggled with early literacy learning; and those who learned early literacy with ease. In my discussion of the cross-case themes, I often consider the participants as members of these two groups, while maintaining the individual experiences and characteristics of each participant. The cross-case analysis can be found in Chapters 5 and 6.

Throughout the process of data analysis, I recognized my role in collaboratively constructing the narrative (Polkinghorne, 1995). Although I did add rigour and validity to my research process through triangulation of the data and member checking, my selection of concepts, categories, themes, and the final story line was inevitably influenced by my own experiences as a student, teacher, teacher educator, and parent.
Limitations

There are several limitations to this research study. The first relates to the small number of participants and their common educational and teaching experiences. Because there are only six participants, it is not possible to generalize the findings to the wider teacher community. Although the participants vary in terms of age, gender, race, culture, etc., they do share many characteristics. All completed their preservice education at the same large urban university, albeit in different programs within the university. In addition, they all teach in the same large urban centre, though in different types of schools, programs and neighbourhoods. These commonalities among the participants may further reduce the generalizability of the findings.

The second limitation of the study is related to the scope of the research. There are many factors that may influence a beginning teacher’s literacy practice. They may include the influence of race, culture, gender, age, sexual orientation, and socioecomic status. Although many of these factors are described in the participants’ case studies as part of their personal learning and teaching context, this study’s main focus is on the participants’ early learning experiences.

The third limitation is related to my biases that arise from my own learning and teaching history. As a child I was a struggling literacy learner, and as a classroom teacher I gave special attention to my students who struggled in similar ways. Therefore, I may identify with my participants who had similar struggles and who have a similar teaching focus. Although I have tried to present a balanced view of my data, my own history, and perspective inevitably influenced my data collection and analysis.
Ethical Considerations

The research project that is described in this dissertation took place within the larger longitudinal research project entitled *Teacher Education for Literacy Learning*, led by principal researchers Clare Kosnik and Clive Beck. This larger study was granted approval by the Research Ethics Board (REB) at the university. As graduate student research assistant I was a regular member of the research team with approved access to the data. I applied for and was granted approval by the REB to use data from the project for my doctoral dissertation.

The participants in the study were given consent letters which described the project and contained an invitation to participate. The letter outlined the data collection process including interviews, classroom observations, and document review. The participants were made aware that they could ignore any questions that they did not want to answer, and that the interviews would be recorded and transcribed. Confidentiality measures were explained. The right to refuse to participate at any time without reason was made clear. The participants signed a permission form that indicated that they had read the consent letter and agreed to participate in the research study. The permission form explained that data from the study could be used for research, writing, or teaching purposes. It reinforced that pseudonyms would be used and that neither the participants nor their schools would be identified in any way (see Appendix H for a sample of the consent letter and consent form). I shared my research purpose with my participants and told them about by own learning and teaching history.

I had not met the participants before the larger study began, and I had not taught in any of the schools in which the study took place. However, two of the schools where I
conducted observations and interviews were in my neighbourhood. My children had previously attended these schools and therefore I knew some of the children and teachers. This was beneficial to me because I had a good deal of knowledge about the context these participants were working in. However, this may have influenced how these two participants spoke to me about their students and their fellow teachers. They may have been more guarded in their comments about students and other teachers, or they may have provided less detailed explanations of their context assuming that I already had some knowledge about it.

Chapter Summary

The chapter illustrates how the purpose of investigating the influence of early literacy experiences on the teaching of beginning elementary teachers was achieved through the research methods that were employed. It outlines the main features of qualitative research methodology and provides a rationale for its use in the present study. The research problem and research questions are detailed, along with the research design. Data collection and analysis processes and methods are described and justified. The case is made that the research process was appropriate, rigorous, and ethical. In the next chapter I begin the presentation of the findings of the study through individual case studies of the six participants.
Chapter 4:
Findings:
Individual Case Studies

Introduction

In this chapter I present individual case studies of the six participants in the study. All of the participants are graduates of a 1-year, post-baccalaureate Bachelor of Education program involving university-based coursework and classroom practicum placements. Four of the participants qualified to teach in the Primary/Junior level (K–Grade 6), and the other two participants qualified to teach in the Junior/Intermediate level (Grades 4–10). The university-based coursework includes the following courses: Teacher Education Seminar; Psychological Foundations of Learning and Development; School and Society; Curriculum and Instruction courses; and a Related Studies course. The Curriculum and Instruction courses consist of broad-based methodology in seven subject areas including: Language Arts; Mathematics; Social Studies; Science; Health and Physical Education; Music; and Visual Arts. The Junior/Intermediate preservice teachers in this program must also take a subject-specific methodology course. In addition to university-based coursework, the preservice teachers all completed two 4-week-long practicum placements in schools.

The case studies are comprised of a description of the participants’ personal and educational backgrounds and teaching context, and an exploration of their early literacy learning and teaching experiences. The case studies introduce the themes that will be developed further in Chapters 5 and 6.
Case Study One: Kendra

Through interviewing Kendra over the three years of the study, it became clear to me that her understanding of her role as a literacy teacher, the literacy teaching practices that she employs in her classroom, and her understanding of how her students learn are closely connected to her own experiences as a young literacy learner. When asked about what she brings from her personal life to her teaching, she is very clear that her learning experiences as a child have greatly influenced her teaching. My observations of her teaching during this time revealed her commitment to establishing a relaxed, positive atmosphere in her classroom. Her students happily worked together, were engaged in their learning activities, and appeared to have a very comfortable relationship with her.

Personal and educational context.

Kendra grew up in Detroit where she completed her elementary and high school, and then moved to New York City for her undergraduate education. Her undergraduate degree is in Political Science and Asian Studies. Teaching is Kendra’s second career. She spent 10 years in fundraising, seven of those years in New York, and the other three in Canada after immigrating in 2002. She became interested in teaching while volunteering at an after-school remedial program in New York City. She is in her mid 30s, is married, and has two children who were in Junior and Senior Kindergarten when the study began.

In her preservice program, Kendra qualified to teach in the Junior/Intermediate division (Grades 4-10), and specialized in teaching Mathematics. She assumed that she would be teaching Math and Science to students in Grades 6 to 8. She did not expect to be teaching students how to read and write. She explains:
I was intending to be an intermediate school teacher and I would teach Math and Science. And of course there is a literacy component in there, but I assumed that the kids would be reading and writing already. I didn’t think I would have to go back and re-cap what they’d learned and kind of draw it back in.

For the first 2 years after obtaining her teaching qualification, Kendra taught Grade 4 in a large urban centre in Canada. The school she taught in is large, middle class, and fairly homogenous in terms of family income, culture, and educational backgrounds. In her Grade 4 classroom, Kendra was responsible for teaching all subject areas other than French and Music. In her third year of teaching, she transferred to another school in the same city, where she taught Grade 7 English, Math, and Science, and Grade 8 Science. This school is also large, but in a much lower income and more ethnically diverse neighbourhood.

**Childhood literacy experiences.**

**Before school age.**

Kendra has fond memories of playing with her younger sister and being cared for by her grandmother at her grandmother’s house while her parents were at work during her early years. Her parents are immigrants from China who worked long hours to support their family. She does not remember being read to as a young child, and does not have any memories of seeing adults reading or writing, other than her father reading Chinese language newspapers to himself. The family did not own a television, nor did Kendra have access to a computer until after she went to school. When she was a child, no one spoke at the dinner table. Kendra believes that her parents were so exhausted by the time that they came home, that they needed some peace and quiet. She says, “I think they just wanted us to stop talking
so they could relax and eat.” Kendra and her sister spent much of their time at their grandmother’s home, and did not attend any pre-school programs or engage in any community programs such as library story times or music programs. Kendra’s parents did not see the need for early reading and writing experiences before school. Referring to learning to read and write, Kendra says, “I think my parents thought that school would take care of that.” Kendra spoke some English before attending school, but not fluently.

**School age at home and in the community.**

After experiencing very little school-type literacy prior to school, Kendra’s early school years saw an explosion of literacy-related activities at home and in the community. At about the time that Kendra entered Kindergarten at age 5, her teenaged cousin Alice came to live with the family. Alice took over some of the care-giving duties from their grandmother, caring for the girls before and after school. Alice modeled reading and writing, explained to Kendra and her sister what she was doing in school, and also bought books for them. Alice sometimes took Kendra and her sister to the library to listen to story time while she did her homework. Kendra was given a library card which became her “prized possession.” She attended Brownies for a short time but was “kicked out for behavioural issues.” Kendra attended an after-school program and remembers a lot of dramatic play, outdoor play, and crafts. About the time that Kendra entered school, her parents had acquired a television. She and her sister watched about two hours of television each day during her elementary school years.

Kendra’s parents expected their children to be successful in school, and paid them monetarily for good grades. They bought the children workbooks and story books from the school book club. Kendra recalls that beginning in Grade 3, she spent a lot of time in the
library doing extra research projects and book reports. She also wrote stories at home. She
says, “I had my own library of books that I created with stapled paper….my mom still has
them, I think, somewhere in the basement.” In addition to writing, she spent a good deal of
time playing school with her younger sister. Kendra was always the teacher in these games,
and she would teach her sister whatever she had learned in school that day.

*The early school years.*

Kindergarten presented a combination of challenges and successes for Kendra. Because she had not attended any pre-school programs, or played with children other than
her sister, school was a completely new experience. Initially, she had difficulty adjusting to
going to school. She explains:

> Whereas I’d been kind of secluded with my sister up until the age of 5, I
didn’t understand how to get along with other kids. [I also wasn’t used to]
having a different adult who wasn’t my parent or my grandmother telling me
what to do. So I really didn’t understand the whole idea of school at the
time….I wasn’t willing to adjust, like I didn’t know how to control myself.

Co-operating with other children and following routines and adult expectations were sources
of difficulty during her kindergarten year.

An additional challenge for Kendra was her lack of fluency in English. Although she
could understand most of what the teacher and other children were saying, she didn’t realize
that she wasn’t being understood because she was speaking half in English and half in
Chinese. Her kindergarten teacher integrated music and visual arts into the program. Kendra
describes her as “very gentle” with an “alternative approach to teaching.” Kendra believes
that this teaching approach helped with both her oral fluency in English and her reading. She says:

The teacher was really good at integrating music into the program… and so I really caught onto the rhythm of the words based on the music that we performed in. And she was very good at visual arts so we did a lot of that as well. So she tricked us into reading and it was very helpful.

Kendra picked up English quite quickly, and this made it easier for her to manage in the classroom, with both her peers and her teacher, although her social challenges at school continued throughout elementary school.

Kendra was most successful at reading and writing skill-based activities, such as phonics worksheets and spelling drills, which she completed individually. She remembers quickly understanding what was expected of her, completing her work easily, and earning gold stars for correct work. Collaborative work, or assignments that required an explanation or interpretation, either orally or in writing, were challenging.

By Grade 3, Kendra enjoyed reading and writing. She says, “that was when I developed the love of it. I never have let it go.” She particularly enjoyed writing research projects and book reports, and getting praised by the teachers for her work. She explains, “I always liked to put things in, not duo tangs, but, you know, stapled little booklets. I was always very good at that. And the teachers wouldn’t necessarily ask for it but I always offered that up. It was a great source of pride.”

While Kendra’s parents were, as she says, “not too forthcoming with the compliments,” she looked to her teachers for positive reinforcement. She was motivated by her teachers’ praise, by good marks, and by the “physical evidence of what I had done. I
hoarded all my projects and stories.” Kendra was particularly proud of her handwriting and spelling. She remembers doing many standardized reading assessments during the primary years, and “doing ok” on them. While Kendra’s Kindergarten memories are quite vivid with respect to the types of activities that she engaged in and how she felt about them, her subsequent primary years are “a little fuzzy.” Her challenges with expressing an interpretation, or opinion, particularly orally, and with collaborative work, continued during her primary and later elementary years.

**Literacy teaching experiences.**

**Preservice.**

Kendra’s understanding and practice of literacy learning and teaching derives not only from her learning experiences as a child, but also from her formal teacher education. However, the ways in which she experienced her preservice and in-service education were influenced by her earlier learning experiences. In her preservice literacy course, Kendra was frustrated that her professors talked about topics such as program planning and assessment, but didn’t give the preservice teachers enough specific strategies or tools, or opportunities to practice using the ones that they were given. In addition, she felt that her instructor’s approach didn’t match her learning style. With respect to the topic of assessment, Kendra says, “We talked about it. There were overhead projections, that sort of thing, but it would have been nice to have, you know, things that I could hold. I’m one of those people who needs to touch and try.”

Given her appreciation of practical, hands-on learning, it is not surprising that one of the aspects of the university-based portion of her preservice program that was most satisfying and useful to Kendra was a series of practical workshops on classroom management. In these
workshops she learned techniques for dealing with different behavioural situations in classrooms, and also an approach to class management that seeks to understand rather than blame the students. Kendra explains the focus of the workshops as, “trying to be equitable and trying to get to the heart of a problem rather than addressing the individual as the problem.” Kendra’s classroom management approach over her first 3 years of teaching, and her approach to teaching her reluctant readers and writers, certainly reflects this philosophy.

Many of the resources that Kendra finds most beneficial in her teaching are the unit and lesson plans created by her fellow preservice teachers. During their preservice year, Kendra created a website for her peers to pool their work for the mutual benefit of all. This initiative was a precursor to the way in which she encourages her students to share with and to learn from each other in her classroom.

Kendra found her school-based practicum placements to be a very useful and satisfying aspect of her preservice year. One of Kendra’s two classroom placements was in a Grade 4, the grade to which she was assigned for her first 2 years of teaching. She enjoyed working alongside the classroom teacher and developing and delivering lessons within the teacher’s overall plan. Kendra notes that this placement allowed her to get to know the Grade 4 curriculum, and although her own literacy activities and teaching approach may be less traditional than her supervising teacher, Kendra still sought her advice during her first year of teaching.

**Early teaching.**

Kendra has a very broad definition of her role as a literacy teacher, and of the role of literacy in her students’ lives. Following in the footsteps of a high school English teacher who helped her to find her voice, she too wants to help her young students find their voices.
She considers it her job to help her students to come to know themselves, to gain confidence to express their opinions, to be flexible enough to change their opinions. She explains:

I think my job is to facilitate their voice, and to help kids have the confidence to say what they want to say, and when they’re wrong, to change their opinion and not feel like they’ve been defeated.

During Kendra’s first year of teaching, she began by using many of the rote teaching strategies that her teachers had used when she was a young student. After about a month, Kendra realized that her students were not responding well to this approach. She spent a great deal of time and energy accessing a variety of resources to try to create a new approach that would work for her students. When she gave her students more choice in their reading and writing, allowed them to work more collaboratively, and began more open-ended and meaning focused activities such as literature circles and readers’ theatre, she saw that her students were more engaged and learning more effectively.

In her second and third years of teaching, Kendra widened her emphasis from oral language to a more concentrated emphasis on her students’ reading and writing skills. She also incorporated more one-on-one conferencing to ensure that she kept abreast of each student’s needs. When planning her literacy program, she believes that it is important to start with the students’ interests and encourage them to contribute and share their knowledge and experiences with their peers. This is an approach that she wishes her teachers had used. She says, “It’s just not something that I was ever taught to believe as a kid, and I guess I missed out on a lot.”

Kendra spends a great deal of time and energy on literacy professional development and on planning her literacy program. She also devotes large blocks of time in her timetable
to literacy activities. In her teaching, she is particularly focused on helping students who struggle with higher level thinking skills and forming and presenting opinions, as she did as a student.

Kendra has a holistic view of literacy learning. She situates each student’s literacy learning within the wider context of the student’s self-concept, peer relations, behaviour, motivation, and general academic ability. She understands that challenges in reading and writing can lead to problems in other subject areas, disruptive behaviour, and difficulty getting along with other students. She believes that students who have literacy challenges are caught in “one of those vicious circles.” When they aren’t successful, they are reluctant to read and write, which leads to a continued lack of success. This, in turn, leads to a low opinion of themselves and to negative social behaviours. Rather than blaming these students for being reluctant to do their work, or for being disruptive, Kendra sees her job as “lighting the fire” or finding out what will help each student to be successful in their literacy learning so that they can break out of this negative cycle.

**Reflection on learning and teaching connections.**

Kendra had reflected extensively on her own early literacy learning and had consciously been using her own experiences to inform her teaching decisions before the study began. Over the 3-year period of the study, she continued to explore the connections between her early literacy learning and her literacy teaching, and continued to deepen her understanding of the intersection of her learning and teaching lives.
Case Study Two: Kelly

Interviews and observations of Kelly’s teaching over the 3 years of the study reveal a confident and caring teacher who feels “at home” in the classroom. Kelly’s early life would seem to be the perfect preparation for a teaching career, although Kelly did not initially see a relationship between her life and her teaching. She is the daughter of teachers and always loved school and was successful at it. She decided to become a teacher early in life and moved directly from her undergraduate degree to preservice preparation to classroom teaching.

Personal and educational context.

Kelly teaches in the same major central Canadian city in which she was born and where she completed all of her education, including her undergraduate and teacher education degrees. Her undergraduate degree is in Physical Education and Health. As part of this degree, she took courses in child development, and also had two physical education practice teaching placements, one in a high school and one in an elementary school Kelly wanted to be a teacher since she began to teach swimming to children when she was in Grade 9. She says, “I just remember working with the kids in the pool and being good at it and loving it. It was a good time. So for me, [teaching] seemed like an obvious choice, really. And I never wavered from it.” Kelly is in her mid 20s, is single, and has no children. Along with her two sisters Kelly is helping her mother to care for her chronically ill father.

In her preservice program, Kelly qualified to teach in the Junior/Intermediate level (Grades 4–10) and specialized in teaching Physical Education and Health. Her first preservice school placement was working in a Physical Education program with classes from Grades 4 to 8. In her second placement, she was in a Grade 4 classroom in which she had the
opportunity to teach all of the core subject areas. Although she had this regular classroom placement, Kelly assumed that after she graduated she would be teaching Physical Education and Health exclusively to students in Grades 6 to 8. She says, “I never really thought I would be teaching a core class.”

In her first year of teaching, Kelly taught four classes of Grade 8 Mathematics, a subject for which she has no university preparation, and one Grade 7 Physical Education and Health class. Her school was comprised of students from low to middle income families, about half of whom were English language learners. In her second year, Kelly taught in a school with similar demographics. She taught one period of Grade 6 Language, one of Grade 6 Mathematics, and the rest of the day she taught Physical Education and Health to Grades 6, 7 and 8. For her third year of teaching, she decided to take a 1-year leave of absence from her school board to teach Physical Education and Health full-time in an international school in Europe.

Childhood literacy experiences.

Before school age.

Both of Kelly’s parents were teachers, so it is not surprising that she credits them as being most influential in her early reading and writing experiences, and that her early years were filled with a great deal of school-type literacy activities. She and her two sisters were read to every night by one or the other of their parents. She says, “I just remember we read every day and our family read. It seemed to be a group activity.” This family activity went beyond simple reading to a more school-type literacy activity. Kelly remembers that her family owned multiple versions of picture books such as The Three Little Pigs. Her parents would read different versions and then discuss the differences with the children. Kelly also
remembers her parents reading newspapers and magazines. The family had several magazine subscriptions, including *National Geographic*, *Canadian Geographic* and the children’s magazines *Chickadee* and *Owl*.

Regular family visits to the library provided opportunities to read and sign out books to take home. Kelly’s parents encouraged their children to choose appropriate books, as well as modeled using the library to support reading for pleasure. Kelly and her sisters felt “at home” in the library, and they each had their own library card from an early age. Kelly valued her library card as a child, and now, looking back, she realizes that her family’s library routine was valuable both for encouraging her to read, but also to take responsibility for her actions. She explains, “And we always had to be careful of our library fines and make sure the books got back. That’s something that I forgot about almost and now if I had kids, I would take them to the library.”

Writing was also a family affair in Kelly’s home. She, her sisters, and their parents regularly wrote letters to relatives. Kelly also saw her parents use writing for everyday tasks such as reminder notes and shopping lists. Conversation and dramatic play were also encouraged from an early age in Kelly’s family. The children were encouraged to talk about their day and their feelings at the dinner table. Kelly explains:

My mom was big on dinner table, we always had to eat together at the dinner table and then we always had to clean up together. And you know, dinner conversation was about our days and what we did and how we felt.

Dramatic play with her sisters occupied a great deal of Kelly’s free time. She and her sisters would create and act out stories with props. She says, “We used to play ‘forts’ a lot, and ‘house’ a lot. And I always wanted to keep the house organized and be the organizer….there
was always a story. It was, you know, escape from here and get there, hide here.” Kelly attended a half-day, play-based pre-school before starting Kindergarten at age 4.

**School age at home and in the community.**

The plentiful reading, writing, and oral language activities at home continued once Kelly began to go to school. From her early elementary years, she remembers reading books to herself to go to sleep after her parents had finished reading to her each night, as well as reading newspapers to herself. Dramatic play with her sisters and family visits to the library continued during her elementary years. She says, “We’d go to the library on the weekends as a family activity until we were teenagers.” Kelly also wrote at home, but not for pleasure. She would write only when writing was necessary. She explains, “I never was a big journal writer….I wouldn’t write for fun.” Kelly and her sisters spent much of their free time playing outdoors and very little time watching TV. Kelly links her current lack of interest in TV to her childhood. She says, “TV wasn’t a big thing for me at all. I find now that I don’t watch it much at all. And I wonder if that has something to do with being a kid who didn’t watch TV.” Although her father was a computer science teacher and they had a computer in their home, Kelly did not use the computer regularly until she had an email account in Grade 9.

Dinner time conversations served to link Kelly’s school life and home life. Her parents used these conversations to reinforce what happened in school both by asking specifically what the children had learned that day, but also through the use of the type of question/answer recount format that is typical of school talk. Kelly explains, “[My mother] would ask us these open-ended questions and not just ‘Did you have a good day?’ but well you know, ‘What did you learn in Math today?’”
This focus on oral language and school-type patterns of oral interaction intensified once Kelly started school. When Kelly’s mother felt that “something wasn’t going right in the house,” she would call a family meeting. These meetings were conducted in a similar manner to a teacher discussing an issue with his or her class. Although Kelly may not have been aware of the ways in which the family’s literacy practices mirrored and reinforced those of her school learning, nor did she appreciate them at the time, it stands to reason that this support from home was helpful in her transition to school, and her ongoing school literacy learning. In fact, after one of our interviews on her early learning, Kelly went home and thanked her parents for providing such a rich foundation for her learning and teaching.

Kelly’s parents were very supportive of their children’s activities outside of the home, and the literacy practices that were embedded in those activities, such as earning badges at Brownies, or participating in Sunday school. Her parents also kept themselves informed about what was happening at their daughters’ school, yet they expected them to be independent. Kelly explains, “They’d always go to parent-teacher interviews and they’d always call in and they’d always be on top of things. I remember my parents being there if I needed them but I just did my homework on my own.”

*The early school years.*

Given the literacy background that she had at home, it is not surprising that Kelly had a smooth transition to Kindergarten. She says, “I was happy to go [to school] and generally did really well at school and enjoyed it.” Kelly does not remember having challenges in any area of her early schooling, either academically or socially. She made friends easily, school activities were enjoyable and engaging, and she felt successful. Kelly continued to be successful in all aspects of school life throughout her elementary years. She was identified as
a Gifted learner in Grade 3, and attended a Gifted program full-time from Grade 4 until Grade 8.

Kelly considered herself a reader by Grade 1 after being able to read a book that was given to her by the school principal. Once she decided that she could read, Kelly was motivated to read as much as she could. Kelly’s enjoyment of reading continued throughout her school years. She remembers particularly enjoying Choose Your Own Adventure stories and Roald Dahl novels. She has carried her enjoyment of Dahl into her teaching career. She has a compilation of his stories in her classroom and uses them with her students. Kelly also considered herself to be a writer by Grade 1. Like learning to read, learning to write did not pose any problems for Kelly. She explains:

I always found it to be easy. I never found writing to be a challenge. I mean, I wasn’t the best writer and I didn’t have the best spelling, but I don’t have any negative memories or even memories of ‘Oh it is so hard, I can’t do it’. No, I’m lucky in that respect.

Reading children’s story books and writing fictional stories were the main focus of Kelly’s literacy education in her early elementary years. She does not remember any worksheets, drills or tests. She enjoyed these literacy activities, and found her teacher’s and parents’ positive feedback to be very motivating.

While Kelly did not encounter any struggles with either the content or teaching approach that her teachers employed, she was frustrated with one aspect of her early schooling. She was very aware that there were children in her classes who were struggling academically. Although she was sympathetic with their struggles, Kelly was frustrated with
children in her classes who did not learn as quickly or as well as she did. She was particularly frustrated when she was asked to peer tutor her struggling classmates.

**Literacy teaching experiences.**

**Preservice.**

Of all of the courses that Kelly took in her preservice year, she found her literacy course to be the weakest. Consequently, she felt the least prepared to teach literacy when she graduated. She says:

I didn’t feel at all prepared in the sense of, you know, resources and different approaches to planning your balanced literacy program, and I had no idea. I didn’t come out of it feeling at all ready to teach, or to create a program.

Kelly felt that she learned how to talk about issues in literacy planning and assessment, but she didn’t know how to put that knowledge into action. She wishes that she had been taught more practical teaching strategies, and given more resources. She found her preservice Mathematics class to be more satisfying in this respect. Kelly felt that at the end of her preservice year she, “didn’t have a vision at all” of what she wanted her literacy program to look like.

In addition to the Mathematics course, Kelly found two other preservice university-based courses particularly useful. One was a course on teaching students with special needs. She found the course to be of great practical use in her teaching. She says, “I just remember feeling in September [of her first year of teaching], ‘Wow, I’m glad I took that course.’” The second course was an elective in class management. Kelly regularly used ideas and techniques from the class in her teaching over the first 3 years, such as standing in close proximity to students who are off task, and using hand signals to indicate desired behaviour.
The classroom placements were highlights of Kelly’s preservice year. Kelly appreciated how well organized the teachers were, the positive relationships they had with their students, and the support they received from their administration. However, because there was little overlap between her the grades and subjects taught in her practicum placements and her teaching assignments in her first 3 years, they were not as much of a practical resource in her teaching as she would have liked. Overall, Kelly wished that there had been more practical activities, strategies, and resources in her preservice program, and more time for practice teaching in schools.

*Early literacy teaching.*

Kelly sees her role as a literacy teacher to be primarily one of school curriculum integrator. She uses her literacy program to integrate all of the other school subjects, and ultimately, to prepare her students to be confident communicators throughout their lives. She considers her literacy program to be the place where the whole school curriculum comes together—facts, thinking skills, organizational skills, and different reading and writing genres. She considers it part of her job to be preparing her students for their lives beyond school. She wants her students to have the skills to be, “a perfectly functioning adult in society.” According to Kelly, these skills include being able to prepare for a job interview, to read the newspaper, and to navigate the internet effectively. She also wants her students to read and to enjoy reading. Kelly believes that if she creates an atmosphere in her classes that makes her students feel “safe and secure academically” they will develop the skills and confidence that they need to be successful in the future.

Kelly fondly remembers the times when her own early teachers read to the class, and so she does so regularly with her own students, often reading her favourite Roald Dahl
stories. Kelly also enjoyed group discussions and answering higher level thinking questions as a student. Because they were so motivating for her, Kelly has tried to use these practices with her students. She finds, however, that her students have not had a lot of experience with either group discussions or the consideration of higher level questions, and therefore complain and misbehave when she tried to employ them. She describes the students at these times as, “off the wall.” In keeping with the value she places on integrated learning, Kelly did not have separate Math and Language periods in her Grade 6 class in her second year of teaching. She considers that the reading and discussion of Math problems serves double duty as both mathematics and literacy activities. She did, however, provide short daily opportunities for students to read self chosen literature and to discuss their reading with their peers. In addition, at times the whole double mathematics and literacy period would be given over to a literacy activity such as preparing a speech or creating a comic.

Kelly is concerned that her students meet a broad range of overall objectives from across the curriculum, and not as concerned with the multitude of specific expectations in every subject. She strives to keep her overall curricular and life goals for her students in view. She calls this the “big picture.” Kelly worries that teachers can become so concerned with the technical aspects of teaching that they lose this focus. She says, “And I think we, as teachers, sometimes lose sight of the big picture.”

Kelly finds it challenging to find time for professional development and planning in literacy. She does not feel that she was well prepared to teach literacy by her preservice program, nor has she found the time to further her knowledge in this area. Consequently, she does not feel confident that she has a well rounded literacy program. Her main goals are for her students to enjoy literacy activities, and to feel confident and engaged.
Reflection on learning and teaching connections.

At the beginning of the study, Kelly had thought very little about any possible connections between her early literacy experiences and her literacy teaching. In fact, she doubted that the former had any influence on the latter. However, as she began to discuss her early learning experiences in the interviews, she began to see how her early learning had prepared her for success in school, and how her early school experiences influence her teaching experiences. By the end of the study, her reflections led her to question whether the teaching strategies that were effective and motivating for her as a child were equally appropriate for all of her students.

Case Study Three: Gail

Gail is positive and enthusiastic with her Kindergarten students. She focuses on their strengths and gives them many opportunities to be successful. Gail runs a very active program with hands-on learning centres, and many opportunities for discussion. In our interviews over the 3 years of the study, Gail presented as a very reflective and articulate person who thought deeply about the questions I asked both during the interviews, and between interviews. In fact, after one interview in which we discussed her early reading struggles, she gathered her family together to discuss their memories and thoughts on their family literacy practices.

Personal and educational context.

Gail was born and attended school in a small city in Central Canada. Her undergraduate degree, which she completed in another small city nearby, is in Art History. She spent 7 years working in arts administration at a museum in a large urban area before
becoming a teacher. Gail is in her early 30s, is single, and has no children. In her preservice program, she qualified to teach in the Primary/junior division (K to Grade 6). Her classroom placements were in a Junior and Senior Kindergarten, a Grade 5 and 6, and her internship was in a Special Education classroom.

Gail taught Kindergarten at an independent school for her first 3 years as a qualified teacher. This school is located in an affluent part of a major Canadian city, and has a very high tuition. As a result, the families tend to have a high income, and there is also a high level of education among the parents. In her first year Gail was an intern teacher in the school, working under the supervision of an experienced classroom teacher, which is the practice for new teachers at this school. Gail appreciated this extra year of mentorship and support before she assumed full responsibility for a classroom. She became a full-time teacher in her second year, and for both her second and third years she taught as part of a two teacher team in the school’s Kindergarten program.

Teaching was not Gail’s first career choice. She wanted to work in the arts and so secured a job in a museum. However, she soon found that her favourite part of working at the museum was teaching the arts education programs for the children. She had also enjoyed coaching children’s sports and working in children’s arts-based summer programs when she was younger. Gail decided that being a classroom teacher would allow her to pursue her interests, but she realized that she didn’t have any school-based teaching experience. In order to remedy this, she arranged with the museum to take one morning off work a week to volunteer in primary classrooms. She did this for 3 years, applying to the preservice program each year. Her persistence paid off and she was admitted to the program on her third try.
Childhood literacy experiences.

**Before school age.**

Gail was an active child who enjoyed crafts and outdoor activities. She remembers her father reading books to himself and loving books. She says, “I’d describe him as the reader in my family. And he was always going to the book stores and he loved books.” She does not remember her mother or grandparents reading much either to themselves or to her or her younger brother. Her mother would occasionally read a favourite book to the children, changing the characters’ names to the children’s names. Gail still has this book and shares it with her students. There were no newspapers in the house or many children’s books, but the children did have subscriptions to the children’s magazines *Owl* and *Chickadee*. The magazines were not read to the children, however, and Gail was not interested in reading them herself. She did enjoy using the pictures for collages.

Gail rarely saw her parents write, but her grandmother regularly wrote letters to family and friends. Her grandmother’s letter writing inspired Gail to write from an early age. She explains, “I became really interested in writing letters and we got pen pals, and I would write to my grandmother when she would go to Florida… she was a huge influence on me in terms of corresponding with people.”

There was not a great deal of family conversation when Gail was a child. Most meals were taken in front of the T.V., and when the family did sit down together for a special meal, Gail remembers that the adults “dominated” the conversation. The children were not invited to join in.
School age at home and in the community.

During her elementary school years, Gail continued to be physically active in sports and dance and to spend a lot of time doing crafts. Her extra-curricular activities all involved either physical activity or the arts. She did attend a library summer camp one year that included stories and drama, but she did not enjoy this, calling it “lame.” In her home there continued to be a great deal of T.V. watching and little reading, but a babysitter sometimes took the children to the library after school where Gail obtained her own library card. However, Gail disliked reading and didn’t feel that she was a good reader. She was much more positive about writing. Gail’s written correspondence with family and friends continued throughout her elementary years. She considered herself a writer from an early age.

Gail’s parents completed high school, and assumed that Gail and her brother would attend post-secondary education. They were positive about the good marks that Gail received in school but this made Gail feel pressured rather than encouraged. She explains:

Both my parents were really positive, my dad was almost positive to a fault in that it made me feel self-conscious and it made me feel pressured…and I didn’t like it. Even though I’d get good marks, I just didn’t tell him about things any more. I just didn’t want all the fuss.

Gail’s mother’s first language is German, and she spoke no English before she began school in Canada. She had literacy challenges in school which she attributed to her lack of English prior to starting school. Gail had never questioned this explanation of her mother’s literacy challenges, but as she began to think about the nature of her mother’s reading difficulties during the study, she began to wonder if her mother’s difficulties go beyond the
second language issue. She wonders if her mother has a reading disability, and whether she may have inherited her mother's literacy learning challenges.

The early school years.

Gail earned high marks in literacy in school from the beginning, but she didn’t share her teachers’ high opinion of her abilities. She was strong in lower level skills such as spelling and decoding, but reading comprehension was difficult for her. She says:

I remember that I was a good student. I was what you’d describe as a straight ‘A’ teacher’s pet kind of student. And I think I did really great in spelling. And I think I could read to people, but I think I wasn’t getting the meaning. I wasn’t comprehending everything that I was reading.

Gail continued to struggle with reading comprehension and continued to dislike reading and being read to. She reports that she never finishing a book in elementary school. Gail was afraid to reveal her difficulties to her teachers. She says:

I struggled with reading the whole way through but I don’t think it was ever recognized. I don’t think I ever talked about it because I was getting these great grades and I knew I had all these expectations to live up to.

Throughout elementary school Gail was happy that she received good marks but she also felt like she didn’t deserve the marks. She felt that she needed to hide her challenges. She says, “I was successful in school but I was a closet struggler.”

Gail wonders why reading comprehension was so difficult for her, and why her teachers never recognized her difficulties. She says:
And I always think why didn’t I get it? Why? Because I mean, I could decode and I could read, but how come I had such a difficult time? And how come it was never picked up?

Gail wonders if she has a literacy learning challenge. She says, “Sometimes I still feel that I have challenges in terms of language.”

Gail also found speaking under pressure difficult at school. She did not like being put on the spot. Writing at school was much easier and much more pleasurable for Gail. She enjoyed writing letters and stories, and making them look attractive, “sort of in a girly, kind of crafty way.” Gail attributes her difficulty with speaking under pressure to her reading difficulties. She explains, “I find difficulty speaking sometimes, and I attribute it to the small amount of reading I’ve done. But I feel very confident in making myself understood in writing.”

Although Gail was confident in her writing ability, her challenges with reading and public speaking led to a general lack of confidence at school. She explains:

I didn’t have a lot of confidence. I knew that I’d hand something in and probably do well at it, but I never felt really, really proud of what I was doing. And I also would still feel, you know, like the really, really smart kids would intimidate me.

**Literacy teaching experiences.**

*Preservice.*

Gail does not feel that her preservice program prepared her to teach literacy to beginning readers and writers. She says, “To be honest, that’s an area that I came away wishing I had more knowledge about.” She remembers the program being more geared
toward junior age students who were already reading and writing. She says, “In terms of teaching a child how to read and the order to go about it…I don’t feel I got that much from my preservice program.” Gail wishes that she had been taught more about child development in the area of language learning. She says, “I feel I could have used more of a foundation of exactly what’s happening when people are acquiring language, learning to speak it, write it, read it, right from the beginning.” In addition, she believes that there should have been more emphasis on program planning and assessment in her preservice program. Because of what Gail saw as weaknesses in her literacy course, she began her first teaching assignment without, “much knowledge or confidence to teach literacy.”

Gail found her Mathematics course to be more comprehensive in terms of teaching practices and strategies although it was still less hands-on than she would have liked. The other courses in the university-based portion of her preservice program that she found satisfying were a course on managing teacher stress and a workshop on conflict management in the classroom. In both cases, she found the instructors did a good job of explaining the rationale behind the course and gave clear guidance on how to implement the recommended strategies.

Gail considered the classroom practicum placements to be an “invaluable” part of her preservice program. She feels that she was lucky to be placed in “fantastic” classrooms that allowed her to witness effective teaching in action. Gail was able to continue to learn under the supervision of mentor teachers during her first year of teaching. In the school in which she was hired, it is the policy to have new teachers serve a year of apprenticeship in a classroom before taking on a sole responsibility teaching position.
**Early teaching.**

Gail’s goals for her students are based on her struggles as a child. She does not want her students to dislike and fear reading as she did as a student. She wants them to enjoy reading, and tries to engage them as much as she can. She explains:

I try and be really, really enthusiastic and I try and read a whole bunch of different kinds of books, and different methods, and have them read back to me. But I generally just try and create a really positive environment around literacy in general.

In spite of Gail’s challenges with reading, or perhaps because of it, she spends a great deal of time and energy on her classroom literacy program. She still sees herself as a struggling reader, but is determined to keep working on her own reading, and to learn as much as she can about teaching reading. She says:

But you know, I just keep learning about it and keep working on it and keep developing my own strategies and skills. And I also keep reading. I still have to push myself to read, all the time.

Gail devotes large blocks of time to literacy in her classroom and is always on the look-out for students who are struggling. She thinks carefully about how and why she implements her literacy program in her classes. She has made many links between her own learning as a student and her priorities and practices as a teacher. As a result of her own struggles with reading comprehension and oral presentations she is careful to plan activities that students enjoy, understand, and can successfully accomplish. Because her own struggles went unnoticed, she is passionate about ensuring that her students do not “fall through the cracks.” Gail endeavours to get to know each of her students well and to regularly track their progress. Her focus in her teaching is on accessibility. She breaks her lessons into smaller
tasks for those who may struggle and ensures that there is deep understanding before she moves on.

**Reflection on learning and teaching connections.**

Gail reports that she has always been a reflective person and that she has become more reflective since beginning to work with children. She had made many connections between her own early learning and her teaching before the study began. However, her engagement with the study gave her the impetus to explore this connection more deeply, and to draw her family into her exploration.

**Case Study Four: Mike**

It is clear from spending time in Mike’s classroom that he is a caring and nurturing educator. His interactions with his students are positive, and there is always something exciting going on in the class. Mike has a keen interest in the arts and active learning and this is evident in the materials, centres, and activities in his Kindergarten classroom. During his literacy-rich childhood, Mike found reading and writing enjoyable, meaningful and purposeful, and he wants his students to feel the same.

**Personal and educational context.**

Mike was born and educated in a medium sized city in Central Canada. He attended elementary and high school in this city, and university in a nearby smaller city. His undergraduate degree is in International Development. He worked for a short time as an employment counselor before deciding to become a teacher. Mike is in his mid 20s, is single, and has no children. In his preservice program he qualified to teach in the Junior/Intermediate division (K to Grade 6).
Mike taught in the same elementary school for the first 3 years of his teaching career. The school is located in a middle class, ethnically diverse community. There is a low percentage of English Language Learners and a high level of parent education in the school population. For his first year of teaching, Mike taught a combined Grade 2 and 3 class, and for the following 2 years he taught a combined Junior and Senior Kindergarten class. When Mike was applying for a teaching position he was not interested in teaching Kindergarten, but he has found that he really enjoys it. He says, “I never would have picked Kindergarten, ever. When I was applying for jobs 2 years ago, it was like anything but Kindergarten. But it’s been a great change.” Mike found his first year of teaching challenging but is enjoying teaching more each year. He explains, “Especially in this year and last year, I’m happy to come every day. Ready to go, you know, excited to get into the classroom. So that part is really great.”

**Childhood literacy experiences.**

**Before school age.**

Mike is the youngest of three children. His parents have high levels of education and had a keen interest in the education of their children. Mike’s mother is a school librarian with a Master’s degree, and his father is a social worker with two Master’s degrees. Mike characterizes his family as a reading family and credits his parents, siblings, grandfather, and family friends as being influential in his early literacy development.

Mike remembers reading often with his family and friends of the family. His grandfather wrote children’s stories for his grandchildren and often read to them. His parents also read to him regularly and he was surrounded by family members who read and discussed what they were reading. He says, “So it was definitely a reading household. And one of the
main books that was accessed and looked at a lot was the dictionary.” There were many adult and children’s books at home, as well as magazines and newspapers. Not surprisingly, given that his mother is a librarian, the library was a big part of Mike’s early life. He went to the library for summer programs and weekly to read and sign out and return books. He also attended children’s story time and author visits. Mike was on a first name basis with his local librarian and felt very comfortable in that atmosphere. He says, “The library was and still is a really big part of my life.” Mike doesn’t remember learning to read, but he knows he was reading before he attended Kindergarten at age 5. He says that reading seemed like something that just happened “naturally.”

Writing was also something that came “naturally” for Mike, and he considered himself a writer before going to Kindergarten. He remembers writing thank you notes and lists at home. His parents and older siblings modeled purposeful writing for him and encouraged him to express his thoughts in writing. He has a vivid memory of writing an angry note to his sister after learning that she had flushed his dead fish down the toilet.

In terms of oral language development, Mike remembers, “Rich, rich dinner table conversations.” His whole family would gather nightly to discuss their day and issues in the news. As the youngest child, Mike didn’t always understand what was being discussed but his family made every effort to explain what they were discussing and to include him in the conversations. He explains, “Dinner was a huge deal. And still is… the five of us sat around and we definitely talked.”

School age at home and in the community.

During his early school years, the rich literacy environment continued for Mike at home
and in the community. His parents continued to read to him nightly until Grade 6 and he was an avid reader of novels on his own in English and also in French. He did not keep a journal or write fiction for pleasure, but he maintained the habit of writing notes, letters, and lists for specific purposes. He did not spend much time watching T.V., preferring to read or play.

Mike enjoyed the physical and nature-related activities in Beavers and Cub Scouts. In these clubs he actively pursued the completion of badge requirements, the acquisition of knowledge of the natural world, and camping skills. Throughout his elementary school years his weekly visits to the library continued as did his attendance at Sunday School.

From an early age, Mike became interested in musical theatre. He spent a great deal of time and derived a great deal of pleasure from participating in community theatre projects. When a new arts-focused school opened up in his neighbourhood, both he and his parents were keen that he should switch schools and attend.

Mike’s parents were actively involved in all of his activities, both at home and in the community. They supported his interests and sought to supplement his education in any way they could. For example, when he expressed an interest in the novel *Uncle Tom’s Cabin* they incorporated a visit to the site of the cabin into their family vacation. As Mike pointed out, his parents were not only well educated, they were, as he says, “educated about kids and how to best develop their minds and enrich their lives.”

*The early school years.*

Mike started school in Kindergarten at age 5 and was happy to go to school. He was successful academically and socially from the very beginning. He says, “It was motivating
just to go because I could do everything there and everything seemed pretty fun. I don’t remember disliking a single thing about school.” He initially attended a French immersion program in which all of the instruction was in French. Just as reading in English had come easily to him at home, reading in French at school was also painless. He says, “Reading was never a struggle, it was never difficult and I enjoyed it.” He continued to enjoy reading in both French and English until the end of Grade three. He says of himself, “I was really into reading for sure.”

At Grade 4 Mike began to attend an English language, arts-focused school. At that point he ceased to read in French, but continued to enjoy reading in English. He also enjoyed writing at school, particularly fiction. He remembers fondly having his stories bound and included in the classroom library. He explains:

I loved writing stories and yeah, I got excited about stories and writing them in those books. Those were good experiences. I remember in Grade 4 writing those and then having them put in the library so we could sign them out.

Mike’s teachers considered him to be successful in all aspects of school and Mike agreed with their assessment. He says, “I’ve always been successful in school.” He was equally successful with the traditional desks in rows and paper and pencil approach to teaching that he encountered from Kindergarten to Grade 3, and the hands-on active learning that he experienced in the arts school in Grades 4 through 6. However, he found the latter experience to be more engaging, exciting, and motivating.
Literacy teaching experiences.

Preservice.

Mike enjoyed his preservice year in general and he particularly appreciated the program’s emphasis on creating a positive classroom community. He feels that the preservice program modeled that well by dividing the preservice teachers into smaller groups or cohorts, and then having them work collaboratively. With respect to his literacy course, however, Mike is less complimentary. While he agrees with the critical literacy theory and multiliteracies theory that was the focus of his course, he feels that there was too much time spent on theory and not enough on practical applications of theory. He says, “I’m someone who likes theory, but the balance was tipped, over tipped.”

Mike’s preservice classroom placements did not give him the practical guidance he sought either. In one of his placements, he considered the literacy teaching to be too traditional and structured. In the other placement, the classroom teacher spent very little time teaching literacy. Mike felt that he was forced to learn how to teach reading and writing “on the job” after he began teaching. He felt that in his preservice program he “didn’t get the how” of literacy teaching. Mike’s criticisms of the literacy portion of his preservice program intensified over the 3 years of the study. By the end of his third year of teaching, he saw very little redeeming about the literacy course. He explains, “That was an area of [preservice] that was really practically a wash. I don’t know how they could have done it much worse.”

Early teaching.

Mike’s main goals for his Kindergarten students are for them to enjoy coming to school, and to take pleasure in literacy related activities. He is more concerned with their
positive emotional reaction to literacy than with their academic achievement in literacy. He says:

And I tell the parents that at the beginning of the year… that’s my number one goal. I don’t care that much if they can’t write their name this year. It’s way more important that they really like coming to school.

Mike has confidence that if his students enjoy coming to school and enjoy learning then their literacy skills will take care of themselves. He does not worry if they are achieving particular reading or writing curriculum expectations. He believes that over time all students who enjoy school will achieve the necessary skills. He says, “Because at some point or another, they’re going to catch up.” He hopes that all of his students will enjoy reading so much that they will be motivated to become independent readers, and to communicate their ideas in writing. He strives to ensure that he creates an atmosphere in which all students can feel successful.

Choice is a key factor in Mike’s teaching. He provides a variety of activities from which his students can choose, in the belief that each child will find something that works for him or her. Mike arranges his program so that his Kindergarten students spend most of their time at self-selected, play-based learning centres. Once the children have chosen a centre such as the art table, construction area, sand or water table, he observes and interacts with them as they work to try to ascertain their thinking. He has been inspired by his study of the Reggio Emilia approach to teaching and learning, in which the teacher follows the children’s lead.

During the shorter, teacher-led part of his daily program, Mike reads picture books and short novels to the class and encourages the students to discuss, write, or draw their
responses to the literature. He experienced this teaching approach when he attended art school as a young student and remembers enjoying it. He says, “Reading aloud to kids, I remember that from being a student… I know that I liked that and so I do a lot of reading aloud to [my students].”

Mike has attended many professional workshops and has read many professional teaching resources on the recommendation of other teachers and the board Kindergarten consultant. He is also part of a professional book club for Kindergarten teachers at his school. He considers himself a “book person” and finds professional reading a good way to continue to improve his understanding of teaching.

Reflection on learning and teaching connections.

When the study began, Mike had few memories of his childhood and he doubted that there were many connections between his early learning and his teaching. However, as the study progressed he remembered quite a bit of his learning history and found several significant connections between his early learning and current teaching.

Case Study Five: Darren

Darren’s interviews reveal a committed educator who is passionate about the role of story in literacy education. Through picture books, storytelling and drama he seeks to engage children, and help them to see the relevance of reading and writing in their lives. Darren is keenly aware of his privileged learning history, and tries to recreate aspects of it in his classroom. He has clear and detailed memories of his early literacy learning at home and at school, and believes he owes his success as a learner and teacher to his family.
**Personal and educational context.**

Darren was born in a small town just outside of the city in Central Canada in which he now lives and teaches. He attended elementary and high school in his home town, and university in the city. He has two undergraduate degrees, one in Economics and the other in Commerce. After working in the computer industry for 18 years, he decided to attend a 9-month post-baccalaureate teacher preparation program. He qualified to teach in the primary junior division, Grades Kindergarten to 6. Darren is in his mid 40s, married to an elementary teacher, and has two children who were 8 and 11 when the study began.

Darren’s first 3 years in the profession were comprised of daily supply work at a number of elementary schools in the city, interspersed with six 1- to 2-month-long supply teaching assignments. The schools in which he taught varied in terms of family income level, level of parental education, and cultural diversity. Darren enjoyed many aspects of supply teaching, particularly the opportunity to experience a number of different schools, and approaches to teaching at different grade levels. By the end of his third year of short and longer term supply work, he was ready to apply for a full time position.

Darren became interested in working with children through volunteering as a Big Brother, and with the Junior Achievement program in schools. While he initially enjoyed his work with the computer company, he soon found it unfulfilling, “I was being stifled in that environment.” He believed that teaching was more suited to his creative interests and abilities, “I really was very creative and I enjoyed writing and different aspects. I thought that would lend itself to being a teacher.” Although teaching is his second career, he feels that it is his true calling, “I was meant to be in the teaching area.”
Childhood literacy experiences.

Before school age.

Darren has four brothers and a sister, and is the youngest in the family. In addition to his parents, his maternal grandmother lived with the family and helped to raise the children. Both of Darren’s grandmothers had been teachers, as well as three aunts, one of whom was a school principal for 30 years. His mother was a full-time homemaker, and his father spent much of Darren’s childhood taking courses leading to certification as an auto mechanic, plumber, and electrician. In addition to seeing his father “always reading” for his courses, Darren was surrounded by a house full of family members immersed in educational pursuits, “There was always education and reading going on in our house, at some point, at some level.”

Darren remembers being read to every night by his mother, “We all got stories at night. So that was something that was a ritual.” Reading came very easily and naturally for Darren. He was reading books and music from an early age, “I don’t remember learning to read because it just seemed to be part of my upbringing. I just remember being able to read.” Parents, grandmother, and siblings all read to Darren, and helped him to learn to write. While his older siblings worked on their homework at the dining room table, he would practice his alphabet and writing words that he knew. He was a confident reader and writer before he went to Kindergarten at age 5.

Oral language development was also a family affair in Darren’s home. Dinner time was the occasion for discussion and debate, “We always had our family meals and there were always arguments and discussions going on.” Darren learned to listen to other people’s point of view, but also to voice his own opinions, “It would have been a mix of topics, everybody
had to get their two cents worth in. So we would listen to each other but there was always a banter of what was important.”

In addition to dinner table conversations, Darren had another regular opportunity to listen and contribute to discussion of topical issues. Darren’s mother ran a women’s church discussion group out of their home. The group would read religious texts and then discuss how they related to current issues in society. Darren and his siblings were encouraged to listen in and then to contribute their opinions.

School age at home and in the community.

When Darren started school, he was able to do his homework with his siblings at the dining room table. He described this situation as a one-room school house, like his grandmother had taught in as a young woman, ―It was almost like the one-room school. Everybody was helping each other because there were so many kids, Mum couldn’t do it individually.”

In addition to helping the children with their homework, Darren’s grandmother spent hours playing cards with children and reading with them. She kept tabs on how they all were doing academically as they progressed through school. Although they were not a wealthy family, all six children completed at least one university degree.

Darren spent much of his free time playing outdoors with his siblings and neighbourhood children. Music was also, “a very big part of my life.” He took piano lessons, and he and his siblings were very involved with a community brass band. He considers this musical experience to be a very important part of his education. He says of music, “It’s
another language and it’s another way of expressing yourself. And a discipline, yes, you have
to be dedicated.”

From age 8, Darren worked with a family friend in antiques, learning both refinishing
and sales. This kind of hands-on learning really worked for him, “Getting your hands dirty,
that’s how you learned. You have to get in there.” He learned practical skills, and he also
gained confidence from working in sales. Darren’s family encouraged his efforts at school,
his musical pursuits, and his informal apprenticeship in the antique business.

*The early school years.*

Darren enjoyed school right from the beginning, and was successful as a learner.
Reading at school came easily, almost magically, “It just seemed like you would pick up a
book and you would be able to read those words. I don’t know, it just seemed to happen.” He
credits his family environment for his literacy success at school, “I seemed to be able to just
read. I don’t know why. I think having a big family and all the interaction that was going on
and the discussions.”

In addition to being able to read, Darren took great pleasure in his school readers, and
in reading aloud to his teacher, “So those readers, they just give you that warmth and that
wonderful feeling that you remember when you were reading, and reading to your teacher.”
He was equally successful at writing, and all of the other school subjects. His friends were
also successful at school, and they all felt pride at their proficiency, “We were good at it, and
felt proud that we were able to do such a good job.” They motivated each other and were
very at home in the school environment, “We were just interested in school, interested in
learning and asking questions and finding out what the answers were.” In spite of his reading
and writing success, Darren sees himself primarily as a visual and hands-on learner. He loved having the opportunity to work with his hands, and to create visually appealing projects.

**Literacy teaching experiences.**

*Preservice.*

Darren enjoyed being back at school for his preservice year. After many years in business he welcomed the opportunity to study full-time, “I loved the whole year. I was embracing the year.” He found his literacy course to be interesting and inspiring. He particularly resonated with the instructor’s emphasis on using children’s picture books as the foundation for literacy activities. However, he wishes that the course had been more explicit in terms of the reality of literacy teaching that he would be facing in the classroom. After teaching for 2 years, he reported that the instructor’s approach to teaching literacy was starting to make sense, “It wasn’t always clear for me, but now it is starting to make sense, when I look back and reflect.”

Darren completed his practice teaching in a Grade 2 and a Grade 4 classroom. He remembers these experiences as being “wonderful.” He appreciated learning practical strategies from his mentor teachers and having the opportunity to develop his teaching skills. When he completed his preservice year, Darren didn’t feel ready to apply for a full-time position. He decided to do supply teaching in a variety of schools so that he could get a better idea of the type of classroom and school community that he would find most rewarding as a teacher.
Early teaching.

One of Darren’s main goals in his literacy teaching is to create excitement and passion for reading in his students. He wants this for all of his students, but he sees a particular need to be a role model for male students who may not be interested in reading. He strives to build a positive attitude toward literacy in his class, as he feels this is, “half the battle.” He wants his students to love learning and to want to come to school, “I think that’s the best compliment a teacher can get, if they love to come to school, that they’re happy learning.”

In order for children to become engaged in reading and writing, and to take the risks necessary to become independent readers and writers, Darren believes that he needs to encourage the creation of positive relationships. Drama serves this purpose in his classes. Through having the students work together to interpret and present a story, they learn to work collaboratively, and to engage with literature in a playful, non-threatening way. Once students have made a personal connection with a story through drama, Darren believes that they are more comfortable expressing their ideas in a group discussion or in writing. He often uses picture books as the starting point for these drama-based literacy activities.

Darren focuses on making literacy a “nurturing experience” so that the students will, “feel confident to be able to make decisions that will push them into areas that they wouldn’t have otherwise have gone.” Because he believes that strong oral skills will translate into strong writing skills, Darren spends significant amount of time encouraging and supporting students to express their ideas orally and to debate their opinions with one another, “I like students to have an opinion. I don’t care if I agree with it, but at least have one. Be able to stand up for what you believe in.”
Darren has taken two additional qualification courses since he began teaching. The first one, in Special Education, changed the way that he sees learning, “I did the Special Education A.Q., and you just see learning differently. I think you see it from a different plane.” The second one, in Drama, reinforced for him the “power of story” in his teaching. Darren has found his teaching colleagues at the schools in which he has worked to be a good source of professional development. He makes an effort to get to know the teachers in the same grade and enjoys co-planning. He considers his wife, an elementary teacher of 20 years, to be his in-house educational consultant.

**Reflection on learning and teaching connections.**

Darren is keenly aware of his privileged childhood and tried to recreate aspects of it in his classroom for the benefit of his students. When the study began, Darren had many clear, positive memories of his early literacy learning at home. He had fewer, and less distinct memories of learning literacy at school, but these memories were also positive. Darren believed that his early literacy learning at home contributed to his success in school. Darren has begun the process of tracing the influence of his early learning on his teaching before the study, but made many more connections as the study progressed.

**Case Study Six: Rachel**

It is clear from spending time in Rachel’s classroom, that she has created a caring and welcoming environment for her students. Her own struggles with literacy learning have motivated her to try to provide learning opportunities that meet the needs of students with a range of learning needs and styles. Due to her keen memories of feeling “lost” at school, she watches closely to detect any students who appear to be confused or disconnected. She is not
confident in her literacy teaching, and while she can empathize with her students’ struggles, she fears that she is not always able to meet their needs.

**Personal and educational context.**

For her first 3 years of teaching, Rachel taught in the same large Central Canadian city in which she attended elementary, high school, and university. Her undergraduate degree is in Psychology and Linguistics. Her initial goal when entering university was to study to become a doctor. She then changed her mind and took courses that would lead to a degree in speech and language pathology, and by third year, had decided to pursue elementary teaching. She had attended a French Immersion program from Kindergarten to Grade 8 as a child, and volunteered part-time for 2 years in her former elementary school while she completed her undergraduate degree. In her teacher preparation program, Rachel qualified to teach Grades Kindergarten to 6, and specialized in teaching French Immersion. Her practicum placements were in a combined Grade 2 and 3 class, and a Grade 6 class. Rachel is in her mid 20s, is single, and has no children.

During her first 3 years of teaching, Rachel pioneered a new mid-entry extended French program in an inner city school. In this program, the children take half of their courses in French, and the other half in English, beginning at Grade 4. The school had an existing late-entry extended French program beginning in Grade 7. Rachel was the first and only teacher in this mid-entry program in her school for the first 2 years, and was joined by another Grade 4 teacher in her third year of teaching. As she said, “I’m the first one here and there’s no one else who really told me how to do things.” In her first and third years she taught a Grade 4 class and in the second year, a combined Grade 4 and 5 class. The local school population has a high percentage of English Language Learners, and a low family
income. However, because the children for this special program come from a wider catchment area, Rachel’s classes had a mixture of native and non-native speakers of English, and a range of family income.

**Childhood literacy experiences.**

**Before school age.**

Rachel grew up in a Chinese speaking home with her parents, younger brother, and two aunts. She did speak some English at home, but she considers it her second language. She comes from a family of teachers. Her grandfather was a teacher in Hong Kong, and she has an uncle who still teaches there. Her mother taught Chinese classes in Canada before she had her children. Both her parents have Bachelor of Science degrees, and she and her brother were expected to obtain a university degree as well.

As a young child, Rachel was read to regularly, “I know my parents always read to me, every night, story time. And they read to me in English and sometimes in Chinese.” She describes both her parents as readers, as well as her aunts. Her father read mainly newspapers, and her mother recipes for her bakery business, and they both read Chinese philosophy and medicine once the children were older. One aunt is only 12 years older than Rachel, and she remembers watching her aunt do her homework and imitating her. Rachel’s mother took a course in the Montessori method of teaching reading, and used to cut food into letters in order to teach Rachel her alphabet. At the same time, her grandfather was trying to teach her Chinese characters by using blocks with the characters engraved in them. There were a lot of children’s books in the house, both English books and Chinese books.
Both Rachel’s parents and her aunts were role models as writers. They wrote for daily purposes such as grocery lists or to-do lists, and also letters to friends and family. Rachel was impressed by their writing ability and wanted to join in the activity, “I always thought grownups or big important teenagers would write on things that looked like books. So I would take pencils and I would scribble in books.”

Rachel does not remember her parents encouraging her oral language development. While the family did sit down together for family meals, the conversation largely consisted of her parents trying to get Rachel to eat, and her brother to sit still. Both she and her brother enjoyed watching children’s programs on T.V.

**School age at home and in the community.**

Rachel did not read independently at home until Grade 4. Until that time, she went to the library weekly, and signed out books with her own card, but she was not able to read them to herself. She would look at the pictures and ask her parents to read them to her. She did, however, enjoy writing independently from a young age. She wrote letters and diary entries regularly, “I owned a diary when I was seven and onwards. And I loved writing letters, like hand-written letters. I really value those.”

Rachel began piano lessons at 4 1/2 years old. She describes herself as slow to learn to read music, but fairly quick to learn to play. She continued to study piano seriously, and eventually became a piano teacher. Difficulty with reading posed a problem for Rachel at Brownies. She wanted to earn badges, but she needed her parents’ help to read the badge requirements. In particular, she wanted to earn the badge for reading in a second language. Even though she considers English to be her second language, the Brownie leaders wanted
her to read in Chinese. Because she did not read well in Chinese either, her father advised her to pretend that she was reading the Chinese characters, and just tell the story in Chinese.

Rachel’s parents tried to teach her to read in English when she began school in Kindergarten, but she found this confusing as she was simultaneously learning to read in French at school, and in Chinese at Saturday morning Chinese classes. Her parents also attempted to help her with her school work throughout her elementary years, but their understanding of English grammar was limited and they did not speak French. She now considers herself to be a fluent speaker of English, French and Cantonese, a fluent reader in French, and fluent, but slow reader in English.

**The early school years.**

When Rachel was four and a half, she began Kindergarten in a French Immersion program, Chinese lessons on the weekend, and her parents began to try to teach her to read in English at home. Rachel found this a difficult and overwhelming time, and became convinced that she could not learn to read in any of the three languages, and gave up trying. “I remember not even trying to read in them all, I didn’t care.” During her early school years, she did not make much headway in learning to read Chinese pictographs, and she continued to find reading in French and English challenging, “My reading came very slowly, really slowly.”

In addition to struggling to learn to read, she had difficulty with spelling. This continued throughout her elementary years, “In Grade 5 we had daily or weekly spelling drills and I flunked them. It was really bad.” While she enjoyed personal writing at home, Rachel had difficulty with writing at school due to her uncertainty about teacher expectations. She would receive poor marks on her written assignments, but she felt that the
teachers did not clearly explain their expectations, nor did they help her to understand how she could improve her work. Rachel believes that her difficulties with reading and writing affected her confidence in herself as a student, “I think it must have had some impact on my confidence, probably confidence in general. I know I was always a shy kid.” She remembers reading, “well enough to get by,” but she still struggled with comprehension, “Things would make sense on a very superficial level, but like to find the deeper meaning of this story, God, no, not as a kid.”

In spite of her reading and writing challenges, Rachel enjoyed school because she felt that the teachers liked her, “I always felt like the teachers liked me. I’m quiet, I do the work, I don’t get in the teacher’s way, so they liked me even if I’m not producing the work that they need.” In grade 5, she had a teacher who gave her the explicit teaching and feedback that she needed, and her school performance began to improve.

**Literacy teaching experiences.**

*Preservice.*

Rachel’s overall impression of her preservice year was of, “a lot of talking heads.” She felt that her instructors talked a great deal about education, but rarely modeled the teaching practices they advocated, nor did they give the preservice teachers opportunities to practice them. Her mathematics and science courses were more practical and useful, in her view, but the literacy course was, “nearly useless.” Rachel did not expect preservice to be helpful, and she did not find it to be. She believes that in order to learn how to teach, one needs to practice teaching, “You need to do it, not discuss it. How can you learn how to do something when you’re not actually doing it?”
Rachel wishes there had been more modeling of teaching by her instructors, and more feedback on her lesson plans and assessment tools. While she was able to observe the teachers in her practicum classrooms teach, she did not find them open to discussing why they made certain teaching or assessment decisions. Rachel was left wondering why the teachers had used certain strategies and resources and not others. She was reminded of how she felt as a child in school, when her teacher’s directions and expectations were not clear to her. She left her preservice year with a commitment not to teach her students in the way she was taught as a child, or the way she had been taught in her preservice program.

*Early teaching.*

In her first 3 years of teaching, Rachel pioneered a new extended French program with few guidelines or resources and little mentoring. She found herself in the same position she had been in as a child in school, unsure of what was expected of her, or how she could improve her performance. There were no other teachers in the program to whom she could turn for guidance, and when she did work with a literacy consultant in her third year, Rachel found her suggestions vague and unhelpful.

Rachel’s main goal for her teaching is to ensure that her students have a more positive experience with literacy than she did. Her goals for her teaching in French are clearer than for her teaching in English. In French, she focuses on her students’ oral language, observing to determine what assistance they need to improve, “So I’ve just been watching and then thinking of a next step that would be useful in everyday conversation.” She feels comfortable and confident helping her students at this early stage of language learning. In English, the students are beyond the basics of learning to speak the language, as Rachel says, “You’re beyond the building blocks and you’re beyond the basic syntax, you’re getting to semantics.”
She does not feel comfortable or confident teaching English literacy because she feels that her own schooling let her down, “I don’t necessarily think I was taught to be literate. Like I think it just happened on its own. My schooling didn’t help me get there.” She also felt let down by her preservice program, which she believes did not prepare her to teach reading and writing.

When teaching in both languages, Rachel is always looking out for students who do not understand what she is teaching, who let the lessons “wash over” them, as she did as a child, “the ones who just sit and, you know, the lesson goes by and washes over their head and they’re just there. It’s looking out for that, making sure everyone’s on task.” She has empathy for students who struggle with literacy, particularly those who are not considered new English language learners, but whose parents do not speak English at home. She believes that this impacts their reading and writing in English, but these students do not get the resources or accommodations that new English language learners do. She understands her students’ struggles with reading and writing, and wants to give them the help they need, but doesn’t feel that she know how, “I understand when they’re stuck. I don’t always understand what needs to be done to unstick them, but I understand that frustration.”

Because of the demands of the extended French program, Rachel has only three, 30 minutes periods a week for English literacy, rather than the daily 90 minutes periods that the other junior grade classes receive. Due to this small amount of time, and her focus on her French program, she doesn’t feel that she has given as much attention to her English literacy program as she would like. She supplements her formal English period by integrating literacy into Math, Science, and Social Studies as much as she can.
Reflection on learning and teaching connections.

When the study began, Rachel had many distinct and emotionally powerful memories of literacy learning both at home and at school. She was already aware that as a teacher she is motivated by her own early literacy learning experiences. Rachel’s participation in the study facilitated her exploration of the ways in which she uses her own experiences as a student to inform her teaching decisions and her understanding of her students.

Chapter Summary

In this chapter, six individual case studies were presented. Table 1 summarizes each participant’s early literacy experiences at home, in the community, and at school. Moreover, their teaching context, understanding of their teaching role, goals for their students, and elements of their teaching practice are also outlined in Table 1.
## Table 1

### Early Learning and Teaching

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Participant</th>
<th>Early literacy experiences at home and in the community</th>
<th>Literacy experiences during elementary school</th>
<th>Grades taught in first 3 years of practice</th>
<th>Understanding of role as a literacy teacher and goals for students</th>
<th>Literacy teaching approach</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Kelly</td>
<td>Parents are classroom teachers</td>
<td>No challenges academically or socially</td>
<td>Grades 6, 7, and 8 Physical Education and Health</td>
<td>Offer exciting and engaging Literacy experiences</td>
<td>Integrate Literacy throughout the curriculum</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Lots of reading and writing by adults and children</td>
<td>Confidently reading and writing by Grade 1</td>
<td>Grades 6 and 8 Math and Language</td>
<td>Help students to feel safe and secure academically</td>
<td>Often does not have a separate Literacy time</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Dramatic play with sisters</td>
<td>Entered a Gifted program in Grade 4</td>
<td></td>
<td>Wants students to be confident communicators, particularly orally</td>
<td>Reads to students</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Included in dinner time conversation</td>
<td>Won a creative writing award</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Group discussion of higher level thinking questions and “big ideas”</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Regular library visits</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Little focus on basic skills, formal assignments or tests</td>
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<td></td>
<td></td>
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<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Informal assessment</td>
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<tr>
<td>Mike</td>
<td>Mother is a school librarian</td>
<td>No challenges academically or socially</td>
<td>Combined Grade 2 and 3 class</td>
<td>Create an inviting and encouraging classroom atmosphere</td>
<td>Play-based program with many “hands-on” learning opportunities</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Lots of reading and writing by adults and children</td>
<td>Confidently reading and writing by Grade 1</td>
<td>Combined Junior and Senior Kindergarten</td>
<td>Foster a positive attitude toward reading and writing</td>
<td>Most of the time spent in active learning centres</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Grandfather wrote stories with grandchildren as characters</td>
<td>Switched to an Arts focused school in Grade 4</td>
<td></td>
<td>Wants students to value reading and writing</td>
<td>Reads to students</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Included in dinner time conversation</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Developmental approach – children will learn when they</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Participant</td>
<td>Early literacy experiences at home and in the community</td>
<td>Literacy experiences during elementary school</td>
<td>Grades taught in first 3 years of practice</td>
<td>Understanding of role as a literacy teacher and goals for students</td>
<td>Literacy teaching approach</td>
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<tr>
<td>Darren</td>
<td>Both grandmothers were teachers</td>
<td>No challenges academically or socially</td>
<td>All grades from Kindergarten to Grade 8 as a long term occasional or daily supply teacher</td>
<td>Engage students through a nurturing, positive environment</td>
<td>Integrate literacy throughout the curriculum</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Lots of reading and writing by adults and children</td>
<td>Confidently reading and writing by Grade 1</td>
<td></td>
<td>Create passion and excitement for reading</td>
<td>Reads to students, particularly picture books</td>
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<td></td>
<td>“one room schoolhouse”</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Wants students to feel confident to take risks with reading and writing</td>
<td>Collaborative drama-based literacy activities</td>
</tr>
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<td></td>
<td>Included in dinner time conversation</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Basic skills will develop when students feel comfortable expressing ideas</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Included in mother’s weekly discussion group</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Informal assessment</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Involved in church and community music</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Regular library visits</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Involved in community theatre</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Little focus on basic skills, Paper and pencil tasks, or tests</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Informal assessment through photographs</td>
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<tr>
<td>Participant</td>
<td>Early literacy experiences at home and in the community</td>
<td>Literacy experiences during elementary school</td>
<td>Grades taught in first 3 years of practice</td>
<td>Understanding of role as a literacy teacher and goals for students</td>
<td>Literacy teaching approach</td>
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<tr>
<td>Kendra</td>
<td>Little reading or writing by adults or children</td>
<td>Difficulty adjusting to school routines and co-operating with other students</td>
<td>Grade 4, all subjects other than French and Music</td>
<td>Offer a relaxed, positive learning atmosphere</td>
<td>Specific focus on literacy learning and teaching</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>No dinner time conversations</td>
<td>English language learning a challenge</td>
<td>Grades 7 and 8 English, Math, and Science</td>
<td>Help students “find their voice”</td>
<td>Large block of time for literacy activities such as literature circles and Readers’ Theatre</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Did not attend community programs</td>
<td>Higher level thinking skills more challenging than basic skills</td>
<td></td>
<td>Wants students to contribute and share their knowledge and experiences</td>
<td>Reads to students</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Parents believed that school would take care of literacy learning</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>One-on-one reading and writing conferences to monitor and assess student learning</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Participant</td>
<td>Early literacy experiences at home and in the community</td>
<td>Literacy experiences during elementary school</td>
<td>Grades taught in first 3 years of practice</td>
<td>Understanding of role as a literacy teacher and goals for students</td>
<td>Literacy teaching approach</td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>Gail</td>
<td>Father read to himself, mother not a reader, little reading to children</td>
<td>Strong lower level skills such as spelling and decoding</td>
<td>Junior and Senior Kindergarten</td>
<td>Offers a positive literacy environment</td>
<td>Specific focus on literacy learning and teaching</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Parents rarely wrote, but grandmother was a regular letter writer</td>
<td>Disliked reading</td>
<td></td>
<td>Offers a variety of literacy resources and teaching strategies</td>
<td>Large block of time for literacy activities that her students enjoy and can successfully accomplish</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Little dinner time conversation</td>
<td>Difficulties with reading comprehension</td>
<td></td>
<td>Wants students to enjoy reading and to have a deep understanding of what they read</td>
<td>Reads to students</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Active in sports and arts activities in the community</td>
<td>Difficulties with oral presentations</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Regularly tracks student progress to ensure that they are learning</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Parents expected her to do well in school</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Participant</td>
<td>Early literacy experiences at home and in the community</td>
<td>Literacy experiences during elementary school</td>
<td>Grades taught in first 3 years of practice</td>
<td>Understanding of role as a literacy teacher and goals for students</td>
<td>Literacy teaching approach</td>
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<tr>
<td>Rachel</td>
<td>Grandfather and uncle were teachers in Hong Kong</td>
<td>Difficulty learning to read in French,</td>
<td>Grade 4 and Grade 5</td>
<td>Offers a caring and welcoming learning environment</td>
<td>Integrate literacy throughout the curriculum</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Parents read to themselves and to the children in English and Chinese</td>
<td>English, and Chinese (at Chinese school)</td>
<td>Extended French program (half-day in English, half day in French)</td>
<td>Focuses on oral language development in French and writing in English</td>
<td>More focus on French literacy than English literacy</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Parents attempted to teach her to read in English and Chinese</td>
<td>Frustrated by learning to read and “gave up”</td>
<td></td>
<td>Wants her students to have a positive experience with literacy</td>
<td>Reads to students</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Little dinner time conversation</td>
<td>Difficulties with spelling and organization in written work</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Observes her students to determine the types of assistance they need to improve</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Regular library visits</td>
<td>Difficulties with reading comprehension</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Studied piano</td>
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</tbody>
</table>
Chapter 5: 
Findings: 
Cross-Case Analysis and Discussion

Introduction

There are many factors in a teacher’s early learning that may play a role in later literacy teaching including race, ethnicity, gender, sexual orientation, home language, class, and family configuration. It is impossible to isolate these factors, and to make definitive statements about the causal impact of any of them. As we saw in Chapter 4, the participants had a wide range of literacy learning experiences in their early lives, and approach their literacy teaching in a variety of ways. In this study, my intent is to investigate the relationships between the participants’ early literacy experiences and literacy teaching that the data suggest, while acknowledging that there are many influences on a teacher’s literacy teaching practice.

In this chapter and the one that follows I will explore nine themes that have arisen through a cross-case analysis of the six individual case studies. In this chapter, five themes will be discussed. In the first theme I will explore the participants’ pre-school literacy experiences and how they relate to their experiences in elementary school. The second theme explores the ways in which early literacy experiences at home and at school influence the participants’ literacy teaching strategies. The third theme investigates how the participants’ images of themselves as literacy teachers and their goals for their students are influenced by their own early learning. The fourth theme investigates the relationship between the participants’ prioritizing of literacy in their programs and their own early learning experiences. The final theme in this chapter discusses the finding that the participants who
struggled with literacy learning as students appear to focus their teaching on their students who are struggling literacy learners. At the end of each theme there is a discussion section in which the findings are summarized and situated within the literature.

**Theme # 1: Early Literacy Learning Experiences at Home Influence Early Literacy Learning at School**

**Teachers in the family.**

The participants in this study had a wide range of early learning experiences. The participants appear to fall into two distinct groups: those whose early learning experiences mirrored the type of experiences they encountered when they went to school, and those whose experiences were not as close a match to school-type learning. The former group includes Kelly, Mike, and Darren, and in some respects, Rachel. All four of these new teachers had family members who were teachers, and who therefore had insider knowledge of the literacy skills their children would need when they entered school. Because they had this knowledge, they were well positioned to provide learning opportunities that prepared their children for school. Kelly’s parents were both classroom teachers. Her mother taught Physical Education and Health, Kelly’s own specialization, and her father taught Computer Science. Mike’s mother was a school teacher-librarian, and for Darren and Rachel, the connection was a bit more distant. Darren’s three aunts and two grandmothers had been teachers, including the one who lived with him when he was growing up, and Rachel’s grandfather and uncle were teachers. In addition, Rachel’s mother had taken a course in Montessori education. Of course having a family member who is a teacher is not a guarantee that a student will be well prepared for school literacy, or that not having one is a definite
disadvantage in terms of school literacy success, but it is interesting to note that four out of six of the participants come from teaching families.

Gail and Kendra’s families did not include teachers, but their families valued education, and expected their children to attain a high level of education. However, perhaps because the families did not have the insider experience of the types of literacy that are valued in school, they did not offer their children the same opportunities to practice the skills or acquire the knowledge that are directly related to school success to the same degree as the families of the other four participants.

**Family members as literacy role models.**

All four of the families in the first group provided many rich opportunities for literacy learning from an early age. Family members served as role models of reading and writing for practical, as well as pleasurable purposes. Growing up, these participants witnessed their parents and other family members reading newspapers, magazines, and fiction and non-fiction books for pleasure and for information. Moreover, family members shared the interest and pleasure they derived from their reading with the participants. Rachel has vivid memories of her father reading the newspaper on a daily basis and her mother reading recipe books for her bakery business. Darren remembers his father “always reading” for the numerous courses he took. Darren credits his father’s life-long learning for inspiring him to change careers and become a teacher after working for 20 years in business. Both Kelly and Mike considered their whole family to be avid readers. As a result, the participants felt drawn into these communities of readers. Kelly described reading in her home as a “group activity.” Writing for a variety of purposes was also modeled in these four family environments.
Witnessing older siblings doing homework, parents writing letters, grocery lists, reminder notes, recipes and thank-you notes were all common occurrences in these homes.

For the second group of participants, which included Kendra and Gail, there were fewer people who acted as role models of reading and writing at home in their early years. Kendra’s parents worked long hours, and most of her time in her pre-school years was spent with her grandmother, who had never learned to read and write. Her father sometimes read Chinese language newspapers to himself when he was at home, but Kendra saw this as an activity particular to him, and not something that she was invited to participate in, or that she desired to emulate. She does not remember ever seeing her mother read, or either parent write for personal or practical purposes. Similarly, Gail’s father was the reader in the family. While he “loved books and was always reading,” she did not consider books to be part of her world. It was just something that her father did. Her mother did not read for pleasure, and only rarely out of necessity. She also has no memories of her parents writing or discussing reading or writing with her. Her grandmother, however, was a prolific letter writer.

**Invitation to join a community of readers and writers.**

For the first group of participants, they not only witnessed family members reading and writing in ways that were attractive to them, they were also actively recruited into the community of readers and writers in the family. For Kelly, Mike, Darren and Rachel, reading was a regular, pleasurable part of family life. In Rachel’s case, reading occurred in both English and Chinese. All of these participants were read children’s books daily, and were frequent visitors to their local libraries. Rachel remembers using her own library card to choose a big bag of books each week, and Mike remembers spending a great deal of time at the library for children’s time, author’s visits, and special summer programming. Kelly
valued the family library routine of enjoying the children’s area with her sister while her
parents chose their books upstairs, and then reuniting with her parents at the check-out
counter. Kelly, Mike and Darren also attended Sunday School, where they listened to Bible
stories, and responded with drawings, and later writing. The parents of the participants in this
group provided a nurturing routine of bedtime reading, access to attractive and interesting
reading material and activities, and encouragement to choose their own books and to
pursuing their reading interests.

From an early age, these four were encouraged to draw, and later write about their
ideas and feelings. Their parents found many occasions for the children to write for authentic
purposes; they wrote thank-you notes, lists, cards, and letters to family members regularly.
Before they were able to write conventionally, they were given meaningful writing activities:
Rachel had a diary; Mike was given the job of creating signs for family celebrations; and
Darren joined his older siblings at the dining room table while they did their homework, and
pretended that he, too, was doing homework.

**Encouragement to develop oral language.**

As children, three of the four participants in this group were also welcome
participants in the rich oral language activities practiced by their families. Dinner time
conversations were the opportunity to bond as a family and to practice listening and speaking
skills for Darren, Mike and Kelly. As Darren explained, “There were always arguments and
discussions going on [at family meals]…we would listen to each other but there was always a
banter of what was important.” The importance of rich oral language was also highlighted in
Kelly’s statement that, “My mom was big on dinner together….dinner conversation was
about our days and what we did and how we felt.”
The participants became used to spending time in conversation with adults and other children, recounting events, sharing feelings, forming and defending ideas and opinions—all skills that would serve them well in a school setting. While Rachel’s family did eat together, dinner time was not the rich oral language experience of the other three. Rachel remembers that there was little conversation at dinner, and the conversation that they did have was focused on encouraging her to eat and her brother to sit still. This lack of oral language stimulation may have been a factor in the struggles she later encountered in school.

**Fewer school-type literacy experiences.**

Kendra and Gail, in the second group of participants, did not have the same opportunity or encouragement to practice school-type literacy in their early years. Kendra does not remember being read to at all before going to school, and there were no children’s books or writing materials provided for her, nor encouragement to read, draw, or write. Family meals conducted in silence. Kendra spent her time playing with her sister at her grandmother’s house. She was not taken to the library or any other community programs. Kendra parents believed that pre-school reading and writing experiences were not necessary for school success, and that, “school would take care of that.” In Gail’s case, she was read to occasionally by her mother, particularly one book that Gail still has today, but it was not a regular occurrence. She remembers occasionally going to the library and subscribing to children’s magazines. However, no-one read the books or magazines to Gail or her brother, and Gail was more interested in the pictures than the words. She remembers disliking reading from an early age. In Gail’s home, most family meals were taken in front of the T.V. When the family did gather at the table for formal occasions, the adults dominated the conversation. Gail did, however, consider herself a writer from an early age. Her grandmother was a
prolific letter writer, and this inspired Gail to draw and write cards and letters to family members.

**Transition to school influenced by early learning at home.**

It appears that the degree of match between home literacy practices and school literacy practices was a significant factor in the level of success the participants enjoyed when they started school. As we might expect, Kelly, Mike, and Darren, whose home lives most closely mirrored school literacy, had a smooth transition to the more formal literacy environment of Kindergarten. All three were confident readers, writers, and speakers before they went to school, and they found school work easy and pleasurable. It seemed a natural extension of the type of activities that engaged in at home. They were motivated to go to school and met with success. As Mike explained, “It was motivating to go [to school] because I could do everything there.” Darren reveled in his school success. As he said, “We were good at it, felt proud that we were doing such a good job.”

Rachel, who was fluent in Chinese, and was functional, though not proficient, in English, had difficulties with literacy when she began school in a French Immersion program. Beginning Kindergarten for her was not a continuation of activities with which she was already familiar and successful. While she had been writing with invented spelling in English at home before school, and had been read to in English and Chinese, she had not been interested in reading independently. Beginning school meant learning to speak, read and write in a third language in a French Immersion program, and learning to read and write Chinese characters in Chinese language classes on Saturdays. In addition, her parents began to try to teach her to read in English at home. Rachel soon became overwhelmed by all of these literacy demands and stopped trying to learn to read in any language. She remembers,
“not even trying to read in them all. I didn’t care.” In addition to struggling with reading, she had difficulty with spelling and was anxious when asked to speak in front of a group, or read out loud. She was often unsure of what was expected of her academically at school.

Not surprisingly, Kendra and Gail found starting Kindergarten to be a big adjustment. Kendra had two major challenges from the beginning. She did not speak English fluently, and she was quite bewildered by the social demands of the classroom. She had not attended any pre-school, library or community programs in which she had to sit in a group and listen to an adult, and cooperate with a group of children. As she says, “I just didn’t understand the whole idea of school at the time.” As the year progressed and her English improved, Kendra felt more comfortable at school, but she still had difficulty with collaborative work, preferring to work alone. Literacy activities such as phonics worksheets and spelling drills came quite easily to Kendra by the end of Kindergarten, but she had difficulty with reading comprehension, and oral presentations. While Gail did not face learning a new language at school, she experienced similar successes and challenges in Kindergarten. She, too, was successful at the individual skill-based worksheets in phonics and spelling, and struggled with reading comprehension and oral presentations. She knew that she didn’t understanding what she read or what was read to her. She explains, “I think I could read to people, but I think I wasn’t getting the meaning.” She disliked reading and being read to, finding it ‘boring.’ In spite of their struggles with reading comprehension and oral language activities, both Kendra and Gail received good marks in literacy in Kindergarten, and both believe this was because only their lower level technical skills were evaluated. Their challenges with comprehension were not detected or addressed.
The pattern of literacy learning continues.

The participants’ initial experiences at school seem to set the pattern for their successes and challenges throughout elementary school. Kelly, Darren and Mike continued to be academically successful at school, and their lives outside of school continued to mirror and support their learning. Kelly loved reading novels and creative writing. After being identified as a gifted learner in Grade 4, she switched to a specialized program where she particularly enjoyed the issue-driven discussions and integrated projects. At home, the rich reading, writing and oral language experiences continued, and her parents were very involved with the school, volunteering and attending all parent-teacher interviews and events. As Kelly says of them, “They’d always be on top of things. I remember my parents being there if I needed them.”

Mike’s experience was similar. He also continued to benefit from the rich literacy life of his family while experiencing school success. After seeing how much Mike enjoyed being involved in musical theatre in the community, Mike’s parents switched him to an arts-focused school at Grade 4. He was equally successful with the paper and pencil focus of his Kindergarten to Grade 3 school, and the more active, hands-on approach to learning in the arts school, but he found the latter far more exciting and fulfilling. Both sets of parents knew their children’s learning strengths and interests, and intervened to switch them to programs which they believed would provide a positive and enjoyable learning experience.

Darren credits his academic success throughout elementary school to his family environment. He describes his home as a “one room schoolhouse” where he and his five siblings would gather nightly around the dining room table for homework, under the supervision of his mother and grandmother. In addition to supporting the completion of his
homework, the family provided many learning opportunities through church, participation in a local band, and Darren’s informal apprenticeship with an antique refinisher from a young age.

The three participants who encountered learning challenges in Kindergarten, Kendra, Gail, and Rachel, continued to experience those same challenges to some degree throughout elementary school. Kendra continued to “do O.K.” on standardized assessments of her reading and spelling, and by Grade 3 she enjoyed reading and writing at school and at home. However, higher level literacy skills were still a challenge. She continued to struggle when asked to articulate an opinion or interpretation, either orally or in writing, about material she had read. Kendra’s parents continued to keep an arm’s length approach to her schooling, feeling that it was not necessary to attend parent-teacher meetings or school concerts, or to become involved with her homework. However, an older cousin came to live with the family after Kendra started school and she read to Kendra and her sister and took them to the library.

Although Gail attained high marks in reading and writing in school, she continued to dislike reading, and to struggle with comprehension. She could not take pride in her marks because she felt that she hadn’t earned them. She explains, “I kind of felt like I floated through on reputation or something weird like that.” Her challenge with comprehension went unnoticed by her teachers, because only her lower level skills such as decoding and spelling were evaluated. She calls herself a “closet struggler” who didn’t want to disappoint her teachers by telling them that she didn’t understand what she was reading, or that she never finished a book. Like her teachers, Gail’s parents were unaware of her literacy challenges. They promoted her interest in sports and the arts through extra-curricular activities, and did not seem to be concerned by her lack of interest in reading.
Rachel had difficulty with both lower and higher level reading and writing skills. She received low marks in reading and writing in French. She also received low marks in English literacy, when she began to have one period of English from Grade 4. In addition, she did very poorly at her Saturday Chinese lessons. She came to expect that she wouldn’t understand what was required of her at school, and that she would not please any of her teachers, “I didn’t really know what they were asking for…so I didn’t really care. I was used to [receiving poor marks].” Things began to improve in Grade 5, when Rachel had a teacher who gave her the explicit instructions, modeling, and feedback that she needed. Her literacy marks improved, particularly in French, and she began to enjoy reading in both English and French. At home, her parents continued to have faith that the school would look after their daughter’s academic needs. They didn’t question her poor report card marks, or become involved in school-related activities.

**Discussion**

It is clear that the participants whose early literacy experiences at home most closely matched their literacy experiences at school, Kelly, Mike, and Darren, had the easiest transition to school, and the most school success. Their families served not only as role models of school-type literacy, but also actively encouraged their children to become involved in reading, writing. Their experiences mirror Heath’s (1982, 1983) findings that children’s literacy experiences at home before school can have a significant effect on their school performance. As in Heath’s study (1982) the participants in this study who had literacy experiences at home that were very similar to the literacy experiences they encountered at school were the most successful with school literacy learning. Like the children in Heath’s study (1982) some of the participants in this study had been exposed to
“school-expected patterns of book reading and reinforcement of these patterns in oral storytelling” (p. 50) and some had not. The homes of the participants who had a smooth transition to school fulfilled Cunningham and Allington’s (2007) definition of “high-literacy homes”: they likely had over 1,000 hours of informal reading and writing encounters from which they developed essential understandings about print, and they were not only read to regularly, but had their early writing attempts encouraged. In addition, the bedtime and lap time reading they experienced would have helped them to develop an awareness of sound structure and language patterns (Lyon, 1998).

The participants who did not come from “high literacy homes,” or whose school experiences did not match the literacy experiences in their homes, struggled with school literacy like their counterparts in Heath’s (1982) study. According to Cunningham and Allington (2007) they would have entered Kindergarten lacking in print concepts, phonemic awareness, and sufficient knowledge of letter names and sounds. Their struggles with school literacy, according to Woolf’s (2007) view, may have originated from their insufficient experiences with hearing, using, understanding, and classifying thousands of words while being read to. The importance of pre-school literacy experiences that is dominant in the literature is reinforced by the findings of this study.

Theme # 2: Choice of Teaching Strategies Is Based on Early Learning Experiences

The choices that the participants make with respect to their literacy teaching strategies and the type of relationships that they try to develop with their students appear to be significantly influenced by their own early learning experiences, both at home and at school. All of the participants refer back to their own early learning, to greater or lesser degrees, to explain why they have approached their literacy program in the ways they have. They speak
about using approaches that worked for them as students, or that they enjoyed, and avoiding teaching approaches that they feel were ineffective or unpleasant. For Kelly, Darren and Mike, who were successful literacy learners in elementary school, there were many positive early literacy learning experiences at home and school upon which they draw when planning a literacy program for their students. Their home lives prepared them to enter school as successful early readers and writers. Once in school, they experienced success with the strategies their teachers employed, and there were few strategies that they disliked. For them, it was relatively easy to transfer their own positive experiences as children into their classroom teaching. In contrast, Kendra, Gail, and Rachel have relatively few early literacy experiences from home or school that they feel were positive and productive, and which they have replicated in their practice as teachers. Their school literacy experiences were characterized by experiences and approaches that they feel were unproductive for them, and as a result, they actively seek to avoid these in their teaching. However, they have been able to transfer the positive effects of their parents’ emotional support for their education, and provision of positive extra-curricular experiences, into their teaching.

The influence of out of school literacy learning on teaching approach.

Darren.

While Kelly, Mike, and Darren all refer to positive early learning experiences outside of school which have influenced their teaching, Darren does this to the greatest extent, citing his home and community learning environment as the model for his approach to teaching. In his classroom, he tries to recreate the collaborative and engaged learning that he experienced around the dining room table in the “one room schoolhouse” of his home. Through drama activities in his classroom, he encourages his students to engage in lively discussions of
current issues, and to become emotionally engaged with ideas. A typical literacy lesson in Darren’s class begins with a read-aloud of a picture book, and continues with a discussion based on the students’ questions and comments about the book. This is followed by dramatic enactments of the story, or enactments inspired by the story. Finally, the students discuss their interpretations, connections, and emotional reactions either orally or in writing. As Darren explains, “Drama makes you think, and have your emotions churn through the power of words. That’s what I try to bring into the class.” In his home Darren was expected to have opinions about issues, and to be able to express them convincingly, both with the family and at community gatherings such as his mother’s weekly discussion group. He believes that this helped him to develop his strong oral skills as well as his skills as a writer, therefore he incorporates this approach into his teaching. As he says, “I like students to have an opinion. I don’t care if I agree with it, but at least they should have one. Be able to stand up for what you believe in.” Another aspect of the “one room schoolhouse” of his home that he brings to his teaching is the practice of putting students into heterogeneous ability groups so that the stronger students can help those who are struggling. This happened naturally in his large family, with older siblings helping younger ones, but he finds it equally valuable for students who are the same age but of differing academic strengths. Darren’s childhood hobbies also find their way into his classroom. His interest in hands-on projects around the house led his parents to encourage him to work as an unofficial apprentice to a family friend who ran an antique business. This was a type of hands-on learning that he rarely experienced at school, but which he found very satisfying and enjoyable. Because this was so positive for him as a child, he gives his students hands-on learning experiences so that they too will have the chance to have this kind of learning satisfaction. As he explains, “I’m visual. I’m tactile. I
have to kind of experience it myself. So in my teaching, I go with what I felt as a child.” Darren believes that all of these approaches are significant contributors to his students’ growth as readers, writers and speakers.

_Mike and Kelly._

Mike and Kelly also choose to bring aspects of their early learning outside of school into their classroom practice, though they see this as less present in their teaching than the influence of their early school experiences. Both encourage their students to read fiction and non-fiction regularly, write for real purposes, and use the public library, as these were very pleasurable parts of their own early home lives. In fact, Mike encourages the parents of his students to incorporate regular visits to the library into their family routines. He explains, “I tell parents on curriculum night, ‘Please take your kid to the library regularly, and get them a library card.’ It was a very empowering experience for me [as a child] to have my own card.” In addition, both Mike and Kelly bring to the classroom the strong focus on oral language skills that was present in their homes during their early years. Perhaps most significantly what all three of these teachers bring from their home lives to their practice as literacy teachers is the confidence that comes from having been successful at reading, writing, and speaking at school. This success led them to be motivated as students, and confident as teachers. They have been able to transfer the positive and successful literacy experiences from their out of school lives to their classroom practice with relative ease. It appears that being successful in a particular approach to learning, and receiving accolades for that success, has motivated them to teach using those same approaches.
As has been discussed earlier, the literacy practices in the homes of Kendra, Gail, and Rachel were not as close a match to the literacy practices that are valued at school. They therefore had fewer specific literacy practices from their early out of school lives that they felt would be beneficial to bring to their classrooms. Their parents may not have given them as many specific school-type literacy tools for school success, but their respect for education was an important factor in the eventual academic success of these participants. All three cite general family attitudes and practices that they consider to have been important in their school success, despite their literacy struggles. These same attitudes and practices also play an important role in their teaching. As we learned in Kendra’s case study in Chapter 4, her parents did not practice school-type literacy with her before she began to go to school. They valued school, but did not believe this type of early preparation for formal schooling was necessary, or that it was their job as parents to provide it. Once Kendra began school, she was very aware that her parents valued education and expected her to succeed. She found this to be motivating as a child. She wanted to succeed in order to meet her parents’ high expectations. Because she believes that this was key in her own eventual academic success, Kendra makes it a point to relay to her students her high expectations of them. Furthermore, Kendra’s parents encouraged and supported her interest in studying music outside of school. Her success with piano, and later the French horn, gave her confidence and a positive emotional outlet that was lacking at school. She chooses to bring her love of music and the arts in general into her literacy program as much as she can. She explains, “I do try to integrate music. We do poetry based on music, based on even rap. I’m O.K. with integrating music and art into pretty much everything that I do.” Kendra’s decision to support her
students’ interests and integrate them into the classroom program stems from the positive impact of her early outside of school experiences.

**Rachel.**

Out of school music lessons influence Rachel’s approach to teaching in three ways. First, Rachel’s success as a piano student built her confidence in the face of her struggles with literacy in French, English, and Chinese. Second, Rachel’s piano teachers had a positive and steadying influence on her while she was growing up. As she says, “My piano teachers were very solid people. They were always, always there for me. They didn’t let anything throw them.” When Rachel was upset about school or friends, her piano teachers helped her to put her problems into perspective. They helped her to see that, “you know, there are other things in life.” She didn’t have this kind of relationship with her school teachers as a child, but as a teacher she strives to play this supportive role for her students. Third, when she was in High School, Rachel began to teach young children piano while she continued her own advanced piano lessons. This allowed her to play this supportive role for her piano students. She describes herself as a “limited” piano teacher to begin with, but that by her fifth year she was, “pretty good.” She uses this experience to gauge her teaching as a classroom teacher. She thinks she has a long way to go as a new teacher, but she is not worried because her piano teaching experience has taught her that teachers take time to develop.

**Gail.**

For Gail, her parents’ support of her interest in sports has had a significant impact on her learning and her teaching. Her parents encouraged her to join community teams and registered her for sports camps throughout her childhood. Her participation in sports both in the community and at school kept her engaged with school. Without sports she believes that
as a student she, “would have been so bored or just not engaged…. [sports] helped me to stay engaged and to continue to go to school.” Gail chooses to bring the broad goals of healthy activity, positive relationships, and engagement from her early out of the classroom life into her literacy program. Because engaging in sports was so important to her as a student, she volunteers as a school coach. She explains:

I do a lot of extra-curricular work here as a coach. I was a pretty active kid when I was younger, and I think those experiences really inform me as a teacher. I think it is so important that kids are physically active. And for kids who are comfortable with it and want it, I think competitive sports are important…I think it helps them mix well in other areas of their life. They are able to get that energy out and they’re able to make those positive relationships.

Although Kendra, Rachel, and Gail do not feel that they were able to bring many specific literacy practices from their early home lives into their classrooms, they believe that their parents’ support and encouragement of their extra-curricular activities helped them to succeed in school, and also informs their teaching practice. This type of parental support and encouragement may be particularly important for students who struggle in school. Kelly, Mike and Darren were able to transfer specific practices from their early home life to their teaching such as regular read-alouds and writing for meaning, with little alteration. Kendra, Rachel and Gail, in contrast, had to extract certain attitudes and behaviours from their music or sports activities, such as perseverance or the value of positive relationships with adult mentors, and find ways to incorporate them into their classroom practice.
The influence of early school learning on teaching approach.

The influence of early school-based literacy learning on the participants’ teaching appears to follow a similar pattern. All of the participants report that they incorporate into their teaching aspects of their early literacy learning at school that they liked, or that worked for them as students, and avoid teaching using those approaches that they did not like or that didn’t work for them. For Kelly, Darren, and Mike, virtually all of the aspects of their early literacy learning were enjoyable and successful, so they have a great deal from which to choose for their own teaching. There are few things that they seek to avoid. Indeed, Kelly and Mike acknowledge that in many ways, they have recreated their own early literacy learning in their classrooms.

Darren.

As mentioned earlier, Darren seeks to recreate aspects of his learning from his childhood home in his classroom. His teaching approach incorporates fewer elements from his school-based learning. Darren’s early school-based literacy learning was very traditional. He was successful at the paper and pencil tasks and basal readers that he encountered at school, although he found his family’s approach to literacy more enjoyable. His preference for the latter approach to learning has influenced his teaching, but he is also influenced by his realization that the approach that his teachers took is not as relevant for his students today. As he explains:

The way I was taught was pretty structured and more teacher-centred than student-centred. It worked for me, so I can’t say it didn’t work. But I think for the vast majority of today’s students, you want to be able to stretch your delivery and make it as applicable for each particular individual in your class.
Although he was a successful literacy learner as a student, he now believes that his learning in school was “narrow.” In his teaching he chooses to move beyond rote learning and surface comprehension to the kind of rich learning that he experienced at home:

I guess the way I was taught [at school] was that you read, you learn, and then you spill it back to the teacher. But there is so much more today. There’s so much more. It’s the connections that you create, the exposure to different ways of thinking and learning. It’s just so much bigger. I guess my learning at school was kind of narrow. There’s so much more than that for kids today.

Mike.

Mike experienced a similar teacher-centred, structured approach to literacy from Kindergarten to Grade 3. At Grade 4, he switched to an Arts-based school. Like Darren, he was successful in the former approach, but he chose to use the latter as an inspiration for his teaching because it was so much more enjoyable. Mike makes a distinction between being considered a successful learner by his teachers in Kindergarten to Grade 3, and having a meaningful learning experience, “I could do the paper and pencil worksheets, but I don’t think it worked for me per se. I just think I could do it.” Mike’s teaching approach is influenced by the arts-infused, project approach that he experienced from Grade 4 to Grade 8. As a student, he appreciated the range of choices that he was given in terms of what and how to learn. He explains, “There were lots of outlets for different ways of thinking in that school…for kids to express themselves in different ways.” With his own Kindergarten students, Mike seeks to provide a similar range of learning options. His students spend most of their time at self-selected hands-on centres such as the block, sand, water, drama, and visual art centres. The children initiate their own activities while Mike circulates around the room, supervising and chatting to students about what they are doing, and taking
photographs. Through observing his students in this environment, he believes that he is giving the students the opportunity to, “show me what they’ve learned in different ways.”

Mike is also following in the footsteps of his art school teachers who regularly read aloud to the class. Read-alouds were one of his favourite school activities, and one that he has incorporated as a regular practice in his classroom:

I know that I liked [teacher read-alouds] as a student, and I do a lot of reading aloud to my students. We almost always have a short novel on the go, and a lot of times I base activities on that and they just kind of come to me as I read.
I find I draw a lot of inspiration from children’s literature.

Kelly.

Kelly also seeks to build on her many enjoyable early school experiences in her teaching. As she says, “I guess my teaching is very similar to what I enjoyed doing [at school]. And I avoid things that I didn’t like.” She frequently reads to her class, as Darren and Mike do, and gives the students time to read novels of their own choosing. She fondly remembers when her own teachers engaged in these practices. Kelly chooses to base her literacy teaching on two features of her own learning that she found particularly engaging and pleasurable: integrated projects and group discussions of complex ideas. Rather than have a regular literacy period, Kelly often gives her students the opportunity to develop their literacy skills through extra time on Mathematic word problems, Science presentations, or Social Studies projects. She believes that this will allow her students to use their literacy skills to integrate facts, thinking processes, and organizational skills from across the curriculum:

I think our job [as literacy teachers] is to tie in skills they’re learning in their other courses, tie in their reasoning and facts from Science, their expressive
proofs from math, and bringing in their outlook on the world from Social Studies…making connections between how different things work, and different people, and sort of tying it all in.

Kelly found the open-ended discussion of complex issues that she participated in as a student in the Gifted program from Grade 4 to be exciting and engaging. She has chosen to incorporate these types of discussions throughout the curriculum in order to help build her students’ oral language and thinking skills. She has found, however, that her students have not responded to this practice in the same way that she and her classmates did when she was a student. Rather than leading to increased motivation and effective learning, she finds that in her classes her students respond with off-task behaviour and disengagement. She explains her challenge, “A lot of times they just want the answer. They just want to plug it in and be done. They can be off the wall. I’ve struggled with that.”

**Gail.**

In contrast, Gail, Rachel, and Kendra do not have a large bank of memories of positive and successful literacy learning experiences from their student days that they can reproduce in their classrooms. Fewer aspects of their literacy learning in school were either enjoyable or successful, while there are many practices that caused them difficulty and which they seek to avoid in their own teaching. These participants report that their early school learning is still a touchstone for their teaching choices, but in a different way. Their literacy programs are largely shaped by a rejection of their early school learning, and a re-invention based on what they wished they had experienced. Other than the practices of one or two key teachers throughout their school career (which will be discussed in a later section), their literacy programs embody an approach to literacy teaching that they did not experience
themselves as students. Through Gail’s Kindergarten program, she seeks to give her students the kind of engaged, supportive, individualized program that she wishes she had had in elementary school. When she was a student, she felt bored much of the time. She says, “I remember sitting at my desk being bored, even though I was pretty good at paying attention and getting the work done.” She chooses to give her own students a more active approach to learning, “I find it more beneficial for everything to be hands-on and for them to be exploring and experimenting and implementing things.” She does not want her students to feel as pressured to perform as she did. As a student, she often felt put on the spot, and made to feel inadequate, “I remember getting flustered and kind of put on the spot and I just couldn’t answer and it made me feel really stupid.” In order to avoid this experience with her students, Gail chooses to have a less pressured, more equitable approach to classroom talk:

I’m overly careful not to call the student who doesn’t have their hand up. I recognize that some of my students are just processing a little bit slower than others…I prefer to do a community circle where we pass around something and you can only talk when you have that thing. Just so that everyone feels a little bit more safe and comfortable and is given the same opportunity to speak.

Due to her own literacy learning struggles, she is attuned to the different learning needs of her students, and chooses to address their needs in ways that she wishes her teachers had done for her. She gives her students many ways to demonstrate their learning, “I get them to show me in a couple of different ways, like ‘Show me on paper. Show me with objects. Describe it to me in your own words.’ I try to give them lots of different opportunities to explain.” She feels getting to know her students and their individual needs are key. Her teachers did not know her well and therefore her struggle with reading
comprehension went undetected. As a consequence she has her own students read and write with her daily, and she makes sure that she knows and records their strengths and needs. She explains, “I have conversations with them [about their reading and writing] and I write those things down. I’m still developing but I feel pretty good about the way that I’m developing my assessment strategies.” Finally, Gail’s teachers followed a literacy program that was often pre-set and not geared to the needs and interests of the students. She avoids this in her own teaching by observing the students closely and responding to their needs, “I let [the students] guide the way and I see what they are ready for…I want to make sure that they’re engaged and that it’s appropriate for their learning and their development.”

**Kendra.**

In her teaching, Kendra is also reacting against what she perceived as her teachers’ lack of knowledge of, and failure to respond to, her particular literacy learning needs as a student. Her elementary school literacy learning focused learning lower level reading and writing skills through worksheets and drills. She did not find that the disconnected bits of information she learned through this approach helped her to acquire deeper comprehension, thinking, writing, or speaking skills. Her goals for her own junior age students is to enable them to integrate their prior knowledge and experience with a deep understanding of what they are learning, so that they can develop and clearly express opinions both orally and in writing. She also wants her students to see the relevance of what they are learning for their futures. Kendra provides opportunities for her students to do this through student projects that integrate subject matter knowledge from across the curriculum:

I try to make it interesting enough that the kids can bring to the table their own experiences and use what they know as they become experts in their project
topic. And at the end, they have to produce something that demonstrates what they have learned and integrate it into what they can use for the future.

The literacy approach that she has chosen for her students is far more ambitious than the ones she experienced as a student. Kendra’s teachers’ assessment of her literacy skills did not go beyond the limited range of standardized tests. When her own students are writing or preparing an oral presentation, she challenges them to consider their goals for their pieces, the evidence that they have for their assertions, the audience that they want to reach, and their overall message. She says, “I want to instill in the kids that when you say something, on what basis are you saying it? Where is this coming from? What do you want to achieve? What do you want people to believe? What do you want people to hear?”

In order to get to know her students and their learning needs in a way that her teachers did not know her, Kendra regularly conducts mini-conferences with her students, and offers them extra help in her after school homework club. She reviews her students ongoing work, and converses with them about their interests and challenges. She also has her students read to her, even though they are in middle school. This is a rare practice for students this age. In this way, she is able to observe and document her students’ learning in progress, and adjust her teaching accordingly.

**Rachel.**

Rachel’s choices in literacy program echo Gail and Kendra’s in many ways, and for similar reasons. She too seeks to know her students well, and to offer a variety of meaningful, relevant literacy learning experiences. She felt “oblivious” in school, unsure of what was expected of her. Her teachers’ expectations, instructions, and evaluation were a mystery to her. She felt isolated and helpless. In reaction to this, she makes a point of clearly
explaining her expectations to her students, and then checking in with individuals to make sure that they understand, “And many times I’ve taken the extra time to sit down with kids and explain a rubric and get them to grade their own work or get them to grade other people’s work. I tell them, ‘Okay, you need to get this.’” She offers hands-on learning activities and opportunities to work collaboratively, things that she wishes she had had as a student.

Table 2 summarizes some of the key features of the participants’ early literacy experiences, teaching choices, and the positive and negative outcomes for their teaching. It is organized in two groups: the first group is comprised of the participants who learned school literacy easily; and the second group is comprised of the participants who struggled with school literacy.
## Table 2

**Literacy Choices and Their Outcomes**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Participants</th>
<th>Early literacy experiences</th>
<th>Literacy teaching choices</th>
<th>Positive/negative outcomes</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Kelly, Mike, and Darren</td>
<td>Successful literacy learners</td>
<td>Recreate many aspects of their own early learning based on positive experiences</td>
<td>Confidence leads to less stress and worry over programming and student learning</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Memories of feeling confident and capable</td>
<td>Plan lessons quickly</td>
<td>More time for other aspects of personal and professional life</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Enjoyed literacy learning</td>
<td>Loose assessment - feel they have a “sense” of what the students are learning</td>
<td>Adult role model of happy life-long literacy learners comes naturally</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Positive relationships with teachers</td>
<td>Little PD in literacy</td>
<td>Confidence may lead to lack of reflection on teaching and student learning</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Practice of school-type literacy at home</td>
<td>Focus on offering open-ended engaging activities</td>
<td>Loose assessment may lead to students “falling through the cracks”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Recreating past experiences may inhibit further PD or experimentation</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Discussion.

The programs of these two groups of teachers may look similar on the surface, the hands-on learning centres in Kindergarten, the integrated projects at the junior level, the emphasis on reading and writing for meaning at all levels, but the teachers’ motivations and inspirations for their programs are quite different. There appear to be advantages and disadvantages for each group of teachers, and for their students. Kelly, Mike and Darren are able to look back on their childhood learning and adopt teaching approaches that they

<table>
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</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Kendra, Gail, and Rachel</td>
<td>Struggled with aspects of literacy learning</td>
<td>Re-invent teaching approaches based on what they wished they had experienced</td>
<td>Concern over competency leads to beneficial reflection on teaching and student learning</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Memories of feeling anxious, helpless, invisible at school</td>
<td>Take more time to research and plan lessons</td>
<td>Systematic assessment may prevent students from “falling through the cracks”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Literacy learning caused stress</td>
<td>Systematic assessment to ensure that students are learning as expected</td>
<td>The need to invent their program means that they engage in PD and are always experimenting</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Uneasy, distant relationships with teachers</td>
<td>Significant PD in literacy</td>
<td>Worry about competency leads to significant stress over programming and student learning</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Family respect for school, and support of extracurricular activities</td>
<td>Focus on offering open-ended engaging activities and close monitoring of student learning</td>
<td>Planning, teaching and assessing takes a considerable amount of time</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Need to work to project a positive image as a literacy learner and teacher</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
enjoyed and at which they were successful. Their confidence and pride as children and positive relationships with their teachers motivate them to choose to replicate many of their early experiences in their own classrooms. They want their students to experience literacy learning as they did. The positive outcomes for these participants appear to be that they are more relaxed as literacy teachers. They are confident in their own literacy abilities, and this translates into confidence as literacy teachers. They have a great many resources in the form of their own positive childhood memories to draw upon when planning and teaching. This allows them to plan activities relatively quickly and painlessly. Their enjoyment of the literacy activities in their classes serves as a positive role model for their students. A disadvantage could be that a recreation their own learning experience may not be effective for all of their students. They may not be aware of students who learn differently than they did. Over confidence may lead to a lack of reflection or close attention to student needs. This will be discussed further in a later section.

Kendra, Gail, and Rachel, on the other hand, want to protect their students from many aspects of the experiences and feelings that they lived through in their literacy learning. As students they felt anxious, worried, and at times, hopeless. They were often embarrassed and were wary that their teachers would discover their struggles. They did not feel that their teachers knew them or understood them. In an effort to give their own students a more positive experience with literacy learning, they have had to create approaches with which they have very little personal experience. Presumably this effort is far more difficult than reproducing an approach that they had experienced, yet it seems to have resulted in positive effects for their students. Kendra, Gail, and Rachel appear to be far more reflective about their teaching and to observe their students far more closely than the other three participants.
Perhaps because they cannot rely on their memories to create their program, they engage in more professional development, spend more time planning activities, and watch their students more closely to gauge their reactions and learning. They also spend more time systematically assessing their students and individualizing their teaching to meet their needs. The disadvantage to their situation may be that they experience more stress and anxiety as literacy teachers than the other three participants. They also spend more time on professional development and planning their literacy program which may take time away from other aspects of their professional and personal life.

The findings in this section affirm the assertion in the literature that preservice and beginning teachers use their own experiences as students when making decisions about their teaching (Benson, 2003; Carter & Doyle, 1996; Feiman-Nemser, 2001; Knowles, 1988; Schubert, 1991). These authors argue that new teachers are likely to perpetuate conventional practice. However, the findings in this study suggest that the relationship between learning experiences as a student and later teaching practices is more complex. The three teachers who were highly successful at school do try to recreate aspects of their early learning in their teaching. However, what they choose to replicate is not conventional literacy practice. Kelly uses progressive teaching practices from the Gifted program she attended, and Mike uses progressive practices from the Arts-based alternative school he attended. Darren chooses to base his teaching not on his conventional experiences as a student, but on his family’s progressive approach to learning at home. All three choose to replicate these more progressive practices because they found them to be enjoyable and fulfilling. For the three participants who struggled as students, their goal as teachers is to avoid the aspects of conventional practice that caused them difficulties. Instead they seek to create teaching
practices that they wished they had experienced and that they believe are beneficial for their students.

**Theme # 3: Teachers’ Goals For Their Students and Their Understanding of Their Teaching Responsibilities Are Influenced By Their Early Learning Experiences**

All six participants in the study want their literacy programs to be enjoyable and engaging for their students and they want them to acquire the skills necessary to become proficient readers, writers, and speakers. However, there is a significant degree of difference in the emphasis they give to these different literacy goals. These differences appear to be related to the participants’ own experiences with school literacy learning as students. For Kendra, Gail, and Rachel, who struggled with some aspects of school literacy, there is a greater emphasis on providing specific literacy skills. They are keenly aware that it is possible for students to “fall through the cracks” and they consider preventing this from happening to be one of the key aspects of their roles as literacy teachers. Kelly, Mike and Darren, who did not encounter any literacy challenges as students, emphasize engagement and a positive attitude to literacy over the attainment of specific literacy skills in their classrooms.

**Kendra.**

Kendra’s view of her role as a literacy teacher evolved over her first 3 years of teaching. When she was in preservice, she imagined that she would be teaching intermediate (Grade 6 to Grade 10) Mathematics and Science. She found it quite an adjustment when she was hired as a generalist Grade 4 teacher with literacy teaching as one of her main duties. However, once she settled into this teaching assignment she had a clearer understanding of her role, and she began to focus on the area in which she struggled as a young learner. While
Kendra achieved success in many separate reading and writing skill activities as a young student in school, she had difficulty integrating and organizing her skills and knowledge into coherent arguments. Through debating in high school, she learned to organize information, to think through her arguments and to explain her ideas clearly and confidently. She explains, “Debating really got me out of my shell and made me feel like when I said something, I was saying it to the best of my ability....I felt supported by the thinking process.” Although she did not acquire this skill until high school, Kendra wants her students to begin to develop this ability and confidence from Grade 4. In her first year of teaching, she focused on her students’ oral skills, but broadened her goals by her second year to include more of an emphasis on the integration of her students’ reading and writing skills. She strives to provide a program that is interesting and motivating for her students, but she is always watching for students who appear to lack a deep understanding of what they are reading, or who don’t appear to be able to express their ideas clearly and convincingly. She considers it her job to keep trying different teaching strategies and resources until she discovers those which enable her struggling students to develop into effective readers, writers, and speakers.

Gail.

In a similar way, Gail’s view of her role as a literacy teacher and her literacy goals for her Kindergarten students appear to stem from her own literacy learning difficulties. Despite earning high marks in literacy in elementary school, Gail did not enjoy reading or being read to and had difficulty understanding what she read. She still sees herself as a struggling reader to some extent, but she is determined to “keep learning about [reading], and to keep working on it and to keep developing my own strategies and skills, and also to keep reading.” She does not want her students to struggle as she did in elementary school and beyond. Gail’s
perception of her role as a literacy teacher includes helping her students learn to love reading and writing and to become confident readers and writers. She believes that this is most likely to occur if she is an enthusiastic model of reading and if the students are given a variety of resources and learning opportunities. However, she also believes that in order to love reading and writing, students must have successful reading and writing experiences. By adapting her instruction and creating activities that are accessible to all her students, she strives to enable them all to experience success. She is happy that she is teaching Kindergarten, because she can contribute to her students’ development of a “strong base” in reading and writing early in their school career. She says, “I just think that if they have that strong base earlier on, then they might be in a better position as they get older, and maybe it will make things easier for them.”

Rachel.

While Rachel loves teaching Grades 4 and 5 in general, she does not consider herself to be a good literacy teacher because her own literacy education was not effective for her. She explains, “I feel like I am a pretty bad literacy teacher, to be honest…I don’t necessarily think I was taught to be literate. My schooling didn’t help me get there.” She feels that when she was a student her teachers did not try to understand the source of her difficulties, nor did they adapt their practices to meet her needs. In spite of her lack of confidence in this area of her teaching, she keeps working to develop her knowledge and skills. She considers building positive and trusting relationships with her students to be a key aspect of her role as a literacy teacher. Once these relationships are established, she believes that she is better able to understand and to try to meet each student’s learning strengths and needs. She says, “I
always try to keep in mind that not everyone does it or learns the same way, so I’ll try to have different activities that suit different people at different times.”

Her goals for her students also appear to be directly related to her experiences as a student. She has both affective and specific learning skills goals for her students. She does not want her students to “feel how [she] did.” This desire to protect her students from the frustrations she encountered inspires her teaching goals for her students. She felt overwhelmed by the literacy demands at school as a student. She did not know how to interpret her teachers’ instructions and expectations or how to improve her work. As a teacher, she strives to keep her students from being overwhelmed in a similar way by ensuring that they understand how they can be successful in her class. She gives instructions orally as well as in writing, and models effective reading and writing practices. She explains, “I think doing it this way, it gives them a fuller picture.”

Kelly.

The three participants for whom school literacy came easily, Kelly, Mike, and Darren, appear to have less of an emphasis on specific literacy skills and more confidence that a positive attitude toward literacy, and toward school in general, will lead to effective literacy practices. All three share the same primary literacy goal for their students: to have them enjoy reading and writing as much as they did as students. Kelly, a Physical Education specialist, who like Kendra expected to teach her specialist subject in Grades 7 to 10, never imagined that she would be a generalist classroom teacher responsible for teaching literacy. She wants her students to be as “excited about learning, and excited to be at school” as she was as a student. She believes that as long as her students feel “safe and secure academically,” they will develop the skills necessary to be effective communicators. She
explains, “I don’t think our role is to teach those specific little curriculum things in English. They are important, but they take a back seat to my goal for them to be confident communicators.”

Mike.

In contrast to Gail, the Kindergarten teacher in the first group who is concerned that her students establish a firm foundation in literacy skills, Mike’s emphasis is on his Kindergarten students’ emotional reaction to school. He says, “I don’t care that much if they can’t write their name this year. It’s way more important that they really like coming to school.” His priority as a literacy teacher at the Kindergarten level is to encourage his students to value reading and writing to the point where they want to try it themselves. He is not concerned with his students’ attainment of any particular literacy skills at this age because he believes that “at some point or other, they are going to catch up.”

Darren.

This belief that a positive attitude will lead to successful attainment of reading, writing, and oral proficiency is shared by Darren. Encouraging students to develop a passion for reading and a personal connection to reading are central to how Darren views his role as a literacy teacher. He believes that if students are positive about reading, and are encouraged to express their ideas orally, then effective written expression will follow naturally. He says, “As long as they have a positive attitude towards [reading and writing], I think that’s half the battle.” Once students are engaged and confident, he believes they will take risks that will inevitably lead to successful independent reading and writing practice.
Discussion

The three teachers in the first group, Kendra, Gail, and Rachel, act like literacy detectives in their classrooms. While striving to create an engaging program for all of the students, they are on the look-out for students who are not learning as expected. When they detect a student who appears to be struggling, they search deeper to try to determine the source of the problem and adapt their instruction to try to meet their needs. They monitor closely to ensure that none of their students is “falling through the cracks.” Unlike the participants in the second group, Kelly, Mike, and Darren, they are not confident that all students will eventually “catch up” as long as the program is engaging. From their own experiences, they know that some students do struggle with literacy learning and that these struggles can go unobserved and unaddressed by well meaning teachers. The findings suggest that having struggled with literacy learning as a student can give teachers a particular perspective on literacy learning that can be beneficial for their students.

This “literacy detective” approach to teaching reading is what Clay advocates in The Early Detection of Reading Difficulties (Clay, 1985). The participants’ close observation of their students is in keeping with Clay’s emphasis on the importance of trying to understand the reading and writing processes of struggling literacy students. Both the participants’ own early learning experiences, and the close observation of their students, leads them to the understanding that Clay (1998) highlights in her book By Different Paths to Common Outcomes. Like Clay, they understand that because students come to school with different types of literacy knowledge, and learn literacy in different ways, one teaching approach is unlikely to be effective for all students.
Perhaps because the three participants in the second group, Mike, Kelly, and Darren, did not encounter any difficulties in their own literacy learning, they do not appear to have the same degree of emphasis on observing and assessing their students with the view to catching any particular learning challenges, or on planning activities to help students to overcome those challenges as Kendra, Gail, and Rachel do. They appear to believe some of the “myths” that are outlined in The Canadian Language and Literacy Research Network (CLLRN, 2011) publication, *Foundations for literacy: An evidenced-based toolkit for the effective reading and writing teacher*. These “myths” are commonly held beliefs about reading that the report argues have been refuted by research. The four “myths” that appear to be influencing these participants’ goals for their students and understanding of their teaching responsibilities are: learning to read, like learning to talk, is a natural process; with time, all children will eventually learn to read; after Grade 3, children are done learning how to read; and students can master reading comprehension if they just read, read, read. A logical outcome of a belief in these statements is exactly the teaching goals and understanding of a teacher’s role that has been adopted by Mike, Kelly, and Darren: a focus on creating engaging opportunities to read, and then stepping back to let the “natural process” run its course.

**Theme # 4: The Priority of Literacy Within The Overall Program Is Influenced by Early Learning Experiences**

The place of literacy within the overall classroom programs of the six participants is consistent with their view of their roles as literacy teachers, and their literacy goals for their students. Those who consider literacy teaching to be central to their roles as teachers, and central to their overall learning goals for their students, place literacy in a prominent place
within their classroom program. Of all the subjects that they are responsible for as elementary classroom teachers, they spend a considerable amount of their planning time and energy strategizing about how to deliver this aspect of their classroom program effectively. All six participants value the literacy component of their classroom program, and seek to serve the literacy learning needs of all of their students, but for those participants who struggled, Kendra, Gail, and Rachel, literacy teaching and learning is a particular priority.

**Early literacy learning struggles lead to an emphasis on literacy teaching.**

*Kendra.*

Kendra considers her literacy program to be a central focus of her teaching. She devotes both a large block of time daily to literacy activities, and also endeavors to integrate literacy into every project and activity across the curriculum. Her students’ response to her literacy program is central to her perception of both the successes and challenges of her first year as a teacher. Whereas she measured her own academic success as a child by the marks she received on tests and assignments, she measures her success as a teacher, and the success of her students, in quite a different way. As a child she was proud of her spelling and handwriting, and as a teacher she is proud of her students’ positive attitude toward reading and writing, initiative, and independence. When asked about the highpoint in her first year of teaching literacy, she replied:

> Having kids come up with their own assignments and saying, ‘Look what else I did’ … the fact that they’ve taken their own initiative and taken their own time out of their day to do something that wasn’t required of them. I don’t know if I had a hand in it but I like to take credit for it anyway.
Kendra reported that her greatest challenge in her first year of teaching was trying to motivate those students who did not show the same degree of enthusiasm for reading and writing as those she described above. She understands that different children may be motivated by different things, and that different teaching strategies and activities will work for different students. She considers it her job to discover out what motivates each child and what type of instruction will lead to independent reading and writing. She explains:

I haven’t yet been able to get to all of them and to find that button that I can push that really gets them moving. I guess that goes with any kind of differentiated instruction. Just lighting the fire, I guess.

Perhaps because of her own struggles with literacy as a child, most of Kendra’s professional development activities have been related to literacy. When she was looking for guidance on ways to improve her literacy program during her first year of teaching, she consulted the Special Education teacher in her school who, “piled [her] with books and just told [her] from her own experiences.” She also consulted the Grade 4 teacher with whom she had completed a teaching placement during her preservice year, although she had found her program, “a little more rigid.” Kendra revisited her notes and resources from her preservice program. She describes this process, “I went through my old [preservice program] stuff and realized, oh, I forgot about this, I had forgotten about that. So I just threw everything back in there together and the kids really responded.” In addition, she has attended numerous workshops and in-service programs on literacy throughout her 3 years of teaching. Instead of shying away from a subject that caused difficulty in her early life, she appears to have taken as many opportunities as she could to strengthen her knowledge and practice in this area of her teaching.
Gail.

For Gail, literacy teaching and learning is also central to her program. She spends a large block of time each morning of her full-day Kindergarten program on a variety of literacy activities. She ensures that all students have opportunities to engage in whole group and small group activities, and that she regularly meets with students individually to conference with them about their reading and writing. Gail’s passion for literacy teaching and learning is fueled both by fear and by joy. Her fear is that her students will dislike and avoid literacy activities as she did as a child. She tries to counteract this fear by making literacy activities a large part of her overall kindergarten program. She explains:

With literacy, my fear is of my students not liking reading. I bring that with me [from my childhood]. So I find that I’m really trying to be positive about reading, and I read to them all the time and I give them many opportunities to read.

She believes that both her positive attitude, and the multiplicity and variety of literacy activities she offers, will help build her students’ confidence and enjoyment of reading. As she says, “I try to present them with so many opportunities that if they’re not quite there yet, at least they’re going to build confidence and a joy of reading.”

While her fear motivates her to give priority to her literacy program, Gail finds her greatest joy in teaching lies in witnessing her students succeed in areas in which she didn’t experience success. When she sees her students “take off” with reading, she is thrilled that they will not have to struggle through school as she did. She says:

It is so exciting for me to see, all of a sudden my students saying ‘Oh can I take three or four books home?’ and their mom saying ‘Oh my goodness, they
won’t stop reading. It’s fabulous’. It’s really exciting to see that take off, because I don’t know that I ever did that.

In addition to her passion, Gail brings to her literacy teaching an understanding that students learn in different ways. She gained this understanding from a young age, when she realized that she did not learn the way that her peers did, and that her teachers’ strategies weren’t working for her. She explains:

When I was young, my teachers weren’t teaching to me in a way that was helping me to learn best. Even when I was quite young, I realized that meant that everyone was learning differently. And so I carried that with me into teaching.

Rachel.

Like Kendra and Gail, Rachel believes that literacy should be a priority in her overall program. However, she has been unable to realize this priority. As mentioned in her case study in Chapter 4, Rachel has spent the greater part of her time and energy during her first 3 years of teaching developing the mid-entry Extended French program that she pioneered at her school. She feels more confident that she is meeting her students’ needs for entry level French vocabulary and grammar, than for their literacy needs in English, but she feels that her literacy teaching in both languages is far from what she would like it to be. She conducts the first half of the day in her classroom in French, with a focus on the students’ oral skills. The afternoon is divided into Math, Science, Media, International Languages, Physical Education, and English. She admits to scheduling her English literacy for “half an hour at the end of the day when everyone’s already worn out, three times a week.” Rachel does have
more time constraints than a typical unilingual classroom, yet within the time she has available she chooses a non-optimal learning period for English literacy.

Lack of time is not Rachel’s only impediment to giving literacy the place in the program that she would like it to have. Because of her own challenges with literacy at school, and what she feels was poor preparation in preservice, Rachel does not believe that she has the knowledge or skills to teach literacy well. In spite of these two difficulties, Rachel persisted in trying to improve her literacy program over her first 3 years of teaching. In her first year, she “taught to the test” in preparation for a mandated literacy assessment, and photocopied activities from a variety of teacher resource books borrowed from other teachers. She found this approach very unsatisfactory, so in her second year she attempted to follow a published literacy program. However, she found this too constraining. In her third year, she solicited the help of a school board literacy consultant, but found her advice and expectations confusing and unhelpful. Each year she could see that her program was improving, but it was still not the program that she felt her students needed. Paradoxically, the high value that she places on literacy, coupled with her belief that she is not meeting her students’ needs in this area, prompted her to “trade away” her English literacy teaching. For her fourth year of teaching, Rachel arranged to teach mathematics to another class in exchange for that teacher taking her students for English literacy.

**Less of a focus on literacy teaching for those who learned literacy easily.**

For Kelly, Mike and Darren, literacy teaching and learning does not have the same pride of place in their classroom programs as it does for the other three participants. All three seek to integrate literacy into many aspects of their programs, and believe strongly in the importance of literacy, but do not have literacy as a particular focus in their overall programs.
Kelly.

Kelly has maintained the teaching focus on Physical Education and Health which she had coming into teaching. She has broadened her teaching focus to include Mathematics, but literacy teaching has remained a less emphasized part of her curriculum. Kelly found it difficult to give equal attention to all of the subjects she taught as an elementary classroom teacher, and admitted that literacy was receiving the least of her attention. She explains:

It’s so hard to spread your energy out. I’m trying to get a vibrant Phys. Ed. program going at the school, I’m trying to teach a really interesting Health program and then I’m trying to teach Math, and I’m trying to teach Language. And I understand that it’s normal for teachers to have to teach multiple subjects, but it’s hard to be up-to-date and current on four subjects, and I feel like I am up to date in my Health and in my Math but I think my Language program is suffering because of that.

Although she scheduled a full period for Language and one for Math each morning in her timetable, many days both periods would be spent on Math. She considers that the reading, writing, and speaking that are incorporated into her mathematics lessons serve double duty as her literacy teaching. She says, “We do a lot of writing in Math and a lot of oral reading and presentations [of mathematics problems] during math class…so in term so my English program, it’s very integrated into the Math.” While incorporating literacy across the curriculum can be a very important and effective teaching strategy, unfortunately in this classroom it appeared that the dedicated literacy period was often being sacrificed to a double period of Mathematics in the name of integration.
Mike and Darren.

Mike and Darren are also proponents of integrating literacy into other subjects. They seek to embed literacy activities into the curriculum, but do not have a concentrated literacy time to the same degree as the three participants in the first group do. Mike reads to his students before “activity time” and offers reading and writing activities as choices during his play-based Kindergarten program, but is not worried if students do not participate in these activities. Darren, as a daily and longer-term supply teacher, does not have the same degree of control over the classroom program as the other full-time teachers, but to the extent that he is able, he integrates reading, writing, and speaking activities through Drama. He uses Drama as a way for his students to think and feel through the ideas in the content areas of the curriculum. He finds that having students dramatize an idea or a scenario “makes them think and have emotions churn through their minds.” He believes that if students can “enter into the story” through drama, effective reading and writing will follow.

Discussion.

For Kendra, Gail, and Rachel, their early struggles appear to have influenced their belief in the importance of literacy teaching and learning in the classroom, but this belief has not translated into their practices in the same ways. For Kendra and Gail, their early learning experiences appear to have led to a driving need to keep learning about teaching literacy, and to flood their programs with a plethora of opportunities for their students’ literacy success. Interestingly, Rachel’s struggles with literacy did not prompt her to do as much literacy professional development as the others, nor to give literacy teaching as much time within her overall program. Even considering the demands of the French part of her program, it was Rachel’s choice to schedule literacy for a very limited amount of time per week, at the end of
the day. Perhaps this is because Rachel’s struggles with literacy were the most extensive of
the three, encompassing difficulties with decoding, reading comprehension, spelling, written
organization, and confidence in oral language. Perhaps some struggle with early literacy
learning that is overcome in later schooling may lead to an increased focus on literacy
teaching, while a more severe or more comprehensive literacy challenge can leave a teacher
feeling just as helpless in the face of teaching literacy as she felt as a child trying to learn it.

The three teachers who were successful and confident literacy learners value literacy,
but do not seem to prioritize literacy teaching and learning to the same degree. They integrate
literacy into other subject areas. Both an integrated and a concentrated focus on literacy
within an elementary classroom program can be effective for student learning. However, it is
interesting to note that those participants who struggled with literacy as students feel strongly
that an integrated approach may not be sufficient for students who struggle. They devote a
considerable portion of their teaching day (or in Rachel’s case, wish they did) modeling,
encouraging, observing, and supporting their students’ literacy learning. They not only offer
engaging literacy learning opportunities, they spend time trying to determine the degree to
which their students are learning. They offer alternate opportunities for those who are not
learning as expected. For those participants who didn’t struggle, this appears not to be the
case. They appear to be confident that all learners will be able to learn literacy skills
successfully using an integrated approach, and that a concentrated effort to “catch” and
address any problems that a student may have is not necessary. They appear to assume that
their students will inevitably succeed in literacy, and that a specific focus on literacy learning
and teaching is unnecessary.
Theme # 5: Teachers Who Struggled as Students Focus on Their Struggling Students

All six participants are caring teachers who aim to meet the learning needs of all of their students. However, their different experiences as students appear to influence the way in which they understand and address struggling learners in their classrooms. Kendra, Gail, and Rachel assume that there will be at least a few students in each of their classes who struggle with literacy learning, and that it is their job to address the needs of these students. These participants’ own experiences have taught them that it is possible for the needs of struggling students to go unnoticed and unaddressed. They are committed to detecting and trying to remediate any literacy learning problems in their classes because they know firsthand the ongoing difficulties and distress that these problems can cause. They observe and assess their students systematically to ensure that they are aware of any difficulties. Their experiences appear to have made them more aware of the complexity of the processes involved in literacy learning and the many ways in which students can struggle with literacy learning.

Looking for struggling students.

Gail.

Gail reports that she focuses on looking for students who may be struggling with literacy learning and are functioning “below the radar” as she was as a student, meaning that their struggles are not obvious to teachers. Her own teachers did not know that she had great difficulty understanding what she read as a child, and that she found aspects of literacy learning difficult and/or boring. As a child, she was able to pretend that she was interested and to keep her marks up, but she felt like a “fraud.” She now sees schools as places where “kids can slip through the cracks.” Her early experience is in the forefront of her mind as she teaches her Kindergarten children. She explains:
I’m always thinking back to [my learning challenges], and I’m always trying to keep an eye out for my students because you want to be able to catch them and give them what they need before they move on to the next step.

When she sees students who appear bored, or who aren’t attempting to read or write, she knows that this may be a sign of an underlying learning issue. She spends one-on-one time with these children, to try to understand the source of their difficulties so that she can plan appropriate activities for them.

**Rachel.**

Rachel is also particularly attuned to students whose struggles with literacy may not be obvious. As a student, she was able to “get by” and her teachers liked her because she was “no trouble,” but she feels that her literacy learning issues were not addressed by her early teachers. As a child, she felt “oblivious” to what her teachers wanted from her. Much of her early schooling in literacy “washed over” her. She does not want this to happen to her students. As a teacher, she has a particular concern for, “the ones who just sit and the lesson goes by and washes over their head and they’re just there. I’m looking out for that, making sure everyone’s on task.” When she sees students looking overwhelmed, she checks to see if they understand what she is expecting from them. Like Gail, she wants to “catch” her students early in their struggles so that she can get them back on track.

**Understanding and compassion.**

**Kendra.**

Not only are these teachers aware that students can and do struggle with literacy learning, and that they need to observe their students closely to determine if they are having any difficulties, they know from their own experiences what struggling can look and feel
like. As a child in Kindergarten, Kendra’s frustrations with literacy learning led to some initial behavioural problems in class. Her lack of English fluency made communication difficult and her inexperience with group learning situations made the day-to-day operations of the classroom bewildering. She initially resisted her teacher’s directions, and did not want to share or co-operate with the other children. She became able to understand and be understood in conversational English fairly quickly and she acclimatized to the life of the classroom. However, this early experience of schooling left its mark.

Kendra’s own experiences as a young English Language Learner, and as a student who had difficulty following directions and cooperating in group learning activities, has led to her holistic view of learning. She situates each of her student’s literacy learning within the wider context of the student’s self-concept, peer relations, behaviour, motivation, and general academic ability and performance. She understands from her own experiences that challenges in reading and writing can lead to problems in other subject areas, disruptive behaviour, and difficulty getting along with other students. She believes that students who have literacy challenges are caught in “one of those vicious circles.” She explains that what she has observed in her classroom is that when students aren’t initially successful with literacy, they are reluctant to attempt reading and writing activities. This in turn leads to a continued lack of success, which is often followed by a low opinion of themselves and to negative social behaviours. Rather than blaming these students for being reluctant to do their work, or for being disruptive, Kendra sees her job as someone who needs to “light the fire” or find out what will help each student to be successful in their literacy learning so that they can break out of this negative cycle.
Rachel.

Rachel has empathy for all of her struggling students, but has a particular focus on the students who are experiencing the same language learning challenge that she did as a child. Her family’s first language is Chinese, but her parents also spoke and read to her in English some of the time when she was a child. She began to learn a third language when she entered a French Immersion program in Kindergarten. Instruction in English in her school began in Grade 4. Her parents were only able to help her with her English school work a little, as their English was limited. They could not help her at all with her French school work. Although English was not her first language, and her parents were unable to support her learning in English, she was not considered to be an English Language Learner (ELL) by her school. Therefore, she did not qualify for English language support. She was expected to perform her English school work at the same level as her native English speaking classmates.

As a teacher, Rachel has several students who find themselves in the same situation. Because the parents of these students can function in English their children were not identified as ELL by the school. They are therefore not eligible for the extra resources or accommodations that are available to identified ELL students. However, these parents do not speak English in their homes to their children and Rachel feels that this negatively affects the students’ writing. She feels that it is unfair that these children do not get any extra help but are expected to achieve the same expectations in English as their native English speaking classmates. She spoke passionately about her concern for these students whose literacy challenges, “really show in their writing and writing style.” She knows from her experience how difficult it can be for students in this situation and she is concerned that the school
A call to action.

For these participants, seeing and understanding is not enough. All three seek to provide the type of teaching strategies, activities and support that they feel they would have benefited from as children. They use their own childhood experiences as a reference point when programming for their struggling students.

Kendra and Rachel.

For Kendra, this involves providing engaging opportunities for her junior and intermediate students to integrate their reading, writing, speaking, and listening skills by researching, writing, and orally presenting their opinions on topics of interest. Rachel strives to be as clear and organized in her presentation of new tasks as possible. She provides a written description, an oral explanation, and a demonstration of any new activity that she introduces to her junior aged students. Furthermore, she checks in with individual students to make sure that they know what is expected of them, and know how to proceed with the task.

Gail.

Gail’s response to reluctant or frustrated beginning readers is to simplify tasks to the point where they can feel comfortable and successful. This may take the form of encouraging students to “read” the pictures in a picture book, or use inventive spelling when writing. She then gently increases the complexity of the tasks at a pace that keeps the students motivated to continue learning. She is not only concerned with providing instruction in the students’
zone of proximal development, but also with their affective response to their learning. She wants her students to be motivated, engaged, and happy to learn.

Gail’s team-teaching situation allows her to compare her perspectives and responses to her struggling literacy learners with her teaching partner, Jill. In contrast to Gail, Jill has always been a strong reader, and loves to read. As Gail says, “Jill can read a novel in a weekend. It takes me a month.” While Gail considers Jill to be a wonderful teacher, she does find that Jill sometimes overlooks things that might be difficult for some students. The perspective that Gail has gained through her own history of reading struggles allows her to act as an advocate for her students who are struggling. She is able to point out to Jill the aspects of an activity that might pose a problem for some students, and to raise the issue of how these students can be supported. She explains:

I’ve found that with my teaching partner, some things will just seem so obvious to her. But then I’ll say, ‘What are we going to do for the kids who can’t or who aren’t comfortable with that, or for whom that is confusing?’ So [my past experiences] have been helpful for those conversations.

For Kendra, Gail, and Rachel their insider knowledge of what it is like to struggle with literacy learning has enabled them to recognize and understand when their students are struggling. They are motivated to help due to their first-hand experience of the pain of unrecognized literacy learning challenges. Furthermore, they seek to put into place practices that will support their struggling learners.

Looking from the outside in.

Kelly, Mike, and Darren are equally compassionate, caring, and dedicated teachers, but their relatively trouble-free early literacy learning appears to make it more difficult for
them to recognize, understand, and address the needs of their struggling literacy learners. All three of these participants enjoyed literacy learning in school and were successful from Kindergarten through High School. Reading and writing came “naturally” to them, and their learning process seemed invisible. All three had begun to read and write before they went to Kindergarten without formal literacy lessons. They seem to have absorbed their literacy knowledge and skills from the abundant school-like literacy learning opportunities in their homes. School literacy learning was equally seamless. In addition to having no direct experience of academic struggles, they had little awareness of what their peers who struggled were going through.

**Darren.**

Darren does not remember noticing any classmates who struggled with literacy learning during his time in elementary school. He was only aware that he and his friends enjoyed school and were successful in all subjects. He says, “I just knew that I was doing okay because I remember my marks and they were fine, B’s or better.” As a teacher looking back, he realizes that there must have been some students who faced academic challenges, but he wasn’t aware of it at the time because it was not his experience. He explains, “I just didn’t experience it so I couldn’t witness what they were going through. But I’m sure that there were problems, I’m sure there were.”

**Mike.**

As a child, Mike was aware that some of his classmates struggled academically, but he didn’t understand why or what it might feel like. He did notice that it was often the students who struggled academically who got into trouble for misbehaviour. He remembers that even as a child he felt compassion for them, as well as a sense of unease. He says, “I
remember thinking ‘What a shame that it’s hard for them.’ Because really, it’s not comfortable to watch somebody have a hard time doing something.”

**Kelly.**

Kelly was very aware that some of her fellow students who were struggling academically when she was in elementary school. She says, “There are kids that pick up on other kids’ weaknesses and I think I was one of those kids. I would have picked up that a child was having more trouble than I was.” Although she was sympathetic with their struggles, she remembers being frustrated with classmates who did not learn as quickly or as well as she did. She explains, “I hated always being held back by the other kids. I hated when kids weren’t able to keep up.” She found this situation particularly difficult to deal with when she was asked to help a weaker student. She says, “I hated the peer conference with the stronger kid and the weaker kid. That bothered me because I was the stronger kid and I hated being held back by the kid that was having a little bit more trouble.”

In her teaching, Kelly uses homogeneous groupings as a result of her unpleasant memories of being asked to help struggling peers. She finds that she can better meet the needs of a group if all of the students are at a similar level. She believes that homogeneous grouping keeps the stronger students from feeling that they are being held back, as she did, but also ensures that the struggling students are not overwhelmed and overlooked in a heterogeneous group.
Compassion from a distance.

Kelly, Mike, and Darren realize that it is difficult for them to understand how their struggling students may be thinking or feeling. It takes an extra effort for them to remember that not all students experience school in the ways that they did. As Mike explains:

I really try to think of the fact that I was just kind of luckily good at most things. I had an aptitude for school. So I try not to think about those kids like me, and try to remember that there’re tons of kids that aren’t quite there and try to hit them.

Darren attributes his school success to his nurturing family and the plentiful learning opportunities they provided for him. He finds it difficult to imagine what it must be like for students who don’t have this advantage. Before the study, Kelly hadn’t really thought about how different her childhood literacy experiences were from her students’ experiences, particularly those students who are struggling with literacy. Through talking about her early literacy experiences in our interviews, she became aware of the richness of her early experiences, and how they contributed to her school success. She explains:

Well, I forget how lucky I was and I forget that some of these kids don’t have that at home. And, you know, that reminds me, I need to understand that my background was very blessed, sort of a rich background in literacy, and I know that my kids aren’t getting the same opportunities at home, some of them.

It’s difficult to find what you’re not looking for.

As mentioned previously, Kelly, Mike and Darren appear to have confidence that all of their students can and will succeed if their classroom literacy programs are engaging. Therefore, they put more energy into creating inviting open-ended learning opportunities
than planning to meet specific learning needs. In contrast to the three participants who struggled as children, they aren’t actively looking for students in their classes who may be struggling. When they do notice students who are lacking in the literacy skills or knowledge that would be expected for their age, they are not as concerned as the participants who struggled as children. They assume that a dose of confidence or enthusiasm, or perhaps just more time, will address the problem.

Kelly, Mike, and Darren all use teaching approaches in their classrooms that have potential for rich literacy learning. In Mike’s hands-on Kindergarten classroom, the students can approach the sand, water, art, or construction table, regardless of their academic level, and find appropriate learning opportunities. Darren begins many activities by introducing an attractive picture book which the students can interpret in many ways. Kelly offers many computer-related options for assignments that are motivating for her intermediate learners. However, these three participants do not spend a great deal of time checking in with each student in a systematic way to ensure that the rich potential of their program is being realized by each student in all areas of literacy. They appear to believe that their primary role as a literacy teacher is to provide engaging opportunities for their students to explore literacy concepts and skills; they don’t appear to recognize that they have a responsibility to take the students’ literacy learning to the next level of skill and understanding. They also appear to be unaware of the need to plan to address specific learning challenges that their students may have.

Table 3 compares four of the participants’ responses to struggling literacy learners. Gail, who struggled with literacy learning as a child, and Mike, who learned school literacy with ease are both Kindergarten teachers. However, the place of literacy within their
programs, and their response to struggling learners is quite different. Similarly, Kendra and Kelly are both Junior level teachers, but their early literacy learning experiences were quite different, as are their responses to struggling literacy learners in their classes.

Table 3

*Responses to Struggling Literacy Students*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Participant</th>
<th>Place of literacy in program</th>
<th>Response to struggling literacy learners</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Gail (Kindergarten teacher)</td>
<td>90 min. daily literacy block&lt;br&gt;all children engage in a variety of engaging reading, writing, listening, &amp; speaking activities&lt;br&gt;enthusiastic model of reading and writing</td>
<td>Close systematic observation and documentation of students’ interests and challenges&lt;br&gt;looking for students who may “fall through the cracks”&lt;br&gt;tailors learning opportunities to meet individual needs&lt;br&gt;focus on confidence, enjoyment and skill growth</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mike (Kindergarten teacher)</td>
<td>10-15 min. read aloud or shared writing&lt;br&gt;Books and writing materials available during activity time (optional)&lt;br&gt;Many other engaging options available including blocks, sand, water, art table&lt;br&gt;Enthusiastic model of reading and writing</td>
<td>No systematic observation or documentation of children’s interests and challenges&lt;br&gt;Assumption that all children will seek out what they need within the choices available&lt;br&gt;Students who do not choose literacy activities are not “ready” and will “catch up” later&lt;br&gt;Focus on confidence and enjoyment</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Participant</td>
<td>Place of literacy in program</td>
<td>Response to struggling literacy learners</td>
</tr>
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<tr>
<td>Kendra (Gr. 4-8)</td>
<td>Dedicated daily Literacy period, Ongoing work on a variety of engaging literacy activities (literature circles, readers’ theatre, writers’ workshop, projects and presentations), Enthusiastic model of reading and writing</td>
<td>Close systematic observation and documentation of students’ interests and challenges, looking for students who may be struggling, including those who misbehave during literacy time, accommodates and remediates in areas of challenge, focus on confidence, enjoyment and skill growth</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Kelly (Gr. 6-8)</td>
<td>Literacy period often used for extra mathematics, Periodic work on engaging literacy activities (speeches, comics, personal reading time), Enthusiastic model of reading and writing</td>
<td>No systematic observation or documentation of children’s interests and challenges, Tries to address obvious learning needs, but doesn’t look for “closet strugglers”, Provides some accommodation, but little remediation, Focus on confidence and enjoyment</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Discussion.**

One might expect that teachers who had been successful literacy learners as students and who love to read as adults might make the most diligent literacy teachers, and those who struggled as students might be reluctant literacy teachers. However, this study suggests that it may not be as simple as that. Kelly and Mike were excellent literacy students and bring confidence and enthusiasm to their teaching, and yet literacy is not a central focus in their program. Their goal is for all of their students to love literacy and be as successful at reading and writing as they were, and yet they don’t have systems in place to detect and address specific students who may not be meeting this goal.
Darren has less control over assessment and planning as an occasional teacher, but he too, shares this view that a positive attitude towards literacy will lead to success for all of his students. Of the three, he has made the most effort to increase his knowledge and skills as a literacy teacher. He uses the knowledge he gained in his additional qualification course in Drama to enliven his literacy teaching. All three of these participants appear to be confident that if they provide engaging literacy learning opportunities, all of their students’ learning needs will be met eventually.

Contrary to what might be expected, Kendra and Gail, who struggled as students, make literacy teaching a central focus of their program, and struggling literacy learners their priority. They reflect on what they believe they needed but didn’t get as students, and do large amounts of professional development in the area of literacy learning and teaching. Both their reflection and their professional development have helped them to create engaging literacy programs that are also rigorous. They closely monitor their students to ensure that they are learning as expected, and plan carefully to address any learning challenges that they see. Kendra refers to this as “overcompensating.” Both she and Gail are keenly aware that literacy was not their strong suit as students, and they worry that they will not be effective literacy teachers. This motivates them to spend extra time and energy to improve their literacy teaching knowledge and practice.

In terms of the literature on multiliteracies pedagogy, it appears that the participants who struggled as students are applying this approach more thoroughly in their teaching. Freebody and Luke (1990) argue that there are four necessary roles for a reader in modern society: code breaker; meaning maker; text user; and text critic. The participants who struggled with some or all of these roles are more aware of the need to focus on all these
roles in their teaching. They ensure that their students are proficient in decoding (code
breakers) and that they can comprehend the material that they read at the whole text level
(meaning maker). They also provide their students with opportunities to use texts for
different purposes (text user) and to critically analyze the underlying values and perspectives
in texts (text critic). For the participants who didn’t struggle with literacy learning, they seem
to assume that their students either are already proficient code breakers and meaning makers,
or that they will learn these skills on their own. They believe there is no need for these roles
to be explicitly taught. These participants focus on the latter two reader roles in their
teaching, text user and text critic. This may work well for students who have already
acquired the first two roles, but can be problematic for students who are struggling in these
areas.

The New London Group (2006) provides another framework for analyzing the
participants’ responses to their struggling students. They describe four elements of
multiliteracies pedagogy. The first is situated practice and involves taking students’
individual backgrounds, experiences, and out of school activities into account when planning
literacy learning activities. All of the participants attempt to bring their students’ interests
into their programs, but the participants who struggled as students take into consideration the
literacy skills, knowledge, and experience that their students bring to the classroom to a
greater degree than the participants who didn’t struggle. They know from their own
experiences that students come to school with different levels of school-type literacy
knowledge and skills.

The second element in the framework is overt instruction. This involves scaffolding
students’ learning through explicit teaching and building on the knowledge and skills that
students bring to school. Once again, the participants who struggled provide more scaffolding for struggling students than the participants who did not struggle. Those who did not struggle appear to assume that this type of explicit teaching is not necessary for their students because it was not necessary for them. They came to school with a great deal of school-type literacy knowledge and skills, and therefore their literacy learning seemed “natural” and automatic.

All of the participants appear to be integrating the third and fourth elements into their teaching. These elements are critical framing, in which students are encouraged to examine the assumptions and perspectives of authors and of themselves as readers, and transformed practice, in which students are encouraged to use the former three elements in their lives outside of school. As in the Freebody and Luke (1990) model, the participants who did not struggle as students assume that they do not need to focus on the more fundamental elements. Their focus is on the use of higher level literacy skills, perhaps because that was their own focus as students.

However, it appears that having struggled as a student is not a sufficient condition for the creation of an eager and diligent literacy teacher. Like Gail and Kendra, Rachel understands and is aware of the importance of literacy learning, and of close observation of students in order to detect learning challenges, but her own struggles as a student and as a preservice teacher have left her feeling overwhelmed. As a consequence, she does not devote much time in her schedule to literacy teaching, or engage in much literacy professional development. In fact, she was so discouraged by her own literacy teaching efforts that in her fourth year of teaching she decided to arrange for another teacher to take it over entirely. Perhaps some degree of struggle as a student that is later overcome can lead to a more thorough and aware literacy teacher, but when the struggle as a student was too great, or was
not sufficiently addressed in school and in preservice, then the teacher is left with awareness of student need, but not the tools to address it.

Chapter Summary

This chapter explored five themes that arise from a cross-case analysis of the data: the degree of match between home and school literacy experiences; how the choice of teaching strategies is influenced by early learning experiences; how teachers’ self-image as teachers, and their goals for their students are influenced by their own early learning experiences; how the priority that teachers give to literacy in their program is influenced by their own early learning; and how teachers who struggled as students focus on struggling students in their teaching. All five themes discuss ways in which the participants’ early literacy learning at home and at school influence their literacy teaching practice. In the next chapter, the influence of the participants’ early learning on their literacy teaching will be further explored through an additional four themes.
Chapter 6:
Findings:
Cross-case Analysis and Discussion (continued)

Introduction

This chapter continues the cross-case analysis and discussion of themes from the previous chapter. Four additional themes, themes 6 through 9, are discussed in this chapter. The sixth theme explores the finding that the participants revealed that subjects that were easiest for them to learn as students are the hardest for them to teach, and vice versa. The seventh theme discusses the ways in which the participants use their own early teachers as role models for their literacy teaching. The eighth theme explores the role of early learning experiences on the quantity and nature of participants’ memories and reflections on their own learning, and how memories and reflection affect teaching decisions. The ninth and final theme discusses how the participants’ early learning appears to function as a filter for their preservice and in-service teacher education.

Theme # 6: Subjects That Were Easier to Learn Are the Harder to Teach and Vice Versa

Surprisingly, the participants find that the subjects that they enjoyed the most, and learned the most easily as students, are the hardest to teach. The opposite is also true: the subjects that caused them some difficulty as students are the ones that they find the easiest to understand how to teach. Kendra, Gail, and Rachel were all strong mathematics students, yet they find mathematics more difficult to teach than literacy. Planning, instruction, assessment, and tailoring their approach to meet specific learning needs are all challenging for them when teaching mathematics. However, due to their own experiences as students, Kendra, Gail, and
Rachel finds that literacy teaching is less of a mystery. They came to literacy teaching with an understanding that literacy learning and teaching are complex, and that it takes a great deal of knowledge and planning to meet the wide range of learning needs that every teacher encounters. Over their first 3 years of teaching they developed their knowledge of specific teaching skills, strategies, and resources in response to their understanding of the demands of literacy teaching.

Kendra.

Kendra considers herself to be “pretty high with [her] math skills,” but she finds it a challenge to understand when her students are struggling with mathematics because it came easily to her when she was a student. As she explains, “I’m not always able to recognize when someone else is having a little difficulty because I never had difficulty in mathematics.” Although she did not struggle with mathematical learning, she knows from her struggles with literacy that teachers can overlook or misunderstand a struggling learner. She also knows from her own experiences that it may be difficult for a struggling student to ask for help publically. In order to address both of these issues, she has her students keep a mathematics journal where they can ask her questions privately. She explains, “It takes the pressure off them having to identify themselves as being deficient in any way.”

Kendra also finds it a challenge to teach those aspects of literacy that came easily to her. She learned spelling and grammar easily as a student, but she has difficulty understanding how to help children for whom it does not come easily. She also struggles when she feels that she can’t use a teaching approach from her own early learning that worked for her. She was successful at the drills that her teachers used to teach spelling and grammar skills, although she did not find them particularly enjoyable. She feels caught
between what was easy for her and what worked for her, and what she feels is considered appropriate according to her preservice and in-service teacher education. She doesn’t feel that it is appropriate to use the strategies that her teachers used with her. She explains:

    I tend to rely on other people’s hints or textbooks to kind of do that. It’s because when I was younger, I was drilled on how to spell, drilled on the grammar rules, and we don’t do that anymore….I don’t want to do the drills, but they certainly do help in a way.

Conversely, the areas of literacy that were most challenging for Kendra as a student are the easiest for her to teach. As a student, Kendra was shy and lacked confidence. She had great difficulty expressing an opinion, interpretation, or argument, particularly orally. Yet as a teacher she makes it a priority to help her students to come to know themselves, to gain confidence to express their opinions, to be flexible enough to change their opinions, and to have the strength to persevere. She says:

    I think my job is to facilitate their voice, to help them find their voice and to find who they are, and to help kids have the confidence to say what they want to say, even if they’re wrong, as long as they feel as if they have the evidence to speak it, and to speak it in a confident way, and then not be afraid, when they’re wrong, to change their opinion and to feel like they’ve been defeated.

**Gail.**

Like Kendra, Gail was a strong mathematics student. Yet, she finds it more difficult to plan her mathematics lessons than her literacy lessons, because she can’t always anticipate what may be challenging for her students. When teaching literacy, she can use her own experiences to guide her. When she saw her teaching partner, who was a strong literacy student, “take certain things for granted” when planning literacy lessons, she realized that she
may be doing the same thing with her mathematics teaching. Her struggles with literacy, as well as the experience of witnessing her teaching partner’s lack of sensitivity for literacy strugglers, made her reflect on her teaching of mathematics:

[My teaching partner] is a reader who loves reading. And so I think she takes certain things for granted. But then it makes me realize that I shouldn’t do that. When I’m teaching math, the students need to understand and communicate with symbols, like in literacy. Math was easy for me, but I know what it is like to struggle with something, so I try to have that viewpoint.

Gail also recognizes that it is a challenge for her to help students who are having difficulty with basic decoding, an area of literacy learning that was easy for her as a student. She says, “The students that are having trouble even just decoding, this is something that I am challenged with as a teacher.” She does not have direct experience with this particular struggle, but she knows that she needs to do something to support them. She works with these students every day, providing them with a variety of experiences and supports in the hope that something will help.

Gail’s greatest area of need as a student, reading comprehension, is her area of greatest confidence as a teacher. She is aware of the Ministry of Education guidelines, and makes a general teaching plan, but she is comfortable following her students’ lead in this area of her teaching. She is confident that she knows when her students are engaged and learning, and can adjust her teaching to both keep their interest and develop their skills. She says:

I don’t like to make my plan too stringent. I have a general idea of what I would like to do, but I’m not very strict about sticking to it. I mean, I know that there are things in the Ministry guidelines that I need or should cover. But if I go off the beaten path, if that’s the way the students are wanting to go,
then I go. Because I want to make sure that they’re still engaged and that it’s appropriate for their learning and development.

Rachel.

Rachel was also a strong mathematics student and continued to study mathematics and science in University. She calls herself a “left brain person,” preferring what she sees as the logical and sequential thinking in mathematics to the more subjective thinking in literacy. Although she was a successful mathematics student and has a strong academic background in mathematics, she finds it difficult to teach. For the first 2 years of her teaching she followed the mathematics textbook closely. In the third year she tried to branch out, but she does not feel that she was very successful. She explains:

I tried. I really tried to look at things outside of the textbook because the textbook is very one-dimensional. So I’ve tried to integrate things more and keep them more current. And I don’t think I’ve done a really good job because I always get overwhelmed by all the stuff that needs to get done.

In addition to having difficulty with planning and organizing her mathematics teaching, Rachel is sometimes at a loss when her students do not understand a mathematical concept that she is teaching. She often does not know how to identify the problem, or know how to explain the concept in a different way. When this happens, she relies on her students to help each other. She describes this situation:

Sometimes I’d be explaining something in math and then someone wouldn’t get it, and then I’d be like ‘Uhhhhhh’, like frozen in class. I would think, ‘Okay, I’m not really sure where to go from here’ and then another kid would raise their hand and say, ‘I think I know how to explain it this way.’ And that would happen a lot, and I would encourage them to do it.
Because Rachel values mathematics education, she experiments with strategies beyond the textbook, and uses her students as resources. One of her main goals is to become a better mathematics teacher. However, she believes that she is not meeting her students mathematics learning needs because a number of them are going to mathematics tutors. She wants this to change. She says, “I would know that I’m improving as a math teacher when I can see the number of students who need to go to an outside tutor decrease because I am filling in the gaps.”

Many aspects of literacy learning were difficult for Rachel as a student, and she finds many aspects of literacy teaching difficult. However, the area of literacy with which she had the most difficulty, that is, understanding and answering questions based on written material, has become the area of teaching in which she has taken the most control. She describes her literacy teaching as becoming more directed over time:

So when I say my English teaching has become more directed, I mean I do my version of English. I teach them Science, I teach them Math, I teach them how to read and answer questions and provide the right answers in an organized way.

By her third year of teaching, Rachel had stopped trying to do what the other teachers in the school were doing, stopped following a commercial literacy program closely, and stopped worrying about the literacy coach’s initiatives. These approaches were confusing and overwhelming for her. They reduced her confidence in her teaching. She found herself in the same situation she had been as a child: unsure what was expected of her, feeling unsuccessful, and not knowing what to do about it. However, when she took a stand and
developed her own literacy goals and expectations, this area of teaching became the one in which she has the most confidence. She explains,

My confidence as a literacy teacher according to what the Board seems to be mandating is zero. My confidence as a literacy teacher according to my standards and my goals is I think I am on my way. The kids know how to read, more than they did before. They know how to interpret, they know how to write. And for those who have problems with grammar or spelling, they might not be improving really quickly but they know that they need work…I am going to work with my standards because it’s the only thing that makes sense to me.

It is interesting that she is able to take a stand and develop her own standards and goals in an area in which she struggled as a child, and admits to still struggling with as an adult, but with mathematics, an area of strength, she feels tied to the textbook and “frozen” when a child does not understand her teaching. Creating her own standards in her literacy teaching could be problematic, but in Rachel’s case, she appears to be tailoring her program to meet what she perceives to be her students’ literacy learning needs.

Always having it easy can make it difficult.

Kelly, Mike, and Darren were successful in all subjects as students, yet the first two do not consider themselves “math people.” In spite of considering themselves to be weaker in mathematics than literacy, Kelly and Mike find mathematics easier to teach than literacy, their strongest subject as students. Darren was equally confident in all subject areas as a student and does not find one subject area more challenging to teach than the others. He feels his challenge lies in meeting the wide range of student ability across the curriculum.
Kelly.

Although Kelly enjoyed all subjects in elementary school, and was successful in all subjects, she was particularly successful in literacy. She was a prolific reader and writer as a child, and even won a national competition for student creative writing. As an adult she still loves to read, but as a literacy teacher she lacks confidence. When she began teaching, Kelly did not feel confident that she had the knowledge necessary to put together an effective literacy program. She had difficulty sorting through official curriculum documents, teaching strategies, advice, and resources from a variety of sources. She explains:

I had no idea what I was going to be doing in Language, and I still have no idea what I’m doing. I’m overwhelmed with how much is out there and how many different things are out there and all these different tools….You know, everyone says you’ve got to do these wikis, graphic organizers, and then there’s- I just can’t get it straight, it’s frustrating.

She did have a clear sense that teaching literacy is very complex, and cannot be reduced to a simple formula. In response to pre-packaged literacy programs she said, “Can you believe someone saying ‘This is how you teach literacy?’ Literacy is not just reading and writing.” She particularly struggles with teaching basic skills, which she does not even remember learning. In her teaching, she prefers to focus on higher level discussions and integrated projects, the kinds of literacy activities that she found engaging as a student. However, she worries that she may not be meeting the needs of all of her students. She says:

But I may be making a mistake in that because I may just be taking how my schooling was and teaching that way. And some of my students may need a little bit more structure, who knows… I know you need to teach specific skills and I understand that but I feel like a lot of time that can embed itself in other
things. And that’s probably where I need to develop - in teaching those skills a little more concretely.

Kelly has more confidence in her mathematics teaching, though less confidence in her knowledge of the subject. As a student, she had to work at mathematics to be successful, particularly in high school, in a way that was not necessary in literacy. She did not take any mathematics courses in university. As she says, “I was never great at math. I was always okay and worked hard and got it. But I don’t have that background.” Because she feels less knowledgeable in mathematics content, she has worked harder on her mathematics teaching than her literacy teaching. She explains, “I’ve worked hard to make it applicable to their lives.” She has also taken an Additional Qualification course in mathematics, the only in-service course she took in her first 3 years of teaching. She regularly consults the Ministry of Education guideline for mathematics, but rarely the one for literacy.

The subject that she felt was her weakest as a student has become the one that she focuses on the most in her teaching. Yet because hard work was all it took for her to be successful in mathematics as a student, she does not have insight into what other strategies may work for struggling learners. She did not need any individualized teaching strategies to help her to succeed. Because her teachers’ strategies worked for her as a student, in mathematics as well as literacy, their teaching methods remained invisible to her. She cannot bring an insider’s perspective when she is faced with students who are struggling. Furthermore, she is surprised when her students do not enjoy or profit from a teaching approach that she enjoyed as a student. With respect to a group problem-solving approach to mathematics, she said:
I kind of just assumed that they’d know how to do it. I didn’t think ‘Oh, I’ve got to really go through the method with them.’ That was a big learning for me. I was saying to myself, ‘Why aren’t they liking this? This is fun.’ Then I realized, they didn’t really have the tools.

Feeling less confident in mathematics has motivated Kelly to spend more time on developing and implementing her mathematics program than her literacy program. It may be that this greater focus, as well as the professional development she has done on mathematics, contributes to her confidence and enjoyment in teaching mathematics.

Mike.

Like Kelly, Mike was successful in all school subjects, but considers literacy to be one of his strongest areas of the curriculum. School-type literacy was infused throughout his early life at home and in the community. His family made a point of including the children in nightly discussions around the dinner table. He particularly enjoyed performing in community theatre, an activity that relies heavily on oral language skills. Interestingly, Mike finds oral language one the most challenging aspects of the curriculum to teach in his Kindergarten program. He was surprised that his students did not have well developed skills in this area when they started school, as he did as a child. He realized by the end of his first year of teaching that he should not have assumed that his students had already developed these skills. He explains:

Speaking and formulating your ideas and saying them. And having a good conversation and being able to talk to somebody and know what they are saying and understand them. And speaking and listening behaviours. All those things I wish I had taught directly because I don’t think the kids are doing them as well as they could. I’d like to have done more teaching on that.
In addition, Mike has always been a strong writer, and yet he finds this a challenging aspect of his teaching. Although writing came “naturally” to him, and he does not remember learning to write, he has many questions about how to teach writing. He says:

I think teaching writing is really hard, and knowing what the balance is between the conventions of writing and letting them express their ideas….Is spelling important? Should we be putting 25% of our day into writing? And what form should it take?

Mike reports that his confidence levels in teaching literacy and mathematics are the opposite of his confidence levels when learning the subjects as a student. While he loved learning literacy at school, early mathematics was merely “fine.” Like Kelly, he started to struggle with mathematics in high school. He explains, “I plateaued with math and then it started to really sink. The higher math was just not, you know, wasn’t easy for me.” He did not pursue mathematics in university. As a teacher, he finds mathematics teaching comes more “naturally” to him. He says, “Well, I guess I have always felt more confident teaching math than I have teaching literacy. It just seems more natural to me.” He considers mathematics to be easier and more straightforward to teach than literacy. He bases his mathematics teaching primarily on one resource book, a text by Van De Walle. He explains how he uses the text:

There’re lots of practical ideas that you can use [in the text]. I’ll read his little section and then I’ll know what the big ideas are, then I just sort of do a few hands-on things with the kids. I mean, the stuff is so basic and the work that you need to do with them is repeated over and over, and they are excited about it because it is fun.
The subject that he found the most challenging as a student has become the one that seems the simplest to teach. Perhaps because he does not have as deep an appreciation for the complexity of mathematics as he does for literacy, he does not have the same types of questions or dilemmas about how to teach it effectively.

**Darren.**

As a supply teacher who teaches a particular class for 2 or 3 months at the most, Darren has a different perspective on teaching than the other participants. He has taught a variety of elementary grades and in special education programs throughout the urban area. He has a wide range of experiences, but they are all short-term. He has not had the opportunity to look back at the end of a year and reflect on his teaching of the same class, or on the students’ learning over a full school year. Nevertheless, his teaching successes and challenges demonstrate the pattern that the other participants appear to demonstrate. Darren was successful throughout elementary school, like Kelly and Mike. Unlike them, however, he felt equally confident in all school subjects throughout elementary, high school, and university. His ease with learning across the curriculum appears to have translated into a teaching challenge that also spans the curriculum: meeting the needs of students with diverse learning needs.

Although Darren’s strengths as a student exceeded those of Kelly and Mike, and his challenge as a teacher appears to be more wide ranging, he has taken a more pro-active approach to this dilemma than the other two. Darren appears to be the most reflective teacher of the three. He attributes this to being older, and to the fact that he has school-aged children of his own. Very early in his teaching career he realized that he did not have the knowledge or experience to help children who had significant learning challenges. He had difficulty
planning and adapting lessons for these children, and supporting them in the way that he knew they needed to be supported. As he said, “I didn’t know anything about Special Education. So I needed to find out and I just felt there was a need for me to know. I think it helps you in any grade.” As a child he had not struggled with any aspect of learning, nor was he aware of the struggles of his classmates. With no personal experience to draw upon, he decided to increase his understanding and improve his practice through taking an Additional Qualification course in Special Education.

Darren’s only area of discomfort as a student was one that he describes as “minor.” He felt that, “presentations were a little concerning. I was shy, so I guess just being put on the spot to do presentations was challenging. I needed to develop a confidence level.” This area of mild struggle as a student, the oral presentation of ideas, has become the easiest and most pleasurable part of his teaching. He understands what it feels like to be embarrassed and unable to express himself as effectively as he would like in front of a group. In order to learn how to help his students with this skill, he took a second Additional Qualification course in Drama. In his teaching he uses Drama throughout the curriculum to help his students explore and express ideas in a fun and non-threatening way. He explains, “And that’s why I use Drama in all areas [of the curriculum] so that the students can express themselves and not feel frustrated like I did.”

Discussion.

Areas of discomfort as students become areas of comfort as teachers.

Kelly, Mike, and Darren did not have any significant struggles in school, yet they all had an area in which they were less comfortable as students than others. This area of discomfort as students has become an area in which they feel most comfortable as teachers.
For Kelly and Mike, the subject with which they had the least comfort as students, mathematics, has become the one they have the most confidence in as teachers. They use more professional resources and attend more professional development in mathematics than in literacy. Moreover, they spend more time preparing and implementing their mathematics lessons than their literacy lessons. In contrast, when teaching literacy they have many questions and are confused and overwhelmed by the array of resources and expectations. They are unsure how to approach teaching literacy, and are surprised by students who struggle with basic skills. Darren, who had the greatest strengths in school learning of all of the participants, recognizes that his teaching challenge spans the whole curriculum: meeting the needs of special education students. His area of challenge, oral presentations, became the focal point of his teaching through the use of Drama.

Struggling in one subject gives insight into teaching other subjects.

As we have seen, Kendra, Gail, and Rachel all struggled with aspects of literacy learning, and find those same areas the easiest to teach. They know what it feels like to struggle, they are able to recognize when students are struggling, and they are aware of the teaching strategies that helped them as students. However, they do not employ just those particular strategies that worked for them. They know from experience that different strategies work for different students, and so they experiment with a variety of strategies, and ascertain what works best for particular students. All three were strong mathematics students, and yet find mathematics teaching challenging. They do not have direct experience with struggling in this subject and so have more difficulty planning for and recognizing student problems. Moreover, they struggle with offering alternate explanations or developing alternate teaching strategies. However, they do not leave it there. They know that their
teaching limitations in this area are a problem and they seek to remedy the situation. Reflecting on their experience of significant struggle in their early schooling in one subject provides them with an outlook that motivates them try to help their students who struggle in other subjects. Kendra provides her students with mathematics journals to record their questions and problems privately, Gail thinks of mathematics as a form of communication to help her to relate it to her literacy teaching, and Rachel has her students act as mathematics resources for one another. In the absence of direct experience of struggling with mathematics learning, their reflection on their literacy struggles allows them to extrapolate strategies that can help their struggling mathematics students.

The greater the struggle, the greater the focus.

All six participants had areas of their school learning as students that were stronger, and those that posed some learning challenges. As we have seen, their strengths as students became their challenges as teachers, and their areas of challenge as students became their areas of focus and confidence as teachers. However, there appears to be a difference between the participants who experienced significant challenges in elementary school, and those who had only minor challenges. Those with minor challenges in an area of school learning, Kelly, Mike, and Darren, became more confident in, and focused on, that area of their teaching, and spent more time preparing and implementing their lessons. However, while they had some understanding and empathy for students who struggled in that area, they did not seem to gain significantly in their understanding how to help struggling learners. Moreover, they were not able to transfer their understanding of struggle in one area of the curriculum to their teaching in areas of the curriculum in which they had been strong students.
The three participants who had struggled significantly as students, Kendra, Gail, and Rachel, also have the greatest confidence in, and most focus on, the areas of the curriculum with which they struggled. Their literacy struggles appear to have given them insight into how to support struggling literacy learners. Furthermore, they have been able to bring this insight, into their teaching of the school subjects that were areas of strength for them as students.

**Theme # 7: Teachers Look to Their Own Early Literacy Teachers as Role Models for Their Teaching**

When asked who their role models were for their teaching practice, all of the participants were able to quickly come up with one or two teachers from their childhood whom they sought to emulate in their teaching. All participants reported they employ the practices of former teachers whom they respected, and who provided opportunities for enjoyable and/or successful literacy learning. Kelly, Mike, and Darren, who had enjoyable and successful literacy learning experiences throughout their school careers, have many positive memories of literacy learning experiences and role models from which to draw. From their many positive experiences, they chose to follow the example of teachers whose teaching approach was particularly enjoyable and engaging. Gail, Rachel, and Kendra, who struggled with aspects of literacy learning in school, have fewer memories of positive experiences with literacy teachers upon which to draw. All three of these participants chose to emulate teachers who helped them to see school and themselves differently, and who formed positive relationships with them.
Gail.

Gail and Rachel were both inspired by their Grade 5 teachers, and try to teach in a similar manner. These teachers had a different approach to teaching than the participants had encountered before. Gail’s Grade 5 teacher was on a work exchange from Australia and brought with her a set of teaching strategies that Gail found both engaging and exciting. Up until this point in her school career, Gail had felt bored and disengaged with the individual paper and pencil approach to literacy she had encountered, and anxious about hiding her comprehension difficulties. Her Grade 5 teacher, Mrs. Grace, engaged Gail with her enthusiasm and through hands-on activities that connected the curriculum to real-life issues. One particularly memorable project that Gail recalls from that year was called “The Marriage Project” in which the students pretended to be married couples balancing a budget. As Gail explains:

We had to pretend to get married to one of the students in the class and then we had to get jobs, figure out our income, buy a house, have a baby and buy baby clothes. Everyone in the class got into it. It was genius.

In another innovative project, Mrs. Grace invited Gail and two fellow students to participate in a teacher research project. She highlighted and celebrated Gail’s strength in writing by asking her and two friends to participate in a video she was preparing on the writing process to be shown to all of the principals in the Board. Being chosen made Gail feel special and also made her feel that her teacher believed in her. She says, “I just remember [Mrs. Grace] having a lot of confidence in me.” The real world connection of both of these projects was a motivating factor for Gail. In addition, Mrs. Grace gave Gail a position of leadership in her weaker literacy areas. Gail was paired with a new student from Japan who
did not speak English, and given the job of helping him with his oral language and reading. Although Gail did not feel that she was a strong reader, or had particularly well developed oral skills, she was able to help this fellow student. Being put in the position of teacher gave Gail confidence in her own abilities. For the first time Gail felt as if a teacher knew her strengths, needs, and interests, and was able to provide the types of learning activities that motivated and engaged her. Furthermore, Mrs. Grace’s confidence that she could succeed in all areas of literacy led Gail to see school, and herself, differently. Gail went from seeing school as a boring place where she needed to pretend to pay attention, to seeing it as a place with engaging activities that she could participate in enthusiastically. Rather than being pre-occupied with hiding her comprehension struggles, Gail began to see herself as a student who was a leader, and who could contribute positively to the classroom.

Like this early role model, Gail makes it a priority in her teaching to be enthusiastic about literacy with her students. She says, “I try to be really, really enthusiastic …I try to create a really positive environment around literacy in general.” Like Mrs. Grace did for her, Gail tries to make literacy fun and meaningful for her students. She gives her students many hands-on opportunities for learning, and ensures that they all have opportunities to be successful. Gail wants her students to feel as she did in Grade 5: confident, competent, and valued.

Rachel.

Rachel’s most inspiring teacher, her Grade 5 teacher Mrs. Henderson, was also a radical departure from the teachers Rachel had encountered up to this point in her schooling. Mrs. Henderson’s teaching strategies were not different than Rachel’s other teachers, but her approach to Rachel’s learning was very different. Rachel reports that her teachers in
Kindergarten through Grade 4 did not address her learning needs adequately. Although she received poor marks in English and French literacy, she did not receive extra help or differentiated instruction. She believes that her teachers did not consider her capable of improvement. Rachel’s teachers liked her because she was cooperative, but they neither helped her nor challenged her to improve. As she explains, “I always felt like the teachers liked me. I’m quiet, I do the work, I don’t get in the teacher’s way. So they liked me, even though I wasn’t producing the work that they needed.” In spite of her teachers’ kindness, her inability to successfully complete her work left Rachel feeling anxious. She says, “I think reading and writing has always produced anxiety.”

Mrs. Henderson was different. Rachel describes her as, “my first real, real teacher. She had standards and she made me meet them.” For the first time, Rachel felt that she was getting the individual attention that she needed in order to understand what was expected of her, and to meet those expectations. Mrs. Henderson had confidence in Rachel’s abilities, and had high expectations of her. Like her parents, Mrs. Henderson was tough on Rachel when she didn’t meet expectations, but then helped her to understand how to improve. Rachel explains:

I think she taught me similar to how my parents treated me. If I’d done something wrong academically, then I’d have to talk to her and she’d completely tear me apart. You know, with my parents it would not be academic behaviour. She’d tear me apart and I’d feel tiny. But from there, after deconstructing me she would reconstruct me and say, ‘Okay, now, what do we have here? What do we have to build with. Now this is good. Now you can build on top of this and on top of that.’ So there was always hope after.
It is interesting to note that Rachel found this “tough love” approach far more affirming and effective than the benign neglect of her earlier teachers. Rachel reports that she was afraid of Mrs. Henderson at the time, but also had “huge respect” for her. She recognized that Mrs. Henderson had pushed her to a “whole new level.” She explains:

In Grade 5 I realized the whole idea of putting work into something, and checking to see if your work matched up with the standards. And if it’s a good match, then you did a really good job and that’s more gratifying.

Mrs. Henderson took a great deal of time with Rachel. As Rachel says, “She must have spent a lot of time on me. I don’t know how she did the whole class.” In addition to her belief in Rachel’s ability to succeed, and the individual time and attention she gave her, Mrs. Henderson was also very specific with respect to what Rachel was doing right, what she was doing wrong, and what she needed to do to improve. Rachel began to feel differently about school and about herself as a learner. Before she felt that school was confusing and overwhelming, and this made her feel powerless and hopeless. In Grade 5 her teacher’s expectations made sense and she knew what she needed to do to meet them. Rachel saw herself as someone who was expected to succeed, and who could be successful at school.

Rachel is very deliberate about following in Mrs. Henderson’s footsteps. She is ‘friends’ with her on Facebook, and has told her that she is trying to follow her example. Like her role model, Rachel takes the time to work with students individually to ensure that they know what they need to do to be successful. She is also very direct with her students about what they need to do to improve. She explains:

And many times I’ve taken the extra time to sit down with kids and show them a rubric and get them to grade their own work or get them to grade other
people’s work. And I say, ‘Okay, look, this isn’t working and you need to get this.’

Kendra.

Like Gail and Rachel, Kendra was quick to acknowledge teachers who were influential in her literacy learning, and after whom she models her own teaching. Kendra cites two teachers who stand out for their ability to help her in her areas of school struggle. The first is her Kindergarten teacher, Mrs. Bradley. Kendra’s entry into the school system was frustrating and bewildering to her. She had not been in any other group learning situation such as nursery school or group lessons of any kind, and she therefore did not know how to follow class routines or work cooperatively with the other children in this setting. In addition, she did not speak English fluently. Kendra was angry that the teacher and other children did not understand what she was saying. Mrs. Bradley helped Kendra to cope with this situation by being “very gentle” and using “an alternative approach to teaching.” Kendra was given the option of working alone at times, and the choice of expressing herself through visual arts. In addition, Mrs. Bradley’s use of music throughout the program helped Kendra to learn to speak English. As Kendra explains, “[Mrs. Bradley] was really good at integrating music into the program…and so I really caught on to the rhythm of the words based on the music we performed. I learned to speak English quickly that way.” Kendra believes that Mrs. Bradley’s extensive use of the Arts helped her learn to read as well as speak English. She says, “She was very good at visual arts so we did a lot of that. She tricked us into reading with the arts and it was very helpful.”

Kendra believes that Mrs. Bradley’s arts-based approach allowed her to become functional in English quite quickly and to build a foundation for reading and writing. Mrs.
Bradley’s gentle and flexible manner allowed Kendra to overcome her fear and confusion and made her feel that she was a welcome addition to the class, and that she could be successful at school. As a teacher, Kendra wants to play this role for her students. She says, “I try to integrate music and we do poetry based on music…I’m okay with integrating Art into pretty much everything.” Like her role model Mrs. Bradley, Kendra is as concerned with her students’ social and emotional development as she is with their academic progress.

Kendra’s second role model comes from near the end of her school career. It wasn’t until High School that Kendra again had a teacher who understood and was able to address the areas of literacy with which she struggled. Mr. McKnight, an English and Drama teacher, helped Kendra to “find her voice.” Through Drama and debating Mr. McKnight helped Kendra to gain the ability to think through her ideas clearly, to garner her evidence, and to confidently express her opinions. She explains:

And I think that [debating] really kind of got me out of my shell and made me feel like when I said something, I was saying it to the best of my ability and explaining it as much as I could, so I felt supported by the thinking process.

Kendra believes that this type of support for her thinking processes had been missing in her literacy education up to that point. Her basic reading and writing skills had been strong since her early schooling, but her oral skills and higher level thinking skills had not been sufficiently addressed. Mr. McKnight helped her to see herself differently. Kendra describes herself as a “quiet and shy kid” who didn’t feel heard as a child. She values the thinking and speaking abilities and the confidence that she gained in this High School class, but wishes it had come sooner. She says, “It’s a goal that I had as a high schooler, but I wish I had had at a younger age, just having a better sense of myself and being more confident in what I had to
say and that other people would want to listen to it.” Without prompting, Kendra immediately links her own learning experience to her teaching:

I try to instill that in the kids as well so when you say something, on what basis are you saying this? Where is this coming from? What do you want to achieve? What do you want people to believe? What do you want people to hear?

As is the case with her use of the Arts in her teaching, Kendra incorporates this emphasis on thinking and speaking clearly and convincingly not just because it worked for her, but because she believes that it works for her students. She says:

And it helps with my insecure kids because if you’re insecure, you don’t want to say anything because you don’t want to appear foolish, but if you have thought it through first, it gives you a little bit more fuel to jump into the fray.

Kendra wants her students to experience activities and approaches that were effective for her, and that were modeled by these two teachers.

All three participants who struggled with literacy learning as students chose for their role models teachers who were able to address their area of struggle in a positive way. These role models helped them to experience success in an area that was causing them considerable stress and frustration. They took the time to get to know the participants, recognized their needs and their potential, and worked closely with them to help them to succeed. They were able to establish positive caring relationships with them, and provide the teaching strategies and support that they needed. These role models stand out for these participants because this type of teaching/learning relationship happened so rarely in their experiences as students. As
teachers, these participants strive to emulate these teachers who made such a dramatic difference in the way they viewed school and themselves as learners.

**Role models chosen for different reasons.**

The three participants who enjoyed success in literacy learning throughout their school years, Kelly, Mike, and Darren, also had influential teachers who serve as models for their teaching. However, these teachers played different roles in the early lives of these participants than the former group’s influential teachers. Kelly, Mike, and Darren always enjoyed school, had good relationships with their teachers, experienced academic success, and saw themselves as capable learners. The teachers they chose to emulate did not initiate a breakthrough in their image of themselves, of school, or of their relationship with teachers. Their learning experiences with their teachers were less dramatic and profound than those of the participants in the first group in that they did not contribute to a new perception of school, of learning, or of themselves as learners. Rather, they offered an enhancement of an already pleasurable and successful experience with school literacy, and a continuation of the literacy experiences in their out of school lives.

**Kelly.**

Both Kelly and Mike chose their most influential teachers from the period of their elementary school lives when they switched to specialized programs. Kelly was taught by her role model, Mr. Philips, for both Grades 4 and 5 in a Gifted program. Kelly cites Mr. Philips as, “my inspiration as a teacher.” She strives to create the same atmosphere, teach using some of the same strategies as Mr. Philips. She hopes to inspire her students the way that she was inspired in his class. Kelly remembers her years in his class as fun, challenging, and motivating. She says, “Everything was fun and he challenged us and he read to us – I
remember he read *The Hobbit* in Grade 5, which was great. And we did Art and he brought everyone to their best.” Kelly felt challenged but not overwhelmed in his class, “I remember everything was not super hard, but challenging….I remember never being overwhelmed by things.”

Just as Mr. Philips did for his students, as a teacher Kelly uses her knowledge of her students’ interests to create activities that she hopes her students will enjoy and find motivating. She, too, reads to her students to engage them with literature. Kelly particularly appreciated the integrated projects in Mr. Philips’ class. Rather than teaching the subject areas separately, and assessing student learning through simple exercises or tests, Mr. Philips integrated several subject areas in his teaching, including Language and Art, and assigned complex projects. As a student, Kelly found that these projects added interest and excitement to her learning. She says, “We weren’t allowed to get away with something easy and something simple. We’d always have these great projects, nothing was boring.” Kelly had always enjoyed literacy at school, and had been successful in all of her previous teachers’ classes, but Mr. Philips offered her opportunities for an increased level of engagement and intellectual challenge. This type of engagement with ideas and intellectual challenge was similar to the way in which Kelly’s family engaged with ideas at home. She was well prepared to engage with complex ideas at school, and found the process to be familiar and motivating.

Mr. Philips serves as a role model for Kelly. He had a style and standard of teaching that she aspires to emulate. She says, “I want to be as great as I remember him being. I want to inspire my kids, but I know that they’re inspiring me.” In addition to being a source of inspiration and practical ideas for her teaching, Kelly also imagines how valuable Mr. Philips
would be as a teaching colleague if they taught at the same school. She does email him from time to time about teaching matters, but wishes she had an opportunity to work more closely with him. She says, “I’d love to work at a school where he’s working.”

*Mike.*

Like Kelly, Mike chose his influential teachers from the first 2 years of a specialized program that he entered at Grade 4. Moving to an Arts-focused school allowed Mike to bring his out of school interest in theatre into his school life. Both his Grade 4 teacher, Mrs. Henry, and his Grade 5 teacher, Mr. George, encouraged him to pursue his interests within their literacy programs. Mike engaged in literacy in a personally meaningful and purposeful way by reading and writing theatre scripts and performing in plays. In addition, in this new program he experienced more opportunities for collaborative learning, and for incorporating the Arts into all of the curriculum areas than he had at his previous school. These teachers took the time to get to know Mike’s interests outside of school and encouraged him to pursue these interests at school. Moreover, they shared their own interests with the class, and brought their interests into their teaching. Although Mike had been successful with the traditional approach to literacy employed by his earlier teachers, he appreciated the new found opportunities to explore literacy in creative and diverse ways at his new school.

In his teaching Mike tries to incorporate the values and practices that he admired in these two influential teachers: encouraging and sharing personal interests; fostering creativity; and accepting different ideas. As Mike explains:

Those teachers that I remember most fondly are the ones where there was a shared interest. I think that has influenced my practice. I know that was important to me, to feel like they were interested in what I was doing. And
their creativity. I try to get some creativity out of [my students] and let them do their thing the way they want to do it. I try to be very accepting of the different ideas that they bring up. That was true of the teachers that I really cared about.

As was the case with Kelly, Mike’s move to a new program, and his work with his influential teachers there, allowed him to increase his already positive experience with school literacy. These teachers provided an even stronger link between Mike’s home and community experiences with literacy, and his school literacy learning. In his teaching, Mike seeks to recreate this teaching approach that was so enjoyable and motivating for him as a student.

**Darren.**

Darren’s most influential school teacher, after whom he tries to model his teaching, also represents a strong link to his home literacy learning. Mrs. Carter, Darren’s Kindergarten teacher, had a similar temperament and approach to learning to Darren’s mother and grandmother. All three women made learning to read and write seem natural and stress-free. Under his mother and grandmother’s tutelage, Darren entered school already feeling successful as a reader and writer. In Mrs. Carter’s classroom, Darren was able to maintain the warm and affectionate association with reading he had developed at home. He describes Mrs. Carter’s approach to teaching in general, and to teaching reading in particular, as, “very calm, very nurturing.” At school, Mrs. Carter made books seem, “something you can cuddle up with. That’s what I remember from Kindergarten.” Darren remembers the focus in the Kindergarten class was on developing children’s interest in reading and writing, and forming positive associations with literacy learning.
Following in Mrs. Carter’s footsteps, Darren attempts to provide his students with positive experiences with literacy learning. He sees himself as a calm and nurturing teacher, and believes that this approach makes learning more appealing for his students. He says of himself, “I feel I have a friendly demeanor and I think that takes you a long way…the students don’t feel threatened.” He, too, seeks to develop his students’ interest in reading and writing, in the belief that this will help them to become more effective readers and writers. He explains, “I think you need to encourage and develop students so that they’re interested in reading. There needs to be a passion there for them to read and they need to be excited about the books they’re working on.”

**Discussion.**

*Influential teachers play different roles in learning and teaching.*

As we have seen, all six participants can easily point to one or two teachers from their early schooling who were particularly influential in their learning as students, and who continue to be influential now that they are teachers. However, there appears to be differences in the role these teachers played when the participants were students, and the role that their memory continues to play in the participants’ teaching. For those who struggled with literacy, their role models made a dramatic difference by addressing their area of literacy struggle effectively. They forged a type of positive student/teacher relationship that these participants did not experience elsewhere in their elementary years. In their role models’ classrooms, the participants felt that school literacy learning was interesting and made sense. They experienced success, and began to see themselves as capable. They emerged with a new sense of competence and confidence. This gave them a new perception of themselves as literacy learners and hope for their future as literacy students. As teachers,
they wish to emulate these role models so that they, too, can make this type of fundamental
difference in the lives of their students. They choose to use specific teaching and learning
strategies related to their area of struggle that their role models employed. While this may
benefit their students who struggle in similar ways, a potential negative impact of this
approach is that it may leave these teachers with less time for enrichment activities.

For Kelly, Mike, and Darren, the teachers after whom they model their teaching do
not represent a stark departure from their other elementary teachers. Throughout their
elementary years, all three felt that school literacy made sense and that they were capable of
being successful at it. They had positive relationships with their teachers, who recognized
and celebrated their literacy accomplishments. Rather than providing opportunities for these
participants to forge a new identity as literacy learners, their role models offered them the
opportunity to enhance their already positive and successful experience with literacy
learning. Their pre-existing engagement and motivation to learn literacy were heightened by
the approach of these role models. As teachers, these participants seek to engage and
motivate their students in the same way. However, not all of their students may have the
same skills and experiences that would enable them to benefit from this approach. A
potential negative impact of this approach is that their focus on enrichment may allow them
less time to pay attention to students who need more targeted teaching strategies.

It is interesting to note that while all six participants initially assumed that the
teaching practices that worked for them as children would work for their students, only the
participants who struggled as children experimented to determine if this is true. From their
own experiences they know that not all strategies work for all students. They observe their
students closely to determine the extent to which particular strategies and approaches are
working for particular children. The participants who experienced success with all the teaching approaches they encountered as students, employ the strategies they enjoyed most, confident that they are equally relevant and enjoyable for all of their own students. As teachers, they approach teaching in a similar way to their role models, in the belief that all of their students will experience the same heightened level of engagement and motivation as they did.

Lortie’s (1975) notion of the apprenticeship of observation is useful in the analysis of the findings in this theme. Lortie argues that preservice teachers’ years of observing their teachers when they were students provided them with a type of apprenticeship into the teaching profession. However, as students they were not aware of their teachers’ goal setting, planning, student assessment, or analysis of their teaching. In addition, as students they did not “perceive the teacher as someone making choices among teaching strategies” (Lortie, 1975, p. 63). This leaves many preservice teachers with a simplistic view of teaching. It appears that Kelly, Mike, and Darren may be attempting to reproduce aspects of their role model’s teaching approach without fully appreciating their teachers’ planning and assessment processes. Because their teachers’ approach was appropriate and successful for them, their teachers’ deliberate pedagogical choices remained invisible. They are reproducing the aspects of their role models’ pedagogy that was visible, such as engaging integrated or arts-focused projects and activities, but without the detailed planning and assessment that happened outside of their view.

In contrast, Kendra, Gail, and Rachel do not seem to have fallen prey to the negative effects of the apprenticeship of observation. They do not seem to have this simplistic view of teaching. As students, they were painfully aware that their teachers were making different
pedagogical choices in their literacy program, many of which did not work for them. It may be that the complexity of the literacy learning process is more evident to those who struggle with learning. As teachers, they are more aware that literacy teaching is also a complex process and that they need to make appropriate choices among the many teaching strategies available to them in order to meet the needs of all of their students.

**Theme # 8: Memory and Reflection Are Influenced by Early Learning Experiences**

When I interviewed the participants about their own early literacy experiences over the course of their first 3 years of teaching, I discovered a wide range in terms of the quantity of their early memories, the specificity and emotional intensity of their memories, and the degree to which they consciously reflected on their early memories for the purposes of their teaching. The participants’ memories spanned a continuum, from those having a great deal of vivid memories that they consciously referred to in their teaching, to those that hadn’t reflected much on their own early learning, nor made many connections to their teaching before the study began. Interestingly, Kendra, Gail, and Rachel, who struggled with aspects of school literacy, had the most vivid memories of school learning, had reflected the most on their early learning, and had made the most conscious use of those memories in their literacy pedagogy.

**Kendra.**

Kendra would fall at one end of the continuum. She has many clear memories of wishing she had more confidence at school and was better able to organize and present her thoughts. She felt that neither her family nor her teachers or peers at school could “hear [her] at that point in [her] life.” She calls this her “struggle to find [her] voice.” She remembers
wishing that she had the confidence and skills to “say what I had to say, and that other people would listen to it,” both orally and in writing. In our first interview, before we had even begun to speak about her early learning memories, she continually made links between her teaching and her own learning. She had already reflected extensively on her own early literacy education and was consciously using those memories to guide her teaching. She believes that there is a strong link between how she learned as a child and how she teaches. As a result of our conversations over the course of the study, she indicated that she would like to explore this link further. She says, “I think it is so important to actually think about those things because it really does help the planning. It really helps with the understanding of where the kids are at…to actually draw it out is something I’d like to try more of.”

Gail.

Gail, whose struggles were in the area of reading comprehension as well as oral expression, also has many vivid memories of her early school literacy learning. She remembers trying to hide the fact that she did not understand what she was reading and her fear of being called upon for oral responses. In one of our interviews, she recounted the specific details and strong emotional impact of an incident in which her Grade 2 teachers reduced her to tears. She describes the incident, “I remember just getting flustered and just being put on the spot and I just couldn’t answer and she made me feel really stupid.” Like Kendra, Gail had already done a considerable amount of reflection and had made many connections between her early learning and her current teaching in her first year in the classroom. She explains, “I’m very very aware as a teacher going forward, because of my past experiences and my past teachers, of things that are really, really important.” Over the course of the 3-year study, she reflected further, became more aware of these connections,
and explored them with her family. Her reflection has led to her belief that her experiences as a learner strongly impact her teaching in a positive way, allowing her to be “hyper-aware and so concerned” about students who have the same struggles that she had. She is vigilant in her observation of her students to ensure than none “fall through the cracks” as she believes that she did.

Rachel.

Like the other two, Rachel has distinct memories of what didn’t work for her with respect to literacy learning at school. She remembers being “oblivious” to her teachers’ expectations and giving up in the face of continuing to earn poor marks on reading and writing assessments. She does, however, also have detailed memories of the Grade 5 teacher who helped her to succeed at school literacy for the first time. Rachel had initially not reflected on her early learning to the same degree as the other two, and was not conscious of drawing upon her early learning in her teaching. However, when I asked her how she plans her lessons for her students, she replied that she tries to plan activities that she would have enjoyed and understood as a student. It was during our interview process that she began to realize that she had been reflecting and acting on her own learning history in her teaching, but, as she put it, “without that label.” Through reflection prompted by the study, and by exploring the connections she made during the study, she came to believe that her learning history has had a positive impact on her teaching. She explains, “So because of that [her understanding of what it is like to struggle], when I have the energy to, I’m able to come up with really enriching experiences for kids.”
Darren.

Darren, Kelly and Mike, who didn’t struggle with school literacy, would fall at the other end of the continuum with school memories that were more limited in quantity, and indistinct. They had done very little reflection on their early learning and the influence it may have on their teaching. Darren has warm, positive, general memories of being successful in school literacy, but few specific or emotionally-charged memories. He has more specific memories of literacy learning at home, which he describes as “beautiful.” At the beginning of the study, he was convinced that his literacy experiences at home and school contributed positively to the person he is, but he didn’t think that his early learning was a factor in his teaching, since he uses very different teaching methods than his teachers used. Darren’s teachers were very teacher-centred and textbook-centred, while he strives to be very child-centred and hands-on in his teaching. Through reflection prompted by the study, he came to believe that the link between his learning history and his current teaching lies in the way he wants his students to feel. He felt successful and proud of his learning as a student at school, and was surrounded by a supportive learning community at home. As a teacher, he wants to create a supportive learning community in his classroom, and provide experiences that allow all of his students to feel successful, albeit through different types of experiences and activities than his teachers used. By the end of the study, he was convinced of the power of teacher reflection. He questioned whether teachers could be effective in the classroom if they didn’t make conscious use of their learning history in their teaching. He explains, “When you are not able to bring who you are to the table, it’s really just acting. It can only go so far.”
Kelly.

Kelly and Mike share Darren’s vague but positive memories of school literacy learning. Initially, both Mike and Kelly were reluctant to entertain the idea that their early literacy experiences at home and at school played any role in their teaching. Kelly considers herself to have been very independent as a student because she did not seek help from her parents with her homework. As a teacher, she believes she has continued to be independent because she does not seek her parents’ help with her teaching, although both parents were teachers. She explains, “I never would run to my parents for help as a kid…and that’s probably how I am now.” Once she began to reflect on my questions about her literacy experiences at home, she began to see that although she hadn’t sought their help, her parents had “set [her] up for success” through the literacy environment that they had provided for her. She reported that our first interview about her early learning “blew [her] mind.” She went to her parents’ house right after the interview and thanked them for their contributions to her learning and to her teaching. Over the 3 years of the study Kelly did a great deal of reflecting on her own early learning and the influence it has had on her teaching. She changed her mind about the importance of making connections between her early learning and teaching. At the end of her third year of teaching she said, “Our teaching is, not based on, but heavily anchored or heavily pillared by our previous experiences.” For Kelly, this new understanding was particularly significant in the area of understanding her students. Because she now realized how important her early learning at home was to her later school success, she has a new understanding of how challenging her literacy program could be for students who did not have the benefit of the types of literacy experiences that she had at home.
Mike.

Mike had so few early learning memories at the beginning of the study that he needed to call his mother to ask her about his early learning. Jogged by his mother’s memories, and my questions, Mike did remember a fair bit about his early literacy learning over the course of the study. Through reflection, he also came to see several connections and parallels between his early learning and his teaching. From seeing no connections between his early learning and teaching at the beginning of the study, he eventually shifted to acknowledging that his learning history plays a minor role in his teaching. The major influences on his teaching, he believes, are the theoretical and practical teaching resources that he reads, and the examples of good teaching that he witnesses in other classrooms. He explains, “I’ve read theory and I’ve learned about what was the best way to teach kids, and that’s what I am applying.” Despite believing that his own early learning plays only a minor role in his teaching, he did value the opportunity to be part of a study that encouraged him to reflect on his teaching. He says, “It’s nice to sit down and sort of think about what’s impacting your practice and to make sure that those are good things that are.”

Discussion

All of the participants had memories of their early literacy learning, and either already saw, or came to see some connections between their learning history and their teaching over the course of the study. However, those who struggled with literacy learning in school had a greater number, and more intense memories of early school literacy. Moreover, they had reflected on those experiences and consciously used them to develop their teaching. Those participants for whom school literacy was easy and uneventful had fewer memories and they were less emotionally-charged. Unlike the first group, they had reflected very little on how
their early learning may be influencing their teaching. All of the participants in the study came to see more connections between their early learning and their teaching during the course of the study, and also came to value the reflective process imbedded in the study, to greater or lesser degrees.

When I asked the participants about their experiences with reflective practice in preservice, they replied that they had to do “endless” reflections on course readings, their lesson plans, and activities that they carried out in practicum. They reported that they did not find these types of reflections very helpful or interesting. Three participants also remembered being asked to write about their early learning in a preservice course. However, none of the participants had ever been asked to reflect on their early learning and to connect their learning to their current teaching. As we have seen, some of the participants had engaged in this type of reflection before the study, but the majority had engaged in very little reflection that helped them to understand how their choice of teaching strategies, their goals for their students, their image of themselves as teachers, and their understanding of their students are related to their own learning experiences as students. In their in-service learning, reflective practice was often referred to, but never explained in sufficient detail.

In their review of the professional development literature on teacher reflection, Marcos et al. (2011) found that reflection is often recommended as a form of professional development for teachers but the process of reflection and of integrating the results of reflection into practice are not clearly articulated. They synthesized the definitions of reflection found in the literature into three main components that are imbedded in a cyclical and recursive process: awareness raising; problem-solving; and construction of professional knowledge (Marcos et al., 2011).
The participants’ attitude toward traditional teacher reflection as it was advocated in preservice and in-service is in keeping with the authors’ findings in the literature. The participants knew that reflection was a practice that was widely recommended, but they were unclear about how to use the suggested reflection practices to improve their professional knowledge or practice. However, the participants who had struggled as students had engaged in a type of reflection that had not been specifically advocated. They reflected on their own difficulties with school literacy as students when planning, implementing, and assessing their classroom literacy program. They engaged in the three components of reflective practice identified in the review to a far greater extent than those who had not struggled as students. The early literacy struggles that Kendra, Gail, and Rachel experienced raised their awareness of the problems that students can face when learning literacy in school. Reflecting on their own experiences prompted them to take a problem-solving approach to their teaching. When they observed a student who was struggling with literacy learning, they experimented with different approaches in an effort to help the student succeed. Reflecting on the successes and challenges of their problem-solving efforts led to the construction of professional knowledge.

In contrast, the participants who had not experienced significant struggles with school literacy learning were far less aware of the literacy learning struggles that their students may be facing. They appeared to be unaware that their own literacy learning history led them to assume that their students would be successful if they were sufficiently engaged with their classroom literacy programs. This assumption led to a belief that there was no need to take a problem-solving stance to their teaching because all of their students would eventually be successful at school literacy as they had been. Because they did not feel the need to problem
solve in their area of their teaching, they had a reduced opportunity for the construction of professional knowledge.

Although this research study was not intended to be an intervention, participating in the study and being asked to reflect specifically on their early learning and their current teaching raised the awareness of this learning/teaching dynamic for all of the participants. For those who had already begun the process of this type of reflection, the study motivated them to continue to problem solve and construct new professional knowledge. However, the participants who had not struggled experienced the most dramatic changes as a result of engaging in the reflective practice inherent in the study process. They went from considering their own learning as students to be irrelevant to their teaching, to realizing the degree to which their early literacy learning experiences at home pre-disposed them to success with school literacy. Furthermore, they began to see that their experiences at home and at school led them to hold certain assumptions and beliefs about school literacy learning. They began to see that these assumptions and beliefs informed their teaching and assessment practices, and may not hold true for students with different literacy histories. This new awareness, in turn, began the process of new professional knowledge about the challenges that some children face in learning literacy in school. Problem-solving and changes in practice had only just begun for these participants by the time the study ended. The findings of the study indicate that this type of reflective practice is achievable and valuable for all teachers, but for teachers who were successful with school literacy as students, the reflective process of awareness-raising, problem-solving, and the construction of new professional knowledge about the intersection of their early literacy learning and current teaching is a long one, and requires a concentrated and systematic effort.
Theme # 9: Early Literacy Learning Functions as a Filter for Preservice and In-Service Learning

The six participants in the study all attended a 1-year post-baccalaureate preservice program at the same large urban university. Although they were in different cohorts, with four qualified in the primary/junior division while the other two qualified in the junior/intermediate division, their formal preparation for teaching was comprised of similar elements: university-based instruction comprised of methods and foundation courses, and practice teaching placements in elementary school classrooms. The participants also share another similarity. All six feel that their preservice program left them unprepared to teach literacy in the elementary panel. However, the ways in which they experienced their literacy preparation in preservice differed. Their experiences appear to be influenced by their own early literacy learning as children. In the first part of this section, the preservice university-based and classroom-based experiences of the participants who struggled with early literacy learning, Kendra, Rachel, and Gail, will be discussed. This will be followed by an examination of the preservice university-based and classroom-based experiences of Mike, Kelly, and Darren, who did not face any struggles with literacy learning. Finally, the in-service experiences of all of the participants will be analyzed. These experiences include the learning and support offered to them through induction programs, and the in-service opportunities offered to all teachers.

More of the same for those who struggled with literacy.

Kendra and Rachel.

The three participants who struggled with aspects of literacy learning in elementary school faced similar challenges in their preservice literacy course. Kendra and Rachel were
frustrated by the large group, transmission-style teaching approach used by their preservice literacy instructors. They both referred to this as a “talking head” approach. In addition, Kendra was frustrated that her professors talked about topics such as program planning and assessment, but didn’t give the preservice teachers enough specific strategies or tools, or opportunities to practice using the ones that they were given. She felt that her instructors’ approach didn’t match her learning style. As a child, she was a “hands-on” learner, and as an adult, she still needs to have concrete learning experiences. With respect to the topic of assessment in literacy, Kendra says, “We talked about it. There were overhead projections, that sort of thing, but it would have been nice to have things that I could hold. I’m one of those people who needs to touch and try.”

Rachel also felt that the literacy learning challenges that she had as a child resurfaced in her preservice program. She experienced her preservice literacy course as a great deal of verbal instruction with few opportunities to see the recommended teaching practices modeled or to practice them herself. As she explains:

The idea of sitting and just discussing and watching things about teaching, but not actually just getting in there and getting your hands dirty, it’s like the link wasn’t there. How could you learn to do something when you are not actually doing it?

In addition to wishing that she had more modeling and practical experiences in her literacy course, she also wished she had more feedback on how she could improve her lesson plans. Her experiences in her preservice literacy course reminded her of her challenges as a student. In both situations she was unsure of her teachers’ expectations, the relevance of the learning activities, and her ability to succeed at the assigned tasks. Her preservice literacy
experience reminded her of her own childhood and led her to make a commitment not to
teach her own students in that way. She says, “It was frustrating, all that sitting and listening.
It made me remember what it was like as a kid and how I don’t want to teach my students
that way.”

_Gail._

Gail experienced a more active, hands-on approach in her preservice literacy course
than the previous two participants did, but she still came away feeling ill-prepared to teach
literacy. She describes her preservice course as active but insufficient. She explains, “There
was drama that we all did, and we did a little bit on how to use a picture book, but in terms of
teaching a child to read, I don’t really feel that I got much from the program.” As was the
case with her elementary schooling, Gail was challenged by the lack of connection to real
world applications in her preservice literacy course. She wanted more specific information
and guidance on planning, implementing, and assessing literacy lessons for beginning readers
and writers. Furthermore, she wanted to learn more about language development and
language learning. She says, “I feel like I could have used more of a foundation of what’s
happening when people are acquiring language. Like how you learn to speak it, read it, write
it, right from the beginning.” Gail felt that her preservice literacy course was the weakest
component of her preservice program. She says, “I didn’t come away with much knowledge
or confidence to teach literacy.” Although Kendra, Rachel, and Gail had different literacy
instructors during preservice, they all felt that their needs as learners and as future teachers
were not sufficiently met.
Practice teaching more helpful.

**Kendra.**

It is not surprising that Kendra, Gail, and Rachel found the practice teaching components of their preservice program more satisfying, given their preference for active, contextualized learning. Kendra found her practicum placements to be a very useful and satisfying aspect of her preservice year. One of her two classroom placements was in a Grade 4 class, the grade to which she was assigned for her first 2 years of teaching. She enjoyed working alongside the classroom teacher and developing and delivering lessons within the teacher’s overall plan. Kendra notes that this placement allowed her to get to know the Grade 4 curriculum. As a teacher Kendra’s literacy activities and approach in her own class are less traditional than her associate teacher’s were, but she still went back to seek her advice during her first year of teaching.

**Gail.**

Gail also valued her practicum placements over her university-based instruction during preservice. She says, “The placements were invaluable in terms of the preservice program. I mean, that’s where I feel like you do all your learning if you have a good partnership with the teacher in the classroom.” One of her placements, in a Junior and Senior Kindergarten, corresponded to the grades that she taught in her first 3 years of teaching. Gail appreciated being able to observe and participate in the day-to-day planning and delivery of the Kindergarten program. Although she does not seek to emulate every aspect of the teaching practices that she witnessed in her classroom placements, Gail found all of the experiences useful in helping her to decide how she wanted to conduct her own classroom.
As she says, “It was all useful. I can still remember the good things that I saw there, and the bad things that I saw there.”

**Rachel.**

Like Kendra and Gail, Rachel appreciated the opportunity to observe and participate in teaching in elementary classrooms. Unfortunately, Rachel’s placements did not provide the type of positive learning experience that the other two had. Rachel found her associate teachers to be impatient and sarcastic with the children. She was disturbed by their lack of compassion. As she says, “It broke my heart.” While they were kind to her, Rachel’s associate teachers did not take the time to explain why they were teaching or assessing the children in particular ways. Moreover, they did not give her feedback on how she could improve her teaching. Rachel’s practicum experiences mirrored her experiences as an elementary student in many ways. In both situations she did not get the explicit instruction, positive modeling, guided practice, and detailed feedback that she needed for optimal learning.

**Preservice literacy course interesting but limited for strong literacy learners.**

For, Mike, Kelly, and Darren, who learned school literacy with ease as students, preservice literacy courses posed no academic problems. They were interested in, and enjoyed, the theoretical aspects of their courses. The traditional and/or de-contextualized teaching approach that distressed the first three participants was not viewed as an impediment to their learning. However, they did consider their university-based courses to be lacking in the practical application of literacy teaching concepts.
Mike.

Mike agreed with the theoretical perspective that his literacy instructor taught in his preservice literacy course. He explains:

My preservice literacy instruction was conceptually really interesting, like the whole critical, multicultural literacies and the idea that kids come to literacy instruction with all different backgrounds and those backgrounds need to be addressed. All of those things, I really agree with.

As a student in school, Mike enjoyed learning about new ideas and was comfortable with abstract concepts. As a preservice teacher, he was equally at home with a theoretical approach to learning in general, but in his literacy course he found this approach to be insufficient. Mike believes that theory and practice needed to be more balanced in the literacy course. His experience was that theory was more heavily weighted. As he says, “I’m someone who likes theory, but the balance was tipped, over tipped in favour of theory.” Mike found his preservice literacy course “practically irrelevant” in terms of learning how to teach reading and writing to young students.

Kelly.

The literacy learning strength that Kelly exhibited as a young student was also evident in her preservice literacy course. Kelly quickly and easily learned the theories and concepts that her preservice literacy instructors taught. By the end of preservice, Kelly felt confident that she knew how to talk about issues in literacy planning, teaching, and assessment. However, she was keenly aware that she did not know how to put that knowledge into action. She wishes that she had been taught more practical teaching strategies, and given more resources. Kelly felt that at the end of her preservice year she,
“didn’t have a vision at all” of what she wanted her literacy program to look like. Of all of the courses that she took in her preservice year, she found her literacy course to be the weakest in terms of preparing her for the task of teaching. Consequently, she felt the least prepared to teach literacy when she graduated. She explains:

I didn’t feel at all prepared in the sense of, you know, resources and different approaches to planning your balanced literacy program, and I had no idea. I mean, I still don’t even know what the point of the course was. I didn’t come out of it feeling at all ready to teach, or to create a program.

**Darren.**

Darren’s comfort and proficiency in literacy learning as a student also followed him to preservice. Like Mike and Kelly, he enjoyed learning theoretical concepts about literacy learning and teaching. The things that Darren most valued about his instructor’s approach were the values and practices that also characterized his early learning at home: the importance of warm, nurturing relationships, supporting children’s interests, and the integration of learning into all aspects of life. In spite of enjoying learning about literacy learning and teaching in the abstract, however, Darren was concerned that he wasn’t getting the specific instruction that he needed to help him teach literacy in the classroom. He says, “I really wish the course had been more explicit about what we would be facing in the classroom.”

**Practicum helpful but insufficient.**

Like the first three participants, Kelly, Mike, and Darren found some of the “how” that was missing from their preservice university-based literacy instruction in their practice teaching placements. However, for a number of reasons, they did not learn enough about
teaching literacy to enable them to confidently implement their own literacy programs in the first 3 years of their teaching.

**Kelly.**

For Kelly, the two 4-week classroom placements were highlights of her preservice year. Kelly appreciated how well organized the teachers were, the positive relationships they had with their students, and the support they received from their administration. However, because there was little overlap between her practice teaching classrooms, and her teaching assignments in her first 3 years, they were not as much of a practical resource in her teaching as she would have liked. Kelly had expected to teach mostly Physical Education and Health classes when she was hired to teach full-time, but in her first few years she taught mostly Mathematics and Language courses. Rather than using her placement experiences as models, she modeled her teaching of these subjects after her own experiences in the Gifted program when she was a student.

**Mike.**

Mike did not encounter a mismatch between the subjects in his practicum placements and his own classes after he was hired, but he did encounter a mismatch of teaching approaches. He reports that in his first preservice practicum placement there was very little literacy instruction, just a written component of a Science project. In his second placement, the teacher used a very formal, structured approach to teaching literacy. Mike did not find that either approach suited what he wanted to do in his own classes. In his first 3 years of teaching he adopted an arts-infused, integrated approach that is similar to his own experiences as a student in an arts-based school.
Darren.

Darren found his practicum experiences particularly helpful in that they gave him an understanding of what classroom teaching was “really like.” He understood for the first time how wide a range of academic knowledge and skills there is in a typical class, and how adept teachers must be at meeting the needs of a wide range of learners. As a child, he had excelled at school, and had not been aware of students who struggled with academic learning. As a new teacher, he believed that he was not ready to take on a diverse classroom full-time, so immediately after he finished his preservice program he enrolled in an Additional Qualification course in Special Education. He found this course to be very useful; he uses the pedagogical understanding and specific strategies that he gained from this course in his teaching. Darren also draws a great deal of inspiration for his teaching from the supportive learning environments in his home and Kindergarten classroom.

It is interesting to note that the participants were far less critical of their preservice mathematics courses. They felt that there was more of a balance between theory and practice, and that they felt more ready to implement a mathematics program in their own classrooms. While Gail found her preservice mathematics course to be more satisfying and useful than her literacy course, it wasn’t until she took an Additional Qualification course in Mathematics, delivered at her school to a small group of teachers that she fully appreciated what her preservice instructor was trying to teach her.

In-service learning fills some of the gaps left by the preservice program.

As we have seen, the participants all agree that they felt unprepared to be literacy teachers when they began to teach full-time, whether they found the university-based portion of their preservice frustrating or interesting, and whether they found their classroom-based
practice teaching somewhat or very helpful. Their experiences with in-service professional learning, either as part of their school and board’s induction program or as part of the more general professional learning options, however, were more successful in helping them to develop and implement their classroom literacy programs. Four of the six participants in the study were involved in the Ontario province-wide induction program for publicly funded schools known as the New Teacher Induction Program (NTIP). Gail and Darren were not involved in this program because they do not teach full-time in publicly funded schools. NTIP is comprised of three elements, orientation by the school and school board, mentoring by experienced teachers, and professional development and training. New teachers are also required to have two teacher performance appraisals within their first 12 months of teaching (Kane, 2010).

Because of the variety of in-service learning opportunities available to them, the participants were able to choose the type of learning that met their needs as learners and as teachers. Specific induction opportunities, Additional Qualification courses on a variety of subjects and topics, workshops offered by their schools, the school board, or the Ministry, professional reading in print and online, professional learning communities, and mentorship relationships are a few of the ways that the participants continued their professional learning after beginning their teaching careers. This range and quantity of choice of learning options was not available in their preservice program.

A wide range of learning options.

Of all of the participants, Kendra took advantage of the widest variety of in-service opportunities. In keeping with how she learned best as a student, she put together a range of practical activities that met her immediate needs in the classroom. Through connecting with
former preservice classmates, teachers at her current school and her formal mentor, she amassed practical strategies and resources that she could put to immediate use in her classroom. In addition, she attended all of the induction workshops that were offered to her over her first 3 years, as well as many other workshops. Furthermore, she regularly consulted a wide range of print and electronic teacher resources when planning and implementing her literacy program.

A variety of learning contexts.

In-service learning was also offered in a variety of contexts, from large group formal courses to one-on-one mentoring to individual reading. Gail, who thrived on small group “real life” contextualized learning, was most fortunate in being hired by a school that provided year-long internships for its new teachers. Gail was able to work alongside an experienced teacher for a full school year, participating in all aspects of planning, teaching, assessment, and communicating with parents. When she began to teach her own class the next year, she felt much more prepared than the other participants. In a similar way, Mike, who describes himself as always having been a “book person,” has continued his professional learning in a way that suits his learning style. Over his first 3 years of teaching he has read a great deal of teacher resource books on his own and with a school-based teacher book club.

Personalized learning options.

The participants were also able to personalize their in-service learning. For example, Darren was able to meet his desire to know more about special needs learners by taking an Additional Qualification course right after graduating from preservice. Because school learning had always been easy for him, he felt comfortable enrolling in an additional formal course right away. His satisfaction with this course led him to take another Additional
Qualification course in Drama the following year. Rachel, on the other hand, was so
dissatisfied with her preservice program, as she had been with much of her elementary
schooling, that she did not want to enroll in any more formal professional education. She
preferred to learn more informally through teacher resource books and experimentation.

*Problems with in-service learning.*

Although there were many types of in-service opportunities available to the
participants, whether through their induction program or outside of it, the system was not
perfect. For example, the participants often found that their assigned mentors taught different
subjects or grades than they did, and they often did not have common planning time. These
factors meant that the mentoring relationships were not as fruitful as they could have been.
Furthermore, because the participants felt tired and overwhelmed in their first few years, they
often lacked the energy to attend off-site workshops, seminars, or courses. Moreover, the
Additional Qualifications courses are very expensive, at approximately $800 each.

Rachel, who perhaps felt the least prepared to teach literacy when she began her
career, was least well served by in-service learning. As a student, she was most successful
when her teachers used a structured approach with close guidance and frequent feedback.
Unfortunately, as a new teacher she was hired to pioneer a new Extended French program
without adequate structure and guidance. Rachel had no role models or mentors in the
program, as she was the only person teaching in it in the first year. While the other teachers
in the school were friendly, they couldn’t give her any specific guidance on this new
program. She attended one literacy workshop, but found it unrelated to her immediate needs,
and so did not attend any others. She considered taking an Additional Qualification course,
but found the cost prohibitive. In addition, she found the literacy consultant who was
responsible for her school to be vague in her instructions and unhelpful in her feedback. If Rachel had been able to do an internship in an existing program, like Gail did in her first year, she may have had a much more satisfying in-service learning experience.

**Discussion.**

**Preservice professional learning.**

All of the participants found their preservice literacy program to have insufficiently prepared them for classroom teaching, and their in-service learning to be more practical and effective. However, the ways in which they responded to different aspects of their preservice and in-service professional learning differed considerably. The early literacy learning struggles and strengths of the participants appears to be a factor in how they responded to professional learning opportunities. Those who struggled with literacy learning as students continued to struggle with the university-based preservice literacy courses. Those for whom literacy learning came easily as students found the university-based preservice literacy courses interesting and enjoyable, if impractical. All of the participants found the classroom-based practicum placements in elementary classrooms to be at least a somewhat more helpful in preparing them to teach literacy, but only the participants who had had successful literacy experiences as students were able to use their childhood experiences to supplement what they learned in practicum.

Like the participants in Kosnik and Beck’s study (2008), these participants felt that they had learned “disconnected bits of information” (p. 124) rather than a coherent approach to teaching literacy. All of the participants also seem to have suffered from what Ball (2000) calls the “fragmentation of practice” (p. 241) in their preservice program. They were taught theory in their university-based courses, and had the opportunity to observe and participate in
the practical aspects of pedagogy in practicum placements, but the two experiences were not integrated in a way that enabled the participants to, “make use of content knowledge with a wide range of students across a wide range of environments” (Ball, 2000, p. 246). The participants’ lack of preparedness to teach literacy effectively in their first few years reinforces the argument of the CLLRN (2009) that Canadian teacher education programs are not sufficiently exposing preservice teachers to the large body of knowledge regarding now to teach children to read, how to identify children who are struggling readers, and how to effectively intervene.

_In-service professional learning._

The wide range of topics and contexts, and the opportunity to personalize their learning were seen to be strengths of their in-service professional learning by all of the participants. They appreciated the fact that they had a greater ability to choose the type of learning that met their individual needs than in their preservice program. The in-service learning choices that the participants made in their first 3 years of teaching appear to match their learning preferences as young students. However, the participants did note several drawbacks to their in-service learning options such as a mismatch with mentors or consultants, distance, time, and cost.

The personal and professional benefits that the participants received from their in-service professional learning underscore the assertion that teacher education continues over the first few years of practice (Feiman-Nemser, 2001; Munby et al., 2001). The findings of this study support Kane’s (2010) evaluation of NTIP. Kane (2010) found that new teachers across the province valued the professional learning opportunities offered by the program, but felt that the mentorship component was not fully realized. Like the participants in this
study, Kane’s participants wanted more time with mentors who were closely matched with their teaching assignment, and they wanted more specific feedback from their mentors.

Chapter Summary

This chapter concludes the analysis of the findings in this study. Four themes related to the purpose of exploring the intersection of the participants’ early literacy learning and their literacy teaching were explored. The four themes are: subjects that were easier to learn are harder to teach and vice versa; teachers use their own early teachers as role models for their literacy teaching; teachers’ memories and degree of reflection is influenced by their early learning; and early learning acts as a filter for preservice and in-service teacher learning. In the next chapter, I summarize the findings of the study in terms of answers to the three research questions that have guided this inquiry. In addition, I draw implications and offer recommendations for practice and further research. Finally, I reflect how this research has affected my own understanding and practice in education.
Chapter 7: Conclusion

Introduction

I conducted this inquiry to investigate how beginning elementary teachers’ childhood literacy experiences affect their teaching. From my experience as a teacher and a teacher educator, and from my reading of the literature, I knew that beginning teachers often struggle to teach literacy effectively. Some of the reasons for this struggle are known, but I felt that there were still areas to be investigated. The research literature indicates that teachers’ early experiences do affect their teaching practice (Applegate & Applegate, 2004; Nathanson et al., 2008; Sulentic-Dowell et al., 2006); however, there is little research that explores how teachers’ early literacy experiences affect their literacy teaching. Throughout this dissertation I have sought to improve our understanding of the influence of early literacy learning experiences on the teaching practices of new classroom teachers. As outlined in the data analysis chapters (Chapters 4 to 6), there are many early learning experiences both in school and outside of school that influence a teacher’s classroom literacy practice. Based on the findings presented in this dissertation, it is clear that teachers need to better understand how their early experiences have informed the assumptions, beliefs, and attitudes they hold about learning and teaching literacy. It is only through being reflective about their early learning experiences that they can come to understand and address the literacy needs of all of their students.

In this chapter I summarize the main findings of this study with respect to the influence of the participants’ early literacy experiences on their classroom teaching practice. Secondly, I identify implications and offer recommendations for literacy teaching and
learning. Specifically, I consider implications for school literacy, preservice literacy teacher education, and in-service literacy teacher education. Finally, I explore the connections between my participants’ learning and teaching experiences and my own. I explain how conducting this inquiry has increased my understanding of literacy learning and teaching, how it has affected my practice as a teacher educator, and how it has helped me to develop new research goals.

**Summary of the Main Findings**

In this section I briefly summarize the main findings from this dissertation. The themes that are explored in Chapters 5 and 6 are summarized under the three research questions that have guided this inquiry:

1. **How do teachers’ literacy histories influence their image of themselves as literacy teachers?**

2. **How do teachers’ literacy histories influence the types of literacy environments and literacy activities that they create for their students?**

3. **How do teachers’ literacy histories influence how they understand their students’ literacy learning?**

**Self-image as teachers.**

Early learning experiences have clearly influenced the way that the participants in this study saw themselves as teachers. Their experiences at home and at school as children influenced their image of themselves as students, which in turn provided the reference point for the development of their teaching identity. Moreover, in their teaching they saw themselves as carrying on the work of significant early teachers.
The participants in the study had a variety of early literacy learning experiences at home. One group of participants had a great deal of school-type literacy experiences before they began to attend school. At home, their families served as role models of reading and writing. As children, the participants were encouraged and supported to join the family community of readers and writers. In addition, their oral language development was supported through rich dinner table conversations. These participants began school with a strong foundation in school literacy. They found the transition to school easy and pleasurable. From their earliest school days, they developed an image of themselves as successful literacy students. They carried this self-image throughout their school years and into their preservice program.

The other group of participants had fewer school-type literacy experiences at home. They were rarely read to, nor did their families model reading and writing to the same extent as the former group. They did not have the same encouragement and support to engage in reading and writing activities. Moreover, the families did not regularly involve them in oral discussions, such as at meal times. These participants found the transition to school difficult and confusing. They were not prepared for the demands of school literacy. They struggled to meet their teachers’ demands and consequently did not feel confident or successful at school. They developed an image of themselves as struggling literacy students that followed them throughout their schooling. When they entered their preservice program, they worried that their earlier struggles with literacy might impair their ability to teach literacy effectively.

As teachers, they chose to follow in the footsteps of their own early teachers who had made a significant impact on them as students. They tried to emulate the teachers who had provided effective and satisfying learning experiences for them as children. The participants
who struggled as students chose to emulate the teaching practices of the one or two teachers who had understood their learning needs and who provided learning experiences that allowed them to feel competent and confident. These participants try to make the same kind of impact on their own students by employing a variety of teaching techniques. The participants who learned school literacy with ease also try to emulate teachers from their childhood. However, rather than experimenting with a variety of teaching strategies to meet their students’ needs, they only offer the type of open-ended activities that they found motivating as students. They assume that all of their students will be successful eventually, as they themselves were.

The participants’ concept of their role as teachers was clearly influenced by their own experiences as students in school. The participants who struggled with school literacy learning considered that their role as a literacy teacher was to vigilantly monitor their students for signs of learning challenges. When they detected signs of struggle, they observed and assessed the student closely to determine the source of the problem, and to offer alternative learning opportunities to meet the student’s needs. They saw their job as keeping students from the negative experiences that characterized their early literacy learning at school. The participants who did not struggle with literacy learning as students saw their role quite differently. Perhaps because they did not struggle with literacy learning themselves, they did not devote the same time and energy to systematically assessing their students, or offering them alternative learning opportunities. They saw their role as providing motivating activities in the belief that all children will be able to learn if placed in an engaging environment.
**Literacy environments and literacy activities.**

Early literacy learning influenced the priority that the participants gave to literacy learning within their classroom programs. The participants who struggled as students believed that literacy learning and teaching should be central in their classrooms. However, only two of these participants actually devoted a significant portion of their timetable to literacy learning and teaching. Rachel, who struggled with literacy to the greatest degree as a student, felt overwhelmed by the demands of teaching literacy, and so confined her literacy teaching to a small amount of time at the end of the day. It appears that some degree of struggle with early literacy learning can increase a teacher’s focus on literacy teaching, but a more serious struggle that was not adequately addressed can leave a teacher feeling helpless.

The participants who were most successful and confident as literacy students did not seem to prioritize literacy teaching within their classroom programs. Rather than have a regular literacy learning time, these participants believed that their students would learn all the literacy knowledge and skills that they needed through their learning in other subjects such as mathematics or social studies. These participants remembered that as students they did not need explicit literacy teaching, and they assumed that their students were all like them.

The specific literacy activities that the participants employed in their classrooms were also influenced by their early literacy learning. The participants who were successful in school literacy had many positive memories of their own schooling that they drew on in their teaching. They particularly enjoyed open-ended projects, discussions of “big ideas,” and hands-on creative activities as students. In their teaching, they used these positive memories as inspiration for their literacy planning. The participants who struggled with school literacy,
however, did not wish to replicate the bulk of their early school experiences which were characterized by frustration and humiliation. Instead, they created their classroom literacy programs through a combination of activities that they wished they had experienced as students, and the positive approach that they encountered in their extra-curricular music and sports activities as students.

Interestingly, the participants who excelled as literacy learners found literacy to be the most challenging subject to teach. They were unsure of how to plan their literacy program and were somewhat mystified by students who struggle. Because literacy learning was so easy for them, the complexity of literacy learning and teaching appeared to be invisible to them. The participants who struggled as learners, however, believed that literacy teaching is one of their strengths as classroom teachers. They knew from personal experience how difficult literacy learning can be for some students, and how the appropriate teaching strategy can make all the difference. They spent a great deal of time planning and assessing their programs to ensure that they were meeting their students’ needs.

**Understanding student learning.**

As the findings illustrate, the participants who struggled with literacy as children focused on meeting the literacy needs of their students, particularly those who struggle as they did. They were more motivated to look for students who struggle and were better able to identify struggling learners, particularly those who were trying to hide their struggles. These participants knew from their own experiences how difficult it can be to struggle with school literacy and they brought this understanding to their teaching. They felt compassion for their students and were compelled to try to keep them from falling through the cracks as they did. While the participants who learned literacy with ease as students were also
compassionate teachers, they did not know what it feels like to struggle, or what it can look like. Their lack of experience with struggling to learn to read and write well, coupled with their belief that all students will learn literacy if they are involved in engaging activities, meant that they had more difficulty detecting and understanding students who struggle.

Understanding student learning appears to have been facilitated not just by the participants’ own early experiences, but also by the degree to which they had reflected on their early learning. The participants who had struggled with literacy learning as children had a greater and more intense number of memories of early literacy learning than the participants who didn’t struggle. Moreover, they had reflected on those memories to a far greater degree, and had used their memories to develop their professional understanding and practice. This study, although it was not intended to be an intervention, motivated these participants to continue to explore the influence of their early learning on their teaching. For the participants who had engaged in very little of this type of reflection, the study provided the opportunity for them to raise their awareness of these issues and to begin to confront the implications of their early learning for their teaching.

It appears that early literacy success as a child, or early struggles with literacy, are less predictive of effective literacy teaching than the degree of reflection on one’s own learning. In addition to strong teaching skills, teachers need to recognize their own strengths and weaknesses as literacy learners, and acknowledge that students learn in different ways and may require different teaching approaches. When teachers are able to do this, they can address the literacy learning needs of all of their students. This understanding needs to be accompanied by a commitment to systematically observe, assess, and plan to meet the wide variety of student ability that is the norm in most classrooms. In order to successfully
accomplish this, beginning teachers need a great deal of support in the form of mentoring, professional workshops and courses, and professional reading. This path is open to all new teachers, but this study suggests that those who struggled themselves as students, and are reflective about their learning and teaching, have an easier time recognizing and acknowledging student need. However, teachers must also take the next step: following through with appropriate assessment, planning, and implementation of the needed support.

Those teachers who have not struggled with literacy themselves may need to take more time to reflect on how they learned their literacy skills and realize that not all students experience literacy learning as “naturally” and painlessly as they did. Although it appeared relatively effortless for them, and therefore simple, literacy learning is far from a simple matter. It is extremely complex, with lots of room for bumps along the road. They can use their own personal proficiency with literacy to create effective programs for all students, but they must first recognize that certain students may need specific guidance and support that they themselves did not need. They must also recognize that it is their job to provide it.

**Implications and Recommendations**

The main purpose of this dissertation research was to explore the influence of beginning elementary classroom teachers’ early literacy experiences on their image of themselves as teachers, their literacy teaching practice, and their understanding of their students’ learning. Based on the findings, it is clear that early literacy experiences both at home and at school have a significant impact on beginning teachers’ understanding and enactment of their classroom practice. Therefore, beginning teachers need to be encouraged and supported to examine the implications of their own literacy learning history. The implications and recommendations that flow from the findings in this study fall in three
Imlications for school literacy.

As the findings indicate, teachers’ image of themselves as teachers, their choice of teaching practices, and their understanding of their students emanates to a significant degree from their experiences as students in school. It is therefore essential that schools provide appropriate and effective literacy learning opportunities for students who come to school with a variety of literacy backgrounds. The following are implications and recommendations for school literacy teaching.

The role of pre-school literacy experiences.

The important influence of pre-school literacy experiences on the lives of the participants in this study suggests that teachers need to recognize the literacy skills and knowledge that children bring to school. For children who have not had as much experience with school-type literacy prior to school, teachers need to provide opportunities for them to build those skills and knowledge at school. Teachers should be wary of assuming that all children have these literacy skills, or that it will naturally develop without their direct support.

Many ways to show what you know.

The participants in this study, whether they had struggled with literacy learning or not, all appreciated being able to demonstrate their learning in ways that made sense to them. Whether it was being able to learn to speak English through songs in Kindergarten, demonstrating their understanding of a story through role play, or practicing forming letters
in the sand table, the participants’ most positive and effective early school literacy learning was situated within active learning activities. This finding suggests that teachers need to harness students’ interests and preferred learning styles in order to engage students, but also so that they can unveil and acknowledge the learning that students may not yet be able to demonstrate in traditional paper-and-pencil activities.

**The role of structured learning in literacy.**

The findings from this study suggest that students who struggle with literacy at school can benefit from a more structured approach to literacy. While keeping their literacy program engaging, meaningful, and hands-on, teachers may need to observe more vigilantly, give more explicit instructions, more structured learning activities, and more frequent and specific feedback to help these students achieve success. A very open-ended approach that assumes that students have the knowledge and skills to choose relevant topics to study, and can independently research, organize, and present material, may leave struggling students feeling overwhelmed rather than empowered. For students who have a strong literacy background and skills, however, this type of open approach may be very motivating.

**The power of positive relationships.**

The power of positive relationships between students and teachers was clearly shown in the findings of this study. All of the participants remembered being inspired by teachers who knew them well and enabled them to be their best. A positive relationship with a teacher can make the difference between students feeling like failures, and seeing themselves as competent and capable of success. Through building positive and trusting relationships with students, teachers are better able to understand, motivate, and support students to achieve their potential.
Reaching out to families.

Early literacy learning at home before school age, and during the school years has far-reaching effects on student learning, as the literature and the findings from this study illustrate. Schools need to reach out to families to alert them to the types of literacy experiences that will prepare their children for success in school. In return, schools need to learn about the literacy practices of the families in their neighbourhoods, so that schools may support and build upon the literacy skills and knowledge that children bring to school. Offering Ontario Early Years Centre programs or parenting programs at the school for parents of pre-school children is one way to reach out and exchange information about literacy practices. Inviting parents of school-age children into the school through classroom visits and more informal community events is another way to reach out to families and enable the types of communication that can lead to student success.

Implications for preservice literacy education.

Preservice programs in Canada typically provide the first opportunity for prospective teachers to engage in concentrated study and practice in school teaching. For many teachers, the preservice program is the most intensive teacher education experience they will have in their careers. It is therefore imperative that the preservice program provide prospective teachers with opportunities to acquire the knowledge, skills, and attitudes that they need to successfully begin their careers, and the disposition to continue to develop professionally throughout their careers. The following are implications and recommendations for preservice literacy education.
**Reflective practice.**

Preservice teachers often engage in reflections on their lesson plans, activities, and readings as part of their preservice program; however, the findings from this study and from the literature suggest that teachers do not know enough about how and why to reflect in order to make it a worthwhile exercise. Preservice teachers need more guidance on how to choose the content of their reflections, the methods of various reflective practices, and the processes by which they can fruitfully implement the results of their reflection. In particular, this study points to the importance of preservice teachers developing the practice of reflecting on their own early literacy learning, and raising their awareness of the attitudes, values, and beliefs about literacy learning and teaching that their own early learning has engendered. Preservice teachers need to be guided through an exploration of their literacy learning histories so that they can examine the assumptions they hold about students whom they perceive to be similar to them, or different from them.

**Differentiated teaching.**

Preservice teachers, like students in school, have different strengths and needs as learners. Preservice instructors must offer a wide range of learning opportunities, just as classroom teachers must differentiate their teaching to meet the needs of diverse learners. “Talking head” instruction, in which an instructor lectures from the front of the room, does not meet the learning needs of some preservice teachers, as the findings of this study indicate. This traditional teaching practice also undermines the message that classroom teachers should be employing a variety of dynamic teaching strategies in their literacy program. Preservice instructors need to go beyond traditional practices and use teaching
strategies that employ print and video case studies, hands-on activities, projects, multi-media presentations, curriculum development activities, etc.

**Addressing literacy learning myths.**

Preservice literacy programs must address the myths of literacy identified by the Canadian Language and Literacy Network (CLLRN, 2011). These include: the myths that learning to read is a natural process like learning to talk; that reading comprehension difficulties can be overcome simply by reading more; that children have finished learning to read by Grade 3; and that given time, all children will learn to read. They must alert preservice teachers, particularly those who learned literacy with ease themselves as children, that some students need targeted, explicit instruction well into their late elementary years in order to learn to read and write well.

**More literacy coursework.**

The importance of acquiring strong literacy skills for a productive and enriching life means that preservice programs must prepare teachers to provide literacy programs that meet the learning needs of all of their students. The preservice experiences of the participants in this study illustrate that they were not sufficiently prepared to teach literacy in their elementary classrooms. Having just one literacy course in their program was insufficient. It attempted to encompass literacy theory and practice for children from Kindergarten to Grade 6, or from Grade 4 to Grade 10. The Kindergarten teachers in this study felt that not enough attention was paid to early literacy learning, and the Junior and Intermediate teachers felt that they were not prepared to teach older students who struggled with literacy learning. Preservice programs must offer more literacy courses that cover the complex field of literacy
learning and teaching in a more in-depth way. A 2-year preservice program may be needed to accomplish this goal.

**Systematic observation.**

This study points to the importance of systematic observation of students as they engage in literacy activities. The participants in this study who practiced systematic observation of their students had the greatest awareness of their students’ strengths and needs. They were able to use the knowledge that they gained from this practice to guide their teaching. Preservice teachers must be taught the literacy knowledge, skills, and attitudes to look for when children are working and playing. They need to learn how to record their observations regularly and how to use these records to plan learning activities that build on their students’ specific strengths and meet specific needs.

**Appropriate practicum placements.**

The participants in this study valued their classroom practicum placements as opportunities to observe and practice teaching literacy. However, they often found that there was a mismatch between the teaching philosophy advocated in their preservice course work and teaching practice they witnessed in their placements. This left them feeling confused and betrayed. When there is an appropriate match between the philosophy of the academic courses and practicum, preservice teachers are better able to become prepared to teach their own classrooms effectively. Practicum placements for preservice teachers must demonstrate exemplary practice, and support the teaching approach advocated in preservice program coursework. In turn, preservice program course work must reflect the reality of contemporary classroom teaching.
A cohesive program.

This study confirms Ball’s (2000) assertion that preservice programs suffer from a “fragmentation of practice” (p. 241). The participants in this study did not feel that their course work presented a cohesive message about literacy learning and teaching. They felt that their literacy course was too theoretical and abstract and gave them little preparation for practical application in the classroom. Lortie (1975) refers to this phenomenon as “grand ideals and scant strategy” (p. 69). Moreover, their practicum experiences were not well integrated into their coursework. The participants had little prompting to reflect on the degree to which the theory they had learned in course work was evident in their practicum setting, or how their practicum classroom experiences influenced their understanding of theory. Preservice programs must do a better job of integrating theory and practice, including the experiences in practicum, in order for preservice teachers to gain the maximum benefit from the program.

Implications for in-service teacher education.

The findings from this study clearly show that in-service learning can be an important part of teacher professional learning. The choice of topics, contexts, and delivery modes that is typically offered by schools, school districts, ministries of education, and universities means that teachers are better able to meet their learning preferences and needs than in preservice learning. Teachers’ in-service learning comes in many forms, and is delivered in many ways, for example, school-based workshops or courses, professional reading groups, independent reading, formal or informal teacher collaboration. Induction programs offer professional development and mentorship that is specific to new teachers. On-going in-service learning is offered to teachers throughout their careers. There are many players involved in
the delivery of in-service learning opportunities. The following are recommendations for ministries of education, school districts, and teacher education programs.

**Ministries of education.**

- Curriculum documents must emphasize the need for systematic observation and assessment of individual children to determine the types of knowledge, skills, and activities that each child needs to learn literacy effectively. Curriculum documents should include suggested strategies and activities that teachers can use to meet students’ particular literacy learning needs.

- Preservice programs must be monitored to ensure that they are providing cohesive, in-depth teacher education in literacy.

- Ministries of education need to support research into the ways in which teacher education programs can meet the individual learning needs of teachers.

- Inductions programs such as the New Teacher Induction Program (NTIP) in Ontario should be supported and developed. They need to be monitored to ensure that all school districts are offering the complete program to all new teachers.

- Research on effective mentorship practices should be supported.

- Resources for mentorship development need to be offered to schools and school districts.

- Ministries of education need to focus on policy and resources that support ongoing teacher education in the area of literacy learning and teaching.
Districts of education.

- School and school district-based induction programs need to be flexible so that they can meet the individual needs of teachers with different learning histories.
- Professional development choices need to be expanded with respect to content, site, delivery mode, and timing. Teachers need professional development that is affordable, easily accessible, responsive to need, and delivered over longer periods of time than one-shot workshops.
- Reflection on teachers’ own learning, attitudes, and beliefs about teaching needs to be a central and on-going aspect of induction and other in-service programs.

Teacher education programs.

- Feedback on their preservice program needs to be solicited from teachers after they begin teaching. This information should be used to improve preservice programs.
- It is important to stay in contact with preservice teachers after they graduate so that they can be alerted to further learning opportunities.
- New teachers should be offered the opportunity to be involved in research projects as a means of staying connected to the university. This connection may also serve as a form of mentorship, as in this study.
- New teachers should be provided with a variety of ways to return to the university for further education including courses, workshops, discussion groups, book clubs, and conferences.
A variety of programs need to be offered that lead to additional qualifications, certificates in specialty teaching areas, or graduate degrees.

**Implications for further research.**

The findings in this study point to a number of areas for further research. It is clear that there needs to be more research into teachers’ early learning experiences and the attitude, beliefs, and assumptions about learning and teaching that their experiences engender. Specifically, there is a need for research in the following areas.

- Longitudinal research into how early literacy learning influences teachers’ self-image, practice, and understanding of student learning throughout their careers.

- Research into how teachers’ early literacy learning affects their students’ literacy achievement.

- Research into other aspects of teachers’ learning lives such as their experiences learning mathematics or art and how that influences their teaching of those subjects.

- Research that looks more closely at the influence of other aspects of teachers’ early lives such as their culture, gender, first language, or their parents’ parenting practices.

- Research that studies the influence of teachers’ previous careers on their teaching.

- Research into the early learning experiences of teacher educators and how that affects their teaching in preservice programs.

- Research that seeks to discover better ways to educate and support new teachers, particularly literacy teachers.
Connections Between the Participants’ Stories and My Story

Research affects understanding.

In the introduction to this dissertation, I outlined my own learning and teaching story. It was important for me to engage in this process of reflection and analysis of my learning experiences, and to trace the influence that these experiences have had on my subsequent learning and teaching, before asking my participants to do the same. Through collecting and analyzing the data in this study, I had the opportunity to reflect on the experiences, beliefs, and teaching practices of my participants. Reflecting on their stories caused me to further reflect on, and learn from, my own story. As a struggling early learner myself, I identified with many of the experiences of my participants who also struggled, Kendra, Gail, and Rachel. However, I also learned a great deal about myself by comparing my attitudes, beliefs, and practices to the participants who did not share as many elements of my learning and teaching story, Kelly, Mike, and Darren. Engaging in this research project has increased my understanding of my learning and teaching in many ways.

Not a “natural” student.

When learning about the early school struggles of Kendra, Gail, and Rachel, I heard echoes of my own early school experiences. Like me, these participants did not “naturally” meet the literacy learning expectations at school. None of us had been given sufficient encouragement or support to become competent in school-type literacy prior to school. This led to frustration, embarrassment, and even despair. I learned from these participants that my difficulties with decoding, spelling, and following instructions were not the only ways to experience school struggle. Kendra and Rachel faced the challenge of learning a new language at school. Kendra and Gail had no difficulty with the lower level literacy skills that
troubled me, but did struggle with reading comprehension. Rachel struggled with both lower and higher level literacy skills. Learning from the stories and struggles of these participants deepened my understanding of the myriad ways that students can struggle with literacy learning and sensitized me to the need to understand and address a wider range of student need. Learning about the early school stories of the participants who did not struggle with early literacy, Kelly, Mike, and Darren, alerted me to a potential challenge that some teachers may face. Because these participants did not struggle themselves, it may be more difficult for them to understand, recognize, and address the needs of their struggling students.

Personal experiences as the basis for teaching decisions.

My exploration of my learning and teaching story revealed that my early learning has had a significant influence on my teaching. My research illustrates that that is also the case for my participants. My participants and I share a desire to create effective learning environments for our students. However, I share a particular approach to this task with the participants who struggled with early literacy as I did. We try to create opportunities for our students that we wish we had experienced as students. What didn’t work for us at school motivates us to provide opportunities that we wish we had had, and that we believe would have worked for us. I learned from Kelly, Mike, and Darren that teachers who did not struggle as students are also influenced by their early learning, but they are motivated to recreate learning environments that did work for them as students.

The importance of role models.

In my learning and teaching history, three role models have been powerful influences on my beliefs, attitudes, and practices. My Brownie leader taught me that it is possible to create learning environments in which children of varied backgrounds, interests, and abilities
can be valued and heard. My day camp supervisor, who later became my teaching colleague, taught me how to take a child’s perspective and how to treat all children respectfully. My preservice professor taught me how to have an encouraging and non-judgmental approach to aspiring teachers. These mentors represented a departure from my understanding of myself as a learner and a teacher. They helped me to believe in myself and inspired me to develop as a teacher.

My participants’ role models also serve an important function in their learning and teaching lives. Like they did for me, the role models of the participants who struggled represented something radically new. Their role models formed a new type of relationship with the participants, and helped them to see themselves in a new, positive light. In turn, these participants seek to emulate their role models’ teaching approach in their own classrooms, as I do. The participants who did not struggle also seek to emulate aspects of their role models’ practices. However, their role models did not have the same life and career changing impact that my role models had for me. In spite of this, their role models do serve as touchstones for their teaching practice.

Preservice and in-service learning.

My preservice and in-service learning had many elements in common with the experiences of my participants. Like my participants, I felt dissatisfied with aspects of my preservice learning, and appreciated the in-service opportunities I had. Like my participants who struggled in school as I did, I needed to work through feelings of inadequacy while I prepared to teach students in a system that had not served me well. When I was in my preservice program, I shared my participants’ struggle with understanding the relevance of the theoretical approaches to teaching that some of my professors employed. I also shared my
participants’ frustration with the lack practical teaching strategies employed in many courses. However, I had an advantage that none of my participants seem to have had: an exemplary teacher educator who became a role model for me.

**The role of assumptions.**

To my surprise, my exploration of my learning and teaching story revealed that although I believed that I was focused on meeting the needs of all of my learners, in reality I had been concentrating my efforts on creating learning environments that met the needs of learners who were like me. I had not been considering that many of my learners had different needs than I had had, and therefore needed different types of teaching approaches. Kendra, Gail, and Rachel also focused on identifying and addressing the needs of their students who struggle in the same ways that they did as students. However, unlike me, they do not appear to assume that what works for students like them will also work for all of their other students. They take a more experimental approach to their teaching, trying out different approaches for different students in order to determine the most effective teaching strategies.

In this respect, I seem to have more in common with Kelly, Mike, and Darren. They appear to share my assumption that all of their students need the same teaching approaches that they did. Whereas my assumptions led me to try to create the learning environment that I believed would have been effective for me as a student, their assumptions lead them to attempt to recreate the learning environment that was successful for them. For them, and for me, this led to a lack of consideration for the learning needs of the full range of learners in our classrooms.
Research affects teaching.

In addition to increasing my understanding of my own learning and teaching history, this research has had a positive impact on my teaching. In response to what I have learned about the importance of reflective practice, I have incorporated several opportunities for my student teachers to reflect on their early learning experiences in my preservice courses. For example, I begin each course by asking my students to write a short autobiography of their early learning experiences related to the topic we are studying, and to reflect on how they think their learning experiences will influence their teaching. I then ask them to read and respond to two peers’ papers so that they can see that different early experiences may lead to different teaching beliefs and priorities. I also read a short version of my own learning and teaching story to my students. It is my hope that this practice may begin a career-long practice of reflecting on how their personal lives intersect with their professional choices as teachers.

Throughout the 4 years of data collection, analysis, and writing of this dissertation, I have shared my findings and my emerging understanding of the significance of my findings with my students. My goal is to act as a role model of an inquiry-oriented teacher, but also to try to address the shortcomings that my participants identified in their preservice program. To this end, I try to connect theory and practice in meaningful ways, and to prepare them for the realities of being a new classroom teacher. In particular, I hope that they will learn from my research process, as I did, the importance of understanding and addressing their assumptions about learning and teaching in order to ensure that they are meeting the needs of all of their learners.
Research affects further research.

The rich learning that I have experienced both personally and professionally throughout this research has encouraged me to continue to research in this area. I intend to conduct self-study research on my own practice as a teacher educator on an on-going basis. I have become convinced that I need to continually inquire into my assumptions, beliefs, and practices in order to continue to develop as a teacher educator. In addition, I would like to conduct a longitudinal study similar to this one, but extend it beyond 3 years to study how teachers’ early learning experiences affect their teaching as they move into mid-career. Finally, I am interested in researching the types of reflective practices that result in rich teacher learning and effective classroom practices.
References


Thank you so much for agreeing to participate in this interview. We think it will take about 1 hour.

A. Background information
1. Name:
2. School:
3. Grade:
4. Number of pupils in your class:
5. Approximate number of students in the school:
6. Are there other teachers in your school teaching the same grade as you?
7. School District:
8. General description of the school community (e.g. high ELL):
9. Where did you do your teacher certification program?
10. How long was it?
11. How much practice teaching did you have?
12. Number of literacy courses:
13. In what grades did you practice teaching?
14. Did you specialize in the program (e.g. specialize in reading)?
15. Where did you do your undergraduate degree?
16. What was your major in your undergraduate experience?
17. Do you have any previous work experience in schools?
18. Do you have any previous work experience outside of schools (relevant for 2nd career folks)?

B. General description of literacy (or language arts) program
19. Tell me very generally about your work as a teacher so far. How do you feel about it?
20. Tell me more specifically about your literacy program so far.
21. How satisfied are you with your literacy program?
22. To what extent are you using a school-district mandated literacy program?
23. How helpful has the District-mandated program been in developing your individual literacy classes?
24. Do you find the District-mandated program consistent with your approach to literacy development?

C. Program Planning
25. How much time do you spend on your literacy program each day (1 hour, ½ day)?
26. In general how do you decide what to teach?
27. What curriculum resource materials (e.g. curriculum guidelines, internet, teacher resource books, other teachers) do you use to help you plan your lessons?
28. When planning your program, do you plan on a daily basis or do you plan for a longer period of time (e.g. for a month, for a unit)?
29. Can you tell me about your overall goals for your literacy program? How did you establish these goals?
30. How many special needs children do you have in your class? Tell me how you have been able to modify the literacy program for them.
31. In your teacher education program, did you have a course on program planning? If yes, tell me about this course? If no, was program planning integrated into your other courses?

D. Assessment
32. Assessment can often be a challenge for new teachers? How comfortable do you feel assessing your students' literacy development?
33. Do your students have to complete a standardized test for literacy? If yes, which one?
34. What is your view of this test?
35. To what extent, do you focus on preparing students to write this test?
36. To what extent do the results of this test help you determine your students’ progress in literacy? Help you plan your program?
37. Please tell me what methods you use to assess you students.
38. Do you see assessment as one of your strengths or an area where you need to grow?
39. In your teacher education program, did you have a separate course on assessment or was assessment integrated into your methods courses?

E. Classroom Culture and Classroom Management
40. Tell me about the culture in your classroom. Do the students generally get along?
41. Do you have to devote a lot of time and energy to managing student behaviour?
42. To what extent do the students work co-operatively?
43. To what extent is your class a community?
44. In your teacher education program, how much time did you spend learning about classroom culture and classroom management (courses, integrated into other courses)?

F. Induction Support
45. Did you attend any induction sessions?
46. Do you have an assigned mentor? If so, how helpful has this been? (Where does the mentor work? What grade does he/she teach? Did you select your mentor?)
47. How much support have you received from your principal and other teachers in your division in developing your literacy program?

G. Links with preservice
48. How similar is your literacy program to the programs you saw in your practice teaching classes?
49. In your teacher education program, you developed ideas about an approach to literacy teaching. To what extent have you been able to have this type of literacy program?
50. What materials are you using that you acquired during your preservice year?
51. To what extent have you modeled your literacy program on the program advocated in your teacher education program?
52. What advice would you give your literacy instructor at your school of education?
53. Recall the assignments you did in the preservice program. Which ones if any have helped you as a beginning teacher?

H. Reflections
54. Which area of literacy teaching do you find most challenging?
55. What have been the highpoints of your literacy program so far?

I. Other comments
58. Is there anything else you would like to say about your experiences teaching literacy, about teacher preparation in this area, or about support for new teachers?
Appendix B
Year 2 Annual Interview
Spring 2009

Thank you so much for agreeing to participate in this interview. We think it will take about 1 hour.
Questions in Bold are higher priority
A. Background information
   56. Name:
   57. School:  School District:
   58. Grade:
   59. Is this the same grade that you taught last year?
   60. Are there other teachers in your school teaching the same grade as you?

B. General description of literacy (or language arts) program
   61. Tell me generally about your work as a teacher so far.
   62. Tell me about your literacy program. What have been the highpoints of your literacy program so far?
   63. How satisfied are you with your literacy program?

C. Program Planning
   64. To what extent are you teaching your literacy program the way that you taught it last year? How is it different? Why did you make changes to your program?
   65. To what extent do you consult the Ministry of Education curriculum guideline to find out what to teach?
   66. Some teachers develop a plan for the year, some develop a plan for the term, some work month by month or unit by unit. Tell me how you do your planning for literacy this year. Do you feel this approach is working?
   67. Reading and writing – how do you feel about teaching each area?
   68. In general how do you decide what to teach? Do you use a school-district mandated literacy program Do you follow a program when you are teaching writing? (e.g., Lucy Calkins writing program) Do you follow a program when you are teaching reading? (e.g., Nelson reading series)
   69. As a teacher you must make many decisions about what to teach and how to teach it. Did this surprise you? How comfortable are you this year making these decisions compared to last year?

D. Vision for Teaching
   70. Can you tell me about your overall goals for your literacy program? How did you establish these goals?
   71. To what extent do you feel that you are becoming the teacher that you want to be?
72. To what extent is your literacy program similar to the other teachers in your grade or division? Do you do team-planning?

E. Assessment
73. Assessment can often be a challenge for new teachers? How comfortable do you feel assessing your students' literacy development in reading? In writing?
74. Can you tell me about some of the assessment methods that you use? Which ones do you feel give you the most useful information.

F. Classroom Culture and Classroom Management
75. This past September you were starting the school year as a second year teacher. How did the start-up of the year go?
76. Tell me about the culture in your classroom. Do the students generally get along?
77. Do you have to devote a lot of time and energy to managing student behaviour?

G. Technology in Education
78. Regarding technology how would you describe yourself: (Choose at least one)
   ● Tech savvy;
   ● OK with computers for my personal use;
   ● Ok with using computers in my teaching;
   ● Am not yet into the 21st century.

Classroom Logistics
Please answer Yes or No for the following questions:
79. I have a website for my class.
   NO YES
25. There is a teacher on your staff who is responsible for teaching students about the computer.
   NO YES
26. My classroom has wireless access.
   NO YES

Personal Computer Use
On a scale of 1 – 5 with 1 being the lowest (Not Very Much) and 5 being the highest (All The Time), please rate yourself on each of the following points.
27. I use the computer for my own use. Not Very Much All The Time 1 2 3 4 5
28. I use email and/or text messaging for my personal use. Not Very Much All The Time 1 2 3 4 5
29. I like the concept of social networking systems such as Facebook. Not Very Much All The Time 1 2 3 4 5
30. I need to know more about how to integrate technology into my teaching.

Not Very Much All The Time 1 2 3 4 5

Internet Use for Communicating and Accessing Materials

On a scale of 1 – 5 with 1 being the lowest (Not Very Much) and 5 being the highest (All The Time), please rate yourself on each of the following points.

31. I use the email to keep in touch with the parents/guardians of my students.

Not Very Much All The Time 1 2 3 4 5

32. I use my school-district website (e.g., for induction support, curriculum materials, etc.).

Not Very Much All The Time 1 2 3 4 5

33. I access materials from websites for my teaching.

Not Very Much All The Time 1 2 3 4 5

34. I use clips from websites such as YouTube in my teaching.

Not Very Much All The Time 1 2 3 4 5

Computer Software Programs

On a scale of 1 – 5 with 1 being the lowest (Not Very Much) and 5 being the highest (All The Time), please rate yourself on each of the following points.

35. I use Powerpoint when I am teaching.

Not Very Much All The Time 1 2 3 4 5

36. I use a SmartBoard in my teaching.

Not Very Much All The Time 1 2 3 4 5

Computer and Internet Use for Students in the Classroom

On a scale of 1 – 5 with 1 being the lowest (Not Very Much) and 5 being the highest (All The Time), please rate yourself on each of the following points.

37. My students use the computer for word processing.

Not Very Much All The Time 1 2 3 4 5

38. I teach my students how to use the internet for research.

Not Very Much All The Time 1 2 3 4 5

39. I encourage students to access materials or information from websites.

Not Very Much All The Time 1 2 3 4 5

40. When students have to do a presentation or culminating activity for a unit, I encourage them to use graphics and/or computer programs (e.g., powerpoint, imovie, etc.).

Not Very Much All The Time 1 2 3 4 5
Computer and Internet Use for Students outside the Classroom

On a scale of 1 – 5 with 1 being the lowest (Not Very Much) and 5 being the highest (All The Time), please rate yourself on each of the following points.

41. I know the kinds of websites and blogs that my students use outside of school.
   Not Very Much All The Time 1 2 3 4 5

42. I incorporate the students’ computer interests from outside of school into my class/teaching.
   Not Very Much All The Time 1 2 3 4 5

Internet Bullying

On a scale of 1 – 5 with 1 being the lowest (Do Not Agree At All) and 5 being the highest (Agree Very Much), please rate yourself on each of the following points.

43. I talk to my students about internet bullying.
   Do Not Agree Strongly Agree 1 2 3 4 5

44. Some of my students have experienced internet bullying
   Do Not Agree Strongly Agree 1 2 3 4 5

Websites

45. Which of the following kinds of websites do you use in your teaching (either planning or actually lesson delivery):
   • Blogging
   • Business
   • Entertainment
   • Health
   • News
   • On-line Help
   • Politics
   • Pop Culture
   • Primary Source Documents (e.g., history)
   • Sports
   • Wikipedia
   • Other

   (Check as many as are relevant)

46. My favourite ways to use the computer/internet when teaching are: (list a few)

Other

47. Which subjects or content areas do you feel lend themselves well to using internet resources/programs?
48. Do you feel that you have the knowledge, skills, and hardware (computers and programs) to achieve the level of computer integration of your literacy program that you would like?

49. Is there anything else that you would like to say about technology and education?

**H. Induction Support**

50. Have you been able to attend any induction sessions?

51. Do you have an assigned mentor? If so, how helpful has this been? (Where does the mentor work? What grade does he/she teach? Did you select your mentor?)

52. How much support have you received from your principal and other teachers in your division in developing your literacy program?

53. What kind of professional development do you find helpful?

54. Were you given any advice about being a teacher that was really helpful? Or, what advice do you wish that you had been given for a first year teacher?

55. How would you compare your stress level between this year and last year? If it has changed, why?

**I. Subject Content and Pedagogy**

56. To what extent do you integrate literacy into other subject areas?

57. Now that you have been a teacher for 2 years, how well do you think that your preservice program prepared you to teach literacy?

58. What do you wish that you had learned about being a literacy teacher while you were in your preservice program?

59. Have you had time to read any books or attend any conferences/workshop focused on literacy? Have they been helpful?

**J. Links with preservice**

60. How similar is your literacy program to the programs you saw in your practice teaching classes?

61. In your teacher education program, you developed ideas about an approach to literacy teaching. To what extent have you been able to have this type of literacy program?

62. What materials are you using that you acquired during your preservice year?

63. To what extent have you modeled your literacy program on the program advocated in your teacher education program?

**I. Other comments**

64. Is there anything else you would like to say about your experiences teaching literacy, about teacher preparation in this area, or about support for new teachers?
Appendix C
Year 3 Annual Interview
Spring 2010

Thank you so much for agreeing to be interviewed once again. We think it will take about 1 hour. Please focus especially on literacy teaching, but more general comments are also welcome.

A. Check Background Information (brief)
Name: Date: School:
School District: Grade: Number of years that you have taught this grade:

B. Brief Overview of Your Program and Experience
1. What has your experience been like as a third year teacher? How are you feeling about it? Are there any particular challenges or successes you would like to mention?

C. Approach to Literacy and Math Teaching
2. Literacy is a major initiative with the Ministry of Education and your school district. Can you tell me about your approach to teaching literacy now? How has it changed over the 3 years?
3. What are your main goals for literacy teaching (may have been addressed above)? What are you trying to accomplish? To what extent when setting your goals (for the year or a particular unit) do you rely on the official curriculum or a textbook?
4. How would you describe your confidence as a literacy teacher? Why do you feel this way?
5. Can you tell me about your approach to teaching math now? How has it changed over the 3 years?

D. Program Planning
6. In general, how do you plan your program for the year? Do you plan by individual lessons, week, month, year? How much time do you spend planning your program during the summer vacation months?
7. Please comment on the materials you create vs. ones available from the internet or teacher resource books.
8. How closely do you follow/cover the government/official curriculum? Has this changed over the past 3 years?
9. In what ways do you integrate your program (in terms of cross-curricular program planning)?
10. How do you deal with the ability range in your class? What ways do you individualize your program?
11. To what extent and in what ways do you collaborate (co-plan, team teach) with your colleagues in program planning and in developing lessons and units? Do you see any dangers/drawbacks in collaborative planning and teaching?

E. Pupil Assessment
12. Can you tell me how you assess your students?
13. What are your views of large-scale assessment activities conducted by the government? In what ways is your teaching affected by these externally-mandated assessment activities?
14. How would you describe your confidence regarding assessment? Why do you feel this way?

F. Classroom Organization and Community
15. Routines are an important part of a well-run classroom. What are some of the routines that you have established that you feel work well?
16. How do you build community in your classroom? Why do you feel community building is important?

G. Inclusion in the Classroom and School
17. How do you try to make your students feel included in your classroom, whatever their ethnicity, race, gender, class, ability, etc.? How has this changed over the 3 years? How successful do you think your efforts have been?
18. In terms of race, ethnicity, ability, and class, do the pupils in your class have a similar background to yours? If they do not, what are some of the challenges you face?

H. Subject Content and Pedagogy
19. Let’s turn for a moment back to teacher education. How could preparation to be a literacy teacher be improved in the preservice program?
20. What do you think that teachers need to know to be effective literacy teachers?
21. How could ongoing growth in knowledge of subject content and pedagogy (i.e. teaching strategies) be fostered among teachers?

I. Motivation and Challenges
22. Motivation is a big part of being a teacher but it is often not talked about. What are your main sources of satisfaction as a teacher?
23. How would you describe your motivation as a teacher now compared to your first year of teaching? What are some of the factors that have influenced your level of motivation?
24. What are the main challenges that you experience as a teacher that affect your motivation? (e.g., in your classroom, in your school, from the system, from parents, from other sources)?
25. How supportive of your efforts as a teacher has your school been over the years? In what ways?
26. What two pieces of advice would you give someone on how to survive and thrive as a teacher?
27. If you could do it over again would you still choose to be a teacher? Why?

J. Professional Identity and Development
28. How (if at all) has your view of teaching - and of yourself as a teacher - changed over the years?
29. What kinds of professional development activities (reading, workshops, courses, classroom learning and research, receiving mentoring, etc.) have you engaged in over the years? What kinds of professional learning have worked best?
30. What is your opinion of the following types of PD:
   - professional reading?
   - school-based PD?
   - school board or government PD?
   - AQ courses?
   - graduate studies?
   - teacher research?
   - professional learning communities?
   - other?
31. What are your professional plans, short-term and longer-term? Can you see yourself being a teacher for the long-term? Where do you see yourself in the next 5 years? The next 10 years?

Do you have any other comments that you would like to share with us?
Appendix D

Literacy Life Experiences Interview 1

Earliest Memories

Home
1. Tell me about your earliest memories of seeing others read? Of being read to?
2. Who was influential in your early reading and writing experiences?
3. Who read and wrote at home? What did they read and write?
4. What types of reading material was in your home? (books, newspapers, magazines, computer)
5. Tell me about dinner table conversations at your home. Did your family discuss books or movies, political or social issues?
6. What role did T.V. and the computer and video games have in your early childhood experiences?
7. Describe a memorable reading or writing experience before you went to school. (as a reader/writer or as one being read to or witnessing writing)

Community
8. Did you go to a public library? If so, what did you do there? (read, take out books, storytime etc)
9. Did you engage in reading and writing anywhere else in the community? (place of worship, clubs such as Brownies or Cubs, music lessons, theatre) Can you tell me about a memorable reading or writing experience you had there?

School
10. What do you remember about learning to read and write in school?
11. What was easy and what was difficult about your early literacy experiences?
12. What did you enjoy about reading and writing at school? Not enjoy?
13. What was your attitude toward school in the primary years? (k-3)
14. When did you consider yourself a reader? A writer?
15. How did you measure your success? (own evaluation, teacher’s, peers’?)
16. What did you find motivating? Frustrating?
17. Did your teachers’ methods and activities make sense to you?
18. What was your family’s attitude toward school?
19. Describe a memorable teacher.

Current Identity as a Literacy Teacher
20. What do you bring from your personal life to your teaching?
21. What or who inspires you as a teacher?
22. When did you know that you wanted to be a teacher?
23. How do you see your role as a literacy teacher? Has this changed since you started teaching?
24. How is your role similar or different from the roles that your teachers played in your early learning? (both school teachers, and your family and community members)
25. What are your short term and long term goals for yourself as a literacy teacher? How do you measure your success?
26. What will help you to achieve these goals?
27. Do you think your early learning both in and out of school has influenced your identity and goals as a literacy teacher? How?
28. How has teaching changed you?

**Teaching Practices**
29. How does your teaching reflect your early learning experiences at home and in the community?
30. How are your instructional practices similar or different from those that you experienced as a student? (ex. types of materials, routines, activities, groupings, evaluation)
31. How does your learning history and sense of identity as a literacy teacher influence the types of learning experiences that you provide for your students?
32. In what ways do you teach the way you were taught, or the way you wish you were taught?
33. Can you tell me about memorable early learning experiences, and/or role models from your childhood that you draw upon when deciding what and how to teach?

**Understanding of Student Learning**
34. Describe the most satisfying literacy lesson that you have taught.
35. In what ways do your own learning experiences help you to understand your students’ learning?
36. Tell me about how you try to understand students who have a different literacy learning history and learning style that you did. What challenges do you face?

**Concluding Thoughts**
37. Have you thought about your own literacy learning history, and how it affects your identity and practice as a teacher before today?
38. Has anything come to mind during this interview about your learning history, identity or practice that you hadn’t thought of before? Is there anything that you will continue to think about?
39. How will thinking about and discussing your early literacy learning influence how you see your role, your practice and your students?
Appendix E

Literacy Life Experiences Interview 2

1. During your preservice program were you ever asked to reflect, either orally or in writing, about your childhood experiences, with reading and writing?

2. If so, were you asked to consider what effect these experiences may have had on your attitudes and beliefs about reading and writing?

3. Have you thought any more about your early literacy experiences since our last interview?

4. If so, have your memories and reflections resulted in any changes in your literacy teaching practices or your understanding of how your students learn literacy?

5. After having had a year to think about it, what relationship do you see between your early literacy experiences and the teacher you are today?

6. Do you think you teach to your strengths or weaknesses as a learner?

7. Do you think you can teach literacy more effectively if it came easily to you as a child, if you struggled with it, or does it not matter?
Appendix F

Year 1 Literacy Classroom Observation Protocol

May 2008

For First Year Teachers

Name of teacher ........................................................... Grade ____ No. in class ____

Date ............................................ Time of actual observation: From _____ To _____

Type of setting: (a) urban ___ (b) suburban ___ (c) other ______________

Class composition: Number of boys _______ Number of girls _____________

Number of students in class __________ Number of minority students ____________

1. What classes were observed? (topics and time)
   Briefly describe the lesson:

2. What appeared to be the teacher's goals with these classes/activities? (Vision and Subject Matter Knowledge) Links to wider goals

3. What materials were used? (Subject Matter Knowledge and Program Planning)
   - Textbook ___ Concrete materials (puppets, pictures) ___ Overhead transparencies
   - Work put on the blackboard ___ Charts made by teacher ___ Worksheets ___
   - Published materials (charts, pictures) ___ Illustrations ___ Samples of student work
   - Internet ____ Powerpoint ___ No materials ___ Other ___________
   Appropriateness of the materials, effectiveness etc.

4. How much discussion was there? (Program Planning and Classroom Community)
   A great deal ___ a fair amount ___ a little ___ not at all ___

5. How attentive were the students? (Classroom Organization and Community Building)
   A great deal ___ a fair amount ___ a little ___ not at all ___

6. To what extent did the teacher pause or interrupt to use a classroom management strategy? (Classroom Organization and Community Building)
   A great deal ___ a fair amount ___ a little ___ not at all ___

7. Follow-up activities? Yes ___ No ___

   a. Small group activity? (Classroom Organization)
      A great deal ___ a fair amount ___ a little ___ not at all ___

   b. Individual seatwork? (Classroom Organization)
      A great deal ___ a fair amount ___ a little ___ not at all ___
If yes, specify which ones:
- Activity sheet/worksheet made by teacher
- Worksheet from teacher’s resource guide
- Series of questions from the blackboard
- Worksheet from a packaged kit
- Open-ended activity (discussion with peers, artistic response)
- Reading
- Writing
- Hands-on activities
- Other

C. How effective were the activities in reinforcing the concepts being taught? (Subject Matter)

**Knowledge and Program Planning** (Teach for understanding)
A great deal ___ a fair amount ___ a little ___ not at all ___

D. Was the follow-up work interesting? A great deal ___ a fair amount ___ a little ___ not at all ___

E. Explained to the students? A great deal ___ a fair amount ___ a little ___ not at all ___

9. Did the students have opportunities to think and act like readers, writers, etc? (Teach for understanding)
   A great deal ___ a fair amount ___ a little ___ not at all ___

10. Did the activities appear to allow for inquiry and argument? (Teach for understanding)
    A great deal ___ a fair amount ___ a little ___ not at all ___

11. Did the learning activities seem to allow the students to construct their own understandings? (Teach for understanding)
    A great deal ___ a fair amount ___ a little ___ not at all ___

12. Did the activities appear to allow for differences in interests and talents? (Diversity)
    A great deal ___ a fair amount ___ a little ___ not at all ___

13. What assessment measures were used? (Assessment)
    a. Explained to students Yes ____ No ____:

**Description of classroom**

14. How were the students seated? (Classroom Organization)
    Rows ___ Small groupings ___ Other ___

15. Was there student work on display?
    A great deal ___ a fair amount ___ a little ___ not at all ___
    What type?:
    How recent?:

16. What other materials were on the walls (photos, pictures, rules, contracts with students, etc.) and what did they look like and convey? (Classroom Community and Diversity)

17. Was there a reading centre? ___ A writing centre? ___ Word processing facilities? ___
    Other centres (which ones)? .................................................................

18. Were there books on display? (Program Planning)
    A great deal ___ a fair amount ___ a little ___ not at all ___

19. Is there a mix of fiction/nonfiction/poetry/magazine/comic books/other in available reading materials? (Program Planning)
    A great deal ___ a fair amount ___ a little ___ not at all ___

20. Were computers being used during the observation period and what were they used for?

21. Other aspects of the classroom set-up:
Further reflections
22. What 2 - 4 words seem to best characterize the teacher's general approach to teaching and learning (Vision, Subject Matter Knowledge, Program Planning) (examples of basis for characterization)?
23. What 2 - 4 words seem to best characterize the teacher's approach to literacy teaching (can overlap with the above)? (Vision, Subject Matter Knowledge, Program Planning)
24. What kind of classroom environment has been created? What messages does it convey to the students? (Classroom Community and Diversity)
25. Teacher’s Professional Identity – any observations

Don’t forget to collect any materials (timetable, unit plans, lesson plans, handouts, student work, etc.) that the teacher is willing to share.
Appendix G
Year 2 & 3 Literacy Classroom Observation Protocol
May 2009 & May 2010

Teacher observed:
Date:
Time of observation:
Class(es) observed:
1. What did you note/observe about the teacher’s work? (What “struck you” about the teacher’s work? What do you want to convey to us?)

2. What did you note/observe about the students’ work? Their participation? Their behaviour?:

3. What were the highlights of the observation?
(What impressed you? What was special? What was interesting?)
Appendix H

Consent Letter and Consent Form

Dear Teacher Education Graduate,

We teach in the elementary teacher education program at OISE/UT and believe it is important to work closely with our new teachers, supporting them and seeking their views on the adequacy of their preservice preparation. We are also principal investigators of the multi-year research project, *Key Components of Learning to Teach Literacy*, a study sponsored by the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council of Canada and approved by the University of Toronto. It is concerned specifically with determining how best to prepare literacy teachers.

The overall goals for the study are to examine factors affecting the preparation of elementary literacy teachers.

- the educational and professional background of the literacy instructors
- the goals and practices of these instructors and the materials they use
- the extent to which their goals and practices are reinforced by the program as a whole
- the adequacy of the connection between the literacy courses and the practicum
- the impact of the preservice program on new teachers' approaches to literacy teaching
- the supports new teachers need when teaching language arts

We invite you to participate in the study over the next three years. Each year, your participation would involve a researcher (who is also an experienced teacher) interviewing you once for about an hour after school and observing you once in your classroom for about 1 1/2 hours, toward the end of the school year. The purpose of the classroom visit is to gain a deeper understanding of your approach, gather examples of good practice, and acquire further information about preservice influences on literacy teaching practices. At no point will we study particular pupils or record their names. Confidentiality will be maintained at all times. Pseudonyms will be used in written reports, and the school staff, students, school, and school district will not be identified in any way.

Involvement in this research project will not pose any risks for you. You can choose to ignore any question. You have the right to refuse to participate or to withdraw from the study without giving a reason and without any adverse consequence.

The interview will be tape-recorded and then transcribed. We will keep the tapes and other data in a locked storage cabinet in our office at the university. The transcripts, tapes, and other data will be destroyed three years after the completion of the study. No one other than members of the researcher team will have access to the data. You will have the opportunity to read the transcripts of your interview to check for inaccuracies.

We will write a report of this study and submit it to Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council of Canada. We will also use the data from the study in our writing on teacher education, either for publication or presentation at conferences. In the report and other writings, once again, pseudonyms will be used and participants and institutions will not be identified in any way.
Thank you very much for your willingness to be involved and we look forward to working together. Please contact us if you have any questions.

Sincerely,

Clive Beck, Professor at OISE/UT; 416-978-0196; cbeck@oise.utoronto.ca
Clare Kosnik, Professor at OISE/UT; 416-978-0227; ckosnik@oise.utoronto.ca
Consent Form

Name: ……………………………
I have read the attached letter and agree to be part of the research study, Key Components of Learning to Teach Literacy.

I agree to let Clive Beck and Clare Kosnik use the data for purposes of research and writing on teacher education, on the understanding that pseudonyms will be used and that neither I nor my colleagues, students, school, or school district will be identified in any way.

Signature: ……………………………
Date: ………………………………..

Email address: …………………………….. Phone: ………………………………..

(We would like to be able to send the transcripts to you as email attachments. However, if you would prefer hard copies please give the address to which they should be sent.)

Address: ……………………………………………………………………………………
……………………………………………………………………………………………………

Again, many thanks.