CLAIMING TEACHER VOICE THROUGH PERSONAL NARRATIVES: EXPLORING TEACHER AND STUDENT AGENCY FOR LEARNING IN CLASSROOMS

By

Maryam Sadeghi

A thesis submitted in conformity with the requirements for the degree of Master of Arts
Graduate Department of Curriculum, Teaching and Learning
Ontario Institute for Studies in Education
University of Toronto

© Copyright by Maryam Sadeghi (2014)
Claiming teacher voice through personal narratives: Exploring teacher and student agency for learning in classrooms

Master of Arts, 2014
Maryam Sadeghi
Graduate Department of Curriculum, Teaching and Learning
Ontario Institute for the Studies in Education, University of Toronto

Abstract

As demands increase for classroom teachers, they must not only meet and maintain expected ministry and board-wide standards, but also find a place for their own voices and pedagogical visions. This study demonstrates that lived experiences and individual narratives play a crucial part in shaping teacher and student identities. Subsequently, as teachers find a place for their narratives within the pedagogical realm, they will gain an increased sense of agency to carry out their practice with greater significance. Similarly, as students’ learning is shaped by the merit of their own experiences and interests, there will be greater investment in their learning both within the school community and beyond. Ultimately, when teachers and students recognize that they have choice in shaping their experiences within the education system, they feel valued and an increased sense of empowerment to commit their efforts in establishing and/or contributing to unique learning communities.
Acknowledgements

This journey would not have been possible without the tremendous love and support of so many incredible people.

I owe a great debt of gratitude to my thesis supervisor, Dr. Mary Kooy, for her wonderful support and guidance, as well as her investment of faith in my work. Our discussions have not only shaped this research, but also my own personal growth. I am grateful to have learned and been inspired by her expertise, strength of character and caring acceptance of others’ stories and lived experiences.

I am thankful for Dr. Kathleen Gallagher’s interest in my work as an educator and researcher which ignited a passion in me to continue on this incredible path. I am grateful for her on-going support, guidance, and for her approachable and genuine nature. I am grateful to Dr. Rubén Gaztambide-Fernández, who provided me with the opportunities to push myself beyond boundaries and perspectives. I also thank Dr. Mary Beattie, for the insight she helped me gain through the meaningful work she demanded of her students. The integrity and passion of these individuals have been inspiring and exemplary.

I thank Professor David Booth, for taking the time to assist me in the final stages of the writing process.

I owe my gratitude to all those who participated in my research – particularly my five participants (Annette, Camille, Elise, Aniya, and Serena) who invested incredible time and trust in me to share their deeply moving stories. Their voices have been invaluable to this research and I will forever carry their stories with me.

My deep appreciation is extended to my principal, vice principals and teaching colleagues (especially those in the English and Arts Departments) whose ongoing encouragement has fueled my energy to keep moving forward. I am very grateful for each gesture of kindness and support over the years than I can ever convey.

I extend my gratitude to my dearest friends, grandmothers, aunts, uncles and cousins. I have been humbled by your enthusiasm, support and understanding throughout this journey.

Finally, I owe a tremendous debt of gratitude to my family. To my mother and my father, I am grateful for your unwavering faith in me. I have found inspiration and strength through your unconditional love and celebrations of all my small successes. Your optimism and support helped ground me during the most challenging times; I would not have accomplished this goal without your existence. To my amazing brother, your wisdom and caring have helped me carry forward throughout these past few years. Your life and your story inspire me and I am utterly fortunate to have your friendship and faithful support.

This has been one amazing journey and I extend my sincerest appreciation to all those who have believed in me, guided me and walked beside me. I have reached great heights because of you. That is an immeasurable blessing and I shall never forget it.
Dedication

For my Grandfather,
whose commitment to the empowerment of others
and honest dedication as a teacher and principal
continues to inspire my endeavours every day.
Your legacy guides me on this journey.
I am forever blessed.

And

For all the teachers and students
who carry incredible stories,
and whose voices matter.
# Table of Contents

Abstract .................................................................................................................................................. ii  
Acknowledgements ............................................................................................................................ iii  
Dedication ............................................................................................................................................... iv  

Chapter 1: Introduction to the Study .................................................................................................... 1  
  The purpose of the study .................................................................................................................... 5  
  Background and Context .................................................................................................................... 7  
    Teaching in the Ontario public school system ................................................................................ 7  
    Context of my work related to issues of concern .......................................................................... 9  
    Teaching English ............................................................................................................................ 10  

Chapter 2: Literature Review .............................................................................................................. 16  
  My Research: Overview and Significance ....................................................................................... 16  
    Context ........................................................................................................................................ 16  
  Current Relevant and Related Research ......................................................................................... 19  
  Narrative Inquiry ............................................................................................................................... 22  
  Teacher Learning and Voice ............................................................................................................ 25  

Chapter 3: Methodology ..................................................................................................................... 34  
  Envisioning the Research .................................................................................................................. 34  
    Keywords .................................................................................................................................... 39  
  Goals and Objectives ....................................................................................................................... 39  
  Population and Sampling .................................................................................................................. 41  
    Participants .................................................................................................................................. 41  
  Research design ............................................................................................................................... 44  
    Questionnaires & Writing Guidelines ......................................................................................... 44  
    The Researcher’s Narrative ......................................................................................................... 47  
  Data ................................................................................................................................................ 50  
    Data collection ............................................................................................................................. 50  
    Data analysis ............................................................................................................................... 52  

Chapter 4: Findings ............................................................................................................................ 55  
  Approach & Overview of Findings ................................................................................................... 55  
  1. IDENTITY ................................................................................................................................. 55  
    1.1 Teachers’ perception of roles in the classroom .................................................................... 55
Chapter 1: Introduction to the Study

This study explores the idea of claiming both teacher and student voices through a look at personal narratives. Thus, at the heart of this study is an interest in stories and lived experiences, informed by the detailed narratives written by the five main participants. As a result, I begin by sharing my own story, which positions me, as the researcher, within the context of the study. In the following chapters, I intersect some of my own visions and experiences with those of my participants’. In doing so, I contribute to the notion of sharing and openness, without which the findings and implications in this study would not have been effectively achieved.

My journey as a student

If we reflect upon our own early years of schooling and remember those teachers who have remained “unforgettable” to us over the years, we remember being made to feel like we mattered. These unforgettable teachers most likely appear in our memories as strong figures, individuals who strived to have their students’ voices be heard, and their capabilities, talents and contributions recognized. And for many of us who have chosen in their footsteps to become educators, we tend to build on these influences that once taught us what it means to have a voice, to be a “somebody” within a community.

The teacher I have envisioned myself becoming and the teacher I strive to be each day in the classroom has largely been influenced by the kinds of teachers I once had myself as a student. When I first arrived in Canada, my grade 4/5 teacher showed me a kind of
devotion that I had never seen in a teacher before. Often, while other students in her class
would work independently, she would sit with me and teach me English one-on-one – always
with a loving smile, an empowering gesture to tell me that soon, I would be able to
participate in conversations just like the rest of the class. She made me feel wanted and
“listened to,” even though in those early days, I was mostly quiet and hardly spoke a word of
this foreign language – English. My teacher helped me foster a confidence and newfound
enjoyment of learning English that would become critical to my future successes. Her efforts
to make me feel welcome in this entirely new world from half way across the globe, her
protection of me and her attention to help me learn and grow were absolutely critical to my
early schooling experiences in Canada. I needed that kind of compassion and devotion from a
teacher if I were going to feel safe during that significant period of transition in my life. And
I know that if I had had the opposite experience, I would have most likely struggled to feel
grounded in this new place which had become my “home.”

Moving on to middle school, I was also fortunate to encounter a couple of teachers
who truly invested in me, fostering my passion for the written word and public speaking.
They encouraged my writing ambitions, until I became a published writer at 13 and
empowered me to take part in public speaking competitions – an incredible risk to take for
someone who was just beginning to learn a new language and a new way of life. Yet, it was
made possible, because there were teachers who went out of their way to nurture me and
provide a place where I could be heard. They provided opportunities for me to share my
stories of the Persian Gulf War with this new world that seemed to know so little about what
it was like to live life in a place called Iran, half way across the globe. Little did I know at the
time that this being heard was also a way of being healed from the trauma I had left behind.
Similarly, during my high school years, it was one particular English teacher who continued to empower me. He also recognized my passion for literature and writing and pushed me to new literary challenges. It was his constant faith in my abilities and his encouragement to share my writing voice with the world that gave me the courage to make the big decision to switch my undergraduate degree from Life Sciences (Biology) to Literature/Theatre Studies.

Throughout all my years of schooling, it was those incredible teachers who invested in me and saw something that neither myself nor my parents would have most likely invested in to a great extent. Above all, they recognized that I had a story to tell, that my life (however young it may have been) was filled with rich experiences. They valued the stories that I carried with me and they were intent on providing opportunities for me to share those stories not only with them, but also with my peers and school community. And so many years later, I am convinced that my success depended so much on the sharing of my stories. I was made to believe that the life I had lived and my understandings of the world was a valuable asset to the role I played within the communities in which I were a part of. I recognize now, more than ever before, that I was truly blessed.

**Being a teacher now**

I cannot dismiss the significance of the opportunities that were once presented to me. I feel a great sense of responsibility in order to ensure that my students are given the same opportunities to share their stories, to have their voices be heard and to know that their existence and their opinion matters. It is challenging for me as a classroom teacher to find room amidst all the expectations and mandates to ensure that every single one of my students truly feels this way. Yet, I cannot imagine how detrimental it might be if even one student
were to ever feel as though he/she was not heard, or whose story did not have significance within the community in which he/she was a part of.

Through the past ten years of my teaching experiences as a high school teacher, I have come to the realization of one thing ... that compassion is the key to being a successful teacher. By compassion, I do not mean to simply show sympathy towards students’ feelings and experiences, but to also give them the sense of assurance that their teacher actually cares and will do what he/she can in order to ensure a relevant learning experience for them. And this, I believe, stems from a place where students are given the opportunity to recognize they have a voice. Then, of course, they must be able to experience a place in which they will also be able to share their voices with one another and be heard. When students begin to recognize that their voices matter, they will invest greater interest in what goes on in their classroom communities. Yet, they must truly believe that they have distinct voices, which are genuinely invested upon. It becomes the teacher’s responsibility (and dare I say, obligation), therefore, to ensure that he/she creates an environment whereby this can become a reality. Of course, this is no easy task for any classroom teacher. It calls for more of an investment on the teacher’s behalf, as well a particular kind of courage and openness. It also brings into light the importance of the teachers’ own voices. For after all, how can students’ voices be fostered if teachers do not feel like theirs is accounted for?

Current problematic issues

Teachers and students, the most affected and least consulted stakeholders in education, have felt silenced in the educational processes. Their lack of inclusion has led to compromising professional identities – that in turn, affects teaching and learning in the
classroom. Teachers have been experiencing a lack of power in decision-making, limiting opportunities for them to carry out pedagogical visions and philosophies. This is problematic, as it re-creates the image of teacher as labourer and order-follower. In eras of accountability, teachers’ working lives have, to a great extent, become sets of mandated requirements and standards that are not necessarily linked to active and/or personally relevant learning. For example, student achievement is often measured by standardized test scores at the high school level. This places a pressure to succeed, both for students and their teachers. The numeracy test is factored in to the grade 9 curriculum and the success on the literacy test is a requirement in obtaining the Ontario Secondary School Diploma (OSSD). School initiatives focus on improving their students’ test scores; therefore, the responsibility of preparing students is not only placed on mathematics and English teachers, but cross-curricularly on all subject teachers. Teachers are required to meet these expectations, and in doing so, they must sometimes disregard their own agenda.

The purpose of the study

This research examines the issues of teacher and student voice in teaching and learning. It highlights the conception of teacher voice in education and the challenges teachers face as they negotiate their identities, perspectives and practices. Compromising teacher voice may limit their pedagogical freedom and visions. Furthermore, this research brings into light the importance of teacher agency and its implications for the roles that students play within schools. The study also addresses student voice, as their ideas and interests in their own learning can provide refreshing new approaches to pedagogy. Listening to what students have to say can help teachers and policy makers construct opportunities that
will be most beneficial to them.

The purpose of the chosen methodology is to also provide opportunities for both teachers’ and students’ voices to be heard. The questionnaires, as well the extended narrative writing pieces invite participants to be reflective by sharing thoughts and feelings about their experiences within the public school setting. As first and foremost the focus is to understand and empower teacher voice, there will be an emphasis on their stories and honouring their lived experiences. Thus, the research explores how numerous expectations, mandates and proposed pedagogical approaches impact teachers in implementing their own personal initiatives. Additionally, this research will bring in to light the frustrations and concerns of public school educators who need a voice in sharing their stories, their contributions and their visions for a more just and personally relevant education system –both for themselves and for their students.

Furthermore, the aim is not only to highlight the implications of the current concerns and challenges faced by classroom educators, but to also offer suggestions as to how teachers can find the time and place to recognize that a) they are entitled to having a voice and b) they can use their lived experiences and professional knowledge in order to create agency.

**Research Questions**

My main research question is twofold: To what extent does teacher narrative influence teaching and learning within the classroom? Within what types of professional, social and intellectual realms do teachers find a place for their own voices in order to establish agency for themselves and their students?
Related research questions:

1. How is the intertwining of teacher and student narratives significant in the process of teaching and learning?

2. What happens to effective teaching and learning when teacher voices are undermined and/or silenced?

3. How does the construction of teacher identity impact pedagogy and student learning?

Background and Context

Teaching in the Ontario public school system

My own teaching experiences over the past decade have certainly led me to question not only my own voice and identity within the public school system, but also the voices and identities of my fellow teachers at large. I have experienced the challenges of carrying out my own teaching philosophies and educational ideals within my classrooms. I can argue that there are the fears imposed by the school boards to be wary of becoming “too close” to the students, to maintain a “healthy, professional distance” – so much so, that teachers have grown more and more afraid to make human connections with their own students and to truly get to know them well. To add to this, I have often felt as though I do not have an adequate amount of time to truly understand and implement the various initiatives that are presented by the school board, or suggested by my school program leaders.

I have often been uncertain as to when and where I can voice my personal concerns – or rather, ideals that are part of my teaching philosophy. For example, I have never been certain as to where or when I could explain that I do not have enough time to get to know my 90 students as diligently as I would truly like. Thus, over the years, I have accepted that
perhaps it is not realistic to establish rapport with my students to the extent that would be ideal. After all, carrying out the curriculum and meeting deadlines is always a pressing matter, one that must be on the forefront of my teaching agenda from day-to-day.

It has become somewhat of a taboo to admit to being tired, as well as overwhelmed by the various needs of students – numbers which have grown in each class over the years. Many of these students have special needs and Individual Education Plans (IEPs) and when one does not have special training in helping particular needs of these students, it can become frustrating for all involved. It is not to dismiss the fact that Special Education teachers work tirelessly to support classroom teachers. The demands are often quite complex and support sometimes takes longer to reach classroom teachers. Despite this reality, I have often felt that I should try to overcome the obstacles on my own – that to reach out for help might taint my reputation as a teacher who does not have effective classroom management skills.

I would not be speaking truthfully if I said that I have not grown disenchanted by the profession at some point over the past few years. Yet, this has served as more of a reason to remain committed to my students. Although students can also be quite aware of what is going on in the system, they also need their teachers to be their voices and to bring in to light the realities of their educational experiences on their behalf. Perhaps these teachers are also struggling to have their voices be truly heard, but if they give up trying, there will be little hope left in the authenticity of teaching and learning in the classroom.

Learning to maneuver my way through the demands and challenges of teaching, I have grown more reflective and insightful as a classroom teacher. I find ways to deliver the passion that my students are worthy of. Above all, I have realized that at the end of each day, I can at least use my voice to let my students know that I am committed to each of them. And
perhaps, this is how a particular kind of trust and the sharing of stories can take place. First, it is within the classroom that dynamics can begin to shift, and then, hopefully, that can spread beyond, shifting school cultures and even the culture of the education system on a broader scale.

**Context of my work related to issues of concern**

While working at various schools and school boards over the past few years, I have been privy to the make-up of numerous English and Arts departments. Although, evidently, each school has had its own distinctive philosophies and initiatives, there remain certain conditions, concerns and challenges common among all schools, for all classroom educators and all students. One of the main challenges has been establishing and maintaining student engagement. Classroom educators have been expected to participate in Professional Development opportunities, as school boards have placed tremendous importance on such initiatives as “Differentiated Instruction,” “Co-operative Learning,” “Equity & Multicultural Education,” “Cross Curricular Numeracy,” “Cross Curricular Literacy,” “No-Child-Left-Behind Initiatives.” There are also various expectations to be met through school-wide and board-wide initiatives in meeting province-wide standardized testing, mandates by EQAO (Education Quality and Accountability Office). These are just a few initiatives and mandates that policy makers have placed into action for the sake of moving our education system forward towards a direction of success and achievement for all!

Although there is value in much of these initiatives and educational ideals, my own experiences within the classroom have proven that when it comes to the implementation of these initiatives, it becomes overwhelming and too many to keep up with on an on-going
basis. For example, when it was time for my Teacher Performance Appraisal (TPA), I felt anxious to ensure that I had clear understandings of the on-going list of initiatives, as well as the competency to demonstrate my understanding under observance. Although I was successful at meeting my administrators’ expectations during the period of my TPA, demonstrating multiple methods of carrying out lessons embedded within these various initiatives, I also knew that I was not going to necessarily maintain these expectations on a daily basis behind closed doors. It is simply not realistic for any teacher to perform to such an extent – as if putting on a show – day after day. To prepare elaborate, multi-layered lessons that meet numerous initiatives and teaching philosophies is also extremely time consuming. I, for one, would be spending countless hours after many of my work days marking papers or conducting extra-curricular activities (not to mention trying to work on my graduate school courses and taking care of my own personal life). Therefore, as much as I would have loved to have extraordinary lesson plans for every single day that I stood in front of my students, it was not going to be realistic. I needed the time for that sort of creation and the truth of the matter was that I first and foremost, I had a condensed curriculum to cover, common evaluations to carry out and reporting deadlines to meet. Subsequently, the long list of initiatives and the accompanying expectations often has a disconnected and prescribed feel for the teacher. As a result, there is always the anxiety of meeting these expectations – for policy makers and administrators have firmly communicated with teachers that competency within these various areas is what defines their success within the system.

*Teaching English*

The Ontario Ministry of Education guidelines divide the learning streams within most
English courses in to four main categories: Oral Communication, Reading, Writing, and Media. In meeting these standards (and the specific criteria set for teaching each category), schools set out specific teaching guidelines for their English departments. In most cases, the Head of English departments (along with suggestions and input offered by fellow English teachers) create specific course syllabi. From there, course material and texts are decided upon. This is where it becomes important as to who will decide upon what will be taught at any given school. Some English departments are led by department heads who are flexible, up-to-date with current reading material and who carry fresh and new pedagogical ideas. Not all schools’ English departments, however, are always so fortunate. On the contrary, some are led by department heads who clutch at the comforts of what they have always known. They believe “good literature” and reading material are those which have been deemed as “classics” – however archaic they might be! In either case, the challenge for any high school English department is the cost of purchasing texts and the issued budgets. This is an ongoing challenge, as classroom teachers must always justify and “sell” the worthiness of a text they believe in and hope to teach. And this is not an easy thing. Take for example a school of over one hundred grade ten students, whereby the core literary texts have been Harper Lee’s *To Kill a Mockingbird* and William Shakespeare’s *Macbeth* for years on end. Imagine there being absolutely no way of negotiating a change, because a) money has already been invested in copies of these texts and b) someone – or a few people – whose voice(s) is/are the strongest, swear by the “literary merit” of these texts. Teachers of the course may not be entirely upset by these circumstances, yet they might simply wish that semester after semester of teaching grade ten English might have other text possibilities in store for them. After all, adhering to these two texts will already take up about two thirds of what is taught in
the course – leaving very little possibility of teaching another major text which they might personally consider to have even greater “literary merit” for their particular group of students.

This raises the issue of choice, both in terms of teachers having choice in the teaching material, as well as students having a choice to read texts that would be most personally engaging. Furthermore, these circumstances limit teacher input, failing to invite their voices in the course design/material selection. The implications of these limitations is that the importance of both teachers’ and students’ identities are undermined. For it is their lived experiences and individual narratives that inform their perspectives on teaching and learning. This approach can lend itself to numerous hindrances, including disenchanted and disconnected teachers, disengaged students and a curriculum that remains stale and unchanging.

**Theoretical Frameworks & Methodology for the Study**

*Relevant research*

First and foremost, I have chosen narrative inquiry as the methodology for my research. My approach is informed by the works of Connelly and Clandinin (1990, 2000), as well as Beattie (1999, 2008). Looking at personal lived experiences and stories of researchers and participants allows for theories and practices of teaching and learning to be understood. Teacher voice is critical within education and it is this inviting of story sharing that will allow opportunities for beliefs, ideas and knowledge to be shared. Remaining silent about who we are and what matters to us only hinders possibilities of change. We become teachers
because we are interested in people, cultures, history and social reform. We care about
democracy, justice and equity – for ourselves, our students and the global community – and
in creating communities of learning within our schools, we hope to make a difference.

Kooy’s (2006, 2009, 2012) research on story sharing through book clubs and
professional learning communities is also significant to my study. Her work illustrates that
people want to be heard, to know that others have also perhaps experienced the world in
similar ways. This sharing of stories is what validates our identities and empowers us to
dream about new possibilities. Within these collaborative communities narratives intersect
and interact, teachers are able to expand their imaginative capacities, (re)create the stories of
their professional lives, and (re)construct their professional knowledge. This collaborative
nature, therefore, allows for teacher growth, developing collegiality and relationships
(Lieberman & Miller, 1999).

Teacher voice gives rise to teacher agency. In turn, when teachers feel empowered
and able to use their voices, they can better represent their students. Subsequently, students
will begin to learn and grow within environments that welcome their opinions and
endeavours. Important to this idea is the work of Rudduck (2004, 2006). Consulting students
and inviting their participation in curriculum planning will help to establish progressive
democratic traditions in our schools (Rudduck & Fielding, 2006). In order to understand the
implications of interactions between teachers and students, my study also considers the
voices of students. I have chosen to include their participation in my research because their
lived experiences and developing identities can be a great source to draw from when it comes
to envisioning educational reform. Furthermore, education concerns them; after all, it is in
their name that various initiatives, mandates and policies are put in to place. Therefore, as
students use their voices and make contributions, they not only exercise choice, but they do so within the framework of responsibility and trust (Rudduck & Fielding, 2006). This is something that most educators hope to foster in the climate of learning.

When teachers and students are given spaces and opportunities to make decisions, the accountability and responsibility that they take on can be transformative. Subsequently, the roles of teachers and students can be reconceptualized as active participants in the construction of teaching and learning (Cook-Sather, 2010). When the hierarchical structures between them turn into more collaborative ones, they move beyond conventional roles and develop a stronger sense of partnership (Rudduck, 2007). Perhaps it is not as complex and unattainable as it may seem. If teachers and students are to be considered as the strongest resources, the good news is that they are rather open to collaborating with whomever is willing to engage them. They are also accessible, existing in great numbers in every classroom that will be visited. Seeing teaching and learning through their eyes might open up vast solutions to many of the questions and concerns regarding school reform and change in education (Flutter & Rudduck, 2004).

**Method of inquiry**

In order to obtain the data for this research, two different questionnaires will be created, one for teachers and one for students. In order to maintain the integrity of a narrative inquiry and provide the opportunity for teacher and student voices to be shared, the format of the questionnaires will be short answer questions. This will allow participants to write reflectively, as opposed to choosing answers from a multiple choice type of questionnaire. Additionally, I will be choosing five teacher participants to write a detailed personal
narrative. The intention is to have them share anecdotes, past experiences, and to provide their stories about what brought them to the teaching profession. Furthermore, they will be invited to share insights and experiences they have gained throughout their practice, as well as their visions for the future of education. The data, therefore, will be qualitative in nature, as patterns and issues shared through questionnaire responses and teacher narratives will be determined and analyzed.

The Following Chapters

The second chapter will discuss an overview and significance of my research. I will also explain how I position myself within the context of the study. Moreover, the current relevant and related research will be outlined. Chapter two will also introduce some of the important categories for my research and discuss theoretical frameworks within which they are based. Chapter three will establish the methodology, as well as goals and objectives. It will introduce the research design, participants, and the format of questionnaires as well as the teacher narratives. The fourth chapter will present the data findings, and the fifth chapter will discuss the implications of those findings. It will also outline limitations of the study and provide further questions and issues for future research.
Chapter 2: Literature Review

My Research: Overview and Significance

Context

This research examines the challenges faced by teachers in finding their voices and truly believing that as classroom teachers, they have agency. Teachers bring to their professional communities rich lived experiences. Together, they have a wealth of stories that must be shared, stories that have the power to inspire and move teaching and learning to new heights. Subsequently, a place for these voices must exist within the system, where teachers can voice their frustrations, fears, and even share their dreams and visions for the kinds of teaching and learning they hope to cultivate (both for themselves, as well as for their students).

Education in this century should be characterized by a more fluid interconnectedness between the roles of educators and students. Yet, on the contrary, the nature of education systems (namely based on my experiences within the Ontario Ministry of Education, as both a classroom teacher and an educational researcher) not only seem to move further away from character education and dismiss the voices of students, but also hinder teacher agency with which many new ideas of education can be built. These hindrances are mainly due to the fact that ever-changing and growing curriculum mandates and board-wide policies have become the main focus of policy makers. Furthermore, the greater the push becomes on such mandates as standardized testing, the less room there is left for classroom educators to implement personal initiatives. Another hindrance is the limitations of resources and lack of
flexibility in units of study taught within public schools – ie: the prescribed nature of curriculum guidelines. Subsequently, when teaching and learning becomes too prescribed and overwhelming with too many expectations and mandates to follow, it also becomes rather inaccessible. Therefore, it will become more difficult for educators and students to find personal relevance within the system. The most unfortunate end result, of course, will be the feeling of disengagement and alienation – something which everyone is trying to avoid, yet something which is experienced quite often within public school classrooms by both educators and students alike.

My place within this research

I have remained dedicated to the teaching profession for a decade and there have been many times that it has felt like an uphill climb. Yet, I have recognized that I must remain committed and believe in some kind of change, for I recognize that my giving up on the system will mean something lost for my students. When I stand in front of my students, I know they want to believe that I care about them and that I will hear their concerns and do everything I can to ensure a relevant learning experience for them. Sometimes, it is difficult to accept the reality that I may not have enough agency to shape their learning as both see most fitting. For I am often limited in terms of what units of study I can cover, what texts and assignment options I can offer them. I am also extremely pressed for time to be able to get to know each of them as well as I would like – to create that “human connection” more often throughout each teaching week. I want them to know that I have their best interest at heart, but I know that given the parameters under which I must do my job, I cannot always carry
The most ideal pedagogy (as I see fit) and even create tremendous opportunities for them to have choice.

I have devoted myself to this research because although I have seen the value of committing to the profession and have made my own contributions over the years, I have still recognized a significant dissatisfaction regarding the lack of voice and teacher agency within our schools. It has been disheartening to see that so many teachers (i.e., my own colleagues) are not given a voice to express their frustrations and needs as often as they should. I have seen the heartfelt teaching of some of the most incredible educators in Ontario. Yet, often, they are not given permission to feel dissatisfied and tired. The goal of this research is to convey the voices of teachers—of course, it won’t be all teachers, but through what will be revealed, the “human” side of these teachers might shine through. Subsequently, administrators and policy makers might be able to recognize the value of teachers’ lived experiences to a greater extent. Each of us has a unique narrative, and that is especially significant for the world of teaching and learning. For what is the essence of a classroom community but the coming together of human beings who have lived in the world and have visions of who they are and what they can offer those around them? Imagine the world of education without the existence of teachers and students. It is impossible. It is also detrimental to forget that each teacher and each student, in every classroom, has a vision of his/her role within that world. Letting those visions and stories go unnoticed for the sake of always adhering to common learning goals, ministry curriculum mandates, and board-wide initiatives takes away opportunities for experiencing education with passion and excitement. This is something our society cannot afford, especially if we hope to move forward in celebrating global education and citizenship. For without agency, neither teachers nor
students will ever believe that the world of education can be a medium through which they will have the power to do extraordinary things. To me, that would be tragic and thus, my devotion to this research is a vehicle through which I can do my share in order to ensure that teaching and learning will always maintain a certain degree of integrity. It is essential to prove to the general public, the students and my fellow teachers that we have so many reasons to keep investing our faith in our education system, despite the challenges and imperfections that may so often make the journey an uphill climb.

**Current Relevant and Related Research**

**Lived Experiences and Storytelling**

The way in which many educators define their roles is often in direct correlation with who they are outside the classroom. The commitments they undertake in their personal lives, their philosophies as human beings, and their personal interests all shape their interactions with students and the pedagogical visions they continue to foster. Subsequently, getting to know their stories allows a better comprehension of their devotion to the children/adolescents whom they teach. Classroom educators’ personal lives have been shaped by both fortunate and unfortunate events. Thus, their unique individual interests and past-times offer them a wealth of knowledge in building units of study, enriching the curriculum and offering their insight through the process of teaching and learning. Subsequently examining teachers’ narratives (and hearing their stories) allows for a more intimate understanding of the specific knowledge that only they can offer their students – for the personal ways in which they have come to experience the world.
In her writing, Mary Beattie (1995) alludes to John Dewey’s (1938) words that “education is a form of social life” (Beattie, 53). She discusses this idea in terms of the significance that narratives play in education:

The stories we live out in our classrooms are intertwined with the stories of our personal lives, the stories of our students, our colleagues, administrators, parents and policy-makers. Our professionalism calls for us to be authentic and accountable not only to ourselves, but also to those others whose narratives are linked to ours within our professional environments. This professionalism and authenticity of practice requires that we listen, hear and respond to the stories of others and that we engage in the co-creation of shared meanings. (Beattie, 66)

Beattie’s ideology intrigues me, for I believe that significances of experience are rooted in individual narratives – that we experience the world (and hence form our identities) by creating and recreating our own stories, while simultaneously being influenced by the stories of others. This has tremendous implications for teachers, as they are on a constant push to build professional communities through school/board mandates and initiatives. Yet, one cannot expect that placing teachers in community groups – be it professional development sessions/groups, learning teams, or lead groups/committees – will yield the most efficient and productive outcomes. What needs to exist is an authentic community, one in which individuals feel that they are a unique and important member of the group. I believe that in order for this to happen, it is not enough to have a shared understanding of (and even interest in) particular curriculum designs and/or policies and mandates, but that there needs to be a higher level of connection between the individuals – a sense of true caring towards one another as human beings. First, they must know and understand each other in order to work through shared visions, as well as different perspectives. It is through the gained understanding of each other’s lived personal experiences that they can draw upon and co-create new pedagogical theories and practices. How else, then, can such meaningful
professional interactions emerge if we do not share our stories? Therefore, as Beattie (1995) states, “at the heart of meaningful educational reform and change, lie the narratives and the interaction of narratives of those who live out their lives in educational settings ... through the telling and retelling of these stories of experience ... we come to know ourselves and our changing environments, and to transform both self and environment” (Beattie, 66-67).

Furthermore, in *Experience and Education*, Dewey (1938) argues that education will never be adequate if the philosophy of experience is not factored into the equation of teaching and learning. Subsequently, the relevance of Dewey’s (1938) work to my study relates to the importance of individual experiences which not only shape narratives, but also experiences of being a learner within a classroom. There are tremendous implications for learning which occurs through experience. Dewey (1938) discusses how central one’s personal experiences (of the world around him/her) are to one’s schooling experiences. He states that although the “internal experiences” of an individual have tremendous power to shape one’s understandings, growth could not be limited to just that – however profound it might even be. Dewey (1938) states,

> experience does not go on simply inside a person … in a word, we live from birth to death in a world of persons and things which in large measure is what it is because of what has been done and transmitted from previous human activities. When this fact is ignored, experience is treated as if it were something which goes on exclusively inside an individual’s body and mind … experience does not occur in a vacuum. There are sources outside an individual which give rise to experience. It is constantly fed from these springs. (Dewey, 39-40)

This idea is at the heart of my study, as I hope to explore the various “external” factors that give meaning to the experiences of teaching and learning within the classroom.
Additionally, other conceptual frameworks for my study stem out of the literature by Mary Kooy’s (2006) notion of teacher development through storytelling. Kooy (2006) uses book clubs as a place for teachers to come together in order to experience storytelling. Her study proves that in this coming together, “teacher voices testify to the place of stories in their lives and the need to articulate and hear the stories of others” and that these shared stories “provide a landscape for investigating and imagining new ways of understanding teaching, and learning” (Kooy, 58-59). Valuable to my study is Kooy’s (2012) ideology that teacher development is made possible when teacher voices have a place within the profession, that professional learning is primarily shaped within social contexts. Therefore, it is “in dialogue with others [that] teachers develop their knowledge and understanding” (Kooy & Colarusso, 80). Kooy’s (2006) book club research proves that there is both a need and a place for teachers to come together in order to build a safe haven for “storytelling.” In essence, teachers are interested in people (i.e., their students, and I would argue, the forming of collegial bonds with their fellow teachers) and every student and teacher carries his/her own lived personal experiences. Kooy’s (2006) research sheds light on the reality that given the time and a safe place for the sharing of stories among teachers, incredible new perspectives, connections, and meanings can be constructed in order to move teaching and learning towards transformative heights.

**Narrative Inquiry**

I am also intrigued by JoAnn Phillion’s (1999) approach to narrative inquiry through her study of multiculturalism education. In her explanation of what narrative inquiry means to her, she describes it as a “dialectic tension between individual experience and temporal,
physical, and relational contexts” (Phillion, 37). It is within this context that she sets out to explore multiculturalism from a narrative perspective. Among the many reasons she outlines for using narrative, Phillion states that most significantly, it is because narrative has at its heart an awareness of humanity, a sensitivity to uniqueness ... Narrative is about how people experience their lives, how they interact, how they shape, and are shaped by, the contexts in which they live and work (Phillion, 39). Phillion (1999) states that a narrative approach to inquiry acknowledges “continuity and history of experience of participants and researchers,” that it is “more than understanding from a scientific point of view … it is about not knowing … about surprises, bewilderment, and dilemmas, and learning with and from them” (Phillion, 44).

The lens through which Phillion (1999) outlines the significance of narrative links directly to the work of Connelly and Clandinin (2000). In fact, one of the frameworks for Phillion’s (1999) study was rooted in the work in progress at the time by Connelly and Clandinin (2000) – which is also central to my own study. Their discussion of narrative inquiry carries at its core the notion of people sharing stories of their experiences as a way to inform research. Just as I find it to be essential for teachers to have a place for their stories within the realms of teaching and learning, I also see tremendous significance in the sharing of those stories when an educational researcher sets out to inquire about the world of teaching and learning. In the same vein, the researcher will also create opportunities for his/her own story to be shared. Essentially, narrative inquirers see themselves in relationship with other people, places and situations (Craig, 2010). This allows for that authentic sense of connection between individuals, allowing for more meaningful professional and/or scholarly interactions and growth.
In their work on curriculum, Connelly and Clandinin (1990) state, “we see teachers’ narratives as metaphors for teaching-learning relationships. In understanding ourselves and our students educationally, we need an understanding of people with a narrative of life experiences. Life’s narratives are the context for making meaning of school situations” (Connelly & Clandinin, 3). Therefore, without access to stories and the sharing of lived personal experiences, an inquiry into the complex world of teaching and learning would lack a particular truth – something which can only be revealed when individuals establish personal relationships through openness and trust. This, of course, is no simple endeavour; as Connelly and Clandinin (1990) state,

Narrative inquiry is … a process of collaboration involving mutual storytelling and re-storying as the research proceeds. In the process of beginning to live the shared story of narrative inquiry, the researcher needs to be aware of constructing a relationship in which both voices are heard … [emphasizing] the importance of the mutual construction of the research relationship, a relationship in which both practitioners and researchers feel cared for and have a voice with which to tell their stories. (Connelly & Clandinin, 4)

This approach might sound idealistic, but it is the only way to approach inquiry within the world of teaching and learning that truly makes sense to me. What is teaching and learning, but the constant significant social interactions between teachers and their pupils? Within any given classroom, some degree of understanding must exist among its community members: who are the individuals sharing that space? What are their goals in being there together? What do they hope to accomplish (both individually and as part of a community)? Without some level of getting to know one other within a classroom community, it would be rather stale (and even difficult) to establish shared goals and to experience teaching and learning in a meaningful way. This, I believe, is the same for educational research. The involvement of both the researcher and participant(s) on a more personal level allows for a particular kind of
empowerment for all involved. And how else do we establish rapport and connections with others, but to be open and trusting in sharing our stories?

**Teacher Learning and Voice**

Having a wealth of lived experiences to draw upon, the sharing of teachers’ narratives, therefore, has tremendous potential to shape the teaching and learning that is experienced within the classroom. Yet, in order for the sharing of these narratives to become possible, there must also exist a sense of conviction for teachers that there is a place within the system for their voices to be heard. They must believe that their voices matter and be given the opportunities to share what they know. Each teacher’s lived experiences and personal narrative can enhance the experiences of teaching and learning within a classroom community. Therefore, policy makers and school administrators should make it a priority to invest in creating the time and the place for teachers to share their knowledge with each other in order to create and implement new pedagogical ideas. One of the major challenges that classroom teachers face is the lack of time to create personal opportunities in building professional communities and/or taking the time to collaborate with fellow teachers (aside from what is mandated during board or school wide Professional Development sessions). This will have subsequent implications for student learning. By overlooking the need to create opportunities for teachers to use their voices, it cannot be expected that the students will have a true solid grounding upon which the fostering of their voices can take shape. Therefore, establishing the time and place for teachers to nurture their ideas, exercise their voices and come together in collaboration goes beyond meeting the needs of the teachers alone.
Kooy’s (2006, 2008, 2012) extensive research on professional learning communities sheds light on the significance of establishing collaborative, social settings as a means through which teachers can develop professionally and foster their individual voices. She outlines the fact that “a considerable body of research supports professional learning shaped in social contexts. In dialogue with others, teachers develop their knowledge and understanding” (Kooy & Colarusso, 80). Teacher learning is criticized as mainly being carried out through prescribed “knowledge transmission” and “quick-fix workshops” through traditional PD (Kooy & Colarusso, 2012). Yet, this is not an effective way for teachers to gain the knowledge they need in order to be agents of change within their classrooms. Kooy’s (2006) ideology stems from the notion of learning through collaborative environments, where teachers become the ones who shape their learning through social interactions with one another. Thus, their learning allows for sharing of the voices they bring together and it is meaningful and relevant to them. Otherwise, Kooy & Colarusso (2012) argue that teachers will be left “ill equipped to move forward, to make meaningful change,” especially when they are excluded “in dialogue on reforms, policies, programs and curriculum” (Kooy & Colarusso, 82). Ultimately, teachers need to feel a sense of empowerment, so that in turn, they can empower their students.

**Implications for student agency**

One of the aims of education in the 21st Century is to empower students to become confident, engaged individuals who will see the value of sharing their voices within their learning communities, as well as the world in which they live. Educators strive to create opportunities for students to recognize their roles within the system. Yet, in order to convince
students that they really do have agency, it is first and foremost important for teachers to feel that they have agency. Classroom teachers are the closest link of the entire education system to the students. Their direct and personal interactions with the students allow for the fostering of particular learning experiences that they may not be able to obtain anywhere (or through anyone) else. As a result, when teachers have opportunities to use their voices and share their practical knowledge, students will also have greater opportunities to do the same. Kooy & Colarusso (2012) state that “this critical relationship between teacher learning and student learning … is central to the capacity for teacher knowledge to translate in to the classroom practice” (Kooy & Colarusso, 82). Listening and responding to student self-representations of their learning experiences is a critical aspect of the interactions they must have:

Teachers are not only best situated to listen and respond, but also to act on and create the dialogic learning experiences that unlock the potential of student voice to influence reform at multiple levels. Greater inclusion of student perspectives in classroom as in professional dialogue informs and improves (‘professionalizes’) teacher pedagogy, helps students become better learners, and ultimately, shifts the emphasis from object to subject for both teacher and students. (Kooy & Colarusso, 81)

The idea that teacher learning translates in to the experiences of student learning within the classroom may seem rather obvious. However, the argument here is what that learning should look like and who should define the ways in which ideas are learned/shared will separate relevant, personal learning from a prescribed one. As it is pointed out, “most schools are not structured to encourage student voice; instead, the structure often conflicts with adolescent needs. Established hierarchies and power relations counter any force to negotiate and alter existing patterns” (Kooy & Colarusso, 83). Thus, there is a dire need for tending to the interests and needs of students. Yet, some of the major factors that stand in the
way of bringing this to fruition is the lack of time, as well as lack of teacher flexibility in order to present new opportunities within their classrooms. It is not to say that teachers are not seeing positive results every day; nor does it mean that students are being totally deprived of personally relevant and enlightening learning experiences. However, there is a lot of pressure within the education system today to adhere to “standards.” In her research, Kooy (2006) refers to Michael Fielding’s (2004) study on approaches to establishing student voice, indicating, “students, under pressure to soak up more and more information in increasingly shorter periods of time, put huge pressure on teachers to ‘deliver’ thicker and thicker sets of notes and often feel let down if some folders are thinner than others and irritated if pedagogy strays from the dull and dutiful” (Fielding, 308). This can be rather concerning, for if classroom teachers grow more and more bound by expectations, mandates and formulaic pedagogical ways, the fostering of student voice and agency will grow to be an even greater challenge to meet.

**Identity Construction and the Self**

In her study on creating professional learning communities through book clubs, Mary Kooy (2006) outlines the significance of story sharing as a powerful tool for learning, personal and professional growth. As the participants came together and shared stories (through specific literary works and texts, as well as their own personal lived experiences), they also shared particular identities with which they entered into the learning community. Over time, and through personal interactions, they began to recognize patterns among these identities and ultimately, began to see new possibilities for the intertwining and changing of these identities.
Kooy (2006) outlines, “Identity is how individuals know and name themselves (race, class) and how others name them … individual identity crosses boundaries and is multiple (teacher, mother, woman, partner, relative, friend). Always in process and fluid, identity is a process continuously under construction” (Kooy, 201). Furthermore, Kooy (2006) states, “discussions of teacher identity have become important in the light of knowledge that self-identity and perceptions shape the way we teach and ultimately, how students learn” (Kooy, 201).

Through her three year study, Kooy (2006) created a space for women teachers to come together and to share their stories with relevance to the literary texts being explored. Her role within this space was to simply be a participant observer, yet as she observed the unfolding of the interactions between these women, clear shifting of self-identities and identity reconstructions was taking shape. Additionally, in grasping new perspectives on the complexities of self-identity and identity reconstruction, these teachers began to make connections as students, while also recognizing implications for students. Ultimately, in being engaged in this study, the teacher participants not only carried with them their own personal interests, but also those of their students. In describing Kooy’s study, Jo Anne Pagano (2006) states,

Despite the bureaucracy of the schools, [the teachers] retain their attachment to reading. And these are sensual, familial, and communal attachments. It’s that that they would like to pass on to their students … What comes through in the voices of all these teachers is the impulse to care which is at the heart of [the] impulse to teach … Telling stories, hearing stories, we are inclined to look at our own teaching identities. (Pagano, ix-x)

What might seem obvious is the fact that teachers (as any other group of individuals) would
identify themselves with a particular understanding of self. Yet, further implications lie in the fact that teacher identity construction has implications for the classroom community which he/she builds. On multiple occasions, Kooy (2006) outlines in her study that creating such spaces as the book club community would often not be feasible during teachers’ work days. Yet, seeing the tremendous benefits of creating such communities, one cannot help but think about the implications when there is a lack of these opportunities. Clearly, with the absence of such communities, where teachers would come together in story sharing, they would face a greater challenge in finding a place for sharing of their voices. As a result, therefore, they would have fewer opportunities to recognize, challenge and re-shape their professional identities. And of course, a teacher who has not nurtured an inner knowledge of his/her own self could not genuinely help bring out the same in his/her students.

Cook-Sather (2006) uses the metaphor of “education as translation” in order to guide her educational practice. She states, “with this metaphor I argue that instead of trying to fix the connections we make, we need to re-imagine education as an unending process of change in which we strive to connect, temporarily succeed or fail, and then seek to establish new connections” (Cook-Sather, vii). She discusses the notion of self and identity construction (and re-construction) in terms of a learner’s constant change, in the way he/she see the world, experiences the world, and carries new knowledge and perspectives from one realm in to another. Furthermore, she highlights the notion of “connection” as being a vital part of learning, understanding self, as well as the re-construction of identity. Mary Beattie’s (2008) review of Cook-Sather’s (2006) work outlines that “the making of relationships and connections are central to the ongoing processes of creating and re-creating knowledge, and of the continuous process of creating and re-creating self” (Beattie, 516). This idea ties in
with my personal interest in looking at the significances of lived personal experiences and the
notion of identity for teachers and students alike. I believe that in order to legitimize identity
construction and re-construction, teachers’ and students’ voices must have a place within the
system.

Cook-Sather (2006) discusses her experiences as a college professor, providing an
account of three different groups of learners (sophomores), enrolled in a reading and writing
course. The course, co-designed by a professor of history, a professor of literary studies and
a professor of education, challenges the students “to explore their beliefs and biases, to
engage in on-going interpretations and re-interpretations of compositions and of themselves,
and to make connections between their thinking and their lives” (Beattie, 520). Similar to
Mary Kooy’s (2006) book club study, the interaction between these individuals allowed for
reflective and collaborative experiences. As described, the individuals came in to each
particular community with their own lived experiences, their own constructed identities and
their own understandings of self. Each came in with his/her own language to describe his/her
lived experiences and each had to be open in sharing his/her own story. Above all, however,
each individual had to be open to receiving new ideas, experiences and stories. Perhaps, the
most fascinating occurrences, for me, is the intertwining of the stories that result from the
sharing of experiences and perspectives – to see where individuals’ ideologies and personal
experiences may come together or diverge, resulting in expanded knowledge, awareness and
pedagogical possibilities. Thus, it is through this symbiosis that one who is engaged in the
process of learning can reconstruct the self. Furthermore, these experiences will allow our
personal narratives to take shape beyond what we may have always identified with. This, of
course, ties back to my earlier discussion on the significance of narrative – both as a research
methodology, as well as a phenomenon to understand lived personal experiences within the realms of teaching and learning. Mary Beattie (2008) describes this interconnectedness between identity construction, the self, community and narrative inquiry:

It is understood that the process of making new knowledge and understanding also involves individuals in the making and remaking of the narratives of their lives and of expanding the stories that they can live and tell … when we construct what we know, we do not become entirely new persons, but we do become new versions of ourselves as the past, present and futures of our lives are reconstructed into a new narrative to be enacted in the world. (Beattie, 524).

What Beattie (2008) outlines here is at the heart of my narrative study (especially in my approach to the involvement of my research participants, which I will discuss in greater detail in the next chapter). My argument, however, is that at the heart of teaching and learning lies rich stories of experience that must be listened to and shared. My observations are based on the public education system at the secondary level within the Ontario classrooms. My experiences as both a classroom educator and an educational researcher have proven that within this particular education system, there is a push towards meeting numerous emerging mandates, constantly under the crunch time of carrying out curriculum expectations and a strong obligation to meet school-wide, and department-wide initiatives. Much of it is in the name of maintaining consistency and standards, yet, I will argue, it is at the cost of neglecting the sharing of narratives and the coming together of voices. Such research, as carried out by Mary Kooy (2006), Mary Beattie (2008) and Alison Cook-Sather (2006), outlines that it is imperative for communities of learning to exist, in order to establish opportunities for the sharing of individuals’ personal stories. Certainly, advancements in educational could take place despite this approach, but what kind of progress and/or reform
would our education system be shaped by, if it is far removed from the issues, perspectives and experiences that resonate with the educators themselves?

There will certainly be some losses when little room is left for the voices and the relevant coming together of our classroom educators. This is something that must not be neglected. Undeniably, at the heart of education is the ways in which a teacher fosters growth in his/her students, so that they can recognize a sense of self and to distinguish, challenge and re-define their identities. As Mary Beattie (2008) has magnificently put it, “connections and relationships are at the very heart of the teaching, learning and researching processes where the intellectual, social, emotional, spiritual, aesthetic, moral and physical dimensions of the individual are interconnected” (Beattie, 525). Thus, identity construction and the understanding of self for both teachers and students cannot be separated from these intricate weavings. Simply put, Cook-Sather (2006) begins the preface of her book with a quote by E.M. Forster, which reads,

*Only connect* ...

And so, we must!
Chapter 3: Methodology

Envisioning the Research

When I first began my graduate studies at OISE, I was enrolled in Foundations of Curriculum, where I learned about various curriculum theories and educational theorists. Through that course, Dr. Rubén Gaztambide-Fernández became my very first instructor as a graduate student, and it was this encounter with him that would teach me to question the process of teaching and learning – both in terms of theorists we studied as well as my own experiences as an educator. The course content was highly academic in tone, as we engaged with intellectual writings from across the centuries, often discussing the works of great philosophers and social anthropologists with relevance to the educational theories/theorists. Professor Gaztambide-Fernández challenged us through course readings, as we were pushed to think beyond the comforts of our own knowledge and experiences. Thus, through those very first experiences as a graduate student, I began to perceive the notion of engaging with curriculum, teaching and learning as a highly theoretical one – until we were invited to write a “Critical Autobiography.” The purpose of the paper was to draw connections between our own life journeys and the theoretical frameworks studied within the course. In doing so, we were to discuss our lived experiences (both in terms of our own personal lives, as well as our experiences as students and teachers). In my first writing attempts, I worked hard to sound “scholarly” and well, “theoretical.” However, Professor Gaztambide-Fernández encouraged me to re-write the first draft of my paper with detailed descriptions of growing up and experiencing the world around me. The task proved to be a challenging one for me, as I tried to reconcile the weavings of theoretical frameworks for analysis and autobiographical story
telling. It was neither the type of writing I had ever been invited to try, nor one that I had even known to exist! I struggled to bring together the “academic” and the “personal.” Yet, the completion of the paper brought about a transformative experience, as I began to really understand the complex theories we had been discussing in the course, while reflecting on this life I had been living ... I was rather awestruck by the outcome.

Throughout my years of educational experience, I had seldom known a place for one’s personal lived experiences amidst academic concerns and critical theories. Even as an English Literature Major in my undergraduate studies, there was never a place to embed one’s lived experiences. In fact, formal literary analysis does not allow for the use of personal pronouns to be used in one’s writing. Thus, over the years in academia, I had grown accustomed to the fact that the “personal” would often have no place in matters concerning theoretical frameworks and critical analysis. Therefore, I found this new opportunity that Professor Gaztambide-Fernández was presenting to us not only refreshing, but above all, liberating. For the thing that mattered most to me was being a writer; at the core of who I was, I had always cared about making emotional connections, being creative and sharing my voice with others. Now, I was being invited to do just that – all within the realms of academia, nonetheless. This experience certainly had me thinking about new possibilities, as my perceptions of “higher education” began to shift. I had made the assumption that my academic experiences and research at the graduate level would be rather matter-of-fact, with an academic tone that can often seem convoluted. After all, most (if not all) of the work we had been studying in the Curriculum Foundations course carried that “heaviness” – something that you grow to accept in academia, I believe. You simply accept that certain theories and research papers will sound convoluted, impersonal and inaccessible.
At the end of our term together, I expressed my appreciation to Professor Gaztambide-Fernández for the opportunity to write the Critical Autobiography, and in reply he said, “You will find a place for your writing voice in graduate school, and for your research, Maryam.” Although I was glad to hear this, I was not entirely certain as to how this would take shape. And the idea did not become entirely clear to me, until I was enrolled in my Research Methodologies course, taught by Dr. Mary Beattie. It was there that I learned about narrative inquiry, and all the magnificent ways that research could take on an organic, personal form – where stories could shape one’s study and bring into light the most challenging and complex ideas. This was rather thrilling to me!

One of the first things that Professor Beattie had us engage with was to choose a novel from a great list of award-winning fiction (and some titles that she, herself, thought to have literary merit). Our task was to pair our novel with a published PhD dissertation and to present a 40 minute in-class seminar based on our comparative analysis of the writings. The task proved to be extremely challenging, but once again, I was able to explore theoretical frameworks through a creative approach to language and storytelling. For a major course paper, Professor Beattie had us conduct a self-study research. Once again, similar to the major course paper for Professor Gaztambide-Fernández’s class, we were invited to bring together our personal stories and critical analysis of theories studied in the course. For the second time, I began to work with stories of my past, present and (envisioned) future to explore theories of curriculum, teaching and learning. However, there were still precise guidelines to follow, as this type of research and writing had to cohere with the concepts of narrative inquiry – a framework established for us by Professor Beattie through the works of Connelly and Clandinin (1990, 2000). Yet again, through this task, I was able to experience a
personally relevant engagement with theory, as I also recognized my own growth as a student. Perhaps the most recognizable was the continued shifting and expansion of my perspectives.

When I was ready to begin shaping my research questions, I was enrolled in my first course with Dr. Mary Kooy in a teacher development course. As we engaged with the notion of professional learning communities and the development of teacher voice, I began to really admire Professor Kooy for the incredible ways she would bring her students together in a very relaxed and enjoyable learning environment. Professor Kooy’s ideologies were rooted in the notion of storytelling and community building. She believed that teachers are empowered when they are listened to ... when they are understood as individuals, with specific lived experiences and journeys, each with a story of his/her own. She believed that we are all, by nature, storytellers and there is an innate desire for us to share our stories. It seems like a simple concept, but the confines of the education system make it a lot more complicated for these realities to take form. Therefore, in her teachings, Professor Kooy challenged us (students/educators/researchers) to recognize the setbacks and obstacles that classroom teachers face, but also to work through possibilities for change and come up with solutions in order to rise above them. What moved me tremendously as a student in Professor Kooy’s class was seeing her philosophies come to life in our very classroom and in the interactions that would define our experiences together. Professor Kooy was an advocate for teacher development, believing that in order to grow and be involved professionals, teachers need to be given the time, an encouraging and safe learning community, and the opportunity to share their insight. These were the things she offered her own students, and for us it was very hopeful to see that her ideologies were not only theoretical, but also rather practical and
achievable. Experiencing this empowerment in Professor Kooy’s class truly made me reflect on my own practices as a classroom teacher, as well as the experiences I had had within my school community. I was moved by how genuinely Professor Kooy listened to each of her students’ stories, how she loved knowing all of us as individuals. She would go so far as to demand that we all have dinner together before the start of our evening class and as such, we truly enjoyed being together as a group of students/educators/researchers. We all had varying degrees of experience in education, as well as opinions, philosophies and worldviews. Yet, a comfortable environment was created for us to be together, which encouraged us to be open to learning from each other. As I proceeded to work on my research questions, it was easy to identify the connections between what I had learned in Professor Kooy’s class and those early impressions I had gathered from Dr. Gaztambide-Fernández’s and Dr. Beattie’s classes. The theories, the philosophies, the methodology, and my own personal interests were all cohering together at this point.

I learned invaluable lessons from my three professors – all of which came together in magnificent ways. These professors presented opportunities for my own voice to have a place within the frameworks of my educational experience, which was often extremely challenging and frustrating to work through. But the most important impact, I would say, was the newly-gained realization that academia and research did not have to feel inaccessible and impersonal. On the contrary, I realized that when woven within the context of the self and stories of lived experiences, it became more convincing and “real” – perhaps, in a way, more tangible and practical. Therefore, it became clear to me that that when I was ready to conduct my own research, I would capture the personal. I knew that I wanted to honour voices and stories. By now, I had learned that many educational theorists had come before me, and had
successfully validated the notion of storytelling through research and that this form was called Narrative Inquiry – all of which resonated with everything I wanted my role as a researcher to be.

Professor Gaztambide-Fernández helped me recognize that there could be a place in academia for a personal voice, while Professor Beattie taught me that “research could be soulful.” Professor Kooy proved to me that the simplest aspects of human connections are the most transformative, that story sharing and fostering of individual voices have the power to change more than we could ever imagine within the world of education. And thus, I started to envision my research as being grounded in these very ideas.

The Research

Keywords

Narrative, choice, teacher voice, student voice, stories, storytelling, lived experiences, learning, learning community, community, self, identity, identity construction, teacher agency, student agency, pedagogy.

Goals and Objectives

The purpose of this research has been to shed light on the struggles and challenges faced by classroom teachers and the factors that hinder their voices from being heard within their schools, their communities and even within their school boards. In the same vein, this research has also aimed to bring into light those circumstances and opportunities whereby teachers find a place for their voices, experiences which lead to their empowerment and in turn, increased action within their professional lives. Furthermore, I have been interested in
examining the importance of teachers’ personal lived experiences on the teaching and learning that takes shape within the classroom. These ideas, therefore, are explored through the use of specific narratives written by teachers for the purpose of this study. Additionally, a wider spectrum of anonymous participants have contributed their insight and experiences through a questionnaire consisting of five reflective questions (see Appendix A). In order to also understand the relation between teacher voice and student voice, a group of 55 students also contributed their reflections through a similar questionnaire (see Appendix B). Moreover, as a means of juxtaposition and drawing connections, I have also logged my personal reflections in a professional journal. I have not only aimed to discover points of convergence between the teachers’ narratives and reflections, but also points whereby I recognize my own place within the narratives as both an educator and researcher. The ultimate goal, however, has been to find meaning in the narratives that have been shared and to identify implications of story sharing within the context of teaching and learning, and of course, establishing of voice and agency.

In essence, this study has been primarily interested in teachers’ stories. Through the five participants, I have aimed to have a better understanding of who these teachers truly are and how they define their roles as educators with respect to the individuals they are outside the classroom. I have been interested to know their stories, so that I could comprehend their devotion to the adolescents whom they teach. By studying their narratives, the goal has been to determine how their personal lives have been shaped by both fortunate and unfortunate events and how their unique individual interests and past-times offer them a wealth of knowledge in building units of study, enriching the curriculum and offering their insight through the process of teaching and learning. In closely examining the five teacher
narratives, this study has aimed to better understand the specific knowledge that only *they* can offer their students, for the personal ways in which they have come to experience the world. Furthermore, not only have I been interested to discover where they come together in their philosophies, passions, interests, commitments, but also where they might diverge. I have been interested to know how each unique individual shapes the education world for his/her students.

**Population and Sampling**

*Participants*

The following five descriptions present a short introduction to the teacher participants who shared their personal narratives for this study. My goal was to have various discipline areas represented by my participants, in order to a) obtain a greater spectrum for the comparative nature of this study, through a cross-curricular lens and b) provide teachers from various curriculum areas the opportunity to share their voices. Although these five participants are not the voices of *all* teachers everywhere, my hope is that through this research, their voices become representative of the common experiences, ideas and concerns that govern the world of teaching and learning within Ontario public school systems at the secondary level. The following are the pseudonyms by which I will refer to my participants throughout the study: Annette (Arts); Camille (English); Elise (Social Sciences); Aniya (Sciences); Serena (Mathematics).

*Annette*. Annette is confident and fair, whose strict upbringing has made her compassionate and receptive to the world around her. Growing up in a fairly large family, her greatest inspirations were her parents, especially the kindness shown by her mother. Her
schoolings years were ones she enjoyed and in which she excelled and played an active role in sports and student government. What brought her to teaching was a story of someone dear to her, whose childhood was scarred by a tragic event. Annette defines her role as a teacher by the way she has been able to impact students’ lives on a personal level – where she has had the power to help them escape an abusive or unfavourable situation. She values her students’ experiences and sets high standards for herself in order to help them achieve success. Although Annette recognizes that her own narrative does not have a significant place within the structures of the curriculum and teaching, she values students’ narratives above her own. She believes their stories and interests need to be central to the contents they are taught in school.

**Camille.** Camille is a witty, funny individual who grew up with a former teacher as a mother. Her childhood was shaped by a close relationship with her older brother (two years her senior), her creative and attentive stay-at-home mother, and her father who travelled often, but maintained a strong connection with his family. Camille’s greatest inspiration has been her mother, who has had to overcome adversity by having cancer twice in her life. In school, Camille cared about achieving her best and the standards she set for herself came from the expectations from her parents to also excel and do her very best. Camille’s aspiration to become a teacher was shaped by the positive impressions and experiences gained while doing a co-op placement as an OAC (grade 13) student in a grade eight classroom. The kind of impression that she hopes to leave on her students is being caring, fair and inspirational; she hopes, also, to instill in them a life-long love of reading and literature.

**Elise.** Elise is kind and down-to-earth; she remembers a childhood filled with imaginative play, with her friends, older sister and brother. Many of her family’s vacation
time was spent on camping trips and she describes herself as being more of a “wallflower” than the competitive type – it was her “smarts” that characterized her as she grew up, as opposed to being charismatic or taking centre stage. In school, she was good at learning and she especially excelled in the humanities. Her brother was someone she looked up to quite a bit, the person who inspired her academic goals and helped her build the confidence she often felt she lacked. After graduating from university with an honours degree in Psychology, Elise began working as a secretary. It was a conversation with one of her bosses which made her consider teaching as a career, and she went back to school to follow that path. She feels fortunate to be able to teach the subjects (Psychology and English), which she is passionate about and through which she can share her own personal experiences and stories with her students who will be making various life decisions of their own.

Aniya. Aniya is a lively and optimistic individual, who grew up with her two older sisters and her “strict/conservative” parents. Her mother worked as a secretary, while her father was a former teacher, who later became a technician for a water plant in the city. For Aniya, school became a lot more interesting when she reached high school, where she felt her teachers took greater interest in connecting with their students. Over the years, it was her sisters who influenced her the most and she believes that in many ways, she has become a lot like them. One of the greatest lessons of strength Aniya has also learned in her life came from sharing in her sister’s experience of giving birth to her premature son and watching him fight the odds to grow into a healthy boy. In her fourth year of university, Aniya became a T.A., where she discovered her passion for teaching. It was then that she knew she wanted to become a high school science teacher. From the early years of her teaching career, she has thought a lot about how she would speak to her students and what she will share with them,
in order to impact them for a long time to come. Aniya values fairness above many other aspects of being a teacher, as it is something that also guides her personal life. She is always passionate to have her voice heard and to try new ideas in the classroom, as well as with her teaching colleagues.

**Serena.** Serena is conscientious and observant, whose successes have mostly been the result of being a self-motivated individual. She spent her childhood with her parents and her older sister and she recalls her parents being rather easy-going. Despite their desire for Serena to do well in school, they did not place much pressure on her – rather, it was she, herself, who set high standards and goals to achieve. Although Serena’s older sister was the person she looked up to the most while growing up, she has also been influenced and moved by her father’s hard-working personality. While in school, Serena was not inspired by any particular teacher; school was never really a challenge for her, until she reached her academic career as a university student. Serena first realized she wanted to be a teacher when she would explain concepts to her classmates and felt like she could help them understand lessons and ideas more successfully than the teacher. Serena sees her role as an important one within her classroom community; her constant goal is to have her students take risks and become self-motivated learners. Therefore, she invests a lot of effort in establishing a comfortable learning environment.

**Research design**

**Questionnaires & Writing Guidelines**

This study is one which deals with personal lived experiences, individuals’
perceptions and construction of self identity, and community building – all of which are expressed and examined through the notion of story sharing and individual voices. Therefore, a qualitative approach, which allows for a wider spectrum of holistic reasoning and data analysis served as a much more suitable approach than a quantitative one. As discussed in chapter 2, as well as earlier in this chapter, narrative inquiry has been the most suitable research method for this study. As Beattie (1995) outlines,

Narrative inquiry allows us to describe and represent the human relations and interactions inherent in the complex acts of teaching and learning, and to validate their multiple realities and many dimensions. It allows us to acknowledge that educators know their situations in general, social and shared ways and also in unique and personal ways, thus validating the interconnectedness of the past, the present, the future, the personal, and the professional in an educator’s life. (Beattie, 54).

To stay true to this multi-dimensional aspect of human interactions and interconnectedness, and to honour the notion of individual voices, I wanted to conduct a personal approach to how I would collect data for this research. My vision was to design a study that would be inviting, relevant and accessible. I wanted my participants to feel like they could invest in the study for a distinct purpose – one that would hopefully be personally meaningful to them. Sure enough, the study was about teaching and learning, but I did not want to simply ask about their experiences and/or opinions about their day-to-day teaching. I wanted to convince them that getting to know them as unique individuals was an important aspect of my research. I felt that one of the most genuine ways to achieve this sense of conviction was to be interested in their stories, to hear them tell me what they felt was important in their knowledge/identity construction (whether as teachers, or simply as individuals).

At first, I created an online survey, but I did not feel that it would do justice to the research design I had in mind. Although I wanted to obtain a fairly large number of
responses, I also wanted to receive thoughtful, reflective ones. Therefore, I decided to change the format of the survey to a questionnaire, with only five questions. This allowed for participants to share their insight and reflections on a more personal level. I was interested in hearing individuals’ distinct voices and stories. And therefore, the responses from the questionnaires provided very distinct voices, as opposed to check marked boxes that I would have received had I continued to use the traditional online survey.

Another aspect of the research design was the teacher narratives that I recruited five teachers to write. As I thought about this approach, I was well aware that the idea of writing – not to mention writing a personal piece – is rather a daunting one for most people. Therefore, I wanted the experience to be manageable and hopefully even enjoyable for my participants. Subsequently, I decided to create a “Guideline for Writing a Teacher Narrative” (see Appendix C). The guideline provided instructions on how to carry out a 15 – 20 minute writing sprint. Additionally, I created two parts for their writing, and included writing prompts under headings. I really did not want the participants to feel frustrated or stumped for topics to write about. In essence, my hope was to have my participants honour their stories and in sitting down on their own time and in their own space, to have a reflective – and ideally, a perspective-building – experience through their personal self expression.

While coming up with prompts for the writing guidelines, I wanted to provide a significant amount of choice for my participants, so that even if they chose to work with the prompts, they would still have “writing freedom.” They were also made aware that they should not feel limited by the prompts offered, that they were encouraged to shape their narratives based on what they wanted to share. Part One of the narrative was divided into the following sub-categories to write about: My Past; Throughout the Years; Being a Student;
Being a Teacher. Part Two of the narrative included five prompts about current teaching experiences/visions/voice. They were to first rank the prompts in order of importance to them and then choose one to elaborate on.

**The Researcher’s Narrative**

Although this research primarily focuses on the experiences of teachers and the implications for the fostering of their voices, there is also a ‘hint’ of self-study for me as a researcher which I explore in connection with the teacher narratives. Although teachers have their own distinct personal narratives, there is also a common narrative thread that connects them. Understanding where these connections are found and how/when they exist is what sheds light on issues that are worthy of analysis. Intersecting pieces of my own narrative within this research is significant for various reasons. Firstly, it provides a means through which I would establish rapport with my participants. I wanted to break down the hierarchical barrier that can often exist between “researcher” and “participant.” This was crucial for the nature of this research, because at the heart of my study is valuing human connections and community building. In sharing my own narrative, a greater sense of conviction could be communicated to my participants that I truly honour their stories. After all, they opened up to share some of the inner-most personal aspects of their lives, as well as their professional experiences as classroom teachers. This not only took time out of their extremely busy schedules, but also a significant degree of trust. Thus, I wanted to reciprocate that by being clear and forthcoming about my own position within this research, as well as a fellow educator.

Another reason why I chose to embed my own story and reflections within this study
and throughout the writing of these chapters was to work within the framework of narrative inquiry, as established in the works of Connelly and Clandinin (2000) and Mary Beattie (1995). Their work outlines the interconnectedness that exists between narratives – the notion that when looking at the narratives of others (ie: participants), the researcher becomes a storyteller of other people’s lives. He/she also narrates his/her own story (of the self, of the research) and therefore, there is a weaving of stories that happens amidst this process. Ultimately, when individuals connect and share stories, shared experiences and visions emerge, allowing for opportunities to better comprehend the implications of those experiences. In describing the purpose of narrative inquiry, Beattie (1995) states that for an educational researcher, this type of study aims “to gain an understanding of teaching and teacher learning from the teacher’s perspective and to understand how the teacher’s personal practical knowledge develops through narratives of experience” (Beattie, 7). Furthermore, as a researcher,

writing your narrative will help you make your tacit knowledge explicit, to articulate the various dimensions of your professional knowledge, and to use what you know to learn what you need to know. It will help you to express the central concerns and values in your life, to explore how they are enacted in your professional practice, and to imagine and create the script for your future. (Beattie, 1995)

As a researcher, this is a lens through which I examine the role that my participants have played in my study. Yet, it is also important for me on a personal level to better understand these implications for the practical knowledge relevant to my role as an educator within the profession. Because I am currently an active classroom teacher, I cannot separate the implications of these narratives from my own. Therefore, in being able to discuss my findings, I must also consider reflections and experiences that have been significant to my own development as a teacher. I have, however, tried to create a delicate balance throughout
this study, so that the stories of my participants take “centre stage.” My aim has primarily been to provide opportunities for the narratives of classroom teachers to be shared, and for their voices to be represented as clearly and fairly as possible. Throughout this research, therefore, I have maintained a personal professional journal, in which I have reflected on informal conversations with teachers, particular observations and occurrences within my day-to-day teaching. As I have studied my participants’ narratives, I have also drawn connections between their experiences and stories with the reflections I have recorded throughout the past year of my research. In order to illustrate these connections, I will be sharing excerpts from my journal in chapters 4 and 5.

**Ethics and Confidentiality**

This study has been identified as being “low risk” for all participants involved. Teachers and students who took the questionnaires were anonymous participants. Therefore, they did not need written consent, as their identities were not being used for data collection/analysis. Students were, however, informed that their reflections would be analyzed for the purpose of the study, and the context of the research was described to them. Similarly, the teacher questionnaires were anonymously completed. Teachers from various departments at the same school were invited to share their reflections and invite other teacher friends (from other schools or school boards) to also contribute their insight by taking part in the questionnaire. They were also informed that their identities would not be used for data collection/analysis. As a result of this anonymity, neither the students, nor the teachers who volunteered to complete the questionnaires risked being identified, or effected in any way.
The five specific teachers who were recruited to participate on a more personal scale (by writing a teacher narrative) were involved in the study within more distinct ethical parameters. Each of these participants were required to sign a consent form (see Appendix D), which outlined the nature of the study, their role as prospective participants and a description of how their contribution (ie: written narratives) would be used in my research. Participants were ensured that their identities would be protected through the use of pseudonyms, and that the information they shared would solely be used for the purpose of the current study. Furthermore, to maintain privacy and confidentiality, the names of employees and place of employment has not been mentioned in this study. Participants were also made aware that they could choose to withdraw and discontinue their participation at any time with no consequences. Furthermore, participants were given a copy of the consent form, while also being invited to address any questions or concerns regarding the study, either prior to, during or following their participation.

Data

Data collection

For the purpose of this study, qualitative data was obtained through specific questionnaires (one created specifically for classroom teachers and one for students – across various curricular areas at the public high school level). Three different grade 11 classes were given the opportunity to complete the questionnaire; a total of 55 students chose to participate. The purpose of the student questionnaire was to gain insight into the kinds of experiences students have had as members of their classroom communities. Questions aimed to bring into light whether students feel their opinions and/or identities are given a
voice/being represented within their classrooms. Similarly, the teacher questionnaire aimed to provide teachers with the opportunity to anonymously express what they regard as greatest challenges and/or frustrations, teaching within the public school system. Additionally, the questionnaire aimed to shed light on whether or not they feel that they have “pedagogical freedom” within their classrooms. Teachers were also asked to share their thoughts on whether they believe students’ unique narratives/lived experiences are being considered within units of study carried out in their classrooms. Finally, the questionnaire provided an opportunity for teachers to express their urgent needs (that may be overlooked) and/or the implementation of changes that they identify as being critical for the progress of their courses taught at the high school level. A total of 20 teachers volunteered to complete the questionnaire. 13 of those teachers were from the same school, and 7 of them were from other schools/school boards within the Greater Toronto Area.

Ultimately, both the student and the teacher questionnaires were set up in order to give students and teachers an opportunity to anonymously share their thoughts and feelings about the nature of their classroom communities. Thus, the data collected was organized into charts and tally sheets, categorizing each given response based on the five specific questions asked on each questionnaire. Interpretations of this data allowed me to identify reoccurring concerns, opinions and reflections from both the student and the teacher questionnaires.

Additionally, my own personal experiences were logged within a professional journal. This was carried out over the course of my research. Through personal reflections as both a classroom teacher and a researcher, I hoped to identify patterns that are important to my research questions and the common “problems” I have set out to address: challenges faced from day-to-day by classroom teachers; limitations of carrying out personal visions of
pedagogy; curriculum expectations/mandates and school initiatives; lack of time and/or resources; lack of teacher and student voices.

In addition to the questionnaires and my own personal reflections, I also gathered five specific “teacher profiles,” written by various subject teachers from the following disciple areas: Arts; Social Sciences; English; Sciences; Mathematics. These narratives paint a more vivid picture of some of the real individuals who have committed their lives as classroom educators. As previously mentioned, through a comparative look at these profiles, I have set out to determine common threads, as well as varying point-of-views that exist among teachers, and the implications of these points of comparison within the realms of teaching, learning and identity construction.

**Data analysis**

The data collected through the student and teacher questionnaires was sorted by creating specific categories. These categories were made into a chart and commonalities between the answers for each question were tallied under headings. Additionally, the student questionnaires were analyzed based on whether students had a positive or a negative response to each question. The analysis chart for the student questionnaires was organized by the following categories: sharing of personal opinion; acknowledgement of personal interests and experiences; opportunity to choose assignments/evaluations; relevance of enjoyment to success; appreciation for learning/subject matter.

The teacher questionnaires were also analyzed in a similar manner, by sorting answers in to specific categories: frustrations/challenges; selection of course material;
pedagogical freedom; acknowledge of personal narratives; something to change. The chart was then studied in order to decipher greatest issues of concern and the general patterns of teaching and learning.

In order to analyze the content of the teacher narratives, I read each one first, then re-read and highlighted the most interesting and personal information that each participant shared. Next, I looked at each narrative in sections (as mentioned earlier, the writing prompts had already suggested categorization of ideas by topics). I then tried to distinguish between how each participant addressed the various topics of discussion. The following were common themes that emerged from all of the narratives: place for narratives/voice within the classroom vs. the school/board/ministry; lack of time and training to help students with special needs; limitations of pedagogical freedom due to mandates and policies; lack of understanding and connections with board/ministry level decision making; desire to make a difference in the lives of students. Furthermore, I closely examined the teachers’ lived experiences of childhood/growing up, as well as schooling experiences and other significant personal information they had shared about their past in order to understand the correlation between their teaching philosophies and classroom practices with their personal lives. These findings will be discussed in chapters 4 and 5. Additionally, within the findings and discussions sections of this thesis, I will also intersect relevant aspects of my own professional journal reflections. As I make connections between the discoveries I have made about my five participants, as well as the questionnaires, I hope to come to a greater understanding about my own role as an educator. I will be able to discuss the implications of my experiences within a greater context, shared by my fellow classroom educators. My story will, therefore, underscore (on a personal level) the issues that have been identified through
the teacher narratives, as well as the questionnaires in this study. In the end, however, it will be an interesting weaving of our shared experiences ... experiences that have stemmed from various unique stories, but which carry at their heart, the same passions and longings for teaching and learning. And our greatest purpose for it all: our students.
Chapter 4: Findings

Approach & Overview of Findings

This chapter will outline the study findings and discuss the three prominent themes that emerged: (1) Identity; (2) Choice; and (3) Teacher/Student Voice. This chapter also address how the research questions were revealed through the shared experiences of the teacher and student participants.

In this chapter, pseudonyms are only used for the five teacher participants who contributed extended narratives. The participants whose reflections are quoted from the teacher and student questionnaires are not referred to by any given names, as there were too many in number and they were to remain anonymous.

1. IDENTITY

1.1 Teachers’ perception of roles in the classroom

The teacher questionnaires revealed that first and foremost, classroom teachers regarded their roles as being the facilitators of learning for their students. They saw their expertise and knowledge as being crucial in establishing a community of learning within their classrooms. Therefore, they spoke about the importance of being equipped with the proper training, resources and/or time in order to meet the needs of their diverse student bodies (especially ones with learning disabilities and Individual Education Plans). One teacher writes:
My goal is to make sure that each student feels valued, safe and supported, while finding creative ways to engage and allow them to demonstrate their learning. I feel sometimes like we are pressed for time and have less time for creative lessons, because we are scrambling to finish required tasks/evaluations. Also, one of the greatest challenges for me is the expectation of my role to help LD students (such as students who are illiterate in grade 11, for example). We don’t have special training as classroom teachers to really help these students. This situation is tragic, sad and unfair to the students.

A clear sense of teachers envisioning themselves as classroom educators emerged: teachers who are supportive, creative and value expanding their professional knowledge. Furthermore, they viewed their roles in providing opportunities for their students not only to grow academically, but also to express their interests and identify their talents and strengths.

1.2 Student identity

The first part of the student questionnaire aimed to understand whether students saw their lived experiences and their personal interests as important aspects of building their classroom communities. They were asked whether they felt they were given the opportunity to express their personal opinions and whether their teachers make personal efforts to get to know their interests. All of them responded by saying that the opportunity is always available to share opinions on the topics discussed in class. They also all said that almost all teachers make clear efforts to know their personal interests. Many of the students responded by referring to one memorable teacher who stood out to them as making the greatest investment in his/her students’ personal interests. The students’ appreciation of having their teachers acknowledge their identities certainly comes through very clearly in the responses. One student writes:
I do feel that most of my teachers make a personal effort to get to know my interests. For example, many of them have asked us to write letters about ourselves, to give them a better understanding of our interests, and also to share additional important information. They also enjoy hearing about my interests, therefore, it is shown that they are making an effort to learn more despite being really busy.

This particular student acknowledged the idea that time is a key factor for their classroom teachers. They also recognized that their teachers have many other students whose voices need to be heard – and that once again, it takes time to reach out to every single student:

I can think of one particular teacher who makes extra effort. Of course getting to know 30 students isn’t easy and she may not always have the time to sit with us one on one, but I feel that if I needed or wanted to talk to her about myself, she would love to listen.

Furthermore, many students drew correlations between their teachers’ efforts in getting to know them as individuals and their interests in seeing them succeed academically. One student wrote,

Many teachers definitely make personal efforts to know our interests. It is clear when they want to see our personalities and know us as people. They try to help us do better by keeping our personal ideas and abilities in mind. There are teachers who force their own beliefs and opinions on their students, but this does not help us learn.

Overall, students demonstrated a high degree of awareness towards the extent to which their classroom teachers acknowledged their personal opinions, interests and lived experiences. Moreover, where they saw their teachers’ extended efforts, they indicated their appreciation and expressed an increased enthusiasm towards their learning.
1.3 Narratives of experience & the self

In the first part of the narrative, participants were invited to share some background information. The writing prompts related to family backgrounds, growing up, early schooling experiences, overcoming challenges, personal passions/interests, envisioning teaching, and early teaching experiences. The following excerpts are from the writing shared by three of the participants, based on the prompts they chose to write about:

**Annette**

_I used to cut pictures of beautiful women out of the magazines and pin them to my ceiling so I could study them before bed, as I waited to grow older and beautiful like those women._

_What brought me to teaching, theoretically, was a conversation with someone close to me about her gang rape by a group of men when she was just a child of three or four. I was told about this horrific event when I was in eighth grade, and it made an indelible impression on me, and would forever change the course of my life. I felt that no one helped this child, and I decided I wanted to be someone in society who had the POWER to be able to help children that needed it._

**Camille**

_The people who have inspired me are those who are articulate and kind, and who are able to face adversity and remain positive in their outlook. To illustrate, I think of my mom. My mom has had breast cancer twice—once when I was about twelve years of age—and I guess if I were to identify a defining moment for me, it would be when she had cancer the first time. I’d never before contemplated what my life might be like without her, and I can vividly remember sitting in the car with my brother crying together about what it meant when we learned that mom would require both chemo and radiation when the doctors found cancer in her lymph nodes following the surgery._

_She faced breast cancer again when I was teaching and pregnant with my first child, and she’s also had cancer in her eye and undergone treatments to address that. Throughout all of this, she has remained an optimistic person who still doesn’t dwell on her health and the challenges she continues to face. She’s a giving and generous wife, mother, and grandmother, and I hope to have even half of her strength as I continue to ‘grow up.’_
Aniya

The greatest personal challenge I have had to overcome was the difficult time I went through when my nephew was born prematurely and was in the hospital for a few months. It was hard seeing him in the hospital and going through hardship and it was hard seeing my sister going through it as well. My family stayed strong throughout the whole thing and now my nephew is a healthy, strong four year old. From this, I learned that we all have an inner strength that will always come out when we need it the most.

The participants shared the core of their experiences – not only the dreams and visions of they hoped to become, but also some of the most defining moments of their lives. Of course, I had approached the narrative inquiry knowing that the stories of my participants would be a significant part of my study. However, I had not anticipated the stories that would be shared with me to speak of such personal secrets, fears, trials and tribulations.

As evident in the narrative excerpts shared above, common threads emerged from the teachers’ stories. Thus, the overarching themes identified were: the importance of people/family as a source of inspiration and support; childhood impressions that shaped personalities, leading to future dreams and interests; the love of learning, school and excelling in academics; desire to make a difference as an educator. Given that these teachers were not communicating with one another while writing the teacher narratives, these intersections revealed similar values, goals, as well as some common lived experiences.

1.4 Teacher identity

The five participants identified rapport building with students as one of most crucial aspects of being an educator. To a great extent, they defined the success of their roles by being able to empower their students. They saw themselves as individuals who would help
students become self-reliant, self-motivated, and curious about learning and the world. In using adjectives to describe their teacher identities, words such as fair, kind, and inspiring resonated among the narratives. The following excerpts from four of the participants illustrate how they identified themselves as being the most effective educators:

**Annette**

*I want to enable all students to become independent in whatever field they choose. Period. I want to help give them the gift of independence and self-reliance that was given to me. If students are going to remember me, I hope they remember that I cared about them and that I taught them that they deserve to be treated well by everyone, no matter their current situation. I also hope that they can see that I was not scared to stand up to the people who mistreated them. Maybe through my actions, they will learn that those people were not so powerful after all.*

**Camille**

*I’d like to be remembered as a teacher who was caring, fair, and hopefully inspirational. I know my reputation is as a hard marker who has high expectations, and I’m okay with this. If students leave my English classes excited about reading and the study of literature, that would be so great. If they leave with a desire to learn more about literature, that would also be so great. If they leave more enthused about reading and curious to tackle some of the texts I’ve recommended or to branch further into some types of literature that might be challenging, that would be awesome. If their writing improves as a result of my teaching and feedback and texts studied in my class, then that would be ideal. I guess I just hope to teach them skills and a love of literature that will extend far beyond our time together.*

**Aniya**

*I have envisioned my role as a classroom teacher to be a very important one in society. I have thought about the fact that what I say to these kids could impact them for a long time and structure how they view the world around them. Thus, I have taken my role as a teacher very seriously and responsibly. My philosophies about teaching are that we are guides to help shape the learning that students encounter in their lives. I think we are responsible for not only teaching the ‘facts’ of our course but also teaching the students about being kind, fair, responsible and ethical human beings.*
As a teacher I want to be remembered as: effective, kind, inspiring, responsible, organized, and fair. Being fair is something I am really adamant about (and have fought for) not only in the classroom but in other areas as well.

**Serena**

I love the interactions and relationships that can be made with students. As a teacher I feel students must be comfortable to take risks, and be self-motivated to improve their understanding of the material. It is my job to create an environment where all students feel comfortable and challenged to the extent that they will be successful, but also not afraid to make mistakes along the way.

All five teacher participants wanted to be heard and remembered as inspiring individuals who cultivate fairness, independence, and strength within their classrooms. Above all, their common hope was to leave everlasting impressions on their students, so that they would take away “lessons” worth applying to the real world and their future endeavours.

In her research on multicultural education and “liberation,” Feuerverger (2007) describes teaching as “an act of courage and beauty.” She speaks about creating connections and establishing a “spirit of community” as she states,

School should be a meeting place continually reinventing itself so that there is always room for more ‘others’, for more choices, for more dreams – a path toward repair and restoration. The power of teaching-learning experience lies in its potential to connect us to our selfhood, to cultivate our own identities as well as our integrity, talents, and inner passions and drives which lie at the very core of our being ... A teacher can be a messenger of disdain and indifference or of hope and freedom to his or her students. I believe that most teachers desire to be the latter. They seek to inspire and to build confidence in their classrooms, where all children can learn a sense of agency and purpose and thus discover their inner gifts.

Feuerverger’s (2007) words ring true in the narratives shared by the teacher participants. As the above excerpts clearly illustrate, these teachers are, first and foremost,
interested in establishing human connections. They recognize that through rapport building and forming of teacher-student relationships, they will be able to bring their pedagogical philosophies to fruition.

Prior to receiving (and reading) any of the teacher narratives, I had taken the time to write down my own reflections. As I set out to make discoveries about my participants, I was also intrigued to decipher how my own story as a classroom teacher mirrored theirs. Therefore, I explored some of the same prompts that I had provided the participants with. When I compare the contents of my own writing with those of my participants, I am struck by the similarities in our words. A passage from my personal professional journal reads:

*My visions of who I would like to be as a teacher and how I would like to contribute my knowledge within my classrooms have not changed since I first entered this profession. I have always recognized my own passion and ability to use words and emotions to connect with others – and to guide others in doing the same. I have become an educator because I want to guide adolescents in gaining more awareness about who they are, where they have come from and the possible paths they can dream of exploring in their lives. I hope to guide my students in realizing their fullest potential, by opening possibilities for them to be less afraid of failures and disappointments – to face challenges with purpose and personal strengths. I hope to be remembered as a teacher who empowered them to take the roads that have been “less traveled by” (to quote Robert Frost), to seek truth, to have integrity, and to move into the world with the most positive intentions.*

In discussing the role of teachers and the purpose to teach, Feuerverger (2007) says, “we must also pose the question: ‘why does one go into teaching in the first place?’ It is a matter of acknowledging our struggle to make sense of our own lives as we confront the lives of our students in classrooms every day.” Ultimately, this is exactly what is revealed through all of our stories. The thread that binds my participants’ stories (as well as my own
reflections as a classroom teacher) is one that embodies the common desire to seek courage, to live with courage and to teach courage.

1.5 The intertwining of teacher and student narratives

The one thing that emerges from the teacher and student questionnaire responses is that these two groups of individuals constantly explain their roles and identities within the classroom community in relation to each other. They reciprocate an interest in the role that each plays within the classroom and to an extent, there is a level of expectation that holds one responsible to the other – in terms of a genuine caring and commitment.

In her research on theatre education and the role of narratives in teacher-student interactions, Gallagher (2001) states,

Teachers interested in transforming education must start with student culture. Doyle (1993) claims that we must give experience a stronger place in education, and states that who is learning precedes what is learned. This seems a logical conclusion to draw, yet so much of our organization around teaching ignores and even denies that our students come to us with a wealth of knowledge and experiences that have already shaped them.

This resonates with the students’ perceptions of their roles within a classroom setting. While the students acknowledged their positive experiences throughout their academic careers and showed compassion and understanding towards the limitations that exist, they recognized that teaching and learning is constructed with the main goal to cater to their needs, but they also regarded their teachers as people whose voices matter within the shared learning community.

The teacher questionnaires revealed their interest in building and maintaining
classroom communities where fluid weavings of their narratives along with their students could take shape. In their responses, teachers—much like the students—wished for opportunities to have meaningful and memorable interactions. One common thread among the teachers’ voices was the notion of inspiring students, impacting them far beyond the classroom walls. They hoped that their own stories and character traits—being kind, fair, supportive, hardworking—would empower the same in their students. From the reflections shared by both the teachers and the students, it is rather clear that teachers value their students’ voices and in turn, students value their teachers’ expertise, knowledge and personal lived experiences. Thus, they are interested in each other’s narratives. What is revealed, therefore, is that there is certainly a need for the weavings of stories between teachers and their students—that without such occurrences, they feel a significant lacking, even hindrance to a successful schooling experience. In Chapter 5, I will discuss how this merging of narratives can take shape and the significance it will have for the process of teaching and learning.

2. CHOICE

2.1 Pedagogical freedom

Teachers reflected on their personal “visions” of teaching and learning and the opportunities to exercise desired initiatives. The responses showed a tremendous degree of passion and enthusiasm towards possibilities to carry out personal visions of teaching and learning. However, the common concern voiced was the limited opportunities that exist at any given time. Many of the responses indicated that in name of consistency and fairness, teachers often feel the need to disregard their own ideologies, in order to ensure they are
meeting established criteria and standards. The questionnaire responses did not dismiss the fact that teachers certainly do have some pedagogical freedom. Yet, as a result of the various demands and expectations, teachers outlined that there remain fewer and fewer opportunities to exercise certain personal visions and/or initiatives within their classrooms. This is reflected through the following responses:

Teacher X: I do my best to be as creative as I possibly can within the guidelines that are laid out for me. So I try my best and stretch the limits as far as I can under the circumstances. But I do not feel like I am at liberty to do and try everything that comes to mind. I want every student in my class to feel enlightened and leave thinking about something they had never considered before as it relates to an assignment or class discussion. My favourite moments are when a student says they discussed something at the dinner table that we touched on in class. My vision would be for that to happen on a regular basis and it would if I had more freedom.

Teacher Y: Unfortunately, I don’t think that students’ personal interests are being met to the extent that they should be in various units of study. However, I try to make connections wherever possible, as I usually do my best to offer them choice. That’s an important element of learning for adolescents. I try to have many insightful discussions with my students – issues that they will have a lot to say about, so that they can feel connected to what they learn. They (or even myself, as their teacher) might not have as much control over what is taught, but at least there can be a sense that we have freedom of expression on the topics being studied.

They struggled to establish a balance between what is expected and set into place as pedagogical frameworks for the teachers and what could be imagined and envisioned by the teachers themselves. Creating a happy medium between these realms has proven to be one of the challenges faced by classroom teachers, who see their individual classrooms as being unique and ever-changing.
2.2 Students recognizing choices

The responses from the questionnaires revealed that students regard having choice as an important part of their learning experiences. They are interested in opportunities to choose their own texts/reading/research material, as well as the types of evaluations and projects in any given course. Nearly all of the responses indicated that students have some choice, but not a great degree of freedom to shape most of their learning experiences based on various choices available to them. One student stated,

Yes and no. We do have some choices for assignments that are mainly for personal enjoyment or independent projects, but we don’t often have a say in the texts/evaluations that we must complete as a class (which is almost everything). These are chosen for us and the down side of that is how it might effect a student’s mark, because not everyone likes what’s chosen for them.

Through many of the responses, it can be concluded that students generally expect limitations to exist. Their reasoning stemmed from their belief that teachers are either trying to follow mandates and curriculum expectations, or that they simply know what is best for their students’ learning and growth. One of the responses reads: “We don’t get a lot of choice, because we follow what the board wants us to do. However, I believe that if I chose the texts or projects for a class, I would not always be as challenged as I should be and I wouldn’t get quite as much out of it.” Furthermore, some students also believed that having choice depends on the funding that each school received: “Even when we have the opportunity to choose, our choices are limited. I know teachers try, but sometimes there is no money and we have a big school.” Overall, however, what was revealed was the students’ clear awareness about how much choice they had in shaping their own learning and what that
choice looked like when it was presented to them in various discipline areas.

2.3 Opportunities for teacher choices

When reading the following excerpts from the narratives, it becomes clear that having choice, to an extent, is a matter of perspective for teachers. Through the reflections that are shared, it is evident that total freedom to choose teaching material and carry out pedagogical visions is considered unrealistic for teachers. Most of the teacher participants stated that their freedom to choose is often limited by administrators’ and/or department heads’ expectations to maintain consistency among courses within departments. Other hindrances include lack of funding and the demand from parents/guardians and students to be fair in the opportunities presented to them from teacher to teacher. Camille and Serena have indicated that although having total freedom may not be the reality for them, they are still able to find opportunities in order to practice personal choice. It is clear, however, that Serena feels less restricted by expectations of uniformity – although, even for her, there are certain regulations to be met. The two teachers write:

Camille

I’d say that I do have the freedom in general to carry out personal visions, but the freedom has limits. Teachers must ensure that students in all classes at the same grade and destination (eg- grade twelve university English) have the same evaluations and tasks/texts that are similarly challenging. Beyond that, though, there is freedom in how we choose to reach these destinations. We usually choose to share resources (or, at least, that’s how I prefer to work and I do my best to encourage this sharing by sharing my ideas and resources when I have something worth sharing), but there’s no one overseeing our day-to-day operations to ensure or insist upon uniformity. Teachers are free to shape the tone and areas of priority within each of their classrooms, so long as the evaluations are the same.
Total freedom isn’t possible; school funds are limited, so teachers can’t buy class sets of texts on a whim. Also, our administration makes it clear that they expect consistency within courses of the same grade and level so that students can transfer without too much disruption, and so that we won’t be vulnerable to suspicions of some classes being “easy” while others that should be identical might be perceived as “hard”. Of course, we also have the curriculum documents and Growing Success to provide further necessary incentive to have a reasonable degree of consistency.

Serena

I do feel I am able to carry out my visions of teaching and learning in my classroom. Our math department has always been a department that supports innovation, and creativity within classrooms. We have not been mandated to all teach the exact same way, or to assess the exact same way. When a group of teachers are all on the same course team, we generally maintain the same unit order, however flexibility is still allowed. The only way we may be restricted is in our final 30%. All teachers teaching the same course are required to evaluate this in the same way. Sometimes there may be resistance on a team to try some new strategy, however often times, we are able to work as a team to try something new.

Aniya and Annette feel bound to the expectations that limit their personal choices to a greater extent. Through their responses, it is apparent that most often, they are faced with making compromises, as well as sacrificing personal interests in order to maintain consistency. They write:

Aniya

I’m not really able to carry out personal visions of teaching too much in the classroom. I am restricted by the curriculum documents as well as what’s decided as a Board, school and department on how/what we teach for our courses. I do have an influence in the department level of how we can teach certain courses; but again if there is more than one teacher teaching the same course, it has to be a compromise.

Annette
Pedagogical freedom is being squeezed out of the classrooms year by year. I had much more freedom as a teacher when I first started teaching. Now, all my courses have to align with the courses of other teachers in my department, and I often find myself presenting projects to the students that I personally would not want to do myself. The majority rules, so I do my best to make the work interesting, but truly, these projects were not of my choosing. This does not make sense, because projects vary widely from school to school. There is no standardization in projects between schools, so why are we being forced to standardize within the school?

There are factors that govern how much and when teachers can choose what they teach in each unit of study – and even how much time they can devote to their lessons. Such factors include being on a timeline with their colleagues/teaching teams, units of study that have been established in course teams, reporting deadlines, as well as particular student needs/flow of learning within each class. As a result, teachers can find it challenging to follow an ebb and flow that is most effective for their given classes. Despite these obstacles, they have stated an interest in creating, building, and sharing resources with fellow teachers. Their greatest concern lies in the limitations of personal choice that seem to increase with each passing year – not the mere reality that standards and mandates are a part of the public education system.

3. VOICE

3.1 Not enough time to be heard

One of the most prominent concerns identified through the teacher questionnaire responses was the notion of time, which in essence highlighted the feeling of not being heard. Not only did most teachers address the constant time restraints to carry out units of study or personal visions of teaching, they also addressed the reality that there is insufficient amount
of time to truly engage in professional development beyond their day-to-day responsibilities.

One teacher writes,

> My goal is to make sure that each student feels valued, safe and supported, while finding creative ways to engage and allow them to demonstrate their learning. I feel sometimes like we are pressed for time and have fewer opportunities for creative lessons, because we are scrambling to finish required tasks/evaluations. We seem to have less and less time to share what we really want to share with our students.

This hurried sense of pedagogy resonates through many of the questionnaire responses – the wish for greater opportunities to be freed from cookie-cutter guidelines and to engage in learning that is experiential and fresh. Another teacher writes:

> My belief is that each class has its own rhythm, a personality of its own and level of engagement. I used to be able to tap into that, challenge that and respond to that. Now I have to worry about whether or not, any enrichment activity I would like to employ will result in students from other classes complaining to their teachers that they don’t have to do something, or do have to do something, or my own students comparing what we do to some other classes. I find the principle of ‘all for one, one for all’ suffocating at times. While the underlying principle that all students should complete the same evaluations and be given the same opportunities across classes/teachers has merit, it does at times affect the teacher’s ability to respond enthusiastically to the personality of his/her class.

Furthermore, teachers expressed an interest in being given opportunities to work collaboratively with their colleagues, such as team teaching or mentor/mentee opportunities for more experienced teachers. One of the teachers wrote, “One of the most valuable learning opportunities for me has been the PD sessions where I’ve been able to work with my mentor teacher and discuss my concerns and ideas with him.”

Many responses discussed the ineffectiveness of professional development initiatives
due to lack of time to hone skills, and taking on new challenges. One of the teachers stated, “A lot of us feel overwhelmed and resentful of yet another new initiative being proposed, because we never have enough time to truly master the previous ones.” For the most part, teachers revealed a clear desire to engage with new ideas of teaching and learning; teachers’ willingness to work collaboratively and innovatively certainly came through in the questionnaire responses. The lack of time to explore options, methods and theories proved a hindrance to such actions.

3.2 Student voice and engagement in learning

One of the observations made from the questionnaires was that students regarded the enjoyment of their learning experiences as an important factor in their academic success. Subsequently, learning that was relevant and personally engaging for them resulted in an appreciation for something beyond the classroom. Therefore, all of the participants stated that it was important for them to enjoy some (if not all) of their subject areas, and to have greater say in what they learn in their courses. They saw this as being rather helpful in discovering an area of interest to pursue in their post-secondary lives. One student spoke about this connection as he/she wrote:

Many of my teachers have made it fun to learn. They have allowed us to research topics that are personally interesting to us. Also, mostly when reading books I understand how much intelligence, creativity and thought process goes into creating a well-known, good book. This also relates to reading articles, essays, etc. Being allowed to read all kind of things in different classes has made me understand so many different genres exist and I have found which interests me the most. So I think it is important for teachers to guide you, but also to give you freedom to find what interests you. This might lead to knowing what you want to study in university, or even the kinds of interests and hobbies you want to pursue.
Many of the students indicated that being treated more “maturely” and being given greater options by their teachers was experienced as they became senior level students. Many of them compared their earlier experiences as high school students with their current senior year (11th grade). As a result, they felt that they were able to discuss ideas to a greater extent. They equated this with learning more about the world and as one student put it, “you become wiser.”

When students shared the implications of not having a voice to shape their own learning, they spoke about their disengagement, which many claimed to be the reason for their lack of academic success. Many of them expressed the importance of connecting with the teaching material and finding personal relevance in what is taught. One student wrote,

> When I don’t enjoy reading something in a class it is often because I can’t connect to the era it is from. Then, my mark ends up being low, because I did not care about what I read. I know it is not always possible, but I think teachers should make greater efforts to ask students what they like to learn about.

Overall, the questionnaire results made it clear that as students felt more engaged in their learning, they showed a greater appreciation of what was taught in their classes, and in many cases, this propelled them forward to discuss post-secondary options with their teachers. A number of participants spoke about a particular teacher who has opened their eyes to a new idea or area of interest, simply by giving them a voice in learning about their interests. In turn, these teachers would become the source of greater knowledge to personally connect them to their future endeavours.
3.3 Teacher voices in schools, districts, and the ministry

Through their narratives, most of the teacher participants have indicated that they have opportunities to voice their opinions and/or visions of pedagogy within some aspect of the teaching world. Their writing reveals that it is more realistic for them to expect their voices to be heard within teaching teams and departments than at the school level. The shared sentiment about having a voice beyond the school indicates that teachers do not feel like they can be agents of change at the school board or ministry levels. The following excerpts from four of the narratives illustrate these sentiments:

Elise

Although my personal voice may be heard in the classroom environment, I don’t feel that it is heard school wide. In the teaching profession learning among teachers and ‘professional development’ seems to be an opportunity for curriculum leaders to validate their visions rather than real learning from/with other teachers. As a result, voices tend to go unheard. I’d love to be more actively involved in improving the education system (eg. extending the validity of assessment practises, enforcing zero-tolerance for inequitable language) but staff and administrators are so overwhelmed with all the demands and putting out fires that there rarely seems time or energy to proactively adopt changes to improve the system as a whole.

In all, one of the reasons I decided to pursue teaching as a career was because I could ‘be my own boss’ within the classroom. I like having control over the direction of conversations, topics discussed, and methods for learning. But beyond that classroom environment, I have been quite disillusioned by the world of teaching.

Serena

I feel like I do have a voice in my department and my school. We are given opportunities to share our opinions at PD and other meetings. At times there is a push for a particular type of strategy that seems to be the next big thing (ie: Differentiated Instruction, IT in the classroom, etc.). These strategies are good as strategies, but when they become the only
strategy that is being spoken about, to the exclusion of others, it can be tiresome, and you can feel bombarded with the same things over and over again.

The issues that need a teacher voice the most, are curriculum review, assessment/evaluation methods and also course materials. It can feel like you must simply teach what has been set out for you by the ministry, even if you feel you can better prepare students for future courses by placing a focus on other topics during the course. I am unsure what the process is in curriculum review, and how the ministry goes about reviewing curriculum, but this would be something I would like to have more of a say in, and be able to voice my opinion.

Aniya

I do feel I have a voice in my department/school most times. I feel within the department there is a lot of room to voice your opinion and reach compromise. It is a little harder at the school level. I also feel like my voice is not being heard at the government level (for example issues with the curriculum documents can’t really be expressed to the Ministry of Education directly unless you know somebody there). As such, a lot of those concerns just get talked about in the department/school level with no real resolution.

Annette

In terms of teacher voice, I feel that I have very little, whether it be in my department or school as a whole. I have found that year after year, teachers’ opinions are asked, and then the input is completely disregarded. At this point in my career, I would much rather just be told what I have to do, rather than have people pretend that I have any say in the process at all. Many things have changed in the years since I started teaching about which I have felt strongly – the no zero policy, the renaming of extra-curriculars to co-curriculars, the implementation of standardized projects throughout our courses, and credit recovery. My feelings or beliefs have made no difference in terms of the implementation of these initiatives. At the end of the day, I have been taught my place in the system and know that how I feel is of no consequence to the people making the policies that have an effect on me. I especially feel that my voice is not heard as a teacher when I am forced to implement policies with which I wholeheartedly disagree.

One of the frustrations that comes across in the above excerpts from the narratives is the notion that teachers feel disheartened about having opinions, visions and a desire to be heard. They do recognize that the limitations are caused – ironically enough – by the many
ways in which schools, boards and the ministry are trying to enhance student success and the education system as a whole. Yet – to quote from their voices above – they feel “bombarded,” “disregarded,” and “forced.” Overall, the teacher participants view their roles as being central in the decision making that goes on at the board and government levels. They believe that having the most direct connection to the students, their knowledge and understanding of their learning needs should be consulted to a greater extent. As illustrated through their words, the teacher participants are very eager to share their ideas on a broader scale than just their departments and/or schools. They have the best interest of their students at heart, but the common tone that comes across in their writing is being tired and almost disenchanted for having to adhere to the mandates, strategies and expectations that feel prescribed to them. Furthermore, they feel pressed for time and they are uncertain as to where/how they could even voice their ideas beyond their schools. As Aniya writes, “I feel like my voice is not being heard at the government level (for example issues with the curriculum documents can’t really be expressed to the Ministry of Education directly unless you know somebody there).” All in all, these teachers have a distinct vision of their roles within the education system. They believe that they should have agency, but simply feel limited in the ways in which they can exercise their expertise in order to really effect change within the education system as a whole. These “ideals” are actually the core of Connelly & Clandinin’s (1988) narrative research on “teachers as curriculum planners”:

When we say that understanding our own narrative is a metaphor for understanding the curriculum of our students, we are saying that if you understand what makes up the curriculum of the person most important to you, namely, yourself, you will better understand the difficulties, whys, and wherefores of the curriculum of your students. There is no better way to study curriculum than to study ourselves. When we have a grasp of the difficulties, for example, of figuring out something simple such as how we think and feel as a component of the personal, we will understand the really
serious difficulties of trying to figure out how someone else, our students, think and feel ... Once we recognize that understanding our students is an important task, we also recognize that no amount of test-giving will us the important things ... Your curriculum is a metaphor for understanding your students’ curriculum.

The teacher participants have certainly demonstrated a strong sense of who they are as individuals and the fact that they carry unique narratives as classroom teachers. In essence, they feel that the true knowing of their students (and themselves as educators) must be taken into account when it comes to shaping school initiatives and curriculum mandates.

3.4 A place for teacher voices and establishing agency

The professional realm

Teachers are eager to seek out new professional development opportunities. They are interested in exploring new ways of teaching, and open to embracing technological tools in their practice. They value the diverse needs of their students and feel that in order to be of most service to them, they must be given the opportunity to attend special training programs. They are in-tune with the teaching material at their disposal, knowing what the most effective one would be for any given class. Thus, being given the opportunity to establish their pedagogy within such parameters, they see tremendous potential for their own professional growth, which in turn can shape the learning experiences of their students.

The teacher questionnaires certainly revealed teachers’ desires to maintain knowledgeable, active roles as classroom educators – in fact, they regarded it as being not only their right, but also their responsibility. For them, this had a direct correlation with their integrity as educators and the personal learning experiences they felt their students deserved.
The social & intellectual realms

Given the nature of a classroom teacher’s job, it is inevitable to think that much of their profession is spent in isolation from other teachers. Sure enough, their days are spent interacting with a vast number of students, but the nature of day-to-day teaching has teachers in their own classrooms, on their own individual teaching timetables, spending much of the time planning alone, grading alone and even teaching alone. Despite this reality, however, teachers voiced their interest in being part of social groups, having the time to meet other teachers. This was reflected in one of the responses on the questionnaire: “There should be opportunities for team teaching—even mentor/mentee opportunities for more experienced teachers. Now wouldn’t that be fun, interesting, energetic, more innovative and more engaging than what we do now—in our isolated classrooms?”

In Telling Stories in Book Clubs, Kooy (2006) explores the coming together of a group of teachers whom, through a book club, develop professionally and personally in significant ways. Kooy’s (2006) study highlights the tremendous implications that meaningful learning communities have for teachers, allowing them to engage with one another and foster their intellectual and social needs. She discusses social theories of learning as she writes:

Bakhtin’s (1986) dialogical theory proposes that thinking and learning depend on multiple voices, each stemming from the voices that came before and blending with the voices already in place. The social interactions both construct and change knowledge (Bakhtin, 1986; Vygotsky, 1992) ... This progressive understanding of the dialogical and social construction of knowledge supports the theory that the most effective teacher development occurs within communities of learning. (Kooy, 2006, pp. 11-12)
The importance of interactions emerged clearly in the teacher questionnaires. Teachers welcome working through their professional challenges and see the value in working together, just as they see the value in establishing rapport with their students. Nevertheless, they often feel limited in participating in social opportunities with other teachers—mainly due to lack of time. Ultimately, when they can exercise their expertise, knowledge, and creativity, they feel in control of the teaching and learning that takes place within their classrooms.
Chapter 5: Discussions

This chapter will set out to interpret the data findings outlined in chapter 4, based on the three main themes that emerged from the study: Identity, Choice, and Teacher/Student Voice. In order to decipher the implications for the findings, each thematic idea will be analyzed in detail with respect to the various data sets. Additionally, I will outline the limitations of the study and further questions that have arisen as a result of the findings and interpretations. Therefore, the chapter will be divided into the following main sections: 1) Interpretations of major themes, 2) Limitations of the study, 3) Further questions and issues, and 4) Concluding remarks.

Overall, this study demonstrates that lived experiences and individual narratives play a crucial part in shaping teacher and student identities. This understanding of the self and the perception of one’s role within the classroom allows for an engagement with teaching and learning that is more personally relevant and engaging. Moreover, when students and teachers recognize that they have choice in shaping their experiences, they feel an increased sense of agency and enthusiasm to extend their interests beyond the classroom. In order to establish choices, however, opportunities must exist for students and teachers to voice their visions of what is taught, how information is taught and what kind of learning is most relevant to them.

1. Interpretations of the major themes

There is an interconnectedness between the notion of identity, choice and voice. All of them have a bearing on the roles that students and teachers play in the world of teaching
and learning. An important element that plays a significant role in the success of the educational world is communication. Without the sharing of ideologies, perspectives, experiences and visions, it would be nearly impossible to establish effective learning environments. Furthermore, it would also be difficult to carry out educational research and establish new philosophies and methods for the betterment of the system. Teachers, students, administrators and policy makers all play distinct roles within this complex and ever-changing world. Together, they can contribute a wealth of knowledge, experience and expertise in the formation of theories and practice for effective schools. The following section of this chapter will discuss these various roles, as well as the challenges that are often faced in the coming together of individual identity, choice and voice. Furthermore, the discussions will shed light on the study findings outlined in chapter 4.

1.1 Identity

Teacher Identity

The data revealed that teachers identified their roles as being facilitators to their students. They defined their roles through the success of their abilities to be supportive, creative and empowering. As educators, they aimed to transfer useful, relevant and engaging knowledge to their students and to present opportunities for them to discover their own interests. In essence, therefore, they created a clear image of their positions within their classroom communities. Aside from teaching their subject matter, they strived to motivate, serve as role-models, and advisors, while establishing learning communities based on sharing, trust and open dialogue.
The idea that teachers define their roles, teaching environments and interactions based on specific images is discussed in Clandinin’s (1986) work. For example, one of the teachers interviewed described her vision for the formation of her classroom as “a mini-society of cooperation.” Clandinin (1986) claims that this teacher’s image of her classroom has a moral dimension. She proposes that “the image functions in [the teacher’s] experience and links together her personal private and educational professional life.” Therefore, everything that Clandinin (1986) observed in the teacher’s classroom – from interactions with and between students, communication with fellow teachers, even classroom clean-up procedures and lessons – were informed by a personal way of knowing and seeing the world.

This image of a classroom as “a mini-society of cooperation” emerges, in part, from the teacher’s view of what a society is, and thus, linking his/her personal life to the same views held within his/her professional life (Clandinin, 1986). This example demonstrates that in order to understand teachers’ identities, their lived experiences must be taken into consideration. Their past experiences define their values, understanding of the world, and this translates into how they envision their pedagogical methods and the classroom environments they aim to foster. Therefore, stories can become lost in standardized accounts when the criteria established do not cohere with individuals’ narratives of experience (Olson & Craig, 2009).

It cannot be assumed that teachers’ identities are formed merely by becoming teachers. Of course, their experiences as educators will further shape who they are as individuals. However, to create an image of what it means to be a teacher and to expect them to mold their ways of seeing the world around expectations set into place by the system only hinders the rich and valuable ways of establishing learning communities within schools.
Student Identity

Understanding student identity is very similar to what has been outlined regarding teacher identity. The research data revealed that students are highly aware of their roles within their classroom communities, and the education system as a whole. They are interested, invested and also question various aspects of what it means to be a student within the public education system. As seen through the questionnaire results, they define the success of their roles by being inquisitive, passionate and personally connected to their learning. Much like their teachers, they see their identities as students in connection to who they are outside the classroom, their interests and the lived experiences they’ve brought with them into their learning communities.

The data findings indicated that most students remembered one particular teacher who made extra efforts to get to know them. This became important, as they equated their teachers’ interests in them with their academic success. As one student wrote, “it is clear when they want to see our personalities and know us as people. They try to help us do better by keeping our personal ideas and abilities in mind.” Therefore, instead of having passive roles, or being afraid of sharing their thoughts, students benefit most from “friendship, security and the recognition of [their] worth” (Bloom, 1952, pp. 135-136). It is evident that students’ individualistic roles cannot be ignored. In fact, their unique identities must be taken into account in order to establish a rich and fulfilling learning environment.

In her research on student and teacher responsibility and accountability in education, Cook-Sather (2010) states,

As generally conceptualized within education settings, student responsibility is constructed as students doing what adults tell them to do and absorbing what adults have to offer. Student accountability here means compliance and acceptance: adherence to what is prescribed, asked, or offered by the adults in charge. Student and
teacher responsibility are defined, in this formulation, as separate and distinct: teaching is what teachers do. Learning is what students do.

Cook-Sather (2010) argues that this conceptualization must change, in order to move towards a more transformative notion of education than what is currently in place.

What comes across through my research findings is that students are interested in this very reconceptualization. For to simply accept their expected roles as compliant and as mere learners does not acknowledge who they are as individuals, which subsequently means that student identity is not factored into the process of teaching and learning. Therefore, despite assumptions that may exist about the role of students within a classroom community (ie: being compliant, accepting and adhering to what is set into place for their learning), students themselves actually want to have a more distinct role. They see their involvement – and the opportunities to share their personal knowledge and interests – as part of the construct of their student identities. All in all, those who are decision makers for the learning experiences of students (ie: teachers, administrators, policy makers) need to take into account that in order to satisfy the learning needs of students in our schools today, their identities must play a pivotal role in the pedagogical practices that are envisioned and carried out. This does not only mean recognizing who our students are, but also understanding how they see their identities and what conditions could help them further shape and re-shape their roles as learners within a school community. Adolescents need to be given the space to do so by being decision-makers and have sufficient freedom in curriculum planning (Rudduck & Fielding, 2006). As they use their voices, become actively engaged and make discoveries, they also learn to cooperate and to negotiate perspectives (Ranson, 2000). Ultimately, student engagement and learning are at the heart of educational philosophies. They are the ones who
can inform new approaches to learning, and much of that is based on who they are as individuals and how they identify themselves both within the classroom/school settings and in their personal lives.

1.2 Choice

Choice for students

As outlined in chapter 4, the study findings indicated that students and teachers face limitations when it comes to how much choice they have in the process of teaching and learning. Although they stated that they had occasional choice, both believed that to expect greater freedom to choose course context and evaluations would be unrealistic. They expressed that there were distinct parameters and expectations set into place for both teaching and learning which often hindered their opportunities to exercise personal choice on a regular basis.

The questionnaire results revealed that students enjoyed being actively involved in choosing contents of study and evaluations/assignments in their courses. They claimed that being given opportunities to choose what and how they learn positively impacts their overall academic success. To them, choice means a personal connection to the material and in turn, a more engaging learning experience in which they would have greater investment to succeed. Therefore, it becomes clear that students are also eager to take part pedagogical practices that are most often envisioned and constructed for them. In essence, when students are given the choice to shape their learning, they can become the teachers – to themselves, to one another, and even to their teachers.

Cook-Sather (2010) discusses the idea of positioning students as “actors” in
education. She states that “educational ideals [...] focus on students as subjects of others’ attention, intervention, and assessment. They are ideals conceptualized by adults, who in turn create structures and practices we believe will facilitate reaching those ideals.” In order to move beyond these structures, and to reconsider the notions of accountability, therefore, students should be conceptualized as actors rather than acted upon. This ideology is not only important for equity (of rights and respect), but also in terms of student engagement and responsibility. There is a distinction, however, which Cook-Sather (2010) points out: “responsibility, not in terms of what students should take on, as prescribed by adults, but rather in terms of what they can and desire to take on when they are part of the process of conceptualizing and actively participating in education.” This notion is founded on principles of student voice (which I will discuss in the following sections of this chapter), as Cook-Sather (2010) states, it includes “the conviction that young people have unique perspectives on learning, teaching, and schooling and that they should be afforded opportunities to actively shape their education.”

Overall, what I gathered from my own research is that choice empowers students. They feel valued as important members of a learning community when they know that their opinions and interests can shape their learning experiences. One of the responses from the student questionnaire read:

*Many teachers definitely make personal efforts to know our interests. It is clear when they want to see our personalities and know us as people. They try to help us do better by keeping our personal ideas in mind. There are teachers who force their own beliefs and opinions on their students, but this does not help us learn.*

These words resonate with Cook-Sather’s (2010) claim that students should have a place to be the actors, as opposed to being acted upon. Further implication for this
reconceptualization is that when students experience personally relevant learning opportunities, they grow more intrigued by what lies beyond the walls of their classrooms and schools. This was also expressed by various students on the questionnaires. Perhaps, then, when students are given greater freedom to choose what/how they learn, there will be greater diversity in terms of both pedagogical practices, as well as self expression and creativity. Subsequently, this means that cultivating humanity and developing responsible citizens lies at the heart of a democratic education system, whereby students’ roles can enable a shared responsibility on a larger, more human level within and beyond the classroom (Cook-Sather, 2010).

**Choice for teachers**

For teachers, the implications of having choice lies in the freedom to carry out pedagogical visions and establishing learning communities within their classrooms that are relevant to their particular groups of students. In the questionnaires, as well as the personal narratives, teachers stated that for the sake of consistency and fairness within the teaching practice, they are mostly expected to structure how/what they teach with regards to specific criteria and expectations – some established within their subject departments, some based on school wide initiatives and some that were mandated by the school board or even the Ministry. There are multiple implications for having freedom to choose personal pathways to an envisioned goal of teaching and learning. One such implication is that teachers will be able to build meaningful learning communities unique to their given groups of students. Often, as expressed in the questionnaires, this means a greater investment on the part of both teachers and students in their shared classroom communities. Furthermore, by exercising
personal choice, teachers also find a place for their own voices. Subsequently, teachers can find empowerment in their roles within the education system and perhaps also find greater interest in becoming leaders within their schools. Lieberman and Miller (2005) distinguish between two approaches to encouraging/establishing teacher leadership: the fundamentalist and the cosmopolitan approach. The former revolves around policies of standardization accountability for schools to meet external mandates. This approach “views teaching as technical and managed work that requires close supervision and a system of externally determined and administered rewards and sanctions” (Lieberman and Miller, 2005). On the contrary, however, the cosmopolitan approach “supports policies that enable good practice rather than prescribe it” (Lieberman and Miller, 2005). This latter approach is advocated by Lieberman and Miller (2005), for they recognize the importance of teachers’ knowledge and skills, as well as their personal incentives to assume responsibility for the learning of their students and one another – all of which contributes to the capacity to transform schooling. They state, however, that “one essential element of such a transformation is the development, support, and nurturance of teachers” (Lieberman and Miller, 2005).

Lieberman and Miller’s (2005) stance on encouraging teacher leadership is relevant to the idea of teachers having opportunities to exercise personal choice in their practice. They give teachers the benefit of the doubt to structure ideologies and teaching philosophies based on what they perceive as being critical for successful – and even transformative – schooling experiences, as opposed to what is prescribed to them. This means that to a significant extent, teachers must have the freedom to carry out classroom practices whereby their own personal preferences, knowledge of the world and strengths have a place for functionality and growth. Therefore, it can be argued that the absence of choice and pedagogical freedom is certainly
counter-productive to the efforts that policy makers aim to set into place for successful experiences of teaching and learning.

Upon considering the study results, it is important to note that most teachers did recognize that they have some personal choice within their practice. However, most of them also stated that their constant struggle has been establishing a balance between what is expected of them and what they personally envision for their practice. Despite the limitations that they felt, teachers were open to change, and hopeful that greater opportunities can continue to exist for new approaches to teaching and learning. This is rather significant for possibilities of change and advancement within school structures and communities of learning. Policy makers can definitely utilize teachers as agents of change and transformation from the very core of the education system: the classroom. Yet, there always seems to be a gap between the worlds in which these different “groups” of individuals exist in the world of education.

In their work on the practicality in teacher decision-making, Doyle and Ponder (1977-1978) state that “teachers tend to describe their work in individualistic terms which emphasize the uniqueness of each classroom and the central role of personal preference (ie, ‘personality’) in the choice of teaching methods.” This is an important point that must be considered by administrators and policy makers. Yet, the teacher questionnaires and narratives indicated that most teachers saw this as being far from their experiences – that what is central to their personal preferences is seldom considered or inquired about when new initiatives and/or mandates are introduced. Ultimately, if what matters to teachers on a personal level is left out of the equation of educational decision-making, there will always
remain an unfulfilled void in the process of teaching and learning. It would be that aspect of meaningful, soulful education that celebrates human connections and diversity.

1.3 Voice

From the above discussions, it can be said that voice is an element which arises from having personal ideals, as well as opportunities to exercise one’s choice. Therefore, when discussing student and teacher voice, the notions of identity and choice will also overlap.

Student Voice

Adolescents are inquisitive and they want to know about their world. They are intrigued by what the world was once like and what it will become in the future. And above all, perhaps, they are interested in their own place within the bigger picture. Thus, they want to be recognized, to tell their stories, to share their beliefs and dreams of the future they envision. This liveliness certainly came across in the tone of the students’ responses on the questionnaires. They expressed their appreciation for those teachers who invite them to share their voices, giving them recognition as valued members of classroom communities.

As discussed in the previous chapter, the study results illustrated that for students, having no (or limited) voice to shape their learning experiences meant being disengaged with the contents being studied. Also, as mentioned earlier in this chapter, students equated their teachers’ interest in who they are (ie: their identities) with having their voices heard. Overall, most students felt that their teachers presented ongoing opportunities for them to share their opinion on topics being studied in their various courses. They also felt that their teachers were most often open to hearing them speak about any concerns or ideas they may have.
However, the general consensus revealed through the study was that there are limitations to the extent in which they have a say in shaping what/how they learn in any given class. Students were aware that at the classroom level, their teachers did what they could to engage them on a personal level with the course content – through class discussions, personal reflections, and even sometimes course surveys. They also indicated that at times, they were given opportunities to choose between text options to be studied and evaluations to be completed. Yet, within these opportunities, there were still parameters which limited how personally relevant or interesting the material would be. For example, one student mentioned that one of the units in most of the English classes at his/her school is usually a group novel study, where students could choose from a few different titles. However, the student’s dissatisfaction was that there were too few titles. Therefore, even though they seemed to have choice and a say in what they read, they were still limited by the titles that were chosen for them – sometimes none that the student would choose for him/herself.

As students themselves pointed out in their reflections, it may not be entirely realistic to say that they can have total freedom to choose their own course of learning in any given class. I am certainly not proposing that myself. However, the above example is one that must be taken into consideration when thinking about what it means to give students agency. It is a good example to illustrate that even though decision-makers may believe they are providing choice and meeting the needs of a diverse student body, students themselves have a different perception of what that should look like. Therefore, if student voice is a priority in the construction of educational experiences in schools today, then why not consult the very students who are trying to be reached? It may be true that within small group settings, such as their classrooms, students are able to voice their opinions, but the bigger picture of school
structures indicates that there is still a gap in what students envision and what their learning actually looks like. To them, there are far too few options to have a say in constructing or co-constructing their learning; they share an assumption that they must accept formulaic, prescribed methods of learning.

In his research on student voice, Fielding (2004) writes,

> Unless we make the appropriate intellectual effort to think more profoundly and in a more historically informed way about our current dilemmas, we look set to unwittingly usher in a new era that is totalitarian both in its dispositions and its practical consequences.

This brings into light the ways in which educational settings/reformists perceive the notion of student voice. Fielding (2004) proposes that understanding student voice is multi-layered. He states that often, interest in establishing student voice stems from political or ideological frameworks, that the discussion on student voice becomes a rhetoric. He claims “student voice only has significance and is only legitimate insofar as it enhances organisational ends” (Fielding, 2004). Furthermore, he touches on the reality that not all voices are the same – that some students are more privileged and more able to articulate their needs. He also indicates that what must also be acknowledged is that “the cultural and structural arrangements and spaces within which those voices are heard are themselves shaped and controlled by positional interests” (Fielding, 2004). However, a more humanistic view of student voice is then presented, as Fielding (2004) claims that this “new wave” of addressing student voice must be something more substantial than a “fashionable” discourse in education. He states,

> We need to create shared practices where we can be attentive and open with one another in ways which encourage our mutual responsibility for the quality of our lives
together [...]. It is about ensuring justice is informed by and committed to our care for each other as persons. It is about acknowledging the importance of roles and yet also understanding what roles are for. It is about ensuring student voices and teacher voices are also the voices of persons in relation to one another in the quest for a deeper and more fulfilling humanity. (Fielding, 2004)

Overall, the relevance of Fielding’s (2004) perception to my study lies in what was revealed through the students’ voices. In essence, they hoped that in being heard, those in the position of power (ie: classroom teachers, department heads, administrators or any other decision-makers) would consider their voices to the extent that their personal interests could be reflected in their day-to-day schooling experiences. These were senior level students, whose perceptions came from their experiences of education at the secondary level. They were reflective, thoughtful and committed in sharing their honest thoughts. They chose to participate in the research because they saw themselves as members of a learning community and were excited to share their voices. As a result, there was a sense of conviction in what they shared through their reflections and answers to the questionnaires. As Rudduck (2006) indicates, students may often feel that they have a lot to contribute to the improvement of teaching and learning, but they may not always be certain as to how to proceed. Having such opportunities to work with researchers is certainly one way to invite this discussion and provide an outlet for them to share their thoughts.

Therefore, if our students have informed perceptions about the nature of schooling, which can not only support learning in the 21st Century, but also potentially bring about change in a meaningful way, then perhaps their words must have greater significance to those who are willing to lend an ear. If that sense of fulfillment that Fielding (2004) proposes can be found through the ideas that students are willing to share, then why are educational decision-makers continuously sorting through theoretical frameworks of pedagogy and
investing in bureaucratic reform and policies? Practicality is most essential, which is not difficult to find; it is in the visions shaped by our students. It would simply mean listening to what our students have to tell us, and then really trusting them for a while, without the fear that to give up control would mean chaos in education. After all, one of the important elements of an effective education system is democracy. Allowing student participation and consultation can be seen as the very principles of democracy. Therefore, by redefining the status of students in schools today, a greater democratic structure for learning can be established (Rudduck & Fielding, 2006).

Educators and others involved with schooling in the new Century would probably all agree that notions of teaching and learning are changing. With the growing information age and globalization, students sometimes hardly seem to even need their teachers to help them advance in their learning and discovering about the world – or even their own interests and/or capabilities. Therefore, if the resourcefulness and worldliness of students today are disregarded, there may be many lost opportunities for advancement in education. In not hearing students’ voices to a significant extent and providing opportunities for their ideologies to take shape within their learning communities, pedagogical practices would struggle to maintain a refreshing and exciting experience for students and teachers alike. Of course, no classroom teacher or educational decision-maker hopes to see this happen, but it is a reality that must be considered when the voices of those who should have agency are not accounted for.
**Teacher Voice & Agency**

It is undeniable that at the heart of any classroom community lies the passion, expertise and lived experiences of the teacher. As self-directed, motivated and innovative as students can demonstrate themselves to be, there is still an inevitable dependence shown towards their teachers. As reflected on the questionnaires, they pay close attention to the intentions and efforts of their teachers, appreciating their hard work, dedication and gestures of kindness. One of the most notable comments on the student questionnaires was how much they valued the time their teachers took to get to know them as individuals. Therefore, teacher voice has a direct link to the opportunities that can in turn enable students to recognize their own voices.

As the data findings revealed through the questionnaires and the individual narratives, one of the greatest challenges outlined by teachers is the constant lack of time. This leads to feelings of always being rushed to implement initiatives, mandates, as well as simply meeting the demands of day-to-day teachings and the expectations of departments, schools and school boards. Thus, as teachers feel the need to work faster and harder to keep up with common goals and practices, they often place their own personal visions on hold for “another time.” Over an extended period of time, however, when that future hope of “later” does not suffice, teachers can grow disheartened. They often equate this lack of time with the undermining of their roles as classroom educators, whose voices are not accounted for when guidelines and timelines are established for them. Of course, good teachers achieve success despite the ways of the system. However, if the aim of our education system is to establish communal, transformative environments through moral and interpersonal ideals, then teachers cannot solely be regarded as being the bearer of results and measurable outcomes.
(Fielding, 2004), but also as people with significant lived experiences and stories who can make enriching contributions of their own to each class that they teach.

Ideally, education and schooling maintains the interest of students at the basis of its theories and practice. Evidently, teachers are the individuals who work most closely with students within the system. Without the intentions for the well-being and growth of their students at the heart of what they do, their roles as educators would be questioned. Arguably, they are the ones who have the most informed knowledge about the needs, capabilities and interests of students. Therefore, possible improvements to the education system will be greatly hindered when voices of teachers are not considered at times of establishing initiatives, mandates and policies.

In this study, research findings have proven that classroom teachers are aware of the limitations that exist in terms of where/when they can share their opinions. Most have indicated that beyond the department (and sometimes the school), they do not have a say in the decision-making relevant to curriculum design. This would require greater connections and/or work at the school board or the Ministry level. It is true that opportunities do exist for teachers to become involved in the processes of curriculum design at the board or even Ministry levels. However, these opportunities are limited, as they would also require an increased commitment beyond the responsibilities of classroom teaching – which, again, comes back to the challenge of not having enough time.

The implication of teacher voice extends beyond the idea of merely being heard. The significance of their voices (whether they are honoured or not) is a parallel to how much agency they have within the system. Studies on transformative education recognize teachers as curriculum developers and as agents of change. Priestley et al (2012) refer to Scotland’s
Curriculum for Excellence, whereby a renewed vision of teachers as developers of curriculum is central to transformational change. This approach, aims to engage teachers in thinking from first principles about their educational aims and values and their classroom practice. The process is based upon evidence of how change can be brought about successfully – through a climate in which reflective practitioners share and develop ideas. (Priestley et al, 2012)

Therefore, current studies infer that in order to bring about change and create spaces whereby teaching and learning can be manoeuvred in transformative ways, teachers need to have agency and take part in making decisions for curriculum development. However, the idea of teacher agency can often sound like a slogan for school reform (Priestly et al, 2012). Therefore, in discussing teacher agency, it must be noted that various factors play a role in shaping the kind and degree of agency that teachers may have. These factors include teacher biographies (Goodson, 2003), belief systems (Wallace & Kang, 2004), and subjectivity and identity (Goodson & Marsh, 1996; Siskin, 1994). Additionally, other factors include ways in which teachers position themselves in relation to politics, change, colleagues and students, as well as the wider community (Leander & Osborne, 2008). Therefore, to obtain agency, teachers must be given opportunities to exercise their voice in various social/political settings, as well as on a personal level. Kooy (2006, 2009) refers to the idea that individuals make sense of what goes on around them by actively constructing a world for themselves (Vygotsky, 1992). This does not happen “independent of other people or the way they understand the world” (Kooy, 2006).

Agency can be developed over time as teachers interact in social, cultural, and structural worlds. This can lead to social reproduction and transformation. Moreover, the
processes of curriculum construction and educational change can be enhanced (Priestley, 2011).

In their study on curriculum making and teacher agency, Priestley et al (2012) inferred that teachers “were greatly concerned with the provision of a curriculum that was educational as opposed to instrumental” (Priestley et al, 2012). They discovered that although school discourse had great influence on teachers’ perceptions and decision-making, it was mainly their previous professional lives and their aspirations for their teaching that informed their main concerns regarding student success, as well as establishing meaningful learning experiences. Therefore, when discussing teacher agency, the question must be raised as to what purpose this agency will serve for the given teacher? Ultimately, this will circle back to the ideologies and pedagogical visions of classroom teachers. The conclusion that Priestley et al (2012) drew from observing how differently various teacher participants contributed to curriculum development was that “the answer lies in the personal biographies of the teachers concerned” (Priestley et al, 2012). Therefore, it becomes quite obvious that prescribed curriculum designs are the farthest from the authenticity that will satisfy classroom teachers. Having agency, therefore, is beneficial to them in so far as it allows them to use their voices for the purpose of the learning communities they hope to build. Therefore, it would be counter-productive to present them with opportunities that do not honour their personal interests and philosophies.

It is not to say that classroom teachers are deprived entirely of opportunities to make contributions to school-wide (and even board-wide) initiatives and curriculum planning. However, these opportunities are not always as accessible and/or obvious to every teacher. Being part of planning teams (especially at the board level) sometimes requires particular
conditions for teachers – some requiring them to be active members of their school communities already, showing leadership skills, as well as having specialized knowledge in the field of study they are interested to contribute to. It may be true that in many schools, administrators and department heads would welcome the collaboration of any of their teachers. However, often, certain teachers are invited to be part of new projects and initiatives, while many others may not even be aware of such opportunities.

Four out of five teacher participants who shared their narratives, spoke about their dissatisfaction regarding the extent in which they could voice their opinions and share their pedagogical visions. Yet, all of them valued the opportunity to engage with colleagues and wished for extra time to collaborate in social and intellectual settings. Therefore, it is important to note that teachers have not given up on their ideologies and the possibilities for improvement. Despite feeling pressed for time, and often having to work with mandated approaches and initiatives, they still hope for a more productive and personally engaging approach to curriculum development. They invest their energies where they have the greatest amount of control: in their classrooms. They do not forget their own beliefs, their place within the education system, as well as the importance of establishing optimal conditions of learning for their students.

In my study, Elise, Serena, Aniya and Annette expressed feelings of being overwhelmed, and sometimes even disenchanted by the teaching profession. As they (and the anonymous teacher participants) stated, their major frustration is the lack of time, but also insufficient opportunities to carry out their own personal visions of teaching and learning. They also feel frustrated when initiatives are continuously put into place for them to carry out, without being asked about their thoughts on how useful they might actually be for their
given students. Furthermore, they have voiced their frustration with the increasing initiatives that are presented at Professional Development meetings – and once again, the lack of time, and sometimes training/expertise, to carry them out. Sure enough, there are often forward thinking, innovative and transformative ideas being proposed for classroom practices; and teachers are certainly open and interested in change and advancement. It is because they see their roles as being fundamental to the intricacies of the education system that they expect to be consulted and have greater agency in shaping the ebb and flow of teaching and learning within their classrooms. Essentially, the participants in this study have made it clear that one of the main reasons for choosing this profession has been to influence their students in positive ways, to stand up for those who have no voice or experience social oppression and/or inequality. The teacher narrative excerpts that I have shared in previous chapters certainly highlight these hopes. They also paint very distinct images of individual teachers whose lived experiences clearly inform their classroom practices.

The passion and interest with which classroom teachers hope to use their voices has great potential for improving education. When teachers have agency, they can provide enriching opportunities for learning that is both relevant and engaging for their students, as well as themselves. This was also revealed through the reflections shared by the students in the study, who regarded community building as a coming together of individual experiences and stories, along with an openness to care for one another. Therefore, if this is the most desired teaching and learning environment for the individuals that make up classroom communities, what would be cost of disregarding their voices, with the assumptions that policy makers know what is best for them?

There are tremendous possibilities for collaboration in education. In fact, I would
argue that without this element, educational reform and/or advancements would be stifled. The 21st Century is a time of honouring stories and cultures. It is a time of standing up for oppression and establishing a global community of equity and solidarity. If our education systems fall short of these ideals, there will be no consistency in the values that we carry and in the ideals that we hope our future generations to embody.

2. Limitations of the Study

I have outlined a few points regarding factors that may have caused some limitations in the overall study findings and data analysis. However, I do not believe that these factors would cause a huge discrepancy between what has been discovered and what may have resulted, if the approach were to be carried out differently. This is because there were distinct commonalities between the teachers’ and students’ voices. The issues that they raised and the reflections that they shared were so clearly uniformed that I felt the number of participants would not greatly alter the study findings. Regardless, I have outlined some of my concerns regarding what may count as limitations for the study.

2.1 Data Collection

The Questionnaires

The main source of data for this study was compiled through teacher and student questionnaires, as well as five written teacher narratives. Three different grade 11 classes were given the opportunity to complete the student questionnaire on a voluntary basis. I chose to involve the grade 11 students as I thought they would have greater insight into their
roles as students with respect to their previous years of high school experience. Perhaps having included students from other grades would have shed light on other issues that the grade 11 students did not address. My participants totaled 55 individuals, who became representative of the student body, not an exact number of grade 11 students at this particular school. Additionally, the questionnaire was a reflective one, where five specific questions were asked (see Appendix B). Therefore, due to its qualitative nature, the students’ answers could not lend themselves to graphs or charts very effectively. Subsequently, deciphering patterns in thinking and responses were interpreted by the classifications and sorting that I as the researcher identified. Similarly, the teacher questionnaire was distributed to various subject departments, asking any teacher who would be interested to become a participant. I received 13 responses from the same school and 7 others from various schools in the Greater Toronto Area (GTA), as teachers passed the questionnaire to their friends at different schools. Although all 20 participants were from public high schools, and at large, their reflections also became representative of teachers in the GTA. The study did not group the responses by districts or aim to look at geographic locations. Therefore, the findings and data analysis had to be based on an overall understanding of concerns, as opposed to specific issues arising within particular schools. In retrospect, perhaps a greater number of teacher participants would have enhanced the accuracy of data findings for the purpose of this study.

**The Teacher Narratives**

Narrative inquiry has been used as the methodology in this research. Therefore, I wanted to honour the notion of stories and story sharing in my approach to data collection. Narratives provide opportunities for voices to be heard and thus, I wanted to maintain the
integrity of an open and honest climate of sharing. Therefore, I did not want to limit my participants in what they chose to share in their personal narratives with regards to their personal experiences, lives as educators, as well as their pedagogical visions and philosophies. However, when I asked them to write a narrative about their lives (both as classroom teachers and their outside experiences/endeavours), some were apprehensive, which resulted in me creating writing prompts/guidelines. This may have influenced their decisions as to what they would share, which may have been the reason why most of the narratives addressed similar topics. Moreover, this portion of data collection included only five participants, all of whom were female teachers. I did try to have representations from varying subject departments. However, having a greater number of participants, as well both male and female teachers may have allowed for a broader spectrum of issues to study. My choice for having five participants was due to the amount of time it would take to analyze long narrative pieces, in addition to the other two sets of data collected through the questionnaires.

3. Further questions and issues

What can teachers do to voice their concerns as well as their visions of teaching and learning?

My research mainly looked at the extent and implications of teacher voice. What became clear through this study were the challenges faced by classroom teachers regarding the sharing of their ideals and visions of teaching within the structures of the current public
education system. However, the issue of teachers taking initiatives to voice their concerns was not really looked at. This would be an interesting factor to consider, in order to understand the degree of agency that teachers currently have. It would also allow researchers to look at teachers’ problem solving approaches as well as how they deal with situations whereby their voices are not heard as much as they might hope.

**To what extent does seniority or privilege play a role in giving teachers a voice?**

One of the issues that came up in some of the questionnaires, as well as the teacher narratives was that sometimes favouritism or rare opportunities were presented to some teachers and not others to take part in pedagogical design and policy development. Sometimes teachers felt that younger, newer teachers had to accept situations as they were presented to them, until they had greater experience to make contributions. This could be an extended part of future research to look at how seniority can influence the extent of teacher participation in various group/professional involvements. Also, if privilege is an element in this involvement, then what constitutes whose voice is considered more valuable to listen to?

**How can policy makers build an environment of genuine interest in what teachers think and have to say about teaching and learning?**

Many teachers today feel that they are constantly being told how to carry out their practice. They feel overwhelmed by the numerous increasing demands, which they do not have enough time to understand or buy in to. Further research can, therefore, look at how policy makers and/or administrators can authentically engage teachers in building a
Within what conditions can teachers and students build open and dependable environments of discussion regarding change and progress in education?

It is clear that teacher voice and agency result in the empowerment of student voice. Their coming together can enhance theories and practices of education. However, there needs to be an effective balance between the roles that teachers and students play within classrooms and schools. Future research can investigate the factors that allow collaboration and discussion between teachers and students without creating power struggles within learning communities. It has become evident that each of these parties must have the freedom to share their voices and ideas. However, future research can address the balance needed between how often and in what contexts voices of teachers versus students are/should be exercised in order to establish a democratic system of change.

4. Concluding Remarks

When teachers are given the opportunity to share their philosophies, pedagogy, and even their frustrations within the teaching profession, they reveal incredible insight that is worth listening to. Similarly, the students who share their classroom communities every day are also eager to share their own perspectives and ideas about learning. What they have to say is often mature, reflective and very honest. The unfortunate reality is that teachers and students do not often have tremendous freedom to construct teaching and learning experiences as they envision for themselves. To a great extent, their experiences are defined
by curriculum mandates, school policies, and ministry expectations. Policy makers have become pre-occupied with measurable learning outcomes, standardized test scores and establishing initiatives that move towards educational reform. Yet, with these increasing demands, there seems to be less time for teachers and students to share their own lived experiences with each other. Teaching and learning starts to feel less organic and more prescribed and rushed. This causes teachers and students to feel disenchanted, believing that their voices have little bearing on the decision-making that concerns their day-to-day lives.

I believe we live in times of dire need to ensure the voices of educators and students are being heard if we hope to see the prospering of a meaningful education system. And where else could teachers hope to have their voices heard, if not in their own schools and districts? It is one thing to struggle against the public perceptions of what it means to be a teacher, but it is quite another (and rather disheartening) to feel that you must prove what it means to be a teacher to administrators and educational policy makers. Theoretically, those in charge of change and policy present their agenda with the goal of seeing educational reform. Ideally, the aim is to move teaching, learning and curriculum design to greater heights. However, it is arguable as to how effectively this is actually happening. The reality is that ideologies and agendas cannot be forced upon individuals. They must be purposeful and with genuine intention, seeking the opinions who will be affected by them. As Greene (1978) suggests, it is this way of living deliberately that one could be an agent of transformation on a societal level, as he/she could subsequently “move others to elevate their lives by a conscious endeavour, to arouse others to discover” (Greene, pp. 162). The same is true for those in the position of power who make decisions on behalf of educators and students. It is certainly possible for their ideas to be accepted wholeheartedly by their target
audience. Yet, the greatest impact comes from people who are interested in presenting meaningful opportunities of discovery and growth.

Considering the study findings that have been discussed, it all comes back to one major point: thinking narratively. I do not simply mean narrative in terms of methodology for research, but mainly in terms of telling and re-telling of lived experiences, of story sharing. In the opening of their chapter on narrative inquiry as pedagogy in education, Huber et al (2013) quote:

We live by stories, we also live in them. One way or another we are living the stories planted in us early or – knowingly or unknowingly – in ourselves. We live stories that either give our lives meaning or negate it with meaningless. If we change the stories we live by, quite possibly we change our lives. (Okri, 1997, as cited in Huber et al, pp. 212)

This idea is relevant in education, because stories are what make up the life in our classrooms and schools. Education embodies the significance of people’s lives, it is “interwoven with living and with the possibility of retelling our life stories” (Clandinin & Connelly, 1998, pp.246). Therefore, through the interaction of these lives and stories, we can come to new understandings about who we are, our world and the future we hope to see. The curriculum that is constructed for our schools, therefore, should be based on curriculum of lives (Huber, 2008). Education in this century should be characterized by spaces of caring, where mutual responsibility towards teaching and learning allows all voices to be assets in decision-making processes. Thus, for policy makers, educational reform should stem from a place of acknowledging teacher and student voices “in the quest for a deeper and more fulfilling humanity” (Fielding, 2004).

There is extraordinary potential within education not only to transform the lives of
those in schools, but also the lives of citizens beyond school communities. Essentially, teachers carry out their pedagogical philosophies with the intention of leaving ever-lasting impressions on their students. In turn, it is the empowered students who will embark on their journeys and imprint their own knowledge and wisdom upon the world. For this to happen, however, there needs to be agency and freedom to dream, speak and act.

When all said and done, which classroom teacher or student would not want to look back on his/her memories and experiences in school and speak the same words Robert Frost would utter?

I shall be telling this with a sigh  
Somewhere ages and ages hence:  
Two roads diverged in a wood, and I—  
I took the one less traveled by,  
And that has made all the difference.

Let us be brave together then. Let us hold fast to our stories, our visions and create sacred spaces for our voices to be heard. Let us take roads less traveled by and discover new heights for teaching and learning in our schools.
APPENDIX A

Teacher Questionnaire

1. What would you identify as some of your greatest challenges and/or frustrations as a high school teacher within the public school system?

2. How would you describe your pedagogical philosophy as a teacher? Are you able to carry out your own “visions” of teaching and learning and/or specific personal initiatives in your classroom (in other words, do you feel you have “pedagogical freedom” in teaching your subject area)?

3. a) To what extent do you believe that your unique narrative/lived experiences are relevant (or can be useful) to the teaching and learning that goes on within your classroom? Are you able to find the time and/or place to share your unique narrative/lived experiences (if yes, to what extent)?

b) To what extent do you believe students’ unique narratives/lived experiences are considered when units of study are carried out within the courses taught in your discipline area? Are their personal interests being met? Do they have a say in the content/units being studied?

4. If there is one thing you could change about the structure and/or content of the courses taught in your discipline area at your school, what would that be? Why do you see this as being critical?
APPENDIX B

Student Questionnaire

1. Do you feel you are given the opportunity to express your personal opinion in your classes? Please explain.

2. Do you feel that your teachers make a personal effort to get to know your interests? Please explain.

3. Do you have any say in choosing your own texts/material/evaluations/projects? If so, how often? Please explain.

4. Do you believe it is important to enjoy a subject area (or your experiences in a class) in order to be academically successful?

5. Have your experiences in your high school courses given you an appreciation for something beyond the classroom? Please explain.
APPENDIX C

Guidelines for Writing a Teacher Narrative

I hope that your personal teacher narrative will provide a vivid glimpse into the essence of who you are as an individual. I am interested in knowing your story, so that I can comprehend the place from which your devotion to the adolescents whom you teach stems from. By reading your story, I hope to understand the kinds of knowledge that only you can offer your students, for the personal ways in which you have come to experience the world. Therefore, as you write, I hope you will write candidly and consider using the first person narrative voice.

I would like your narrative writing to be two-fold. First, I would like you to write about your past, interests, experiences/visions/philosophies as a teacher (see the first set of prompts). Then, I would like you to discuss your “teacher voice” (see the second set of prompts/questions). Please do not feel limited by the prompts provided, they are simply meant to assist you, should you find them useful.

First part of your writing (this could be 2/3 of what you write): Background info about who you are (prompts to use)

- Who I am (ie: where I come from, my family background) ...
- A little bit about my childhood ...
- A favourite/significant memory of growing up ...
- My passions/interests/past-times as a child ...
- My passions/interests/past-times as an adult ...
- The person/people who has/have inspired me ...
- What I remember about my early years of schooling ...
- My journey as a student ...
- How my academic career shaped the person I have become ...
- What I have lived and/or fought for throughout the years ...
- The greatest personal challenge I have had to overcome (and what I have learned from it) ...
- What brought me to teaching (or the first time I considered becoming a teacher) ...
- How I have envisioned my role as an educator/classroom teacher ...
- My philosophies about teaching and learning ...
- The experiences I have had as an educator/classroom teacher (what has surprised me the most; what has frustrated me the most; what has inspired me the most; what has challenged me the most) ...
- How I envision a community of learning to be ...
- What I am most passionate about sharing with my students ...
- If I had more time with my students, I would ...
- What has had the greatest influence on me as an educator/classroom teacher ...
- If I had the power to change one thing, I would ...
- How I want to be remembered (as a teacher, otherwise, or both) ...
Second part of your writing:
Consider addressing the following questions in order to discuss the role “your voice” plays in your teaching experiences

- Are you able to carry out your personal “visions” of teaching and learning and/or specific personal initiatives in your classroom (in other words, do you feel you have “pedagogical freedom” as a teacher)?
- To what extent do you believe your unique narrative/lived experiences have a place in the construction of your classroom community/units of study?
- Do you feel you have a “voice” as a teacher in your department and/or School? Please explain.
- When do you feel like your voice is not being heard as a teacher?
- What are the issues/concerns/opportunities that need your voice the most? Do you feel like you can exercise your voice within those realms? Why or why not?

In order to remain true to the nature of a narrative, please write in Standard English Prose (ie: proper sentence/paragraph structure, no point form responses).
Dear Participant,

I am currently conducting research for my thesis as a graduate student from OISE/UT (Ontario Institute for the Studies in Education at the University of Toronto), and I would like to invite you to take part in my study. The following information is to provide some insight into the nature of my current research, and to outline your role as a prospective participant.

The purpose of this study is to examine what it means for teachers and students alike to have a voice within the realms of teaching and learning. It aims to highlight the challenges that are faced by classroom teachers, which may limit their pedagogical freedom and visions based on personal ideals of education. Furthermore, this research aims to shed light on the importance of teacher agency and its implications for the development of student agency.

You have been selected as a prospective participant in this study, as I believe you have unique experiences and insights to offer my research. You will be one of five subjects chosen to participate in the writing of a “teacher narrative” for this study. If you agree to participate, you will be required to write a personal narrative about your lived experiences which have informed and shaped your teacher identity. The teacher narratives will be included as appendices in my thesis; pseudonyms will be used in order to protect your identity. Through a comparative look at these teacher narratives, I hope to determine common threads, as well as varying points-of-views that exist among teachers within the public school system. In essence, I am interested in these stories, in order to better understand how teachers define their roles as educators with respect to the individuals they are outside the classroom. I am interested to know how teachers’ personal lives, their unique individual interests and experiences offer them a wealth of knowledge in building units of study, enriching the curriculum and offering their insight in to process of teaching and learning. Furthermore, not only am I interested to discover where my participants come together in their philosophies, passions, interests, commitments, but also where they might diverge. I am interested to know how each unique individual shapes the education world for his/her students.

Please note that if you choose to participate in this study, you may withdraw and discontinue your participation at any time with no consequences. I confirm that the information you provide will be used solely for the purpose of my search. I will be happy to address any of your questions or concerns regarding the study, either prior, during or following your participation.

If you agree to participate in this study, please sign your consent with your knowledge and understanding of the nature and purpose of the research. You will be provided with a copy of this consent form for your personal records.

Date: ___________________________ Signature of Participant: ___________________________

With thanks,
Maryam Sadeghi, Principal Investigator
References


