“Something to Just Hold On To”
Occasional Teaching and Collaborative Inquiry in Precarious Times

by

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A thesis submitted in conformity with the requirements for the degree of Master of Arts
Department of Curriculum, Teaching and Learning, OISE
University of Toronto

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Abstract

This thesis is the product of a collaborative inquiry involving six occasional teachers, myself included, who came together over five months to share our experiences of navigating a teacher labour market ruled by teacher surplus, job shortages, and increasing employment precarity. Together we took an inquiry stance on occasional teaching (Cochran-Smith & Lytle, 2009) and explored the consequences of precarious teacher employment for teaching, learning, working, and living. Here I document the myriad ways precarity shapes not only our career trajectories but also our everyday experiences of practice, our professional identities as educators, and our engagement in political action and institutional change efforts. I also offer specific processes and interventions that mitigate the risks of long-term employment precarity for teaching and learning. Throughout, I rely on my participants’ words as well as my own to tell a story about our work, what it means to us, and why it matters.
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My supervisor, Rob Simon, told me early in this process that there is no such thing as a solo-authored thesis. Mine, it turns out, is no exception. It took several villages to make this work possible.

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Chapter 1
“Hello, My Name is Placeholder”: The Story of the Question

“Neither the life an individual nor the history of a society can be understood without understanding both.”

C. Wright Mills, from The Sociological Imagination (1959, p. 3)

1 Introduction

A few weeks before I found an offer of admission to grad school peeking out from the well of my mailbox, its manila corners softened by snow, I was hired to teach senior English for a semester in a rusty portable. I had taught in the same tin can classroom three years prior, and countless others like it at half a dozen other schools in the years between. On the first day of that new semester I stood outside the portable door, perched on the snowy stoop, to greet each unfamiliar face with a warm hello and a smile. The thirty-three bodies that tiptoed up the salt-pebbled steps would have been in middle school when I taught in that same school last; the students who once sat in their seats since graduated. One or two caught my glance and returned a nervous smile. A few were too busy staring at their phones or coaxing their feet into others’ footprints that they hardly noticed the man in the navy button-down whose back held the door ajar. Others carried on talking to the person beside them with gleeful disregard. None of them had met me before.

“Who are you taking math with?”

“I can’t believe I have to take French with Madame So-and-So again!”

“Really? I love her!”

“I’m so excited to be back in Mr. What’s-His-Name’s class! He’s the best!”
The bell wheezed through the PA system to announce that class had begun. It would do this nearly a hundred times before I would be gone again. I had placed a blank sheet of paper on every desk before the students arrived, which some had already begun to fold, spin, pick up, and watch wobble as their conversations thinned out. I took my place at the front of the room and waited for all thirty-three sets of eyes to meet mine.

“Hi everyone,” I said, still smiling. “We don’t know each other but I know that we’re going to get along just fine. Before we say or do anything else, I’d like us to spend a few minutes with the blank pages in front of us.”

A few students already predicted what would happen next: they had folded their page into a saggy tent, spelled out their names in large letters in the centre, and propped it where they reckoned I could see it.

“Yes, we are going to make a name tag,” I told them, “but as well as your name, I’d like you to include a few other things that say something about who you are.”

I learned this “extended name tags” strategy (Gibbs, 2006) as a teacher candidate during my first stint OISE. The students’ names go in the middle of the name tag, of course, but dotted in the four corners around it are other identifying details, too: the place that makes them feel most content; two or three things they know they’re good at; the name of someone else who inspires them; a year that they spent three amazing days in a row. Underneath their name, I ask them to record the title of a memoir based on their life so far, if ever they were asked to write such a thing (Figure 1). It’s the first of many conversation starters that I hope will begin to knit us together as a community of learners.

Figure 1 My extended name tag
As I gave these instructions, I kept the name tag I’d prepared before class purposefully out of sight. I knew that none of the students knew my name.

Earlier in the day I had been given the master schedule, the same one used to populate each student’s individual timetable with course codes and room numbers—and the same one that was posted, in large font, on the wall of the main hall. Each course was attached to a room, and each room attached to a teacher. The entry for ENG3U-06, the course I’d been hired to teach, read as follows:

ENG3U-06
English
P8
Placeholder¹

“Since we haven’t met before, I figured I should make a name tag, too,” I told the class, hoping my smile wouldn’t betray the prank I was about to pull.

I picked up the saggy tent of paper from my desk and turned it to reveal the name I’d written in thick black ink on the front panel: PLACEHOLDER. Some of the class erupted in laughter. Some were perplexed and looked to their neighbour to fill them in on the punchline. The odd few who remained unaware or unfazed continued to draw wild squiggles and fold their pages into airplanes and paper cranes.

1.1 Remembering the occasional teachers of my past

Mary McLaren was my third-grade teacher and the first substitute teacher I can vividly remember. Whenever my second-grade teacher was absent, Miss McLaren, whose fiery braids seemed almost as long as the ankle-length dresses she wore, was always in her place. Our days in Miss McLaren’s care were never frequent enough and never long enough. She sang to us and told us tall tales about buried treasure and safaris like she was hosting a kids’ game show. Her

¹ A brief style note: I regularly cite artefactual texts like timetables, lesson plans, and even my own journals and field notes, in this thesis. As I outline in my methodology (Chapter 2), these are among the data I analyzed to write it. I use a sans-serif font, here and in the remainder of this work, to denote text that has been lifted directly from documents like this one.
stories—picture stories, as we came to know them—were Miss McLaren’s particular speciality, her magic trick, and we begged her to tell them again and again anytime she happened to be sitting at Mrs. Healey’s desk. What was so memorable about these stories was that she illustrated them as she told them. As she spoke, she scaled the board with chalk-dusted fingers back and forth and then back again, drawing little pictures in a seemingly haphazard fashion. By the time Miss McLaren stepped away from the chalkboard at the story’s end, this mess of images and symbols had braided together into a symbolic whole. Pirate hats, ship masts, and flags once separated by a sea of feathered dust knit together: they formed the map that revealed the location of the buried treasure. It was magical.

And it was more than just the change in routine that made it seem as though Miss McLaren breathed new life into my second-grade classroom. The truth is, by the time I met Miss McLaren—and before she became my full-time third grade teacher—I had already been taught by other occasional teachers\(^2\) who no doubt shaped my schooling life but simply did not dazzle in quite the same way. I remember that my first-grade teacher left halfway through the year on maternity leave and that her replacement, a wonderful woman whose image I can call up more easily than her name, also left later that same year to move her family to Texas. I know, too, that my second-grade math teacher spent some time away after breaking her ankle, and only because the teacher in our class picture is not her but someone who taught us until Miss George was able to hobble around the school on crutches.

Occasional teachers have always played a significant role in my education. Indeed, some have left deeper imprints in the short time I spent with them than others who taught me more regularly and for much longer. Miss Argyle, my tenth-grade English teacher, was the first person I ever uttered the words, “I’m gay” to. She was likely a first or second year teacher, and, coincidentally or not, a graduate of my high school. Word of this had trickled down from a friend

\(^2\) I use the term “occasional teacher” as it is defined in the Ontario Education Act: to refer to a certified teacher who is “employed by a board to teach as a substitute for a teacher or temporary teacher who is or was employed... in a position that is part of its regular teaching staff” (Ministry of Education, 1990). This includes daily supply teachers and long-term occasional teachers (“LTOs”) who work in publicly-funded elementary or secondary schools in Ontario. The adjectives, “substitute,” “supply,” or “daily” are used interchangeably here to refer to daily occasional teachers.
of a friend of Miss Argyle’s brother and those who bothered to scour the graduation photos that lined the cafeteria walls confirmed the rumour. Hers was the first smile in the Class of 1994 portrait. Miss Argyle taught me how to write a literary essay and was the first of my high school teachers who seemed to me like a real person. And yet, at the end of the school year, she was gone. Only her photograph remained.

In September 2002, just as I was getting to know Miss Argyle, the Ontario College of Teachers released the first of its annual *Transition to Teaching* reports. Each year the college surveys new entrants to the profession to “see what kinds of jobs they are getting and how they are settling into the profession” (Ontario College of Teachers, 2002). Miss Argyle may very well have been one of the 6,800 surveyed as part of its first publication. At that time, jobs for new teachers abounded. With the demand for teachers fuelled by an onslaught of retirements in the years following Premier Mike Harris’s tumultuous reign, “not only did almost everyone find a teaching job in the first year,” the report states, but “slightly more than three out of four obtained regular teaching posts” (Ontario College of Teachers, 2002). The other quarter of new graduates (23%) found work in long-term occasional roles and as daily supply teachers. Miss Argyle would have been among the latter, although to me, she was no different a teacher than Mrs. Lau, the math teacher who taught me for three straight years in a row.

I would not see Miss Argyle again until my senior year when I heard the ghost of her voice seeping out from under the door of a neighbouring classroom. A hoard of former students had cornered her in the ninth-grade class she was subbing for. As the lunch bell rang out, Miss Argyle asked me to take a walk with her. We stepped out into the winter air and walked a few blocks down the street—far enough away from the smokers and the stoners that we would could catch up in peace. She told me about the nightmare year she spent at an elementary school and how supply teaching seemed like a better alternative to her than working full-time in a place that made her unhappy. I could not understand why she had not simply chosen to stay at my school.

It wasn’t until my second or third year of university that I began to realize that choice likely had little to do with Miss Argyle’s decision to stay or go. I hadn’t given much thought to the notion of temporary or occasional work, and its implications for people’s lives and livelihoods, until the contract academic staff at my alma mater went on strike towards the end of my third year at university. Several of my professors, and ones whose mentorship and intellect I
cherished deeply, were among those rallying with placards in the blistering February cold, demanding better pay, access to benefits, and more job security. I knew from my conversations with one of those mentors, Kyle Morrison, that the life of a sessional professor was hardly desirable. Kyle at the time was notching up kilometres on his odometer as he travelled between different universities, sometimes teaching three or four courses at a time so that he might provide for his family. He was paid far less than his tenured colleagues, he and his family had no access to health or dental benefits, and because he taught more courses than full-time faculty in order to make ends meet, tending to his own scholarship and professional advancement landed at the bottom of a long list of priorities. Like many of his casually-employed colleagues, Kyle seemed to be locked in an institutional vortex—a revolving dead-end.

I was something of an armchair activist before the strike. Pursuing a degree in sociology meant that I had aligned myself with several social justice causes, but none that seemed to demand more than impassioned spectatorship. I championed the rights of my fellow LGBTQ peers, decried gendered violence against women, balked at wage inequality, shook my head in disgust about Canada’s colonial legacy and histories of cultural genocide, and laid in bed thinking about globalization and the systemic pillaging of the global south. I attended parades, pow-wows, film festivals, public lectures, and rallies. The strike, however, was different. Those affected were not “out there.” They were not types or theoretical constructs or identity categories: they were real people I knew and learned from and cared about. So I stood with them in solidarity in the February cold to demand more and better. And when a group of “radical” students rallied its way into the Dean’s Office to stage a sit-in, I was among those crying out against the obvious injustices of casual intellectual labour.

The casualization of academic work was and remains “something of a ‘dirty secret’” in the university sector, write Rothengatter and Hil (2013, p. 51). Estimates in their native Australia—home to a vocal and growing literature on the subject—place the number of casual academics well above 60 percent of all post-secondary instructors (Lama & Jouillé, 2015). In the United States, part-time and sessional instructors now account for 45% of all post-secondary faculty (Levin & Montero Hernandez, 2014). The swell in the number of non-tenure stream employees is widely understood as a function of the cost-saving measures that post-secondary institutions have adopted amidst widespread defunding under neoliberal governments (Levin & Montero Hernandez, 2014), even as their student enrollments continue to surge (Lama & Jouillé,
Aspiring academics like Kyle were once a minority among these ranks, the role traditionally reserved for graduate students, retired professors, and industry experts for whom short-term and temporary contracts offered greater choice and flexibility (Gottschalk & McEachern, 2010; Levin & Montero Hernandez, 2014).

Many of the grievances that forced the contract academic staff at my alma mater to walk the picket line are still echoing amongst part-time and casually-employed scholars both at home and abroad. As Levin and Montero Hernandez (2014) argue, those grievances often have less to do with the work itself and more to do with the conditions in and under which part-time faculty are expected to carry out that work. They found that

In their instructional assignments in classrooms, part-time faculty members viewed their position as experts in the translation of specialized disciplinary content into less complex content that made sense to students. Outside the classroom, when part-time faculty members reflected on their position within the larger institutional and social context, they viewed themselves as both undervalued and sometimes even abused by their working conditions: low salaries, extended periods of work, excessive workloads, no physical space allocated to them on campus, and limited or nonexistent participation in departmental and institutional matters. (p. 551)

Participants in their study and others like it also cite a dearth of professional development and induction opportunities to support their career advancement (Brown, Kelder, Freeman, & Carr, 2013). Lama and Joullié (2015) point out that these precarious employment arrangements can not only hinder casually-employed scholars’ own work and life trajectories, but that they can also compromise teaching quality and academic integrity.

Before the strike, I knew little about the extent to which the post-secondary education system relies on temporary and casual employment in order to sustain itself. My alma mater was not only relying on its fleet of casual instructors: it arguably was exploiting them. Just over a third of all instructors at the school’s two campuses were hired on a per-term basis, so many in fact that the Ministry of Training, Colleges, and Universities threatened to fine the school for misallocating human resources. Once a deal was ratified, and the job action ceased—nearly three weeks after the strike began—Kyle and some of the other sessional professors I knew were swiftly and unceremoniously promoted to the tenure-track ranks. Kyle, fortunately, was among the lucky few who eventually found a tenured position elsewhere—that is, a job that actually promised stable and gainful employment instead of one that only pretended to.
1.2 Transition to teaching: My journey from student to teacher

When I began my career as a secondary school teacher, I quickly learned that post-secondary institutions were not the only ones overflowing with short-term, casual, part-time, and temporary workers. I knew when I started my B.Ed. at OISE in 2009 that job prospects for new teachers were less than promising. My professors consistently reassured us that even if the market appeared unstable, all of us would find some sort of teaching employment after we graduated. “It may not happen right away,” they told us, “but soon you’ll pick up those supply days and those LTOs\(^3\) and you’ll land that job.” Catherine Williams, who headed the Global Education cohort in which I found myself, must have fielded questions about employment at least once a week. Things were different in her time: she found herself in a full-time permanent contract soon after graduating teacher’s college, having been hired to a school on the Friday of the Labour Day long weekend. “That’s how it will happen for you,” she assured us. It did happen for a few of us, but not many, and certainly not all of us.

It happened to me in November 2010. I was one of about 11,850 new teachers to enter the Ontario job market that year (Ontario College of Teachers, 2012). I had spent nearly two months of the school year working at a dead-end retail job, patiently submitting application after application to no avail, when I received a call from the coordinator of an adult day school north of Toronto. She wanted to interview me for a short-term teaching position. The adult learning centre where I would eventually teach—off-and-on, for the better part of two years—sat unassumingly at the corner of an industrial plaza. I was surprised to discover that its white brick shell, which appeared from the street to be no larger than a one-room schoolhouse, contained six classrooms, a community services office, a personal support worker training program, and a common area spacious enough to host a weekly pancake breakfast for the students. The coordinator who greeted me when I entered the building for the first time was a European woman whose jackets were as precisely tailored as her desk was tidy. She led me into her office where she and a vice principal asked me four questions to determine whether or not I was qualified to make pancakes with the rest of the faculty on Thursdays.

\(^3\) LTO stands for “long-term occasional.” It is common parlance among my colleagues. I have had LTOs, and have called myself an LTO. I use it in this work to describe a specific type of teacher employment contract—one, in Ontario, that lasts at least ten consecutive school days—as well as the teacher who occupies it.
It turns out I was not qualified—not at first anyway. Three days after my interview the coordinator phoned to tell me that they had whittled down the competition to two candidates: me, and another newer teacher who’d been struggling for several years to find teacher employment. The hiring committee opted to offer the English teaching position to the latter. But later that same week, late on a Thursday evening, the coordinator called back to offer me a position teaching Foundations, a Grade 9 and 10 equivalency course. I started Monday. Three months later, after all but one of my adult students transitioned to credit-granting courses, I was gone.

My employment trajectory in that first year was not unlike many of my peers’ early career paths. If anything, I fared well by comparison. Nearly a third of all new entrants to the profession in 2011 were “completely unsuccessful” in finding teaching work according to the Ontario College of Teachers’ 2012 survey. And of those who did find work, nearly half (47%) reported being underemployed. The College reported then that

Almost one in three of the teacher education graduates of 2010 who sought teaching jobs during the 2010-11 school year were unemployed, with no success in finding even daily supply teaching during the first school year of their teaching careers. Only one in eight of them secured regular teaching jobs. And just one in three of those who were on the job market secured as much teaching work as they wanted. (Ontario College of Teachers, 2013, p. 3)

Had I been one of the teachers surveyed, I might have counted myself among that latter third. Of course, I didn’t think of my own employment arrangements in quite the same terms. I simply wanted to teach—and needed to work—so I felt fortunate that I’d managed to piece together what felt like a full year’s worth of teacher employment. By the time my contract expired at the Adult Day School, I had landed a full-time, semester-long gig teaching Social Science in the same portable that opens this chapter. I thought I had won the lottery.

But then I wasn’t aware of just how grim my prospects were in light of the longitudinal employment trends that shaped teacher labour and employment in the decade since I’d met Miss Argyle. “Eight straight years of annual over-supply” had flooded the Ontario job market with new teachers (Ontario College of Teachers, 2013, p. 6). While both the number of retirees (Ontario College of Teachers, 2013) and the number of students enrolled in Ontario schools (Declining Enrollment Working Group, 2009) declined from 2003 onwards, the number of new teachers rose substantially. Amidst dwindling employment prospects, Ontario’s faculties of
education continued to graduate more new teachers than they had before, creating a surplus that was four times greater than it was a decade prior.

Not only is the transition to full employment longer than it was for the previous generation of teachers, it is also marked by increasing precarity and near-constant change. Indeed, significant job insecurities are report by nearly half of all new teachers in Ontario. According to the 2014 *Transition to Teaching* report,

More than three in five new graduates (63 per cent) with teaching employment in Ontario are limited to piecwork teaching. More than half who did find work during the school year report that it was still just part-time by year end. Half say they were teaching in multiple schools. And half report their employment is daily supply. (Ontario College of Teachers, 2014, p. 11)

Even by the fifth year of their career, more than half of Ontario teachers “expect their jobs to change in the next year” (Ontario College of Teachers, 2014, p. 13). Their term contracts expire; they are given surplus and lay-off notices; they heed the call of more steady and lucrative teaching employment overseas. While some of these changes reflect individual choices, the College agrees that “the expected change reflects the precarious status of [teacher] employment” in Ontario (2014, p. 13).

By September 2013 I had worked as a long-term occasional teacher in three different schools, been a member of six different departments, and spent countless days corralling students in other teachers’ classrooms as a substitute. The days, semesters, and school years all ended the same way, with me packing my belongings and leaving. At its peak in 2013, the oversupply of teachers meant that “almost two in five teacher education graduates… who sought teaching jobs during the 2012-2013 school year were unemployed” (Ontario College of Teachers, 2013, p. 3)—and I felt I was among them. Fewer student bodies wandered the hallways of the schools where I’d been teaching. Teachers who were six and seven years into full-time contracts were being declared redundant. And Regulation 274/12⁴, which the Ontario government passed in

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⁴Responding to cries of nepotism and unfair hiring, the Ontario government introduced Regulation 274/12 to “promote a consistent, transparent and fair hiring process for long-term and permanent occasional teachers” (Ministry of Education). Under Regulation 274/12, all school boards in Ontario are now required to maintain a “roster” of occasional teachers from which long-term occasional positions can be filled according to seniority. Teachers must spend at least ten (10) months on these occasional teacher rosters and complete at least 20 days’ worth of daily occasional (substitute) teaching before they are even eligible to apply for long-term or permanent assignments. Combined with policies at the board level,
2012, had effectively taken me out of the running for what scant jobs were available. For the second September in a row, I found myself at home on the first day of school with few prospects. With the promise of secure teaching work nowhere in sight, I did what any sensible person might: I applied to graduate school.

1.3 From teacher to student and back again: Finding a research question

Cynthia Ballenger (2007) suggests that to find a good research question, “we have to watch more first, get the feeling of the broader field in which the question operates… we have to use more of what we know” (p. 99). Like bell hooks (1994), I “came to theory desperate, wanting to comprehend—to grasp what was happening around and within me” (p. 1), yet I didn’t know where or what to grasp. I share Marilyn Cochran-Smith and Susan Lytle’s (2009) belief, as I imagine many educators do, that the “purpose of educational systems [is] improving learning and enhancing the life chances of all students so that they have genuine choices about meaningful work, continued education, and civic engagement” (p. 2). And yet as I attempted to navigate these systems—first as an adult educator, and then as a high school teacher—I felt that my and my students’ choices were tied up in the “organizational gridlock” (Wisniewski in Cochran-Smith & Lytle, 2009, p. 87) of departmental mandates, board-wide initiatives, school improvement plans, “best” practices, literacy test scores, and pre-ordained assessment criteria. I was desperate to somehow reconcile the growing divide between my lofty aspirations as a liberal, justice-oriented critical pedagogue and the daily realities of my teaching practice.

Many of the friends and colleagues I met in the early days of my MA were desperate, too—desperate to find work. So many in fact, that the precarity of teacher employment in Ontario became a regular refrain in our conversations both in and outside of class. Several of my colleagues could not find their way onto an eligible-to-hire list, let alone a school board’s roster of substitute teachers. They volunteered in their children’s schools and tutored math in the which often require teachers to complete a certain number of long-term occasional assignments before they are eligible for permanent hire, these changes have effectively enshrined occasional teaching as the mandatory starting point in the career of all teachers in Ontario.
evenings. They enrolled in additional qualifications courses and learned how to teach subjects that principals demanded. They did everything and anything to stand out in a qualified crowd. And yet they wondered if they could even call themselves teachers.

Frankly, I wasn’t sure whether I could call myself a teacher anymore either. I found myself “worlds apart from the everyday” (Pinar, p. 231)—or at least the everyday that I had become accustomed to in the many classrooms in which I taught. A journal entry I wrote in October 2014, a few weeks into my first term at OISE, reads:

The social worker assigned to the literacy class I supplied for today asked me "what I do". Since I'm not actively looking for full employment—which, to everyone around me, I ought to be—what is it that I "do"?

I couldn’t come up with a clear answer. Feeling that I was no longer “working from inside the lived world of real problems of practice” (p. 151), as Susan Lytle and Marilyn Cochran-Smith (2009) put it, but instead a practitioner on hiatus, how could I grapple with the questions that led me back to graduate school in the first place? How could I sort through the organizational gridlock that seemed to entrap my students without first mapping my way through the one that I and so many of my colleagues were so deeply enmeshed?

Clandinin and Connelly (1994) tell us that “[i]n the study of experience, it is the researcher’s intentionality that defines the starting and stopping points” (p. 416). But “[at] least as important,” they continue, “is the almost inevitable redefinition of purpose that occurs in experiential studies as new, unexpected, and interesting events and stories are revealed” (p. 416). I had never intended to write about occasional teaching. My inevitable redefinition of purpose came as I began speaking to other substitute teachers, the ones I met in staff workrooms and hallways at the schools where I used to teach regularly. Their grievances were different than my colleagues’ at OISE, the ones who couldn’t find work at all, but they shared these concerns with a similar urgency, the same breathlessness. Too often they felt like “outsiders within” (Collins, 1990)—somehow both belonging and not belonging to the communities they parachuted in and out of. Another of my journal entries, this one dated October 15, 2014, reads:

There are two women sitting at the table next to me. One I recognize, the other I only met yesterday. Both are career supply teachers.

The one I recognize says that full-time teachers take for granted the simplest things, like having the right set of keys. She says that yesterday, at a different school, she spent nearly half a period running around asking for the right keys to access the computer lab. Meanwhile the students in
the English class she was substituting for were hoarded outside the locked room, filling the hall with their laughter and fooling around while other teachers poked angry heads outside of classroom doors to shush them. Nobody bothered to help this woman. I could see in her eyes even as she retold this story how frantic she must have been as she darted from room to room asking for a key. Even the office assistant, she says, didn’t seem bothered that the kids had been left unsupervised in the hallway. “Please help me!” she begged.

These teachers, like my OISE colleagues, wanted desperately to talk—and to anyone who might listen.

What would happen if teachers like us came together intentionally to discuss our practice? And what might our conversations suggest about living and working during this time of teacher surplus, labour shortage, and increasing employment precarity?

1.4 The road ahead

This thesis is my attempt to tackle those questions. Broadly, it examines what happens when a group of occasional teachers comes together to share their experiences of professional practice. Specifically, it considers the ways in which an economic climate ruled by teacher surplus, labour shortage, and long-term occasional employment shapes our experiences and identities as teachers, and what our collaborative inquiry suggests about the consequences of precarious teacher employment for teaching, learning, working, and living.

If the College of Teachers’ annual Transition to Teaching report takes a bird’s-eye view of employment precarity across Ontario’s teacher labour market, then this thesis offers a more microscopic complement. I take Marilyn Cochran-Smith (2000) seriously when she writes that stories are not only the “primary way we understand and construct our professional lives and our multiple identities,” but that it is through narrative and storytelling that we can begin to “scrutinize our own work and theorize our own experience” (p. 185). The stories that fill the pages to follow—stories like the “Placeholder” nametag gag that opens this chapter—were shared among a group of occasional teachers with whom I met regularly during the winter and spring months of 2016. Our stories illustrate some of the ways precarity—or precariousness, as Armano and Murgia (2013) put it—is lived and felt in the everyday. I offer these stories, our stories, as a means not only of fleshing out the quantitative employment trends that have made it challenging for a number of us newer teachers in Ontario to find stable employment, but also to
theorize the extent to which precarious employment shapes us as professionals and impacts our capacities to affect change in and through our work.

While the results of its most recent survey suggest that the demand for new teachers has begun inching its way to meet the oversupply, the College of Teachers acknowledges that the “path to full employment [in Ontario] remains a long one” (2014, p. 5). At least half of new teachers in Ontario will still be seeking full employment as many as five years after graduation (Ontario College of Teachers, 2016). And while the one-year extension of Ontario’s initial teacher education programs\(^5\) will cut the number of graduates competing for positions on occasional teacher rosters by half, new graduates will spend at least the first year of their career as daily substitute teachers before the prospect of regular employment is available for consideration. Precarious work, in other words, lingers on the horizon for me and many of Ontario’s teachers, yet few are investigating what impacts, if any, this climate of economic uncertainty has on teaching and learning. The consequences of extended periods of precarious (un)employment—for teachers’ lives and livelihoods, but also, and perhaps more importantly, for the learning and life chances of students—remain alarmingly undertheorized.

This thesis does not offer a comprehensive or definitive analysis of those consequences, but I hope it offers a rich and nuanced glimpse. **Chapter 2** outlines the methodology that brought this thesis to life and the theoretical frameworks that informed my data collection and ongoing analysis. It also introduces the readers to the five occasional teachers whose experiences animate this work. **Chapter 3** documents the myriad ways employment precarity impacts our career trajectories and everyday practice. It explores how precariousness brings to life professional narratives that shape the way we engage in teacher practice and construct our teacher identities. **Chapter 4** builds on this discussion, taking a closer look at the micropolitics of our inquiry community and how precarity both creates and constricts possibilities for us to engage in political action and institutional change efforts. I read across these themes in **Chapter 5** and suggest implications of this work for various stakeholders, including the school boards that

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\(^5\) Prior to September 2015, most initial teacher education programs in Ontario took one year to complete. The Ontario Liberals introduced the extension, as well as a cap on funding for new spaces to accommodate would-be teachers, as part of its measures to address the surplus of teachers competing for jobs after graduation.
employ occasional teachers and the faculties of education that credential us in the first place. I also consider where our conversations leave us—as occasional teachers, as teacher-activists, and as would-be teacher-researchers. Throughout, I rely as much on my participants’ words as my own to tell a story about our work, what it means to us, and why it matters.
Chapter 2
Taking an Inquiry Stance on Occasional Teaching: Theories and Methods

“Stories matter. Many stories matter. Stories have been used to dispossess and to malign, but stories can also be used to empower and to humanize. Stories can break the dignity of a people, but stories can also repair that broken dignity.”

CHIMANANDA NGOZI ADICHE, FROM HER TED TALK, THE DANGER OF A SINGLE STORY (2009)

2 Introduction

This thesis is largely an ethnography of a community of teachers who met over several months to collectively explore their experiences navigating Ontario’s precarious teacher job market. It may have been propelled into being by the political economy of teaching in Ontario during the early years of my teaching career, but really it is about the six teachers, including me, who found ourselves coming together once a month to talk about our lives and livelihoods. Most are or were colleagues from my graduate classes at OISE who expressed interest in participating in this research from its earliest inception. Others were my supervisor, Rob Simon’s, former students, who I’d met through my work as a research assistant and my participation in the Toronto Writing Project, an urban writing collaborative organized by OISE’s Centre for Urban Schooling. One is a colleague from the public school board where I teach. Since it is these teachers whose stories help contextualize the longitudinal employment trends identified in Chapter 1, it seems only right that I introduce them before I describe what, exactly, we did together and how our shared inquiry came about.

I met Amanda because we both belong to an inquiry community through OISE’s Centre for Urban Schooling that resembles the one at the heart of this thesis. Indeed, it served as a template of sorts to guide our own coming together. Amanda is a fifth-year secondary school
teacher employed by a large public school board. As we took turns introducing ourselves, she
told us that she has “kind of bounced around a bit” between long-term occasional positions at
two schools and had “done daily supply as well in between.” She explained that “when [she] first
started in the Board it was quite easy to get into an LTO with mat leaves and sick leaves.” Now,
she said,

It’s quite hard, unless it’s a sick leave and they don’t know when the teacher’s going to
come back. That’s been a lot of the tension amongst occasional teachers, like who gets
the position and why and seniority. I’ve been able to make my way up the seniority list,
but I’m still on a 2,000-person list. It’s kind of crazy. But it’s been nice to be able to work
in two schools. I guess a lot of my frustration has been debating. Because going into
teaching, I was hoping to get something a little more secure. Now I’ve moved outside of
the city so it’s a game of “do I stay with what I’ve been doing for five years, and the
seniority and the connections I’ve made, or do I start fresh somewhere else?”

Cameron found himself contemplating a similar dilemma. As a daily occasional teacher
in the secondary panel of the same suburban public school board that employs me, he has “been
on the supply list… since the beginning of [his] employment”—nearly seven years—and has
also spent time teaching music and English in long-term occasional positions at the high school
he attended. “Unfortunately, because of redundancies and surpluses,” he told us, “the music
program that [he] worked in for two years went to another young teacher with a full contract […]
who needed to be given a job before LTOs could be considered.” That rejection, even if
procedural, still stings. As well as teaching, Cameron is actively involved in the teacher’s
federation and regularly facilitates workshops for teachers and students around equity and social
justice causes—work that he and I have done together over several years.

Jeremy is also a daily occasional teacher, and the only bona fide substitute teacher who
participated in this study. He works as a daily occasional teacher for both a publicly-funded
Catholic school board and an all-girls private school. As a full-time PhD student, his “experience
of occasional teaching has always been very truncated”—and mostly by choice. While he
reserves at least one day a week for substitute teaching, his “occasional teaching has been very
loose” due to other part-time work commitments, including teaching and research assistantships
at the university. It was through our shared involvement in Rob Simon’s research projects that
we came to know and work alongside one another.

I also met Melanie at OISE. It seemed like she and I shared a timetable. We had several
classes together before this community brought us together again. Melanie is a second-career
teacher who “decided to just do occasional work […] because [her] kids were still at home” when she entered the profession in 2007. She is currently employed for two large, publicly-funded school boards, where she does daily casual work for all grades (K-12). She’s “had five or six LTOs” in the past, but “[hasn’t] really been looking for anything [lately] because [she’s] been so, so busy.” Between graduate school, which she completed a few months before our group convened, and caring for an elderly parent, Melanie feels that she “[hasn’t] had a chance to do anything other than daily occasional.”

Like Melanie, Shelby is a second-career teacher. And like Jason and myself, Shelby balances occasional teaching with full-time graduate studies. She was “illegally doing an LTO” in a public elementary school over the course of this study—so-called because it violates provincial hiring regulations—but worked previously as a daily casual teacher for a large urban school board. She said of her LTO assignment:

It’s a 0.5 and being a second-year PhD student, I don’t want to have to do prep and marking all the time but I knew that there’s no way that I’d be able to support my kids if I didn’t take this LTO that was basically being handed to me at the time. And it’s illegal, and it’s lots of work, but we need to eat.

The remaining chapters trace how this group of practitioners came together to take an inquiry stance on occasional teaching (Cochran-Smith & Lytle, 2009)—in other words, how we made sense of “the problems and contexts of our practice… and the ways we collaboratively theorize[d], stud[ied], and act[ed] on those problems” (Cochran-Smith & Lytle, 2009, p. 123). Although framed primarily in terms of ethnography and participant observation (Heath & Street, 2008), I drew from numerous methodological traditions, including critical practitioner research (Cochran-Smith & Lytle, 2009), narrative inquiry (Beattie, 1995; Clandinin & Connelly, 2000), participatory action research (Kemmis & McTaggart, 2000), and institutional ethnography (Smith, 2005) to inform this research. In the remainder of this chapter, I describe the methods that made our collaborative inquiry possible, as well as the conceptual frameworks that informed those methods and my analysis of the data that emerged from our conversations. Finally, I state the research questions that this work hoped to answer.
2.1 Research methods

2.1.1 Sampling

The participants profiled above were recruited using a snowball sampling method from among my colleagues in both the graduate program at OISE/UT and the suburban public school board where I have taught since 2010. I contacted them as well as half a dozen other prospective participants directly via e-mail. The only criteria for joining our inquiry community were that prospective members had to be (1) an Ontario Certified Teacher in good standing with the College of Teachers and (2) employed in Ontario by a board of education or independent school as a casual or long-term occasional teacher. Participants could be working in either elementary, secondary, or continuing education panels and had to be actively seeking teaching employment. As I describe in further detail in Chapter 4, the final composition of our group owed mostly to scheduling and proximity. Those who could attend our meetings did.

2.1.2 Data collection

Data were collected at the Ontario Institute for Studies in Education of the University of Toronto (OISE/UT) between January 2016 and May 2016, with participants meeting in person on five separate occasions. Each session lasted between 60 and 120 minutes and was digitally recorded and later transcribed. A provisional outline of the intended topics or themes for each session was prepared in advance (see Figure 2); however, since research of this nature rests on the contributions and participation of the people involved, I intentionally created space for the indigenous questions (Lytle, 2000) that arose over the course of our meetings. Following Herr and Anderson (2005), I expected that “[a]s data gathering and analysis proceed[ed], the questions, methods, design, and participants may all shift somewhat” (p. 70). The iterative quality of this research, like my own involvement as a participant, is perhaps one of its strengths: it allowed for a “spiralling synergism of action and understanding” (Herr and Anderson, 2005, p. 71).
Taking cues from Ballenger (1999; 2007), Freeman (1998), and Strieb (2014), I wrote detailed field notes immediately following each session. Transcripts were prepared between sessions and shared with participants via a dedicated website on OISE’s Pepper platform. Between sessions, participants were also encouraged to share questions, reflections, concerns and resources online. My field notes, along with the transcriptions of our recorded sessions, and any artefacts shared by participants over the course of the research formed the raw data for my analysis.

| Session #1: Where have we been? Why are we here? Where are we going? |
| In the introductory session, participants will be invited to introduce themselves and share any biographical information they feel is relevant to our purpose. They will also be asked to share their expectations for participating in the research and any questions they wish to explore in future sessions. |

| Session #2: To what extent do we see ourselves in the Ontario College of Teachers’ Transition to Teaching report? |
| In the second session, I will share key findings from the 2014 Transition to Teaching report and invite participants to reflect on these findings vis-à-vis their own experiences navigating the Ontario labour market. |

| Sessions #3 and #4: What might my current practice tell us about occasional teaching in Ontario in this current moment? |
| In the third and fourth session, participants will be invited to share pivotal moments and/or key artefacts (e.g. lesson plans, curriculum documents, policy and procedural memoranda, etc.) that they feel are integral to their current practice as occasional teachers. Questions emerging from the first and second sessions will also be revisited here. |

| Session #5: Where do we go from here? |
| In the final session, I will invite participants to reflect on the process of collaborative inquiry and suggest future directions to support professional learning among occasional teachers. |

**Figure 2 Provisional outline of discussion topics (for my reference only)**

I should note, too, that our group continued to meet even after my formal data collection ended. Indeed, as the remainder of this thesis illustrates—particularly Chapters 4 and 5—it did quite literally take on a life of its own. I call us an “inquiry community” and not a “focus group” for precisely this reason: it continues to evolve, generating new questions for us to untangle.
2.1.3 Data analysis

Transcripts of our conversations, along with lesson plans, curriculum documents, policy and procedural memoranda, or other artefacts that participants shared with the group were coded and analyzed using a constant comparative approach (Strauss & Corbin, 1998). As I transcribed our conversations, I wrote analytic memos to document my initial impressions and emerging understandings. Initial themes documented in these memos not only shaped data collection, since recurring topics and questions were probed in later sessions, but also offered a heuristic for my later analysis of the transcripts and artefacts. My earlier hunches and impressions were, of course, re-evaluated in light of emergent themes.

2.1.4 Ethical considerations

This study was approved by the University of Toronto’s Social Sciences, Humanities & Education Research Ethics Board prior to our first meeting. In keeping with this protocol, each participant signed a Letter of Informed Consent prior to our first meeting (Appendix A). Although some identifying information is included in this thesis—I acknowledge, for example, that all participants are current or former OISE students—I have made every effort to ensure that participants’ identities are protected through the use of pseudonyms and that their employers, in particular, remain anonymous.

Admittedly, I was at first hesitant to adopt these routine ethical standards since, as Zeni (2001) notes, standard measures enforced by many ethics review boards are not always befitting of qualitative research that involves participants as co-investigators who are also members of the community under investigation. Participatory research of this nature often “raises its own, often sticky, ethical issues, which may never be addressed by review boards” (Zeni, 2001, p. 153). Even assumed standards surrounding consent, harm and privacy do not translate seamlessly in this context. Because my participants’ own questions and interests effectively drove our collective inquiry, it seemed only fitting that they were consulted in determining what ethical measures would be taken in the collection, analysis and dissemination of this research (see Herr & Anderson, 2005). All agreed that for the purposes of this thesis, their identities should be kept anonymous; however, as Shelby put, “if we write something collectively about our experiences
and we’re identified as authors then that’s different.” As of this writing, we are currently preparing our first presentation venture, which will likely take the form of a panel discussion for teacher candidates.

2.1.5 Validity and reliability

Standard measures of validity and reliability are equally ill-fit for a project of this nature. Eschewing traditional notions of “internal” or “external” validity, I am adopting instead the measures of validity outlined by Herr and Anderson (2005), since they more accurately reflect the relational—and therefore ethical—complexities of this research. Democratic validity, as a measure of the extent to which my participants’ multiple or even conflicting perspectives are given credence and catalytic validity (Lather, 1986), which is concerned with the degree to which our collective inquiry “deepens” my participants’ understanding (Herr & Anderson, 2005), are the validity criteria that seem most relevant to this work. Cochran-Smith and Lytle (2009) suggest that inquiry communities like the one at the centre of this work “provide rich and challenging contexts for practitioner learning... as well as [make] available productive locations for linking communities of educators with larger change efforts” (p. 140). Not only did this research provide a space where occasional teachers’ voices were heard and honoured, but participating in this inquiry community perhaps offered a small but not insignificant learning opportunity where, as I elaborate in Chapter 5, few others exist.

2.2 Conceptual frameworks

2.2.1 Teachers as knowers and knowledge generators

Situated primarily within the methodological tradition of practitioner inquiry in education, which acknowledges that “local understandings, observations, and insights can accumulate knowledge of critical importance to the challenges and problems at hand” (Lytle, 2008, p. 37), this research is founded on the assumption that occasional teachers themselves are best positioned to illuminate both the challenges and possibilities of the current job market. I
believe, as Cochran-Smith and Lytle (2009) do, that “practitioners are legitimate knowers and knowledge generators” (p. 89), and it is under these auspices that I invited my participants to collectively and collaboratively theorize what it means to be an occasional teacher in Ontario in this particular moment. This stance on research and professional practice is epistemologically rooted in critical theory, and critical pedagogy (Friere, 1975/2010) in particular, which locates knowledge production and meaning-making in the lived experience of real people and the various social, cultural, political, intellectual, and institutional networks in which they are enmeshed.

Despite growing in numbers over the last decade, occasional teachers remain vastly understudied—particularly in Canada (Duggleby, 2007; Duggleby & Badali, 2007), but especially in Ontario where literature on the subject is virtually non-existent (Pollock, 2008). The existing North American and British literature on occasional teaching focuses more or less exclusively on daily supply or substitute teachers and highlights the many challenges they face in and through their work (e.g., Clifton & Rambaran, 1987; Duggleby & Badali, 2007; Vorell, 2012). The absence of occasional teachers’ voices (writ large) from the academic literature about “substitute” teaching is precisely the “gap” that Katina Pollock’s (2008) dissertation—one of the few about occasional teaching in Canada—sought to address. “Few studies,” Pollock writes, “have explored [occasional teachers’] individual experiences, beliefs, attitudes, perceptions, or the ways that gender, race, ethnicity, or socio-economic status figure into their work” (p. 65). Hers is among a scant few studies (see also Duggleby & Badali, 2007; Trotter & Wragg, 1990; Vorell, 2014) that explore occasional teaching from the perspective of occasional teachers themselves. It is this same void that my research continues to fill.

Because I am a practicing occasional teacher as well as a graduate student, I also count myself among the participants in this study—I was, in effect, the sixth participant in our inquiry community. Just as “[a]uthentic education,” for Freire (1975/2010), “is not carried out by ‘A’ for ‘B’ or by ‘A’ about ‘B,’ but rather by ‘A’ with ‘B,’ mediated by the world—a world which impresses and challenges both parties, giving rise to views or opinions about it” (p. 93), I approached this work by explicitly positioning myself as a co-researcher alongside my participants. Herr and Anderson (2005) are adamant in their assertion that research of this kind involves “inquiry that is done by or with insiders to an organization or community, but never to or on them” (p. 4). To them, “insider” status is powerful: it offers an epistemic privilege
(Campano, 2007) not afforded to the traditional researcher who peers in from the outside. Citing Gloria Anzaldúa's (1987/2012) notion of “borderlands,” Susan Lytle (2000) likewise argues that practitioners like myself are uniquely positioned to offer valuable insights precisely because we occupy a liminal space between the academy and the “real world” of the classroom (p. 699). Far from a limitation, my insider status allows me to draw on several methodological traditions, as well as my own experiences, to offer a richer portrait of occasional teaching in Ontario.

2.2.2 Inquiry as stance

I described what I hoped my participants and I would accomplish by joining together in conversation as inquiry before I had given much thought to what inquiry in this context might actually entail. Maybe that is because inquiry, like reflection, has become so routinely used in education circles that its meaning is often assumed as given (Loughran, 2006). It forms one cornerstone of what Mary Kennedy (2006) calls the “teacher education collective vision,” mobilized alongside similarly “progressive” terms like learning community and social justice to describe—perhaps even idealize—a particular sort of educational practice which promises to liberate and transform. To be sure, the vision is a promising one. But for Kennedy, it sometimes “lacks a repertoire of habits, rituals, and rules of thumb” that might actually deliver on its promise (p. 211).

Kiss and Townsend (2012) offer a useful heuristic for untangling different ways of conceptualizing inquiry that involve distinguishable, though not discrete, processes. They distinguish between inquiry as (1) a cognitive process, (2) a research paradigm, and, (3) following Cochran-Smith and Lytle (2009), a stance “that is critical and transformative, and can be understood as a disposition to wonder” (p. 26). Although fundamentally cognitive, inquiry is not inherently private or internal: it may be made public, and shared dialogically in conversation or in writing (e.g., Simon, 2009; Simon, 2013; Simon, Campano, Broderick & Pantoja, 2012; Simon, Evis, Walkland, Kalan, & Baer, 2016). “Teacher inquiry research,” Kiss and Townsend suggest, “is maximally explicit, tends towards wondering, and […] explicitly values individually-created local knowledge” (2012, p. 26). These wonderings are substantiated empirically and rest on a “systematic, rigorous, and targeted” (p. 26) process of data collection.
For Cochran-Smith and Lytle (2009), inquiry is not bound to particular projects or activities, but a stance: a “worldview, a critical habit of mind, a dynamic and fluid way of knowing and being in the world of educational practice that carries across professional careers and educational settings” (p. 120). This orientation to teaching and learning is intentionally ambiguous: Cochran-Smith and Lytle knowingly blur boundaries between “research and practice, researcher and practitioner, analyzing and acting, and conceptual and empirical research” (2009, p. 123). For them, inquiry involves a “continual process of questioning and using the data of practice to investigate those questions” that matter to practitioners. Inquiry as stance is also, for them, a collaborative and therefore public process. It is and should be transformative:

Fundamental to the notion of inquiry as stance is the idea that educational practice is not simply instrumental in the sense of figuring out how to get things done, but also and more importantly, it is social and political in the sense of deliberating about what to get done, why get it done, who decides, and whose interests are served. (p. 121)

When I proposed to invite a group of occasional teachers together in conversation, I intended our coming together to resemble Freire’s (1975/2010) culture circles: that it would offer a space where, through dialogue, my participants might “develop their power to perceive critically the way they exist in the world with which and in which they find themselves” (p. 83). My hope was that our questions would be not merely practical but also change-oriented, even if, regardless of the scope or nature of their questions, I ultimately wanted my participants to “follow where the inquiry takes them” (Tanaka, 2015, p. 135). And yet I also knew that because the very nature of our work is casual and often sporadic, our “data of practice” would look different than what is normally accounted for by teacher-researchers. The process of data collection and analysis described by Freeman (1998), and exemplified by teacher-researchers like Cynthia Ballenger (2007), for example, are often localized in schools and classrooms. As occasional teachers, we too are “working from inside the lived world of real problems of practice” (Cochran-Smith & Lytle, 2009, p. 151), but “practice” for us, as I explore in Chapter 3, is not a given. Thus, we required somewhat different “habits, rituals, and rules of thumb” (Kennedy, 2006) to feed and sustain our shared wondering.
2.2.3 Institutional ethnography and figured worlds

Dorothy Smith’s (2005; 2006a) work seemingly landed in my lap as I struggled to articulate what, exactly, my participants and I were doing in this space of collaborative inquiry and why it might be useful. I framed this work as teacher-research (e.g., Ballenger, 2007; Campano, 2007) but our inquiries were not—could not be—entirely grounded in the realities of everyday classroom practice. Classrooms are only one site in a web of institutional spaces that occasional teachers shift in and out of, and many of us do not have regular or consistent access to those sites. As well as classrooms, we found ourselves in principals’ offices, boardrooms, faculties of education, Facebook groups, and our homes, waiting for work. By bringing together a group of occasional teachers, I intended not only to surface our personal and professional experiences in those spaces, but also the broader relations that give them shape.

Smith describes institutional ethnography as a sociology that “explores social relations and organization in which our everyday doings participate but which are not fully visible to us” (2005, p. 1). She is adamant that it is not a methodology per se, but a way of seeing. As an epistemological stance that, again in Smith’s words, “begins from the people,” it “aims at a knowledge that is essentially an extension of the ordinary ways in which we know our everyday worlds into regions we have not been to, and perhaps could not go to, without the explorer’s interests and cartographic skills” (p. 2). Institutional ethnographies thus map a course through the formal machinations that coordinate and make possible our activities in particular spaces—and, importantly, they do so from the “standpoint” of specific actors. Often researchers in this tradition are among “the people” from which these inquiries proceed—like Griffith (2006), for example, who explored how schools participate in the discursive construction of “single parent families” from the standpoint of her own experience as a single mother. Also, just as for Cochran-Smith and Lytle (2009) assuming an inquiry stance orients teacher-researchers toward change, Smith argues that institutional ethnographies “produce a kind of knowledge that makes visible to activists or others directly involved the order they both participate in and confront” (2005, p. 32). They are meant to be instrumental on some level.

Gathering artefacts—and texts in particular (Smith, 2006b)—is crucial in this pursuit since, as Marjorie DeVault (2008a) tells us, they tend to “organize [our] doings, making some but not other things possible, shaping opportunities for action” (p. 7). I was initially drawn to an
almost show-and-tell-like format of artefact sharing after an exercise in my Narrative Inquiry class with Mary Beattie (1995), where texts and objects served as springboards as we reflected together on pivotal moments in our teaching practice. In their “primer” to institutional ethnography, Campbell and Gregor (2002) note “[t]exts appear in people’s talk because they are an integral part of what people do and know. The texts that researchers see being used by informants during field observations are often central to everything that happens” (p. 79). As I document in Chapters 3 and 4, texts like lesson plans and policy memoranda became central to our inquiry because they seemed to make visible the institutional structures that shaped our access to and engagement in teacher employment.

Elsewhere, Smith (1987) also reminds us that “the importance of texts, as of any phenomena of language, to the social is as coordinator of the diversities of people’s subjectivities, their consciousness” (p. 65). They are, in other words, brokers not only of our actions, but also, and more profoundly, of our identities. What exactly we mean when we identify ourselves as “occasional teachers” is both an implicit and explicit concern in this work. For Holland, Skinner, Lachiacotte Jr., and Cain (1998), “individuals and groups [are] always engaged in forming identities, in producing objectifications of self-understandings that may guide subsequent behaviour” (p. 4). This “continuous self-fashioning” consolidates what they describe as a figured world: “a socially and culturally constructed realm of interpretation in which particular characters and actors are recognized, significance is assigned to certain acts, and particular outcomes are valued over others” (p. 52). Numerous researchers have put this concept to work to make sense of the process of identity formation in education contexts (Urietta, 2007). It is particularly useful in this context since the coordinates of a figured world are not fixed: it is discursively as well as spatially produced. I lean on it here as a complement to the epistemological cues of institutional ethnography, since both actors and systems were the objects of our collaborative inquiry.

2.2.4 Precarity, precariousness, and the precariat

As well as creating a space for occasional teachers to draw upon their own lived experiences of professional practice, this study is one of very few that have investigated the impacts of labour market conditions on the work occasional teachers do and the ways they
construct their identities (see also Eide, Goldhaber, & Brewer, 2004; Merson, 1996; & Pollock, 2010). Again I take cues from Pollock’s (2008) doctoral research, which, like this thesis, was partly motivated by her own experience navigating job shortages during a time of teacher surplus. Pollock at one point “believed that the supply and demand cycle had no bearing on [her] professional identity as a teacher” (p. 245), and it appears her sentiment is shared by most who study occasional and substitute teaching since none of the existing literature offers a substantive analysis of the ways labour market conditions nuance the experiences of occasional teachers, save only to acknowledge that occasional teachers have differentiated access to teacher employment and practice (Pollock, 2008). I told my participants when we gathered for the first time that

the word I’ve been using to describe how I understand what occasional employment looks like is the word “precarious” because I think whether we are daily supply teachers or long-term occasional teachers, there is always a sort of open question of whether or not we’re going to continue being employed and that there’s a lot of irregularity, maybe, to our employment.

This thesis documents not only the distinctive yet diverse ways in which our work and employment is precarious, but also the consequences, as we understand them, of precarious teacher employment for teaching, learning, working, and living. It presents, in other words, a grounded theory of precariousness from the standpoint of occasional teachers.

Precarity has become something of a buzzword among labour studies scholars and in the broader public imaginary (Ross, 2017), referring broadly to “forms of flexible labor that rely on the substitutability and dispensability of working peoples” (Butler, 2011, p. 12). Such jobs have been on the rise in Canada since the early 1990s (Vosko, Zukewich, & Cranford, 2003). In an overview of precarious employment trends for Forum magazine, Stephanie Ross (2017) explains that “a precarious job is more likely to lack permanency, to be difficult to unionize or to regulate through employment standards, have little control over working hours or scheduling, and to be low income” (p. 20). Vosko, Zukewich, and Cranford (2003) typify these as “non-standard” forms of employment, whereas, “[u]nder the standard employment model, a worker has one employer, works full year, full time on the employer’s premises, enjoys extensive statutory benefits and entitlements, and expects to be employed indefinitely” (p. 16).

While precarity emerged as a viable political and theoretical construct amidst a wave of youth un- and underemployment in Western Europe, it was, at the same time, a response to
eroding state welfare, health care, and pension provisions enshrined by neoliberal austerity measures (Casas-Cortés, 2014; Standing, 2011). Most accounts of precarity’s rising currency among activists and academics trace its roots to Bourdieu (Armano & Murgia, 2013; Näsström & Kalm, 2015; Standing, 2011), who articulated it in the late 1990s to describe what he observed as a “generalized state of insecurity that cuts across social-status divisions” (Näsström & Kalm, 2015, p. 557). Both material and psychosocial vulnerabilities were captured in Bourdieu’s formulation, hence why, perhaps, precarity’s specific meaning has been contested and refigured across different labour movements and in the service of multiple and sometimes conflicting agendas (Casas-Cortés, 2014).

Butler (2004; 2011) and others (e.g. Tsianos & Papadopoulos, 2006) likewise employ precarity not only as a means of describing particular labour arrangements characterized by short-term and insecure contracts, but also to signify a subjectification process that brings into being particular social actors and structures of social engagement (Casas-Cortés, 2014). For Butler, precarity is a universal condition that characterizes every embodied and finite human being, and non-human being as well. This is not simply an existential truth—each of us could be subject to deprivation, injury, debilitation or death by virtue of events or processes outside of our control. It is also, importantly, a feature of what we might call the social bond, the various relations that establish our interdependency. (2011, p. 13)

Building on Butler’s reading, Armano and Murgia (2013) are careful to distinguish between precarity as a “structural condition tied in particular to work and the contract” and precariouslyness as “an experiential condition to do with [a] person’s life… and his/her specific positioning” (p. 488). They write,

> Because the concept of precariousness—or perhaps it would be better to say precariousnesses—concerns the experiences of persons in their partiality and situatedness, it induces us to consider different, manifold, but simultaneously dynamic, positions that not only differ among individuals who define themselves as precarious but also change for the same individual over time. (p. 488)

Guy Standing (2011) argues that the growing number of individuals who find themselves in precarious jobs constitute, in Marxist terms, an emerging “class-in-the-making”—what he calls the precariat. Apart from the obvious instability in both access to employment and consistent earnings, Standing suggests that what distinguishes the precariat from other occupational groups is its lack of a work-based identity. “When employed,” he writes,
[the precariat] are in career-less jobs, without traditions of social memory, a feeling they belong to an occupational community steeped in stable practices, codes of ethics and norms of behaviour, reciprocity and fraternity. […] There is no ‘shadow of the future’ hanging over their actions, to give them a sense that what they say, do or feel today will have a strong or binding effect on their long-term relationships. The precariat knows there is no shadow of the future, as there is no future in what they are doing. (2011, pp. 20-21)

In Standing’s estimation, members of the precariat have yet to consolidate the same “robust pride and dignity” that led the industrial working class to reshape labour relations in the twentieth century. Without a clear sense of occupational identity, and robbed of the time needed to form collegial relations, this emerging class is also left without a clear politic from which to lobby for change. In other words, it has yet to become a class for itself.

### 2.3 Research questions

When I invited a group of occasional teachers to join me in excavating their experiences of precarious teacher employment, I set out to answer a broad question, namely: what happens when a group of occasional teachers comes together to discuss their practice? But questions have a way of begging others. And, as Nicol (2006) points out, productive inquiry “involves creating conditions that are intentionally ambiguous” (Nicol, 2006, p. 27) in the first place. Thus, while the remaining chapters in this thesis broadly illuminate a response to that overarching question, our talk surfaced others that this work addresses, too:

1. What makes occasional teaching precarious in this historical moment?
2. How do occasional teachers construct and enact their professional identities in the face of precarity?
3. How does precarity shape the possibilities for occasional teachers to mobilize for change?

Like the broader question that frames this study, the first of these questions is explored across the remaining chapters. That’s to say that evidence of the precariousness of occasional teaching in this specific moment in Ontario’s teacher labour climate is peppered throughout this thesis. The second and third questions are explored in Chapters 3 and 4, respectively.
Chapter 3
“I Still Feel Like I’m Not a Teacher Yet”: The Precariousness of Occasional Teaching

“Just as in religion the spontaneous activity of the human imagination, of the human brain and the human heart, operates independently of the individual—that is, operates on him as an alien, divine or diabolical activity—so is the worker’s activity not his spontaneous activity. It belongs to another; it is the loss of his self.”

Karl Marx, from his Economic and Philosophical Manuscripts of 1844 (1964, p. 111)

3 Introduction

Just before we went around the table and introduced ourselves for the first time, Melanie, who I’d met in a class the year before, turned to me and asked, “Are you teaching now?”

“I am!” I responded. Then, after a brief pause, I added: “Well, I’m doing supply.”

It occurred to me as I was transcribing this casual exchange that I use that phrase quite a lot. When people ask, “You’re a teacher?”—and people, especially students, sometimes do—I tend to follow-up with a standard clarification: “Well, I’m a supply teacher.” I suppose I do this for clarity’s sake. When Melanie or anyone else asks if I have been teaching, I assume that by “teaching” they mean the sort of teaching that most of us think of as teaching: the sort of teaching that involves teachers and students together in the same space over a sustained period of time. But teaching for me and the participants in this study is structured by a different temporal metric and made up of different spatial arrangements. Some of us have spent only a few hours in the same classroom, teaching students we have never met before and may never meet again. Others spend entire semesters or school years in the same place, with the same faces, before finding themselves someplace new or nowhere at all.
“Well, I’m doing supply” gives some hint of these discontinuities but it also betrays a certain ambivalence about my work as a daily occasional teacher. I can hear in the tone of my voice that I offer it almost as an apology. To the extent that common wisdom tells us that school days taught by substitute teachers are “lost days” (True, Butler & Sefton, 2011), those four little words also map onto a much wider discursive terrain, one littered with questions of purpose, status, competence, and belonging for those who trek it. It is this terrain, broadly speaking, that I begin to chart a course through in this chapter.

I knew when I asked the participants in this study to join me in collaboratively exploring what it means to be an occasional teacher in Ontario in this historical moment that our shared dialogue would probably surface many of the challenges we face in and through our work, and probably more of them than rewards. Indeed, we began identifying some of those challenges only moments after the recorder was switched on. As we introduced ourselves, and offered glimpses into our past and present experiences of teacher employment, we did so with reference to the concerns and interests that brought each of us to the table in the first place. For Amanda, those concerns revolved around school hiring practices, employment security, and employee relations. As she described her work teaching literacy to so-called “at-risk youth,” she told us:

When I first started in the board it was quite easy to get into an LTO with mat leaves and sick leaves—at least for a couple months. But now it’s quite hard. Unless it’s a sick leave and [the administrators] don’t know when the teacher’s going to come back. That’s been a lot of the tension amongst occasional teachers, like who gets the position and why and seniority. I’ve been able to make my way up the seniority list but I’m still on a 2,000-person list. It’s kind of crazy. I don’t know what you consider is, like, good about it.

Similarly, as Melanie told us that she works in classrooms across two school boards, and both elementary and secondary panels, she vented some frustration about what her work in those diverse spaces entails:

When I do daily occasional work, if I’m teaching kindergarten, it’s brutal. Especially in the winter. All the little snow suits, putting them on and off. When I’m teaching high school, like I was yesterday, I couldn’t be more bored. I mean, there’s nothing to do. You’re, you know, strictly a babysitter.

Grievances like these abound in the scant literature about occasional teaching and they surfaced again and again in the conversations my participants and I shared. When Shilling (1991) surveyed that literature in the early 1990s, he concluded that “casual supply teaching can be seen as a highly demanding form of labour which offers participants little job satisfaction, control
over their work or career prospects” (p. 6). Like the substitute teachers that Trotter and Wragg (1990) interviewed in the late 1980s, we often “found it easier to talk about the disadvantages of the job than the advantages” (p. 272). The grievances aired in that study and others like it (Duggleby & Badali, 2007; McCormack & Thomas, 2005; Shilling, 1991) most often concern the challenges of navigating unfamiliar school spaces and communities, the lack of support from administrators and colleagues, the dearth of opportunities for meaningful professional learning, and the overall and often overwhelming sense that occasional teaching is not valued within the very system it helps to sustain. We expressed similar concerns and others, too, that crop up in the pages that follow.

My aim in this chapter, however, is not simply to enumerate the challenges we identified—these have been well-documented elsewhere. Instead, my aim here is to build upon our own indigenous questions (Lytle, 2008) and honour how we made sense of our temporary labour and its impacts on the ways we practice and identify as teachers. “People use their bodies in work,” sociologist Marjorie L. DeVault (2008a) reminds us, “and work always takes a physical toll, though quite differently in different kinds of work” (p. 2). This chapter considers the unique toll that occasional teaching takes. Specifically, it asks, what sort of teacher is brought into being by extended periods of precarious employment?

Amanda and Melanie’s words above capture some of what that toll entails, at least for us as individual teachers. They also gesture towards two broader archetypes that seemed to lurk behind and between our words—the ghosts that haunted our talk. I explore each of these narrative tracks in this chapter. On one hand, there is the “babysitter,” as Melanie put it: the sort of unqualified, under-skilled substitute teacher parodied in popular culture by shows like Mr. D (CBC, 2012), and to which my own “Well, I’m doing supply” refrain most certainly gestured. On the other hand, there is the entrepreneurial teacher who must steadfastly climb her way up a 2,000-person seniority list to land that coveted permanent job. The “babysitter” and the “entrepreneur” are not merely ideal types: I show here how they manifest as actual practices in the world—how they are brought into being by the rhythms and realities of occasional teacher labour, and especially the actors—teachers, administrators, students, and so on—who make that work possible. I begin by summarizing those rhythms and realities as we experience them, before moving to consider how they bring to life very different narratives of teachers and teaching. These narratives, I argue in the conclusion, shape the way we construct and enact our
professional selves. For many of us, they make it challenging to claim “teacher” as our professional identity.

3.1 “That’s what the jobs are”: The rhythms and realities of occasional teaching

In preparation for our third meeting, I asked my participants to bring an item—any relic—that, for them, represents some aspect of their practice as occasional teachers. Cameron was the first to share. He held up his cell phone:

So at the risk of seeming unimaginative, I actually brought in my phone—my cell phone. […] I mean we all have our phones out now if we’re working supply. It’s something that I need to keep with me at all times as supply teacher—especially after 6 p.m. because that’s when the calls come in for us in [my district]. And it’s also where I keep my calendar and where I’m able to keep track of where I’ve worked, who I’ve worked for, how long the shift—well, how long the day was for. It helps me keep track of what I do as an occasional teacher.

Building on this line of thinking, Shelby described her artefact, a day planner, as “pretty much the same”:

My phone is for all of those things but also I have my academic year planner, which, this year, I’ve been fortunate enough that I’m in the same place every day so I don’t have to constantly keep track of where I am. But […] I can write exactly where I need to be each day, even if it’s two different places. Like last year, there were several weeks where I worked in nine different schools in a week, ’cause that’s what the jobs are.

To be sure, cell phones and calendars are common artefacts in many lines of work, if not simply a taken-for-granted part of our everyday lives, irrespective of profession. As Shelby herself pointed out, maintaining a day planner is not only integral to her teaching practice, it also helps her manage her “life outside of that”—“like where [her] kids are supposed to be at any given point” in time. Her calendar, like Cameron’s cell phone, remained close to hand throughout that meeting, and the ones after it, without much fanfare from the rest of us. Until I began transcribing these and our other exchanges, I hadn’t really given much thought to their presence at all. Cell phones simply remained in laps and on tables, ever waiting for the school board’s callout system to buzz them to life. Calendars likewise hid beneath papers or were tucked into bags waiting to be inked up with future commitments.
Cell phones in particular, it turns out, were not mere accessories to our conversations: they were an omnipresence. I would acknowledge that presence at the start of each recorded session, explicitly reminding those of us who rely on calls for our daily sustenance to keep our phones close to hand. I would apologize in advance, on behalf of my own or anyone else’s, for any potential disruption to our conversation. And disrupt they did. At least once during every session, the skips and squeals of mine or someone else’s phone would punctuate the middle of a conversation, sometimes sending us on a wild tangent while the recipient frantically punched in numbers or ran closer to a window in search of better reception. Melanie was curious to know at one point if my board’s callout system was similar to hers, so I even answered a call on speakerphone. The recorder captured my frustration as I entered my identification code one, two, three times to no avail before the system timed out. “It’s wonderful being beholden to a robot for your paycheque,” I mused.

While they are perhaps benign artefacts—“unimaginative” even, to use Cameron’s words—cell phones and calendars served as (mostly) quiet reminders that precarity is woven into the fabric of our work as occasional teachers. To the extent that Ontario’s Ministry of Education (1990) defines occasional teaching as a form of temporary labour, precarity in many ways is the fabric. The discontinuities and irregularities inherent in our temporary teaching contracts began surfacing only moments after the recorder was switched on. As we introduced ourselves and offered glimpses into our past and present experiences of teacher employment, we also gave shape to the temporal rhythms of our work. Jeremy, for example, who practices as a daily substitute teacher, told us how work for him is often sporadic and unpredictable:

I wasn’t getting anything [last fall]. I didn’t get any calls until really November. And then I got a couple [supply teaching days] in. And then sometimes I have meetings and other stuff that I do [as part of another job] so I don’t have the option to do too many [supply days]. I like to do—I usually try to do—Fridays. Every Friday. Or every Monday. Or kind of both. And occasionally I’ll sort of work full-time toward the spring. Last year I did every day in May basically. And then I did some days in June and then it kind of peters out for the summer of course.

Amanda told us about the “insecurity that [she] might not have work” she experiences too, even while she has remained consistently employed as a long-term occasional teacher at the same school for a number of years:

It’s such a challenge because I tread both [security and insecurity] and just how we’re all dealing with the August nervousness or the June nervousness of what’s going to come
next year. I’m full-time right now but [my contract is] going month-by-month. Hopefully it goes to June. Every year it’s been like that—month-by-month—for a sick leave.

Amanda described this arrangement to us as “very precarious,” a term that we spoke out loud only occasionally but underscores much, if not all, of our talk. When I suggested that our inquiry was compelled, at least in part, by “the open question of whether or not we’re going to continue being employed,” I borrowed the meaning of the term “precarious” from the Ontario College of Teachers’ Transition to Teaching (2015) report, cited in Chapter 1. “Precarious teaching contracts,” its authors write, “are arrangements that have definite end dates and/or do not specify volume of teaching days from week to week” (p. 6). As Jeremy indicates above, these irregular rhythms are more or less predictable and expected, especially by daily occasional teachers for whom it is, “of course,” just the nature of our work. For some of us, these irregularities are also as much a function of choice as they are a consequence of factors outside of our control: “Yesterday was a snow day, so my day got cancelled,” I shared in one session, “and today I just didn’t want to go so I cancelled [the job].”

The Transition to Teaching reports illustrate how precarious employment arrangements play out broadly in the early lifespan of new teachers—what Melanie described in one of our first sessions as “the eternal while.” But because longitudinal studies like Transition to Teaching illustrate patterns over time, they also necessarily inflate time. Rarely did we speak in terms of entire semesters or school years—those great expanses of time that stretch outward and might someday knit together to form a teaching career. For us, time seemed to be always and inherently truncated, narrowed: a tiny window we could only peak through in hopes that we might glimpse an unforeseeable future. As Jeremy put it, “[The Transition to Teaching report] is a very longitudinal, sort of ‘big picture’ look at issues in the teaching profession, but there are things happening on the ground that are in the minutia that […] are affecting my livelihood on a day-to-day basis.” Indeed, we experienced precarity not only in the year-over-year transitions between employment contracts, but often and more poignantly in the everyday: not just in the months and seasons, but also in the days and even hours of our employment.

This is particularly true for daily occasional teachers for whom, in Jeremy’s words, “every day is [the] first day on the job.” The inescapable precariousness of daily occasional teaching was a regular refrain in our conversations, most certainly by dint of the composition of our membership but also, perhaps, because the insecurities of substitute teaching are so deeply
and widely felt (Clifton & Rambaran, 1987; Vorell, 2012). Jeremy captured some of these well when he told us,

I think the reason […] I find supply teaching to be so precarious [is] that you never really know what you’re doing until you get there. In my case because it’s not a request from a friend, it’s the robot and they say who your subject will be for that day, and then you get there and it’s changed anyways. You get somebody else. I get very anxious about that and the idea of then having to navigate the geography of a new school and the people. You know, what is the schedule? Is it actually the real schedule today or are there any special events happening? All that is really very frustrating, you know, to say nothing of actually getting to a classroom and teaching children and, you know, being their guardian for that time.

I confessed to my participants that I had declined a substitute teaching assignment the day of our first meeting for similar reasons:

I was supposed to [teach today]. I know of the school. I’ve been in the school that I was supposed to go to today, but I had never actually supply taught in the school and I didn’t want to go. Like I just didn’t want to go. And I actually ended up writing about it this morning because I was like, “What is wrong with me?” I need to go. I mean I’d like to get a paycheque, right? But I really didn’t want to do it today.

Our talk regularly vacillated and blurred the lines between the material and temporal terms of our employment and the intersubjective and psychosocial conditions of our everyday labour in this way. Shelby and Cameron agreed, for example, that the uncertainty of navigating new and often unfamiliar spaces—which is really what substitute teachers do for a living—is often anxiety-provoking:

Shelby: I mean if you know what the school is you’re going in then you probably have a good idea that you’ll make it through that day.

Cameron: You can navigate it.

Shelby: You can navigate it. But if you’ve never been at the school, you don’t know anyone who has taught there before, you’re going in—

Cameron: It’s an unsafe space to you if you don’t know the space.

Shelby: Exactly! So the level of anxiety that goes into that.

Cameron: Beyond just natural anxieties of, you know, this is a new place. It’s like the first day of work every day you go.

Shelby: Yep.
Cameron: I’ve been to all 17 schools in my board now so I feel fairly comfortable, but it took quite a bit of time to get myself to that place.

Jeremy told us it is for those very reasons that he “prefer[s] to go to [the] school[s] that [he’s] a little bit familiar with.” It allows him to mitigate some of the uncertainties inherent in his work. “I feel like if I’m just another anonymous supply teacher then at least I am anonymous in a place that is not as anonymous to me,” he explained, “and I find that to be a sort of small bit of comfort.” What he is saying is that precarity irrevocably shapes his teaching practice: that it quite literally calls him into being as a particular subject. This is how Butler (2004) understands precarity, too. For her and others (Armano & Murgia, 2014; Standing, 2011), precarity has as much to do with contractual arrangements as it does with identity. Occasional teaching does involve different kinds of physical and emotional labour than so-called “regular” teaching (Duggleby & Badali, 2007; Vorell, 2012), and much of it concerns the management of its inherent uncertainties. The question, then, is who emerges from these precarious arrangements? If this is just “what the jobs are,” where does that leave us? Thinking of precarity in these terms—as a subjectification process—the remainder of this chapter profiles two distinct occasional teacher-subjects brought into being in this current labour climate: the babysitter and the entrepreneur.

3.2 “No teaching required”: The occasional teacher as babysitter

Per usual, I was wandering around looking for the classroom that my schedule tells me I’m supposed to be in—room 215. But instead of finding a lesson plan, I’m greeted by a gentleman in the back corner who looks deeply suspicious.

“Is this Room 215?” I ask.

“It is,” he says. “This is a math room.”

“Do you know where I might find Lisa?” I ask. “That’s who I’m covering for today.”

“Who?”

I explain that the schedule I’ve been given has directed me to this room. Maybe it’s because he realizes that the folder of papers I’m holding is the only thing that separates me from a total stranger walking around the building, or maybe he senses a note of desperation in my voice, but he warms up a little.
“I think there’s been a miscommunication,” he offers.

He gets up and walks toward the door and across the bustling hall to the adjacent room. There, on the door, is a tiny scrap of paper that informs whoever happened to notice it that the rooms had been swapped.

- Journal entry, 02/19/2016

Melanie came into our first artefact sharing session looking exasperated. She was carrying a sheet of paper that looked very much like the ones office assistants hand me at the start of a casual supply day: the sort that contain all the information that administrators figure substitute teachers need to know, like where to send a student who misbehaves or what to do in the event of a lockdown. No sheet of paper, of course, can say as much about a place as time spent there reveals, but in the absence of time, documents like these offer some starting point. The piece of paper in Melanie’s hand was blue and it, too, with letterheads, charts, and diagrams, promised to help whoever received it become somewhat familiar with an unfamiliar place. Before Melanie explained the significance of this piece of paper, she told us about a supply teaching assignment she’d had a few weeks prior:

Just before March Break, I had an assignment. Somebody was very, very ill so I was asked to cover his class. This would’ve been a Grade 6 class. And the lesson plan was six pages long! The first three or two—I think the first two pages—were just standard. He would’ve given that to all the teachers who come in, with the same sort of notes. The last four was my lesson plan, which was great. You know, very thorough.

She held up the piece of paper and continued:

So today, I taught in the secondary panel. This was my lesson plan! And if you’ve taught high school, then maybe you’re familiar with this. As you can see there is no lesson plan. None at all! Nor are there any notes or instructions. And it says at the top: “Note below: Well in advance of a planned absence, please complete this form and submit to…” Whatever, whatever. I won’t mention the names obviously. So I did what most teachers would do. I called the office and said, you know, I was wondering is there a lesson plan that I could refer to? And no, there wasn’t. The secretary told me in person that there wasn’t.

Melanie reasoned that she “did what [she] could” to engage the students, but that ultimately she “spent an entire day with students on their phones, just chatting and catching up about their holidays.” For her, “it was just a colossal waste of everyone’s time.”
Dorothy Smith (1990) suggests that texts like the one Melanie shared with us offer useful windows into the machinations of institutional organizations since texts so often mediate and coordinate activity within places of work. Lesson plans in particular came up early and often in our conversations. We began talking about them, and how or why they matter, during our very first session by way of a discussion about teaching qualifications and the availability of casual work. Jeremy, who had recently earned a spot on the substitute roster of a small private school, told us that one of the new challenges he faced was being called in to cover for classes outside of his grade and subject area expertise—“removing [him]self twice,” as he described it. With so few sections of his teachable subjects on offer, his options were sometimes limited.

“Well I guess because it’s a small school, and if you’re just in the [history and world studies] departments, you’re just kind of waiting for a call from those teachers, right?” Amanda asked him.

“Yeah,” Jeremy replied. He admitted, though, that one of the “weird” affordances of this arrangement was that he would now receive “lesson plans and stuff in advance,” which for him “is really cool”—and not at all the norm.

Lesson plans were significant to us because, to borrow from sociologist Marjorie L. DeVault (2008a), they appeared to “organize [our] doings, making some but not other things possible, shaping opportunities for action” (p. 7). For us, these texts appeared to be crucial mediators in helping to relieve some of the uncertainty inherent in daily occasional teaching. They also invited us to enact different versions of our teacher selves. Receiving lesson plans in advance meant that Jeremy felt he could do something different—something more meaningful and engaging for students than if he had received them only moments before he was expected to teach. Likewise, the “thorough,” four-page lesson plan that Melanie describes above set the stage for a different sort of exchange between her and the students in her charge than plans that contained hardly any instructions.

We all agreed that the lesson plans we receive as daily occasional teachers rarely invite us to do more than simply supervise students, a concern echoed across multiple studies (e.g., Cliffton & Rambaran, 1987; Duggleby & Badali, 2007; Lunay & Lock, 2006). Amanda, who had spent time working as a daily substitute before landing consistent long-term occasional work, told us during our second meeting that “very few times [was she] able to teach a lesson as a daily
She said supply teaching for her, especially “in high school,” involved “so much babysitting.” Melanie agreed. “I never—I mean ever—have a chance to teach,” she told us flatly.

I’ve done this so many times—we’ve all done this, I’m sure—where you are babysitting. And there’s really no lesson plan ever. It’s like, “Have them review Chapter 9” or “Go over this or that.” And [today] it was like that. All the students looked at me and said, “But we did that already.”

Cameron could relate:

I was teaching at an adult education place and the teacher said, “Everything you need will be on the Google Docs.” I didn’t really quite understand what that meant. But I talked to the program coordinator there and she said, “Oh yeah, all the students are set up.” […] She said they all know what they’re working on and it just made me more aware of the fact that [knowing what the students are working on] is your way in as a substitute teacher to engaging with the students. It’s little things like taking attendance so you can at least engage one-on-one with every student in the room. And it’s giving instructions, knowing what the students are working on. […] I wasn’t even given an attendance sheet so I went in and talked to them again. I said, “I need to at least have an attendance sheet so I can talk to the kids.”

In an email correspondence, Jeremy shared a particularly demonstrative example that seemed to typify many of our experiences. “Although I regret not keeping the note, I remember it quite vividly,” he explained. “It read something like: ‘The students have their work assigned. Just supervise. No teaching required!☺’” For him, those three words—“no teaching required”—consolidate many of the frustrations he and the rest of us experience as daily substitutes:

I think I’ve mentioned to you before how dehumanizing and deprofessionalizing I find occasional teaching, from being called by a machine to not knowing precisely what I’ll be teaching until I am there (although sometimes there isn’t even a lesson plan from the regular classroom teacher). For me, this note was the perfect emblem of these experiences as a whole. I imagine, from the smiley face and exclamation mark, that the regular teacher intended this to be a good thing. Ostensibly a simple day. But I found it wildly deprofessionalizing.

Lisa Weems (2003) writes that “[t]he image of the substitute teacher as a babysitter—someone with no or little teacher training, certification, or experience continues to have currency with many professional teachers” (p. 258). Having combed through decades’ worth of policy and popular media representations of substitute teachers, she tells us that the “image of the substitute as unqualified” is a historical artefact 80 years in the making. Because of its entrenchment in the public imaginary, it is not difficult to be persuaded by studies which suggest that full-time teachers, students, and administrators openly regard substitutes as lesser professionals, if education professionals at all (Dendwick, 1993; Galloway & Morrison, 1994). Clifton and Rambaran (1987) suggest that the lesson plans substitute teachers receive are indeed a useful
proxy for the extent to which their professional expertise is measured and valued by other educational professionals, especially other teachers. Crystallized in the lesson plan are particular assumptions about what occasional teachers can or should offer—which, if our pool of evidence is any indication, isn’t much. “They... think that you’re still not a teacher,” Shelby said simply. Melanie agreed that “there is a total misunderstanding across the board of what an [occasional teacher] is.” She said that more than once a student has asked her, “Are you going to be a real teacher someday?”

Clifton and Rambaran (1987) suggest that this valuation is mostly a function of the transitory nature of occasional teaching work—because, as Shelby put it, “that’s just what the jobs are.” From interviews conducted with substitute teachers, “regular” teachers, school administrators, and students, as well as observations made at multiple sites and in consultation with these various stakeholders, they draw the conclusion that daily occasional teaching is a “marginal situation in which substitute teachers do not fill roles that allow them to adequately legitimate their behaviour” (p. 325). A teacher’s right to exercise power, they argue, rests on the authority inherent in their position and their familiarity with the rituals and routines of school and classroom life. Substitute teachers, lacking both, therefore find it difficult—impossible even—to stake legitimacy. Cameron put it simply when he suggested that “you’re not respected the same way as a supply teacher from students because they think that you’re not a fixture in the school.” The result is that occasional teaching becomes something of a losing game: “[N]ot being treated as having authority means that substitute teachers have difficulty in participating in forming the rituals, and because substitute teachers never know all the rituals, they are seen as lacking authority” (Clifton & Rambaran, 1987, p. 314).

For us, the image of the substitute teacher as babysitter is not simply a figment of the imaginations of students and teachers; it is enacted in the world, as my professor Kathy Bickmore (2008) would put it, by actual words and deeds—including lesson plans that demand we only supervise students. “No teaching required” is a discursive framework we reference again and again as we construct and enact our teacher selves. As Jeremy explained,

I wonder sometimes... how we frame things as supply teachers. And I have a lot of colleagues who supply teach who tell me this a lot—you know, it’s just babysitting or whatever else. But, I don’t know, there’s some days where there won’t be very much in terms of a lesson plan, or it might even say “just supervise” or “no teaching required.”
[...] But, you know, even if there’s like nothing to do or no product, I guess I try to think of myself as still a teacher, or still teaching, because I find that otherwise I’d just quit.

Like the substitute teachers Vorell (2012) interviewed, some of whom explicitly reframed their professional identity as “guest teachers” instead of “substitutes,” we mobilized a range of strategies to cope with the widespread “de-professionalizing” of our work. Cameron told us, for example, that “one of [his] supply tricks” is to insist that students hand in whatever work he has assigned to them. “I say, ‘This is being collected at the end of the class’ and I never get instruction for that.” And Jeremy said that “oftentimes” he’ll engage students in conversations that students “find really valuable but [are] often never valued professionally in school.”

Let’s say it’s a Grade 11 class, I’ll go up and ask, you know, “So what are your plans for next year?” Like we’ll start talking about things that maybe they wouldn’t have access to in a “lesson,” right? Like university applications, resume stuff, all that stuff.

Still, the image of the unqualified substitute teacher is buried deep in our professional consciences. Galloway and Morrison (1994) write that “[w]hile often considering themselves to be effective instructors, substitutes frequently do not see themselves as professionals” (p. 1, my italics), a tension that surfaced in our conversations, too. We spoke frankly about our own struggles to see ourselves as teachers, and to reconcile the image of the substitute teacher as babysitter against our own measures of professional skill and status. Perhaps Melanie captured that struggle best when she told us that she refuses to identify herself as a “supply” teacher. “We’re not toilet paper!” she exclaimed. And while Melanie opined at one point that she “wish[es] to God someone would give [her] a chance to teach something,” she also conceded that full-time teachers “don’t know who they’re getting so they have to be very careful.” Even Amanda, who had not taught as a daily occasional for many years at the time of our meetings, told us that she “still catch[es] [her]self” negotiating her teacher identity in light of the pervasive beliefs about who occasional teachers are and what they can offer:

I still catch up myself having to... preface myself in what I consider my own school—because I’ve been there so long, but I’m not there permanently. And it makes such a big difference walking in and saying, you know, I’m your new English teacher, I’ve been here five years as an English teacher. I don’t like say I’m an occasional teacher or anything. But when you come in as a supply teacher, it’s like a totally different view of you. So it’s interesting like how you self-identify, right? Because I consider myself part of that school but I’m an outsider, and I’m the only LTO there.

Jeremy explained it this way:
I feel like I’m always at war with myself in terms of trying to resist de-professionalizing myself by downplaying the work I do. Even though on one hand I could say it’s just babysitting, or I’m just like a body in the room; on the other hand, I try to resist that. But I’m not sure if it’s real. I’m not sure if I’m just making myself feel better, you know, by having that perspective.

The tensions, in other words, remain unresolved.

3.3 “Franken-teachers who don’t even exist”: The occasional teacher as entrepreneur

Our show-and-tell of artefacts generated such a rich discussion the first time around that I suggested we repeat the exercise to break the ice during our fourth meeting. Unlike the cellphone he held up during that first go-around, and the “no teaching required” lesson plan that Melanie shared, Cameron’s artefact was “an experience that [he’d] had” that day—one he felt is “indicative of the life of an OT.” This is the story he told us:

I got to the school today—it was a half day that started at noon—and […] the job was called to me as a “Vacancy,” which typically means that either you’re covering for more than one teacher and they’ve combined the day or there’s a timetabling issue and they might just not have a teacher. And that’s what it actually ended up being today. So I came in and the Office Assistant said, “You’re actually only teaching one period and then your planning time is afterwards, but the principal would like to speak to you.” I said, “Okay.” “So if you could come back down right after teaching you’re done teaching your first class.” I said, “Sure.”

So I went up and sure enough there was no teacher. Luckily there was a co-op presentation today so it was the easiest supply day I’ve ever had. I just went in there, sat down for a period and watched him present, and then went down and spoke to the principal. The principal said: “There’s been a scheduling issue that came up and the class you just taught—it was a Civics and Careers class—it’s one period and we’ve lost a teacher. It is going to be posted as an LTO, and I’m wondering if you would consider taking one period in the middle of the day?”

[…]

I just looked at him. And he had a hard time asking me with a straight face. It’s the middle of the day, too, so it’s not like [I] could go [teach] anywhere else. He said, “I know, one period. Would you?” I said, “Absolutely not. I would not be able to make it work on $90 a day.” He said, “Okay.” He said, “I understand. If you’re a supply teacher and you take one period—like right now you taught one period—you get paid for a half
day.” I said, “Yeah. It is still kind of like comparing apples and oranges but if you want to look at it like that.”

It was just the culmination of that experience: being in the game for seven years, but not only that, having known the principal and having sat across from him in interview settings a few times, and having met him at multiple schools while he was a VP and now as a principal, and him approaching me as if he didn’t know me and just introduced himself. It was just one of those moments where you’re like, you know what, I’m not really a part of this system and they’re just throwing crap at me.

[…]

And there was a time, probably just a couple of years ago, when I would have been very gracious and said, “Thank you so much for the opportunity!” But I didn’t go there this time. I just kind of gave him that incredulous smile. Like you’re not actually thinking I would take that, right? I mean, I’m an adult. And I have responsibilities. And one period’s not going to cut it.

There are many tensions captured in this story. So many in fact, that it was all we could do to shake our heads and muster a few encouraging words. “That’s crazy!” Shelby chimed in at one point. “They’re just hoping you’ll bite!” Melanie offered. Not only did Cameron’s words give voice to the feelings of loneliness and alienation endemic among occasional teachers (Duggleby & Badali, 2007), but they also point to a complicated space where the material realities of our work and our more idealized notions of teaching collide. There is much at stake in Cameron’s decision to accept or reject an offer like this one: taking it would most certainly put his financial wellbeing at risk; refusing it could potentially sour his relationship with the administrator, and jeopardize future job opportunities. He can continue to babysit, or he can teach—at a price. It’s a conundrum that leaves him feeling that he is “not really a part of this system.”

I asked aloud to the group, “Who’s able to take that one period? Somebody’s going to take it.”

“Someone fresh out of school probably,” Melanie suggested, “who’s living at home.”

Cameron said “that’s what [he] did” when he was freshly graduated:

I took a one-period LTO when I first got out. I was excited. This is going to be my foot in the door! This is going to be me showing the principals that I’m really keen! Well what I learned really quickly is that that doesn’t amount to anything. It really doesn’t matter.
“It can show that you’re easier to exploit!” Shelby joked. She too had been recently offered a part-time LTO assignment, only hers she accepted because it gelled with her needs as a working graduate student and mother:

In my situation I work part-time, I’m a 0.5, and I’m happy to be so. […] There’s no way I could be an OT and not have other income coming in. If I were a single person with a roommate helping to pay rent, maybe. But supporting two other people on a single income, there’s no way.

The question of who is included and who is excluded by hiring practices that involve arrangements such as one-period LTOs and a broader policy landscape that has enshrined long-term casual employment was raised in the second session as we pored over the then-current Transition to Teaching report. We landed there by way of a discussion about Ontario teachers being certified by out-of-province colleges and universities, and how those numbers had dwindled after a seeming surge of popularity in the early and mid-2000s (Ontario College of Teachers, 2016). Shelby had briefly attended such a program for the same reason she had accepted her part-time LTO: “As a single parent, the idea of being able to go one or two nights a week to be able to do my teaching degree was really, really huge,” she explained. For her, the shift to a mandatory two-year teacher certification program—one of the provincial government’s strategies to address the overflow of new teachers entering the job market—means that fewer teacher education faculties can “cater to populations that [are] non-traditional.”

“It tells you who the [College of Teachers] want as teachers and who universities think should be teachers,” she said. “We should all be 22 and fresh out of our undergrad!”

Jeremy agreed. “And you should volunteer for all these things,” he added.

“All these reports sort of valorize that in some way,” I said. I drew our attention to a specific passage in the report:

Where does it say it here… Oh yes: “New teachers are highly proactive job seekers. Most apply to multiple school boards, look for more than one region in the province, network with education contacts, and apply to individual schools as well as school boards.” It’s this list of wonderful things that take a certain amount of privilege to be able to do.

“Exactly!” Shelby said. “A car alone!”
“It’s placing the ability to get a job or not solely on the individual,” Jeremy reasoned, “less on the system itself which either provides those spaces or doesn’t, right? Or credentializes you as a somebody or not, right?”

Näsström and Kalm (2015) observe that when market-based solutions are allowed to become dominant in ever more spheres of society and the benefits and risks of life are privatized, it becomes necessary for individuals to cultivate certain manners and attitudes that might give them an advantage over others in the competition for status and jobs, such as entrepreneurial spirit, ambition, and self-promotion. (p. 567)

For them, the imperative to become a literal entrepreneur of the self is a defining feature of neoliberalism. “It’s also how we do everything in education,” Jeremy pointed out. “It’s all about whether you’re exceptional or not; you’re an A student, you’re not.” Butler (2011) describes it as a specific brand of “neoliberal morality,” one that has enabled “the general attrition of social democracy in favor of entrepreneurial modalities supported by fierce ideologies of individual responsibility and the obligation to maximize one’s own market value as the ultimate aim of life” (pg. 12). And yet, as Butler also points out, neoliberalism “demands self-sufficiency as a moral ideal at the same time that it works to destroy that possibility at an economic level” (pg. 12). It requires something that not all of us can give—particularly those of us who are not “22-year-old white women who live at home.” No wonder Jeremy described this state of affairs, at least as it plays out in education, as “ridiculous.”

Volunteerism is certainly one way that we observed this entrepreneurial imperative playing out among newly certified teachers. “I recall teaching in a number of schools—and I’m sure you’ve all seen this—where fresh graduates are volunteering,” Melanie shared at one point. “Not for, like, a week or a month but—”

“Years!” Amanda chimed in.

“In their second year of volunteering!” Melanie exclaimed. “It’s just painful.”

Unpaid labour is a growing reality for many who are precariously employed in knowledge and service sectors (Armano & Murgia, 2014). The young knowledge workers Armano and Murgia (2014) interviewed in Italy, for example, “stressed the growth in the amount of free work that is ‘normally’ required upstream, downstream, alongside and beyond the formal
employment contract” (p. 493). As Jeremy told us, free work is still the strategy of choice touted among pre-service teachers—even if seniority-based hiring practices have been provincially legislated for the explicit purpose of curbing nepotism:

We just had a presentation yesterday […] with a recent B.Ed. graduate. She’s teaching an LTO. One of her big takeaways for the group was that you need to be volunteering in schools in the first week of September because you’ll get jobs that way. Because teachers will know you, and principals will know you, and then they’ll get you hired. I mean all the students were just writing that down and the faculty in the room were like, “Yeah, that’s what you should do.”

Armano and Murgia (2014) found that their participants were willing to engage in free labour because of their “self-identification […] with the object of their work” (p. 492)—because they quite literally believed themselves to be the job they do. This conflation of labour and identity, in their words,

transforms the person into a sort of enterprise based on the identity socially granted to it and on remuneration which is primarily motivational, not economic. [Such] motivational and identitarian remuneration makes it possible to withstand what we have called job precarity and which, in the stories of the interviewees, often translated into dreadful working and contractual conditions. (p. 493)

Believing we are what we do is perhaps a privilege reserved for those working in non-industrial sectors, where the labour is more psychosocial and relational than it is material. Teaching, especially, is rife with notions of purpose and passion: it is widely understood as a calling to which some are destined to pursue. Nevertheless, the line between identifying with our work and exploiting ourselves to engage in it is a fine one. For teachers like Cameron, the ones for whom volunteering or accepting one-period LTOs “doesn’t amount to anything,” it comes with diminishing returns.

Nowhere was that line more apparent than in our discussion about the accumulation of additional teaching qualifications—another trend we observed among newly minted teachers, and a gamble some of us had made, too, in our search for sustained employment. As Melanie pointed out, “[T]here is a demand for computer science, math, and French […] but the majority of teachers aren’t necessarily in those fields.” Jeremy observed a “big push” for new teachers to seek out qualifications in these subjects “because they know that’s the ticket in. Or they think it is.” And they might be onto something. Shelby observed that, at least at the secondary level, “in order to avoid those 0.3 LTOs” like the one Cameron was offered, principals “are forced to make Franken-teachers who don’t exist”: 
“They’ll post these postings: one [period of] Civics and Careers, one Music, and one Phys. Ed.”

“Who is doing that?” Cameron asked. I could almost hear his eyes rolling.

“I mean I have a range of qualifications,” Shelby laughed, “but come on!”

“It’s like you put your baton down, throw your whistle in your mouth, and then go down to the gym!” Cameron mused.

“And then teach parliamentary procedure!” Shelby added.

“Maybe that creates a whole gamut of problems that we haven’t really begun to unpack,” I suggested.

“For sure!” said Shelby. “I mean, I’ll be the first person to say, like, I’m a competent French teacher but it’s not my passion. […] But, you know, I have two teenagers. I have to pay the rent.”

There were several empathic nods. Each of us had perhaps resigned ourselves to this inevitability—that we would all eventually, maybe hesitantly, have to set our loftier aspirations aside—but our resignation was not a simple one. A second reality existed alongside this one: the fact that each of us had some experience of teaching outside of the grades and subject areas for which we are qualified, and that those experiences often left us feeling as alienated from our work as spending “lost days” in classrooms as so-called babysitters. It is a reality faced especially by daily occasional teachers like Jeremy. A recent policy change at his Board meant that “for the first time in five years” he is “now forced” to “just start accepting positions that [he is] a) not qualified for in terms of subject area and b) not qualified for in terms of age group”:

I’m an intermediate-senior teacher qualified for English and History and Special Education. And now, for the first time ever, I was unable to opt out of elementary music, elementary French, and so on. Which is really frustrating because I don’t like teaching lower than Grade 9. I don’t really enjoy teaching middle or elementary school. And I get calls for that now where I have to decline them because the idea of putting on a kid’s snowsuit is not something I want to do. It’s not what I thought of being a teacher. […] It doesn’t excite me. […] So I feel in this weird position. Like I’m fine working where maybe I’ll teach high school science or math—things that I can at least do, I suppose, in some way. But it just feels weird that I’m now removing myself twice. Not only is it not
the subject, it’s not even the age group. It is making me feel very uncomfortable with the idea of teaching outside of that.

I could understand Jeremy’s discomfort. Not only did “removing [him]self twice” make it likelier that he would be, as he feared, “just like a body in the room” when teaching outside of his grade and subject area, but it also raises important questions about who gains and who loses in a climate that seemingly demands we spread ourselves impossibly thin. As Jeremy puts it, “it’s [just] not what [he] thought of being a teacher.”

Amanda, it turns out, was facing a similar dilemma. She told us that she was feeling “a lot of pressure from [her] principal right now to do [her] drama qualification because maybe [her current job] could turn into a vacancy.” “There are always the maybes, right?” she mused. It’s a line she said she’s “been hearing a lot. It’s like, ‘You need to do these qualifications because this will get you a job.’” But her principal’s insistence that “They’re always looking for drama teachers” gave Amanda pause. She wondered aloud if she would “want to do that just to get a job.” “It’s a weird balancing act,” she said, “because I’ve seen teachers do that but you also have to be aware that whatever is on your qualifications, it is very hard to remove. Like you may be teaching that.” Some of her colleagues had found themselves in exactly this conundrum. They had played the bet, but the gamble backfired:

That’s this drama issue is that teachers took drama because there were jobs and now they’ve gotten drama and they hate it. […] No one wants to teach the Grade 10 drama, so what they’ve been doing in their timetable is putting it into a vacancy spot, which is this spot. [She points to herself] So they’re like, “No one in the English department wants to teach Grade 10 drama”—because it’s part of the English department—“so let’s just put it with the person who probably doesn’t have the qualifications to teach it!”

Amanda laughed as she said this. Her discomfort was palpable. “Last year it was a really hard experience,” she continued, “It got to the point where, my goodness, it was affecting my mental health. It was a really tough group. And then my fiancé said, ‘You’re never teaching drama ever again!’ […] But it’s one of those things where it’s like I don’t know if I’m going to get another LTO this year. This is at least steady work. It has been for the past couple of months. So you know what, I’ll just take the risk.

The conundrum Amanda finds herself in is not unlike the one Cameron did on the day he was offered the one-period LTO. The risks in each case are multiple and potentially big ones. Here, not only is Amanda’s personal wellbeing at stake but student learning is also implicated in decisions that “put […] the person who probably doesn’t have the qualifications to teach” a
particular subject in the classroom. This is not to suggest that Amanda did not or could not competently teach drama: it is to suggest that our needs as employees and students’ needs to learn from qualified teachers are placed seemingly at odds. The questions begged are these: to what lengths are we willing to go to land that job? Who among us can even go to such lengths in the first place? And, crucially, at what and at whose cost?

3.4 “I still feel like I’m not quite a teacher yet”: The tolls of precariously on teaching and learning

I picked up Karl Marx’s (1964) *Economic and Philosophical Manuscripts of 1844* as I listened, again and again, to the stories we shared about our work and its impacts on our lives and livelihoods. I first read the words that preface this chapter more than a decade ago, when every Wednesday evening I spent three hours in a lecture hall, hypnotised by my sociological theory professor’s stories about Marx’s life and works. She was among the sessional lecturers who rallied against poor wages and working conditions during the strike I describe in Chapter 1. Her words, and the stories she told, are partly what led me to the streets with them. And those words—hers and Marx’s—returned to me like a ghost as I pored over the transcripts of our own. As my participants described the various ways they felt distant and estranged from their work as teachers, I wondered if Marx might help me make sense of why and how that estrangement mattered.

Central to Marx’s theory of alienation is a question of belonging—a question that seemed to haunt our conversations, too. Dirk Struik (1964) notes in his preface to Marx’s *Economic and Philosophic Manuscripts of 1844* that Marx’s theory of alienation “start[s] from the fundamental fact that the object produced by labour confronts [the worker] as something alien, as an object, a power, independent of the producer. It doesn’t belong to him, it turns against him” (pg. 44). Of course teaching, as indeed many other non- or post-industrial pursuits, does not produce any obvious object-commodities. Insofar as what is produced—learning—exists in the space between free-thinking individuals, the “objects” in this context may always and necessarily remain alien to us. But alienation for Marx is two-fold. More than the commodities it produces, the “worker’s activity [is] not his spontaneous activity. It belongs to another; it is the loss of his self” (Marx, 1844/1964, p. 111, my italics). As Guy Standing (2011) writes in *The Precariat*, his own
conversation with Marx’s ghost, “Alienation arises from knowing that what one is doing is not for one’s own purpose or for what one could respect or appreciate; it is simply done for others, at their behest” (p. 20). It is one of “four-As,” along with anger, anomie, and anxiety, that he argues are endemic among members of the precariat—conditions that could well characterize many of the verbal exchanges included in this chapter.

To be sure, I was somewhat hesitant at first to think of teachers and teaching in these terms. Marx’s proletariat, at least in its inception, calls to mind workers engaged in industrial labour over which they have little say or control. On the other hand, a diverse array of workers and job classes have been cast under the net of precarity and the precariat, including, among others, performance artists (Turrini & Federico Chicchi, 2013), migrant workers (Fudge, 2012), and those in consumer goods manufacturing and natural resource extraction (Varga, 2013).

While heterogeneous, Standing (2011) argues that the precariat “consists of people who have minimal trust relationships with capital or the state… And it has none of the social contract relationships of the proletariat, whereby labour securities were provided in exchange for subordination and contingent loyalty” (p. 8). For him, members of the precariat lack many of the securities ushered in by the industrial labour movement and the rise of unionism in the early twentieth century: consistent access to income and employment, job and income protections negotiated through collective bargaining, and opportunities for career advancement and professional growth and training. Teachers, by contrast, and perhaps especially in Ontario, are an admittedly privileged bunch. We can and do exercise a tremendous amount of control over our day-to-day work, including what to teach and how. When employed, we are well-compensated and our jobs are generally secure. We belong to Federations with tremendous bargaining leverage and are well represented in discussions about employment rights and securities. And, as demographics shift, fewer of us will likely find ourselves working as occasional teachers for such extended periods. In other words, there are still middle-class careers waiting for us.

We openly acknowledged that teaching both demands and perpetuates a certain level of class privilege, but I heard echoes of that nagging sense of displacement—of estrangement—in our words all the same. Those of us in daily occasional roles seemed to feel the sting most acutely, likely because the ghost of the unqualified substitute teacher so often haunts our work in schools. Jeremy told us that in the process of interviewing for another teaching position—this
one at an independent school—he found himself questioning whether or not he could rightly think of himself as a teacher at all:

One thing they said to me was, you know, “You’re an experienced teacher.” Because I had five years of occasional teaching with the Catholic board. And I remember in my head I was like, am I? I don’t feel like it, right?

Cameron, who has spent time in both daily and long-term occasional roles, “[could] relate”:

Just you saying that resonated with me because I find that as an OT and as people who aren’t full contract teachers you’re in this sort of liminal space for such a long time that I just thought about myself, as you were saying that, as a new teacher. But I’ve been doing it since ’09. So I’ve been teaching for six years, but I still feel like I’m not quite a teacher yet, like I’m not right in the profession.

Their words provide a simple answer to the question that frames this chapter. In short: the sort of teacher brought into being by extended periods of precarious employment is one who may not feel like a teacher at all—one for whom that professional status, and perhaps all it demands, is somehow alien. “A teacher’s not a teacher” in this climate, Melanie observed. “There’s no profile, there’s no persona, there’s no face. […] You’re just another number.” This, according to Standing, is one of the defining characteristics of the precariat. For him, class is only part of the picture: the precariat “also has a peculiar status position, in not mapping neatly onto high status professional or middle-status craft occupations” (2011, p. 8, italics in original). “Precariousness,” as he puts it, “implies a lack of a secure work-based identity” (p. 7). And in the case of teaching, which is so tightly yoked to notions of purpose, identity is the currency of its remuneration. Without access to the standard professional narrative, occasional teachers are left grasping.

The examples included in this chapter illustrate that the precariousness of our identities as teachers is not merely a figment of our imaginations. As a former professor and mentor of mine, Ken Montgomery (2013), would put it: it doesn’t only exist in our heads, it exists in the world. Jeremy’s retelling of his interview with the independent school is a good reminder of this fact:

Even though they were viewing me as an experienced teacher in one regard, I also asked about [professional development] and was like, you know, I want to join an independent school, it’s a community, I want to know everyone there. And they were like, “No, PD is for our full-time employees.” So simultaneously they were affording me a kind of status that I didn’t even see in myself, yet also removing and maintaining the kind of status quo of being an outsider to that community.

It is an experience that Amanda, who has belonged, if provisionally, to the same school community for a number of years can relate to:
That's the reason when we went [to a conference in the United States] it was a fight for me to get days to go. And I just… As an occasional teacher, I don’t feel like I’m viewed as a professional. Whereas like a contract teacher, they’re allowed days, their meals get paid. So to go to this [conference]—which was like, we’re bringing kids, it was the most relevant form of PD for me!—my principal was very supportive but he had to fight on behalf for me to get miscellaneous days. I knew it was going to be unpaid, so I lost two days of work.

These decisions to include or exclude occasional teachers in professional development opportunities—like the ones that determine a daily occasional teacher’s scope of practice in the classroom—continue to call our professional status into question. I offer the “babysitter” and “entrepreneur” as two ways this looming question of our professional status and identity manifests and is taken up in our daily practice.

What our conversations did not—maybe could not—address, substantively, are the tolls this precariousness takes on the learning and life chances of students. In fact, if there was any greater evidence of the precarity of our identities as teachers it might be the conspicuous absence of explicit dialogue about students and learning from our talk. We gestured to the consequences, certainly, because we recognize, for example, that “lost days” spent with “babysitters” are “a colossal waste of everyone’s time.” “I could be teaching something. We could be doing something,” Melanie said again of the day that was punctuated by the blank lesson plan she shared with us. “I was so upset because I felt like it was a real waste of [the students’] day. I mean, I could have been happy reading my magazine I suppose. But that’s not why I was there.”

Our acknowledgement of the potential consequences for students, however, was almost always filtered through the reality of our uncertain employment contracts. And perhaps this is the biggest takeaway: that so long as substitute teaching is constructed as “babysitting,” and new teachers are compelled to entrepreneur their way to longer-term employment, teaching and learning become an afterthought.
Chapter 4
“Us and Them, and Them”: Redrawing the Borderlands of Occasional Teaching through Collaborative Inquiry

“The ability to respond is what is meant by responsibility, yet our cultures take away our ability to act—shackle us in the name of protection. Blocked, immobilized, we can't move forward, can’t move backwards. That writhing serpent movement, the very movement of life, swifter than lightning, frozen.”

Gloria Anzaldúa, from Borderlands: The New Mestiza (1987, p. 46)

4 Introduction

When the door closed behind me on the last day of teacher’s college, it stayed closed for four years. I simply returned my cap and gown and ventured out into the world. It never occurred to me that I might find a reason to come back—or to keep coming back—if I was no longer on roll as a student. It never occurred to me, that is, until I met Amanda.

Amanda was the first teacher who responded to my call for participants and often the first person to arrive at our meetings. I had to come know Amanda through our involvement with another inquiry community at the university, one that brought teachers together with professors and graduate students to explore student literacy practices in urban schools. Amanda seemed to jump at any opportunity like it that presented itself. In fact, she had been returning to the university in some capacity—as a guest lecturer, or panel discussant, or co-researcher—every year since she began teaching. I had heard of one-off alumni gatherings and public lectures because I was routinely invited to them during the intervening years between my graduation and eventual return. But none of those one-off hurrahs resembled the slow and sustained coming together that studying in scheduled classes offered. Amanda, however, appeared to have crafted her own workaround for this dilemma: it was like she carried an invisible timetable. I saw her in the building more often than many of my student colleagues.
We found ourselves waiting for the others to arrive one afternoon when I asked Amanda just what kept her coming back, again and again.

“I need something,” she said. “I need something to just hold on to with like-minded people.”

Those words lingered with me after our conversation that afternoon, and I thought of them often as I pored over the hours of recorded audio that our group’s coming together had produced. It was, after all, this same promise of bringing together like-minded people (or at least people who shared a job title) that attracted participants to our community of occasional teachers in the first place. More than a dozen responded to my call for participants even though, at most, only five ever made it to our actual meetings. Those who never made it still believed that bringing together a group of occasional teachers was “a wonderful idea” and “greatly needed.” They “for sure” wanted to be part of the conversation. But none of this eagerness could alter the circumstances that seemingly made it impossible, in the end, for them to join us. They simply could not afford to take the time off from second and third jobs or pay to have their small children looked after. For them, finding “something to just hold on to with like-minded people” seemed as tenuous as finding teaching employment.

Community is a somewhat tricky notion for occasional teachers since the very nature of our work requires us to shift in and out of them with such regularity. We can and do make meaningful contributions that shape the communities to which we temporarily belong, but our membership is also always shadowed by its inevitable expiry. Each of us came to the table because, like Amanda, we “need[ed] something to just hold on to with like-minded people,” yet it was obvious by the end of our first meeting that while we shared a job title, and many similar experiences of employment precarity (see Chapter 3), we were not, strictly speaking, “like-minded”. To begin with, as I observed in my field notes, “the work we do is quite different […] because some of us are in daily roles and some of us are in long-term occasional roles.” I wondered aloud if “this work [could] accommodate and welcome both.”

Jeremy told us then that he was “curious of what we all want to come of this community together, like collectively.” He and the others agreed that the purpose for our coming together ought to be more than a private conversation shared among a small group of colleagues. They wanted—maybe even needed—our work to go somewhere: for us to somehow, together, make a
difference. It seemed to me, though, that we would need to consolidate some kind of collective identity—or at least some shared politic—in order to accomplish what “we all want[ed] to come of this community together.” We would need to find ties to bind.

“Maybe we don’t have much in common after all,” I wrote in my field notes after that first session. “Maybe we can’t co-exist. Maybe a unified collective voice isn’t possible.” In short, this chapter probes those possibilities. Here I attempt to trace the nebulous ties that held us together—that made our ongoing inquiry possible. If the last chapter summarizes the litany of evidence that compelled us to seek out sympathetic others, then this one explores how we began to put that evidence to work to build a community. It is about our struggle to find that collective voice: a place from which to begin cultivating some kind of collective action. The first section of this chapter illustrates some of the ways we “negotiate[ed] which people and ideas belong” (Achinstein, 2002, p. 426) within our fragile community of teachers, as well as the conflicts that animated our discussions and propelled our collaborative inquiry forward. The second section explores how we came to consolidate a “we” in and through our critical readings of the various institutions that organize our work. In the conclusion, I consider whether any of this moved us closer to affecting change.

4.1 “Us and them, and them”: Searching for common ground in a community of outsiders

The spectre of the teachers “who have yet to come” haunted our first few meetings until slowly, eventually, they were forgotten. The haunting was certainly my doing, since I insisted that more people would come, but we all fed the ghost through our casual references to “the others.” Melanie even suggested at one point if I “would consider having people Skype in” if work and childcare obligations made it challenging for them to physically attend meetings. At first, I interpreted these gestures as a kind of politeness—a show of support for my research project and an eagerness to help it along. But with each refrain it seemed that we not only wanted our pool of stories to grow, but that we needed it to grow. That our conversations would somehow feel weightier, more legitimate with more ears and more voices.
Amanda maybe had another reason. She wanted more people not only to amplify our collective voice, but also because the more people who joined our conversation, the likelier it would be that others would share her experiences. It was clear by the end of our first meeting that occasional teaching looked very different from her vantage point as someone who had been working in long-term occasional assignments at the same school over several years. Even the lists we generated together of possible questions and topics for discussion (Figure 3) bore many similarities, but the differences were salient, too. At the top of Amanda’s list of concerns were “strategies and resources” to better support occasional teachers in their work and questions about “work-life” balance. For the rest of us, feelings of isolation, alienation, and being undervalued—themes explored in the previous chapter—were top of mind.

Those grievances would come to dominate much of our talk. Indeed, it seemed that our shared frustrations would be “where we might find some common ground.” When I asked Melanie and Shelby what kept each of them coming back to our group, again and again, they told me:

Shelby: This is what I refer to in my head as my ‘I’m not crazy’ group.
Melanie: The “it’s not just me group.”
Shelby: Exactly. I know when I come here that if I say something, there are going to be nods.
Melanie: Yeah. Been there, done that. Got it.
Shelby: But if I open my mouth in other spaces it’s just kind of a head tilt, you know?
I understood exactly what they meant because I so often found myself alone in staff rooms with only my journal to lend an ear. I invited people to come together to share in dialogue precisely for this reason. Amanda told me likewise that “the venting we do here is necessary because we’re so isolated”—even though she arguably had something the rest of us did not: a school and a group of colleagues to which, albeit precariously, she already belonged. She felt that “[t]here’s not really anybody” to whom she could turn to discuss the nuances of her employment situation. If anything, belonging to a school community had only magnified her isolation.
Figure 3 Our questions, concerns, and wonderings
“There’s one LTO in the building besides me, and she’s half time and so we barely cross paths,” she explained. “This group’s nice because there’s not really anybody in the same situation [at my school]. That’s the big thing.”

The thing is, though, that by the time Amanda shared these words with me, I had already been worrying that the group wasn’t offering her what it seemed to offer the others. Melanie told us that “it’s nice to have the space” because “when things happen in the moment, you feel—I have felt—the urge to share. Like, we should talk about this, too!” Indulging this urge, as the previous chapter illustrates, is exactly what she and the others did. Amanda appeared to share in this belief as well, yet her voice was at times conspicuously absent from our discussions—and notably so when those discussions involved “venting” about the everyday challenges of our work. She may have been the first person to arrive to our meetings, yet twenty minutes could go by without the recorder noticing her presence at all. Her assertion that “the venting we do here is necessary” lingered with me because the venting “we” did often seemed to exclude her. I wondered, in fact, if she felt isolated within our community of occasional teachers the same way she felt isolated within the school she had called her professional home for almost five years.

I acknowledged early on that “the work we do is quite different […] because some of us are in daily roles and some of us are in long-term occasional roles” and wondered aloud if “this work [could] accommodate and welcome both.” From the vantage point of the classroom, the differences between daily and long-term occasional teaching can appear as pronounced as those that distinguish all occasional teachers from teachers who are employed under permanent contract. That latter line seemed easy to draw: “us and them,” as Melanie put it. “It’s not a hierarchy,” she clarified, “it’s just that we have completely different problems, goals, objectives, I think.” But as Amanda pointed out, the same differences manifest “even across occasional teachers,” or in other words, within communities that are seemingly unified by common goals and experiences:

Because in some respects you’re in competition for jobs, too. So it’s really lonely. Like I find I’ve sat in staff rooms and it’s just like you’re alone because the school runs and functions and you’re sitting there. And it’s like, do you open up to that other occasional teacher? Do you mind your own business? You want to get called here again. You’re careful.
Shelby agreed. “Sometimes it’s us and them, and them,” she said,

Because once one of us gets an LTO, we’re in a very different position than a daily OT, right? […] Like we feel a little bit more security when we know that there’s a set period of time where we’re going to the same place with the same students. Maybe that decreases our anxiety about a lot of things: financially, knowing what’s coming the next day. And then we don’t necessarily have that same feeling of precarity or vulnerability that we do when we end that LTO and go back to day-to-day.

Each of our lists of potential discussion topics gestured in some way to the irrefutable differences between daily occasional teaching and long-term occasional teaching. Melanie even asked at the outset if my “research is going to focus more on daily occasional work or LTOs,” because, as she saw it, “they’re two different fields.” She acknowledged that “there might be some overlap because I know I’ve done both,” but insisted also that “there are some very unique areas that it’s like you could be writing two separate theses.” I explained that I intended to “put both in conversation,” while acknowledging “my experience working in the [teacher’s federation]” had shown me that “there are sometimes tensions between [these] two groups because they have fairly different experiences.” What scant literature does exist about occasional teaching testifies to those differences as well: the experiences of long-term occasional teachers like Amanda simply are not accounted for.

The lines that divide “us and them, and them” were drawn again and again in our meeting space, even as we attempted benevolently to “navigate between LTO and OT [concerns], back and forth.” The differences among and between us manifested in our small community by way of Amanda’s relative silence during many of our discussions, and would quietly surface again each time she struggled to weigh in on the others’ concerns. But the lines that seemingly divided “us and them, and them” were not only theoretical: they were also often bottom lines, drawn because of the inescapable fact Amanda pointed out that many of us are or might someday be competing for those coveted long-term and permanent positions. They are one inevitable by-product of the entrepreneurial imperative I explored in Chapter 3. While none of us, to my knowledge, were in direct competition for jobs, “equity in hiring OTs”—one of the proposed discussion items from Melanie’s list—was the site where our conversations were their most heated, and most cautious. On the topics of preferential hiring, nepotism, “double-dipping” retirees, and “illegal LTOs,” our voices became a fractured chorus.
Shelby told us when she joined the group at our second meeting that she had been recently hired into an “illegal LTO”—so-called because it violated the graduated hiring process enshrined by provincial regulations. “The only reason I accepted an LTO [is because] it’s [part-time] and being a second-year PhD student, I don’t want to have to do prep and marking all the time,” she explained. “But I knew that there’s no way that I’d be able to support my kids if I didn’t take this LTO that was basically being handed to me at the time. And it’s illegal, and it’s lots of work, but we need to eat.” Shelby laughed as she shared this. It seemed as though she anticipated her words might raise suspicions, her “we need to eat” refrain sounding almost like an apology. She was quick to clarify that her job “was basically… handed to [her].”

Most of us, it turns out, had at one time or another been the benefactor of “illegal” contracts, myself included. “I’ve had the whole illegal LTO thing, too,” Amanda shared later that session.

Melanie: I think we all have.

Shelby: It’s so precarious!

Amanda: It’s just such a hard position to be in because it, you know, causes tensions amongst us! [Laughs] And competition.

The tension was palpable even in the room, not least because even speaking about it “also identifies us,” as Amanda put it. She was concerned that making these arrangements public—as a joint publication or presentation venture might—could put her and her employer at risk. “I know my principal has gone through hoops to make me stay,” she admitted. “I don’t want to put him at risk of [exposure] either. I don’t think that’s fair.”

Achinstein (2002) suggests that tensions like these are integral within teacher communities. Reflecting on the micropolitics of two teacher learning communities, it is conflict, she argues, that “defines the community borders and ultimately the potential for organizational learning and change” (p. 422). More than that, points of conflict and tension are what actually propel teacher communities in the direction of meaningful change: “The processes of conflict,” she writes, “are critical to understanding what distinguishes a professional community that maintains stability and the status quo from a community engaged in ongoing inquiry and change” (p. 446). Glazier, Boyd, Bell Hughes, Able, and Mallo (2017) agree that “[n]ot all collaboration [among teachers] is created equally” (p. 18). Their review of the literature on
teacher collaboration and communities of practice fleshes out a continuum of engagement models that are more or less conducive to maintaining the status quo. For them, “critical colleagueship,” which acknowledges and even welcomes conflict, offers a

model of collaboration [which] requires that teachers engage with one another in ways that move beyond the surface and simple solutions. Ambiguity and insecurity is engaged rather than avoided. Critique of self and others is encouraged rather than discouraged, moving beyond a simple sense of unity. (p. 7)

And yet, as they and Achinstein concede, conflict is difficult. Consensus is widely and deeply prized (Apple, 2004).

The points of conflict among us were often subtle, and we tended to skirt carefully around them. The dance was partly my doing (my own bias against conflict is perhaps revealed by the questions that frame this chapter) and partly a function of a group that came together under prescribed circumstances and whose norms of engagement had only begun to marinate and reveal themselves. I often unknowingly diffused moments of palpable tension by steering the conversation elsewhere. When Amanda pointed out that preferential hiring “causes tensions amongst us,” for example, rather than probe those tensions explicitly, I turned to ask Jeremy for his input about a separate matter. It is a variation on the same dance of disassociation and deflection that Shelby engaged in as she explained the circumstances of her illegal LTO. “I’m not the only person in that situation and sometimes I feel weirdly guilty about it,” she confessed. “Because it isn’t nepotism. I didn’t know anybody. […] I just happened to have a qualification that was in demand.”

But the invitation to participate in our group was premised on conflict and so conflict, directly acknowledged or not, inevitably followed. The subtle points of tension in our talk seemed to be emblematic of the broader conflicts that ripple across and between occasional teachers—the same ones that perhaps make it difficult for a community like ours to sustain itself. Again, it was when our conversations centred around hiring practices—the processes that ultimately separate us from a paycheque—that those conflicts seemed most pronounced.

Our opinions appeared to be especially divided about policies and practices that allow Boards, principals, and classroom teachers to exercise some measure of favouritism in hiring occasional teachers. Shelby told us that her Board had “actually implemented a trial of getting rid
of all the preferred lists in elementary”—lists that narrow the field of possible substitute teachers who work at any given school to only a chosen handful. “What’s everyone’s stance on that?” I asked, hoping to gauge our views and experiences. Instead of sharing her own viewpoint, Shelby told us that the response among her colleagues was divided:

There’s a mix, because there are lot of teachers who are like, “No that’s totally fair because everybody should at least have the opportunity to get one job.” But then other people are like, “Yeah but we’ve been pounding the pavement for years and we’ve developed these relationships.” And we’re talking about building relationships with the school community and having the same teachers come in every day as occasional teachers. The students feel like they’re staff. There are fewer behavioural issues. There’s a lot more continuity. And especially in model schools, we need that. But there’s a lot of resentment and bitterness from some teachers who are like, “Well that’s not fair.”

Shelby may well have been speaking for some of us around the table whose differing views were never clearly articulated. Our silence was as loud a testament to those differences as the careful maneuvering Shelby, me, and the others engaged in as we struggled to make sense of the conflicts that punctuate occasional teaching more broadly. “We don’t have preferred lists in our board but we do have a system where you can request individuals” was my response to her comment above. “Just about every year without exception someone will come to our [federation’s] annual general meeting and say, ‘We need to get rid of that.’” Whether I counted myself among them I did not say. Shelby later clarified her stance, although as the ellipsis alone suggest, she did so very carefully:

In some situations it’s… It’s almost… I’m a terrible union member for saying so, but for the school culture, it’s sometimes better that it’s happening in some contexts. Not necessarily mine. But, like, in really small schools where somebody coming in who doesn’t have the same kind of philosophy of the rest of the school can completely shift the dynamic of what’s happening. […] Like one teacher comes in and does not share the pedagogy, they can tank the program in a year, right? So… It’s interesting.

On the matter of retired teachers being rehired as daily occasional teachers, our views were even clearer—and the differences among them much sharper. A number of us expressed concerns about retired teachers “double-dipping,” or continuing to teach while also collecting a pension. Melanie was especially vocal in her critique of retirees occupying coveted spots on occasional teacher rosters:

There’s such an insurmountable glut and then on top of that there’s that whole issue of double dipping from the seniors who’ve, you know, retired and they’re still there
showing up. Lovely, lovely people. I don’t even care. But when I look at all those people in their twenties who’ve graduated, they don’t have a chance to get in when the schools are hiring people who’ve been doing this for thirty or forty years. That’s where I get really like, “Wow! This is really not right.”

Several of us nodded in agreement. Shelby, however, cautioned us to also exercise a measure of charity towards our fellow colleagues. She wondered whether those so-called “double-dippers” are “retiring at full pension” or if “they just join[ed] the teaching profession, in which case, they would need the additional income still to be able to pay their rent, right?” She continued,

Because I know I am not going to hit retirement age at full pension. […] Or like what other family circumstances did they have to retire and go back into OT work for? Maybe to take care of an ailing family member, or maybe they have a disability that they’re navigating that’s new. Or, you know, there are all kinds of factors that go into that.

It was precisely these points of tension that made me wonder aloud to the others where or if we “might we find some common ground.” “I really feel like sometimes these conversations pit us against each other,” I said at one point, referring to the broad and hypothetical “us”—the all occasional teachers “us”—rather than the specific “us” in the room. It’s true that these moments captured some of the structural nuances that seem to splinter occasional teachers as an occupational group, at the same time that they threatened to unsettle the budding collegiality that was shared in our meeting space. And yet, it was also these moments that brought us closer to engaging in the sort of critical colleagueship that moved the teacher communities documented by Glazier et al. (2017) and Achinstein (2002) forward. Melanie, for example, said she “wasn’t even aware” of the counter-narrative that Shelby offered about retired teachers: “I never considered that that’s true, too.”

Indeed, what I initially observed as splinters in our group were often, in fact, the very conjectures around which we began to consolidate our unity. As I explore in the remainder of this chapter, our binding ties were the same ones that, knotted any differently, could have easily unraveled us. Because our inquiry surfaced the tensions that often estrange us from our colleagues, it also forced our gaze outwards towards the structures that breed those tensions. Such a critical distance was perhaps demanded by the invitation to participate in an inquiry community like ours in the first place, but our unity in some ways depended on it. As we shifted our critical eye away from each other and our fellow colleagues, and towards the systems that
create opportunities for some and not others, the ties holding us together started to reveal themselves.

4.2 “Somebody needs to be held accountable”: Turning our gaze outward

While it was obvious by the end of our first meeting that I might in fact, as Melanie suggested, “be writing two separate theses,” it was also clear that forging common ground amidst our inevitable differences was something we still hoped to accomplish. “Shared experiences” seemed particularly important to Amanda, since she noted them as a potential theme on her own list of proposed discussion topics and suggested, as she shared it with us, that “maybe if [we choose] a broader topic then everyone can bring in their experiences:”

If there’s something similar, clearly everyone’s interested then. Even if, Ty, you emailed us, “This was a similar theme, why don’t we start our conversation with that?” […] And then from that there will probably be some similarities, some differences. Because even I’m noticing when talking about the daily occasional work, I haven’t done that in so long so it’s like I bring a perspective from what I see, and you guys bring like what happened yesterday. But then I can talk a little bit as an LTO.

I opted to begin our third and fourth sessions with a show-and-tell of artefacts from our practice for precisely this reason. While the six of us did not always share similar experiences in schools and classrooms, we could share a common experience in our meeting space. Cell phones, calendars, and “no teaching required” lesson plans helped surface those similarities and differences at the same time that they presented a common experience around which we could all pivot. That is what happened when Mary Beattie (1995) asked me and the other students in her Narrative Inquiry seminar to bring an object to class for a writing exercise she called “artefact sharing,” and why I applied her technique here. The artefacts held stories that were unique to each of us. Sharing them accentuated that uniqueness, but it also drew us closer together as a community of witnesses. Amongst us occasional teachers, the artefacts helped ground and give shape to our experiences, displacing some of the subtle points of tension between us and locating them in something we could all see and touch. They also helped to position us on a wider map of institutional networks and ideologies that structure our work. I think of them as the “you are here” markers on that map.
The Ontario College of Teachers’ 2014 *Transition to Teaching* report (2015), a portion of which we read together during our second session, was really the first of these markers. “This is trying to say something about us,” I explained, waving copies of its most recent findings to pass around. “I wonder how much we see ourselves in this.”

The recorder listened as we flipped pages and scrawled notes in the margins. Nobody spoke for nearly fifteen minutes. It was Melanie, finally, who broke the silence. “It just goes on,” she said, thumbing through the pages her eyes had yet to meet.

I apologized. “I was hoping for the executive summary—you know, like ten bullet points. Doesn’t exist. I don’t think we’ll be able to address everything that’s in here, I just thought there might be a couple of things that stick out for us.”

“They need more effective policy writers,” Shelby mused. “If you’re going to be writing this, you need to have an executive summary.”

Several of us nodded.

“They don’t have time to read a 58-page report,” she continued. “They don’t have time to even flip through a 58-page report to find, like, this piece is what’s relevant to me. [...] It’s almost like [the College of Teachers] doesn’t want us to read it.”

Although there had, by then, been more than a dozen annual publications, I had never seen or heard of the report myself until I began surveying the scant literature about occasional teaching. When I did stumble upon it, it was like stepping in front of a mirror. Laid out before me was quantitative proof that others—many, many others—had journeyed through the early years of their teaching careers in the same way as I did. And yet, while the data reported on in *Transition to Teaching* are reflective of our own long and bumpy journeys on the road to teacher employment, our collective reading called the validity of those data into question. Shelby’s statement above neatly captures the heart of our critique. On one hand, there is a question of relevance: for what and for whom are these data collected? And on the other, a whiff of conspiracy: a quiet suspicion of wilful negligence.
“My impression is that this isn’t aimed toward teachers,” Jeremy offered. “It reads like I’m just watching paint dry. […] If I were a teacher—well I am a teacher—but if I were looking for a job, I would not find this at all helpful.”

“Me either,” Shelby said.

Melanie was shaking her head, too. “It’s very discouraging,” she said.

“Discouraging, yeah,” Jeremy agreed, “and there’s nothing applicable to me.”

“You know my feeling is the only people who would do anything with this is the media if they’re so inclined,” Melanie replied. “They’ll pull out, you know, six or seven key points and splash those all over the paper. […] I just found it [to be] lots and lots of data.”

“This is a very longitudinal, you know, sort of ‘big picture’ look at issues in the teaching profession,” Jeremy observed. “But there are things happening on the ground that are in the minutia that I didn’t even know about—that I can’t even articulate because I don’t know what the term is and I don’t know where to look for that term, right?—that are affecting my livelihood on a day-to-day basis.”

Making sense of those “things happening on the ground” took up much of our airtime. If I were to carefully parse and quantify the substance of our talk, at least half of our utterances dealt with the very minutia Jeremy often finds so difficult to put into words. Even amidst our reading of the report, we often stopped to clarify the particular nuances of employment regulations and everyday problems of practice. The number of days one needs to supply teach in order to remain on their Board’s occasional teacher roster (“Are you sure it’s 20?”), the circumstances under which a contract teacher can request supply coverage (“If a teacher has to leave suddenly or for sporting events then it goes into all sorts of other rules”), and the possible reasons for job shortages in particular school boards (“No secondary LTOs have come up because they’ve been filling them with surplus contract teachers”)—these are among the everyday concerns missing from the Transition to Teaching report. Of course, I invited us together in part to reconcile these (necessary) oversights.

I also worried that dwelling in the minutia might lead us somehow astray. As we vacillated between the nuances of our everyday problems of practice and a more explicit critique
of the College’s findings, I sometimes tried to force our gaze towards the latter. “I’m just getting us thinking about this document again,” I interjected at one point, perhaps cutting short a discussion about whether a daily supply teacher assigned to a Grade 8 class could also be asked to provide prep coverage for a Grade 2 class in the same day. “It’s interesting because I pulled out a really slim part of this report but what I’m hearing across the room—and [Jeremy] put it really well—is that the issues I’m actually facing in my daily life, I don’t really see reflected here.”

“I’ve read these silly things over the last year,” Melanie said, “I won’t call them silly, but my feeling is that they’re not proofread.” Everyone laughed. “I found inaccuracies,” she continued, “and I’m not talking typos, I’m talking about incredible inconsistencies. […] There’s an effort to be very honest, I think, but it’s inconsistent in my opinion.” For her, the report not only seemed to elide the lived realities of early career teachers, but it also seemed to obscure just how grim that reality is for many. She elaborated further:

In the last paragraph under ‘Study Highlights’ on page one it says, ‘There’s a substantial decline in the number of the new teachers competing for jobs.’ And they do go on to address it a little bit further on. But I mean, that doesn’t sound… It sounds like, ‘Wow, they’re all getting jobs!’ Are they getting jobs in teaching? What kind of jobs are they getting? And then further on you find out some of them aren’t even getting certified as teachers or the jobs they are doing don’t require that certification. So, you know, you’ve got to kind of read the whole document. I mean it’s very easy to read the first page and go, ‘Oh wow, that sounds really good. I think I’ll become a teacher!’ And then you read the next three pages and you realize it’s not quite as awesome as it seems.

The line to which Melanie drew our attention is the first under the “2014 Study Highlights” header. It reads: “Although the past two years of new teacher supply and teacher demand presented further annual surpluses, there was a substantial decline in the number of new teachers competing for jobs” (2015, p. 4). Melanie had circled it and written several exclamation points beside it on her copy of the report (Figure 4). She highlighted another passage above it, one that also assured readers that at least one of the measures introduced by the governing Liberal party to address Ontario’s teacher surplus—namely, the extension of its teacher education programs from one to two years—was delivering on its promise:

The two-year rollout of the new program with a first class graduating in 2017 means few new Ontario teachers will be certified in 2016. This will cut the new teacher supply sharply for the 2016-2017 school year recruitment. And new Ontario teachers in subsequent years will be at levels substantially below recent years. (2015, p. 4)
I had circled the same passage in my own copy of the report. “What about the glut from the previous years? What happened to them?” are the questions Melanie scribbled beside it on hers. When she later pointed out the College’s retirement forecasts (“How do you forecast something like that? I mean, really and truly”), Jeremy questioned “how [the College is] defining retirement”: “Does that mean that they’re done completely or not?” He observed that “even if they are all just sort of finishing, that’s still a 2,000 [person] gap between the new teachers being licensed, so there’s still going to be a surplus.”

![Image](image.jpg)

**Figure 4 Our annotated copies of the *Transition to Teaching* report**

Of course, none of us—not even the Ontario College of Teachers—could wrest a different reality out the numbers. While we did appear to question whether that reality was somehow obfuscated by the College’s measured words, the data themselves were never really in question. The fact that 8,000 teachers were still forecast to enter an already-saturated market, even if such forecasts could be described as “sharp” or “substantial,” did not seem to comfort or shield us from our present reality. If evidence of the many and difficult challenges of that current
reality was offered by something like *Transition to Teaching*, it might be in its reporting of higher attrition rates among early-career teachers. Its authors note that “[w]hat historically was a loss rate of fewer than one in 10 new education graduates dropping their membership in the College in the five years after they first obtained their Ontario teaching license is now more than one in seven” (2015, p. 4). Those figures can only hint at an answer to Melanie’s question about “what happened” to those teachers who found themselves in the swell of the glut.

Perhaps what we found most discouraging about the report, then, was not the data themselves but the manner in which those data appeared to be made sense of and acted upon—or not acted upon. Whether it was because she had “read these silly things before” or because she had been caught in the glut for nearly a decade, Melanie seemed particularly unsettled. “Shall I rant?” she asked, eyebrows raised, “that’s not going to offend anyone, right?” She recounted the number of days she spends “babysitting” as a supply teacher with the same astonished look. “I think it’s been very irresponsible of the government to not address the teacher surplus and the new teacher glut a lot earlier. It was evident in the mid-2000s…” Her voice trailed off. She inhaled deeply and shook her head again. “Wow. And we had to wait until 2016 for this to come out? I mean, this has been coming out every year, but I’m shocked about that. Somebody needs to be held accountable!”

We all seemed to draw the same conclusion from our reading of the *Transition to Teaching* report. We could acknowledge, like Melanie, that the College of Teachers’ diligent reporting of the early experiences of newly qualified teachers represented “an effort to be very honest,” but those efforts did not appear to alter what we already witnessed as a collective denial of the grim reality facing new entrants to the profession across the network of institutions that credential, employ, and bargain on behalf of teachers. Not only was the College of Teachers high on our list of suspects, but our inquiry also called school boards, faculties of education, and teacher federations to account. Shelby told us, for example, that she could not recall an “Okay, here is what your reality is” conversation during her initial teacher education program: “We were basically told that there were no jobs. […] They basically said up front, ‘Good luck trying to get into a Board.’” What those and our other critiques seemed to imply is that occasional teachers’ concerns—our concerns—are often seen but rarely actually *heard*. There may be acknowledgement but there is little action. As Melanie recounted a meeting between her
employers, federation leaders, and a handful of her occasional teacher colleagues during our fourth and final show of artefact, that denial was made even more clear.

Melanie was unable to attend the meeting, which the Board called in order to discuss the “current problems” of job shortages, preferential hiring practices, and the glut of teachers competing for employment in her district. Amidst our reading of the Transition to Teaching report, she turned to ask if Shelby had attended the meeting or knew anybody who did.

“There was a lot of conversation in the [Board’s] Occasional Teachers’ Facebook group,” Shelby said.

“You mean in reaction to meeting?” Melanie asked. “How was it? Were they happy?”

“Yeah,” Shelby said. “They were happy to have had the opportunity but didn’t really feel like it moved anything forward. The Board representatives were saying, ‘Oh no, of course there’s no preferential hiring’ and blah blah blah. […] Which we all know isn’t true.”

It was not until Melanie arrived at our fourth session with a copy of the minutes recorded from that meeting that I thought of this exchange as anything more than an aside in our broader critique of the longitudinal data—a dead-end, even, as we tried to figure out “what we all want[ed] to come of this community together.” While Melanie had not attended the meeting, she had studied the report carefully. I could see as she spoke that it was covered in the same graffiti as her copy of Transition to Teaching. This is what she told us:

There was a meeting held in early February [at the Board office] and all the senior, senior, senior people were there. And it was a board discussion to discuss some of the upcoming OT challenges.

 […]

The biggest concern is that there are just fewer phone calls. I work both boards and that’s definitely the case. Thank God I work both boards! Because I’m getting very little with the [public school board] and the Catholic school board is keeping me employed right now, thank God. And that’s true.

 […]

Then we go into a Q&A period which is quite interesting because you have an OT question and then you have a Board answer. […] It’s almost amusing.
And this is why I just shake my head. I can’t believe the tone. I mean granted there’s tremendous polarity. It’s us against them and it’s this terrible feud going on and perhaps it’s the way the questions are being raised. I don’t know, I wasn’t there. But not only is the board defending itself, but on about five separate occasions they say, “Well, there was no question so we’re not answering that.” And if you look at the answer, there is a question but there are a couple of comments after the question. The question’s there.

I’ll give you an example: “Why can’t principals be held accountable?” Because there’s this sort of back and forth question. They have the jobs in their hands and the power to put who they want in there. There’s no response provided.

There’s a few examples where there’s a question in there, there’s an explanation of why that question exists, and, again, “As there is no question, no response was provided.” So that goes on and on and on. Question after question after question.

[…]

It’s just a big vicious circle! It’s so circuitous that nothing gets done.

There were echoes of our own grievances in the 25 questions asked by the occasional teachers who attended that meeting. Among them were nine questions about the availability of work—the fact, as Melanie pointed out, that “there are just fewer phone calls”—and another nine about the sort of preferential hiring practices that had earned some of us “illegal LTOs” but not others. The third question, as reported in the minutes, reads:

**OT Question:** Regarding the 20-day requirement to stay on the list by May: this year has been the most challenging for OTs. And with the use of the preferred lists, it is even harder for OTs to access work. What will the Board do about this?

And the fifth,

**OT Question:** Regarding the LTO list, the application process is made clear by Regulation 274. Why are principals still picking preferred or brand-new hires? Principals should be given more than 5 top senior people. Could you open this up to the top 50 people to give Principals more to choose from so they do not feel so restricted and would be more inclined to follow the process?

For Melanie, the questions asked were less important than the answers given—or not given. Although her account of the meeting was second-hand, the minutes she shared with us indeed suggest an escalating confrontation around that “sort of back and forth question” of “Why can’t principals be held accountable?”—the same question of accountability, differently worded, that we found ourselves asking as we made sense of the *Transition to Teaching* data. Those in attendance were seemingly unsatisfied with the Board’s response. Questions about the “lack of
supply work” and “principals [...] still hiring the people they know” persistently follow, culminating, as Melanie’s retelling does, in a series of “no comment”-style answers:

**OT Comment**: Why is there a preference happening? [...] Problems are created when jobs are given to specific people rather than being fair.

**Board Answer**: As there was no question, no response was provided.

**OT Comment**: Something is seriously wrong with the way jobs are distributed and we need something to change!

**Board Answer**: As there was no question, no response was provided.

Eventually, the minutes begin to resemble the transcript of our own conversation about the College of Teachers’ *Transition to Teaching* report: voices insisting that “something is seriously wrong”—“we need something to change”—but then only hearing themselves echoed back in return.

To be fair, the Board acknowledged that the occasional teachers in attendance at their meeting raised many “pertinent” issues concerning equitable hiring practices. “Thank you for bringing it forward,” its representatives are reported to have said. Before refusing to comment any further, they insisted that they would be “taking [these] concern[s] back and [...] investigating” to “see where the shortfalls are.” And yet I heard in Melanie’s analysis of the meeting the same suspicion of wilful negligence with which she read the *Transition to Teaching* report—a suspicion likely shared by the teachers who attended the Board meeting. The exchange between those teachers and the school board representatives could be aptly described as a “vicious circle,” but so too can the broader landscape of which it is one emblem. Dramatized by that exchange, and Melanie’s reading of it, is the silencing of occasional teachers’ voices on matters related to their own work and livelihood: the same silencing, more explicitly rendered, that our reading of *Transition to Teaching* called into question. The same silencing, maybe, that makes it possible for faculties of education to continue, in Melanie’s words, “pumping us out year after year, thousands of us.”

If not to improve prospects for our future gainful employment, what, then, is the purpose of tracking the experiences of new entrants to the profession? If not to engage in meaningful dialogue about the concerns at hand— dialogue that might point to ways of resolving the everyday frustrations of occasional teachers—what point is there in inviting stakeholders
together in something like a town hall meeting? If, as Melanie suggested, the glut of new teachers “is something [the College of Teachers] could have projected,” why did it appear to us that so few stakeholders were even having a conversation like ours? These are some of the questions we found ourselves circling back to as we mapped out the terrain of our working lives. Of course, we begged answers from sheets of paper that could not speak for themselves. The occasional teachers who attended the meeting Melanie told us about asked questions of actual people and still seemed to get the same answer: their realities—our realities—are being routinely and systematically denied. The most pressing question we were left with was, what could we do about it?

4.3 If “we are against each other,” it “means we all lose”: A community stirred

I invited a group of occasional teachers to come together and air out its most pressing questions and wonderings because I wanted, above all else, to “follow where the inquiry [took] them” (Tanaka, 2015, p. 135). I expected that our inquiry would surface many of my own familiar frustrations, and that together, maybe, we could excavate their roots. Once unearthed, I believed we could untangle those roots, trace their lineage, climb them, perhaps even alter the course of their growth. I hoped, in other words, that our inquiry might take us beyond the walls of our shared meeting space and, in the process, draw other views and voices into the fold. It was clear by the end of our first gathering that my participants shared in that hope, too. I heard it in their questions about whether and how our budding community could grow to include more members, and even more so in the question that eventually replaced it: the question of what, if anything, our community might do together to affect change.

“Should we also be considering or maybe focusing on change and how we can improve the existing OT world?” Melanie wondered aloud when I asked, towards the end of our first meeting, “what [we] imagine this group would be doing.” We were brainstorming possible topics to discuss at future meetings—ones that we could all weigh in on, as Amanda hoped. “Like are we just going to talk,” Melanie continued, “or are we going to try and make a difference here?” There was an echo of uncertainty in her voice, but an optimism, too. “You know, talking is great. It’s therapeutic, it’s important. Do we want to take it to the next stage? How passionate are we
about some of these [topics] and do we see another way of doing things? And if so, what are we going to do about it? Who do we go to?”

“Exactly.” Amanda agreed.

“We need to look into avenues of getting a voice out there,” Jeremy suggested. “If that’s something that the rest of the people who are yet to arrive come and think about too, right. [...] Some kind of op-ed or something. Like, ‘The View from the Occasional Teachers’ or whatever. I think we started this conversation by saying that this is something that isn’t really talked about, so it would be neat.”

We would revisit the “what are we going to do about it?” question, in some variation, every meeting thereafter. “Maybe that would look something like a piece of [professional development]. Maybe it would look like something that is published. Maybe it would look like a conversation that we might have with [teacher candidates]” I suggested as the timer ran out on our second meeting. “Maybe our first item next time when we come back together is talking about what we might do and what that might look like.” Whether because I, in fact, placed it second-last on our subsequent agendas, or because our conversations so often concerned, in Jeremy’s words, “things happening on the ground that are in the minutia,” we never seemed to get around to answering that question succinctly. When I did pose the question directly, it was often answered with silence. “I’m looking to all of us if there’s one thing or a couple of different things we want to try,” I insisted during our third meeting. Only a pause followed. “There are long pauses in our talk—awkward silences even—when I pose the question, ‘What can we do?’” I noted in a memo as I transcribed the recordings of our conversations. “The participants regularly look to me for answers.” Perhaps it is for this reason that I often heard myself steering our conversation towards a more tangible, actionable critique of the current system. Tallying grievances, as previous studies on this topic have, did not appear to have shifted the landscape of occasional teaching in any observable way for us. I worried that ours would meet a similar fate if we wallowed too long in the everyday nuances of our employment.

Cameron suggested that “the policies that the government has put in place” might be to blame for our ongoing struggle to envision what a community like ours might accomplish together. “There are so many aspects of the teaching career right now for occasional teachers that are so demoralizing,” he explained. “And you have all these different stakeholders. I think that’s
why we’re having a hard time deciding where to focus our energies because there’s problems at every level.” He believes occasional teachers are “scapegoats” in this current milieu. “There’s never been this level of reporting to unions of member-on-member conflicts,” he said amidst our shared reading of Transition to Teaching. “It’s people saying I know this person got the job and I know they don’t have these qualifications. It’s awful. We’re against each other now.” It is a variation of the conundrum that Guy Standing (2011) outlines in The Precariat—and why he describes the precariat as a “class in-the-making.” Missing among this emerging class of precarious workers, Standing argues, is a clear sense of collective empathy: an obvious base from which to mount its politics. “Part of the problem,” he writes, “is that the precariat experiences few trusting relationships, particularly through work” (p. 22). The competition bred by precarious labour only exacerbates that sense of mistrust, especially since “[p]eople in incipient competition conceal from others knowledge, information, contacts and resources, in case revealing them would take away a competitive edge” (p. 38). “We are against each other” is how Melanie put it. “Which means we all lose,” Shelby said.

As this chapter illustrates, the quiet competition among us animated our inquiry in more ways than one—providing both grist and wind for our critical mill. Michael Apple (2004) observes that much of society operates under “[a] basic assumption [...] that conflict among groups of people is inherently and fundamentally bad and we should strive to eliminate it within the established framework of institutions” (p. 81, italics in original). But as Maxine Greene (1975) reminds us, conflicts need to be acknowledged—“indeed, they need to be affirmed”—in order to create space for meaningful transformation. Freire (1975/2010) would agree that it is the only means by which we “come to see the world not as a static reality, but as a reality in process, in transformation” (p. 83), and one we have a stake in transforming. Our talk pointed us towards “problems at every level” but none so clear as this: that as we compete against one another for scarce jobs, engineering ourselves into “Franken-teachers” in the process (Chapter 3), our capacity to affect change—big and small—is compromised. Our collective voice, like our professional identity, may be lost somewhere along the way.

The very act of our coming together in some ways rehearsed an antidote to the current state of affairs: it offered a balm for the divisiveness that seems, to us, to plague occasional teachers as an occupational group. Our conversations demanded a kind of empathy that the competitive job market we find ourselves in rarely prizes. It forced us to engage conflict directly,
to allow tension to form the ties that could bind us together. To use Amanda’s words, it gave us “something to just hold on to.”

And maybe that in itself is enough. Maybe in coming together “just […] to talk,” we were already accomplishing what “we all want[ed] to come of this community together.”

Collaborative inquiry is, after all, an inherently active rather than passive model—and certainly more active than the models of occasional teacher practice we often find ourselves rehearsing in classrooms. Proponents of teacher inquiry share a common linguistic landscape to describe the active processes it involves. Those who engage in dialogue like ours “think critically” (Cochran-Smith et al., 2009; Nelsen, 2015; Pedro, 2005), “make decisions” (Adler, 1991; Nicol, 2006; Oliver & Oesterreich, 2013), “pose questions” (Kiss & Townsend, 2012), and “take ownership” (Beck & Kosnik, 2006). Cochran-Smith and Lytle (2009) emphasize that inquiry, in this way, should be understood as both means and ends: that inquiry is

not simply instrumental in the sense of figuring out how to get things done, but also and more importantly, […] social and political in the sense of deliberating about what to get done, why get it done, who decides, and whose interests are served. (p. 121)

In other words, the questions our inquiry surfaced—that they were even posed at all—are maybe as, if not more important than the answers that followed. Whereas I often worried that focusing on the everyday minutia of our work somehow compromised our broader interrogation of the system, and offered evidence that employment precarity makes it difficult for us to engage in sustained, collective efforts towards systemic change, those discursive shifts also surfaced the questions that ultimately drew us together as a nascent community of teacher-activists. Even in our conversations about the minutiae of seniority rankings or salary calculations, for example, is a quiet questioning—a suspicion even, that the system has been in some ways rigged against us. The very act of our coming together and “just talking” about that which is so often silenced is an affront to the collective denial that we feel has kept many of us in limbo. That we wanted to continue meeting, even when the recorder would no longer listen in on our conversations, was perhaps proof that we were already doing enough.
Chapter 5
“We’re All Very Good at Something”: Reimagining Practice in the Face of Precarity

“We all define ourselves by what we are not, as much as by what we are, by what we could not be, as much as by what we could be.”

GUY STANDING, FROM THE PRECARIAT: THE DANGEROUS NEW CLASS (2011, p. 40)

5 Introduction

I first watched author Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie’s (2009) now famous TED talk, The Danger of a Single Story, when I was a teacher candidate at OISE. Either a colleague or a professor had screened a portion of it during a class—the specifics, I cannot recall. I had forgotten about it until a year later when I found myself in a rusty portable trying to do the thing teacher’s college had ostensibly prepared me to do. I was weeks into my first long-term occasional teaching job at a public high school, and my department chair, Sonja, had scribbled Adichie’s name on a post-it that she stuck to the desk next to hers, the one that I had carefully emptied and repopulated, temporarily, with my own belongings. She had seen the talk at a professional development workshop the week before and was buzzing with fresh ideas. “You’re going to love it!” she told me. I managed to include it somehow in nearly every class I have taught since.

In her talk, Adichie recalls visiting the home of her family’s houseboy, Fide, and how “his mother showed [her] a beautifully patterned basket made of dyed raffia that his brother had made.” The basket “startled” her. “It had not occurred to me that anybody in his family could actually make something,” she admits to the audience. Having grown up in a middle-class family in Nigeria—one that could, at the very least, afford domestic help—“all [she] had heard about [the houseboy’s family] was how poor they were.” She explains that “it had become impossible to see them as anything else but poor. Their poverty was my single story of them.”
Adichie would not be confronted with the dangers of the single story until she left her home in Nigeria to study abroad. There she would discover that much of the world believed a single story about where she came from as well, and that this story would need to be retold and rewritten, again and again, in order to affect change. Because the single story, Adichie argues, generates its own insidious kind of impoverishment: it infects the mind and then the world. Most appreciably, of course, the single story robs its subjects of their full humanity. By narrowing the range of narratives on offer, single stories also nearly robbed Adichie of a certain richness of experience that would ultimately shape the course of her life. It nearly abdicated her of the responsibility to tell stories as richly woven as the basket at Fide’s home.

I was not aware of it at the time, but I came to the teaching profession with a single story, too. My single story would likely not wreak any real havoc on the world, as a story about a poor family or an entire country might. It was not shaped by the same tides of colonialism, poverty, and privilege (although these have no doubt come to bear on it, too), but it did, slowly and insidiously, begin to wreak a quiet havoc on my sense of self. The story was about what my job entailed and how it would unfold. It went something like this: I will enter a classroom and stay there for roughly the next twenty-five years. I would maybe have to “substitute [my] way to a real job” (Stephens, 2013), but I would get one eventually, and I would keep doing it.

Of course, my story did not unfold that way. Neither, it turns out, did the story I thought I might tell about occasional teaching when I decided to embark on this thesis journey. The story I gleaned from the literature was most certainly a singular one: occasional teachers—and specifically substitute teachers—are largely marginalized within their professional spheres (Clifton & Rambaran, 1987). As I began meeting with the group of teachers at the heart of this work, and our grievances added up, it seemed that our stories only echoed the same. But like any budding scholar, I was dogged by doubts about my authority as a researcher and a writer. I wondered long and hard about how to accurately and fairly represent my participants’ experiences, how to balance their words with my own, how to parse from the tangle of stories one that I could tell about the time we spent together and what it might say, if anything, about occasional teaching and precarious work in Ontario today. And meanwhile, I was living out the very thing I was trying to make sense of. I worked nearly 100 days as a substitute teacher, spent a month in a colleague’s classroom as a long-term occasional, and taught summer school twice over the course of researching and writing this thesis.
I underestimated the toll this piecework teaching would take on my ability to write—how I would feel pulled in too many different directions, my participants’ words continuously fading in and out of focus. Working precariously at the same time that I was writing about employment precarity gave me grist for the mill, but it also kept that mill spinning with more ferocity than I could sometimes stomach. Armano and Murgia (2013) believe that “[t]he greatest suffering caused by precariousness seems to be [the precarious worker’s] difficulty in shaping a coherent narrative, defining a story, recognizing a ‘plot’ in their activities, identifying a goal to be achieved and, consequently, the means to do so” (p. 496). I heard echoes of that suffering in my participants’ words as they struggled to claim and enact a teacher identity that aligned with their expectations and beliefs about who teachers are and what they do (Chapter 3). I felt us working against it as we articulated various ways that the institutions which credential and employ us appeared to perpetuate the many challenges we face in and through our work (Chapter 4). I saw it playing out in my own struggle to find a plot amidst the long and winding conversations that we shared.

At the same time that I struggled to put our stories into words, more and more newsmakers, labour activists, and politicians seemed to be touting the consequences of precarious employment for workers’ health and wellbeing (Ross, 2017). I read stories about part-time, casual, and temporary workers in newspapers and magazines, heard about them on podcasts and the radio, and watched organizations like the Ontario Federation of Labour and United Way rally around the cause of long-term employment precarity, demanding legislative reforms and greater institutional accountability. In early 2017, a year after our group met for the first time, the sitting Liberal government in Ontario announced its most significant overhaul of the province’s labour laws since the early 1990s—its response to the increasing precarity of work across all employment sectors. Among the recommendations outlined in the Changing Workplaces Review (Mitchell & Murray, 2017) is a call for employers to cap the number of temporary and casual employees it relies upon and to mitigate some of the uncertainty inherent in precarious work by posting schedules well in advance, and offering part-time and casual workers access to sick days and health benefits. Precarity, in other words, is an ever-growing site of political action and public interest.

It was obvious early on in our discussions that none of us occasional teachers experiences precarity in quite the same way. Instead, what we shared were “singularities in common” (Casas-
Cortés, 2014)—experiences that resonated across one another but were ultimately shaped by the particulars of our employment arrangements, our past professional encounters, our future aspirations, our material resources, and our deeply held assumptions about what teaching is or ought to be. They involve multiple and shifting precariousnesses, as Armano and Murgia (2013) put it. What I did not hear as often in our talk are the grievances around which other members of the growing precariat are loudly rallying—namely, the impacts of precarious work on their abilities to live a good life. There were more than whispers of it in our conversations, to be sure, but the material facts of our employment mostly lingered behind and between our words. Rarely did financial worries or uncertainties about the availability and frequency of employment take precedence in our conversations about what makes our work “so precarious.” Like Butler’s (2011), our operational definition of precarity appeared to be deeply rooted in and concerned with relations—to students, to colleagues, to decision-makers, and even to the physical spaces that house our labour. And what seemed to be most at stake for us during this “eternal while” of daily and long-term occasional teaching is the professional identity we imagined awaited us in the classroom. When we wondered together how we might mitigate the inherent uncertainty in our work, we often seemed unsure of how to forge a path forward.

Marilyn Cochran-Smith and Susan Lytle (2009) suggest that “when inquiry is regarded as an outcome,” as it was in this research process, “[the] goal… is producing uncertainty rather than certainty” (p. 114, my italics). Uncertainties abounded when the recorder stopped listening in on our conversations in May, 2016—five months after we met as a group for the first time. We were still not certain if or how we could affect change to improve our and our colleagues’ lots in the early years of teaching. More than one of us was unsure, in fact, if teaching was a career that we would continue pursuing at all. And yet, as we inquired into the very uncertainties of our working lives, there was at least one thing we knew for sure: we wanted to keep meeting. Indeed, if there is a single story to tell about our time together it is this: we kept coming back. It is a simple but powerful answer to the question that frames this thesis. What happens when occasional teachers come together to discuss their practice? They keep doing it.

And so, we did. As of this writing, the now-minted “OISE OT Network” continues to meet. We are preparing our first public speaking event, a panel to discuss the realities of occasional teaching with OISE teacher candidates and we are looking ahead towards a co-authored article and other presentation ventures. This chapter is therefore a conclusion to a thesis
journey, but also, and more importantly, a blueprint for the ongoing work of a community of occasional teachers that continues to come together to make sense of its shared problems and wonderings. Here I attempt to pull together the various threads of conversation documented in the previous chapters so that we can look towards the road ahead. First, I read across the preceding discussions to offer some final reflections on the intersections of precarity, community, and identity—the themes that ripple throughout this work. I move on to suggest implications of this work for the various stakeholders our inquiry called to account. As I have in the previous chapters, I use my participants’ words as much as my own to chart our path ahead. What I hope this chapter illustrates—indeed what I hope this entire thesis testifies to—is how the process of engaging in collaborative inquiry allowed us to reframe and reimagine our relationship to teacher practice: how our precarity became a generative site of both problems and possibilities.

5.1 “We have to juggle through to […] get where we want to be”: Rewriting the stories we tell

I believe Kanu and Glor (2006) when they write that “as educators we need to understand that stories (narratives) are in essence what our art is about” (p. 109). So much of teaching and learning involves the telling and retelling of stories, like the ones Miss McLaren drew on the chalkboard of my Grade 2 classroom. We carry stories with us into our places of work; bring new stories to life as we interact with the people who populate those spaces; help those with whom we are tasked to teach and learn to piece together a story about their seat in the world and what they might do from it. And so, like Gallagher (2014), we used “the story not as a place at which to arrive, but as a place from which to begin inquiry” (p. 16).

I have tried to include as many of our stories as I could for these reasons, although, of course, there are many that were shared among us occasional teachers over the time we spent together that did not ultimately find their way into the pages of this work. There is one story that Amanda shared during our third meeting—when we shared artefacts for the first time—that I knew belonged among these chapters, but I struggled to find a place for it. It is an anomaly among most of the narratives we attached to the objects we shared, and among our conversations broadly, because it deals explicitly with teaching and learning. Indeed, it reflects that Amanda
was something of an anomaly among us, since she had spent so many years, albeit without any real job security, at the same school. It sounds very much like a story a “regular” teacher might share.

Cameron had set down his cell phone and Shelby her day planner as Amanda held up a paperback copy of *The Hunger Games* (Collins, 2008). “I brought in a book,” she said. “This book is very special to me because of the following story:”

One of the things [a professor] told me when we were going through [teacher’s college] is that you have to be very creative when you get into schools if you want to get what you want to get in there. When I was first at the school that I’m at right now, […] I was brought in to teach [Grade 11 college-level English]. I was just thrown in in November. They were reading *Catcher in the Rye*, and it wasn’t going well.

So one day I just asked the department head—because I had gone to [a professional development workshop] and they had a unit, a whole unit plan, on *The Hunger Games*—and I said, “Is there money to buy like 15 *Hunger Games*? They’re $4 each at [the used bookstore]. I can go pick them up.” [Laughs] And I was brand new there so it took a little bit of risk.

And she said, “Oh, what are you thinking of doing with it?”

I showed her the lesson plan and it was like really interesting stuff. I didn’t make it up; it was like “[Board] worthy” because we got it at a PD. And she said, “Yeah, I’ll buy you the books.”

The movie hadn’t even come out yet, I don’t think. This was like five years ago—five, six years ago—so it was like the “in” thing to read. And I was with a group of boys. Four of them had been incarcerated. They were like half in school, in transition, and they had never picked up a book before. All of them finished it!

And it was just that moment of like, you know, when you’re new and you’re like, “I got this.” […] For me it represents some of the creative avenues that we have to juggle through to kind of get where we want to be. Whether it be through scheduling or what material we want to use, but it’s also the determination I think you have to have. And there were bumps, of course. But, I don’t know, it was worth asking the right questions. And I’ve been told “no” many times, but the one time it’s a “yes,” it was worthwhile. Ever since then they teach this book in that school.

Amanda’s story seemed so different to me than the ones the rest of us shared. Whereas so many of our stories were couched in frustration and defeat, hers was a victory narrative not unlike the novel at its centre—a story of triumph against several odds. Interpreted this way, it reads like a relative of the entrepreneurial narratives explored in Chapter 3: it presents a teacher who, by dint of her own willpower, expertise, resourcefulness, and ingenuity, brings about a
necessary change in her environment. There were no echoes of deflation or defeat in Amanda’s delivery; none of the resignation that coloured Melanie’s account of “spend[ing] an entire day with students on their phones, just chatting and catching up about their holidays” or Cameron’s one-period job offer. Amanda was certain she had made a lasting impact on the community she found herself “thrown” into. She acknowledged that challenging the existing norms and structures of a space in which she is, by definition, a visitor “took a little bit of risk,” but the gamble had paid off. The experience had not left her “at war with [her]self” or “feel[ing] like [she’s] not quite a teacher yet.” Quite the opposite: “I got this” is her humble triumph.

And yet, there is another narrative that exists alongside it—the one captured by Amanda’s assertion that she “didn’t make [the Hunger Games unit plan] up,” that “[she] got it at a PD.” The curriculum plan had been a “gift” from a beginning teachers’ workshop, Amanda later explained, as we talked together before our group’s “final” meeting. In her initial telling of how The Hunger Games came to be taught at the school in which she is employed as a “month-to-month” long-term occasional, that “[Board] worthy” unit plan was the fulcrum on which her challenge to the existing curriculum hinged. In truth, however, Amanda had already “taught [the novel] [her]self” the year before, piecing things together” in such a way that was “just enough that the kids read.” In the meantime, she had been returning to OISE to continue working with her mentor professors (“I miss[ed] it. You feel alienated.”), one of whom suggested they “come up with ideas together” about how to teach the novel to the class she had suddenly inherited.

As I struggled to find a home for it amidst the many other stories we shared, it occurred to me that although Amanda’s Hunger Games story seemed to be an exception, it might actually help me clarify what our group did—continues doing—together and why it might matter. Because as much as Amanda’s story reads, at first, like a lone-wolf victory narrative, it is not a triumph of her own engineering. I am not suggesting that Amanda did not take a pivotal role in reshaping the department’s existing curriculum so that students “who had never picked up a book before” finally did—far from it. I am suggesting that while her story emphasizes—even romanticizes—“the creative avenues we have to juggle […] to get where we want to be,” it also illustrates how the communities to which we belong inform those decisions and how those decisions, in turn, shape our communities. It is, in short, a parable of collective ingenuity.
It also draws a map of the system in which Amanda finds herself, one that demands she carefully negotiate the existing norms and practices of a community to which she only temporarily belongs vis-à-vis her own burgeoning sense of professional autonomy and, not least, the needs of her students. Amanda told us that approaching her department chair to revise the existing curriculum “took a little bit of risk” because she “was brand new there.” I think the risk was potentially enormous. Melanie suggested during a later meeting that “if you ever said anything negative about your experience” at a school, “they’d never have you back.” The rest of us agreed: “If you ever suggested an improvement, kiss your job goodbye.” It is telling that Amanda leverages the “[Board] worthy” unit plan in her construction of the story: it betrays her tenuous status. In her insistence that she “didn’t make it up,” I hear her dancing with the ghost of the unqualified substitute teacher. And whether or not our risk assessment is accurate is beside the point (Amanda’s experience was “worthwhile” all around, for example)—we operate as though it is. The message we seem to have internalized, as Shelby so neatly put it, is, “You don’t know what you’re doing, and you can’t be trusted.”

Amanda told me that she might have purchased the books herself if it had not been her “first full-time job.” Such a decisive intervention seemed unsustainable “when there’s 40 students and you barely have an income,” she laughed. It was the only gesture she made to the other, mostly unspoken truth that hung over our proceedings: that we are trying to earn a living in order to make a decent life for ourselves and our families. “Finances have not really been on the table,” I wrote in my field notes following our fourth meeting, “yet economics underlie any discussion of work and working.” Tellingly, Amanda’s needs—as a teacher, as an employee, as a person—are nowhere to be found on the map her story draws. There are a number of possible reasons for the relative absence of explicit discussion about the material consequences of precarious labour from our talk—not least of which is occasional teachers’ relative privilege among the precariat. Perhaps we eschewed such a frank discussion because, as Melanie suggested, “it’s taboo” in professional circles—especially one so early in its infancy. Or perhaps it is because, as teachers, we can look beyond the paycheque and attach some notion of purpose or meaning to our work (Armano & Murgia, 2013). The narratives that construct teaching as a calling and a force for the greater good perhaps offer some balm for the material realities of a working life: the bills we struggle to pay, the experiences we miss out on, the sleepless nights and endless worry. These conversations, often eschewed anyway out of corporate standards of
professional decorum, are perhaps even more unthinkable when the job we do is supposed to mean something.

And truly our jobs do, since ultimately these decisions impact the learning and life chances of the students we have been charged to teach. Amanda said that “of course” hers was the sort of “class that LTOs get.” It seemed to all of us that long-term occasional teachers are often given the classes that “nobody else wants to teach”—by which we meant classes populated by so-called “at-risk” or “remedial” students like the ones Amanda introduced to *The Hunger Games*. She described the English class she inherited as a “watered-down” version of an advanced-level course—not one that had been intentionally and carefully designed to meet the needs of the students who found themselves in it. “You’re basically thrown crap,” Shelby chimed in—“and then given no support.” Indeed, there is another, mostly unspoken, layer of complexity to Amanda’s words: a question of belonging looms over both her and students. Their status within a community into which they have all been “thrown” is under careful surveillance. Amanda intimated that she was perhaps able to revise the existing curriculum because of her colleagues’ assumptions about the classes—and therefore students—she had been hired to teach: “They gave [me the books] because they don’t care.” The “no teaching required” lesson plans that each of us daily occasional teachers had encountered seemed to suggest the same (Chapter 3). Not only do these practices betray particular assumptions about the status and competence of occasional teachers, they also, crucially, structure opportunities and possibilities for students.

Thankfully for Amanda’s students, the classes “nobody else wants to teach” are where she feels most at home. I admit that I was hesitant at first to include her story because it does, in some ways, romanticize the neoliberal fracture between individual and collective action that keeps so many of us languishing at the margins (Butler, 2011). It almost casts isolation as a resource to be mined at all odds, obfuscating the collective efforts that make sustainable change possible. And yet, it is also true that Amanda’s very outside-ness made it possible for students “who had never picked up a book before” to learn something they might not have. Her precarity proved to be an asset as she sought to make a necessary change within the community to which she tenuously belongs.

The irony of any hero’s journey is that it is simultaneously a story about isolation: about an individual who is outside of something (Campbell, 1949/2004). This positioning is common
across nearly all of the stories we shared in our meeting space—even Amanda’s, who is arguably the most securely employed among us. The same “tremendous polarity”—between “us” occasional teachers and “them,” the ones who credential and employ us—that animated Melanie’s description of the meeting between concerned occasional teachers and their employer (Chapter 4) quietly ripples through Amanda’s story too. Hers is almost a counterpoint to the offer of underemployment that left Cameron feeling like he was “not part of the system” at all (Chapter 3). The specific contents of our stories, and the extent to which they accurately reflect the system that brought them to life, are in this way secondary to their structure. The point is we position ourselves in opposition to these spaces—as constantly negotiating our sense of belonging. This is what makes occasional teaching so precarious.

Miss McLaren’s picture stories must have left an indelible imprint, because the only way I could think of pulling these narrative strands together was to literally draw them on the chalkboard that covers one wall of my kitchen (Figure 5). It may be as concise a picture I can offer about the themes that our work continues to elaborate.

![Conceptual map of our ongoing sites of inquiry](image)

**Figure 5 Conceptual map of our ongoing sites of inquiry**

The questions we wrestled with—the ones driving Amanda’s *Hunger Games* story—are the same ones that I expect most teachers ask: Who am I as an educator? Where and how do I fit within the place(s) I find myself? What does this mean, in the end, for the students in my care? The difference for us is that the answers to those questions are never given; there is additional, often hidden labour involved as we try to answer them. The material precarity of our working arrangements informs how we construct and enact our identities as teachers and how we
participate within the spaces that house our work, and vice versa. Indeed, it structures all of teaching, working, and living for the six of us. Precarity, identity, and community not only form the discursive terrain of our ongoing inquiry: they are mutually constitutive sites of action that bring to life specific encounters in schools and communities—words and deeds that ultimately shape the learning and life chances of students. Orbiting those, as I have tried to capture, are myriad assumptions and practices that shape the roles and responsibilities of teachers (“professionalism”); the economic and cultural privileging of individual enterprise over collective action (“neoliberalism”); the norms of community engagement with which we must grapple (“collaboration”); and the possibilities for us to envision different and alternative futures (“change”). I believe our capacity to affect change in and through our work—what I would call “agency”—exists somewhere in the space between these sites. It is the place from which Amanda advocated on behalf of her students; the same one in which we, as a community of occasional teachers, began to imagine what we could accomplish together.

5.2 “If people sat around and made this, then people can sit around and unmake it”: Implications for research, policy, and practice

Marjorie DeVault (2008b) reminds us that “economic transformation takes place not in some abstract realm—labeled and discussed as “the economy” or “globalization”—but in people’s embodied lives. […] The changes that seem to ‘just happen’ are the products of people at work” (p. 289, my italics). Amanda’s story offers testament to this same truth: it reminds us that decisions which shape our activities at work—decisions which impact our lives and livelihoods, and the learning and life chances of students—are made by actual people in real time. Sometimes in our attempts to sort through the “organizational gridlock” (Wisniewski in Cochran-Smith & Lytle, 2009, p. 87) of the various policies and practices that shape and make possible our labour, we lose sight of this simple fact. Or perhaps from our vantage point, as Cameron suggested, the key decision makers are never really in sight to begin with. “Us who have limited power in the situation want to make a change,” he said, “but we don’t know where to go because at every level it really depends on who’s there.” Although we struggled at times to identify specific “points of productive intervention” (DeVault, 2008b) from which to affect
change, our mounting critique of the institutional machinations that structure our work implies that precarity is not simply a feature of occasional teacher labour; rather, occasional teaching is *made precarious* through the presence and absence of specific coordinative processes. As Melanie put it, “If people sat around and made this, then people can sit around and unmake it.”

Calls for improved supports for occasional teachers date back to the 1970s and 80s (e.g., Clifton & Rambaran, 1987; Jentzen & Vockell, 1978; Parsons & Dillon, 1980; Washington, 1972). Although the express or latent purpose of much of the occasional teaching literature has been to recover some of its legitimacy within the profession, many of the recommendations laid out in these and more recent publications (e.g., True, Butler & Sefton, 2011) tend to reinforce the prevailing conception that occasional teachers are lesser professionals than their fully-employed colleagues in terms of expertise and autonomy. The solutions to the “problems” of occasional teaching are often top-down monitoring and evaluation by administrators and school board officials. Even the so-called “tricks of the trade” outlined in many professional publications (e.g., Bowers, 2009; Ontario Secondary School Teachers’ Federation, 2005), which promise to arm occasional teachers (and in particular substitute teachers) with specific strategies to improve their effectiveness in the classroom, present a similar double-edged sword. These “survival skills,” as they are often termed, form a definable corpus of knowledge and expertise which legitimate occasional teaching as a skilled profession yet, at the same time, continue to construct occasional teacher practice as more a matter of “coping” (Vorell, 2012) than an exercise of professional will.

Our collective recommendations, which I pull together below, bear a remarkable similarity to those that have come before. We, too, identified several tangible ways that our work could be made less precarious by those who are more strategically positioned than we are to affect change. But just as our own inquiry process demanded that we participate in imagining possible futures dialogically, so too do our recommendations emphasize the co-construction of solutions to local problems rather than sweeping reforms that elide the lived experience of actual people in their places of work. If I were to boil them down to a single implication, it would be that those with the authority to make decisions which impact our livelihoods ought to pay closer attention to the realities we face as we navigate this “eternal while.” At the very least, we are calling for teachers, educational leaders and policymakers, teacher educators, and educational
researchers to better account for that which has, from our vantage point, been ignored, silenced, or otherwise denied.

5.2.1 Implications for educational leaders and policymakers

Our conversations gestured towards a handful of specific ways that our work could be made less precarious by educational leaders (principals, superintendents, directors of education) and policymakers. The most obvious to us would be to review the number of teachers who are placed on eligible-to-hire and occasional teacher rosters to ensure equitable and sustainable access to both daily and long-term occasional employment. Under Regulation 274/12, all boards in Ontario are required to maintain a list of occasional teachers from which long-term occasional positions are filled according to seniority. In addition, most boards maintain a separate roster of occasional teachers for daily substitute assignments, which, depending on their specific practices, may be filtered further by preferred lists at individual schools. The town hall meeting that Melanie recounted for us in Chapter 4 was intended to address the consequences of these practices for occasional teachers’ access to work. At that time, her employer’s roster had over 4,500 teachers competing for daily occasional work, leaving many underemployed. “That’s when you don’t work,” Cameron mused. He suggested, and the rest of us agreed, that caps should be placed on these lists to ensure that those on them can earn a sustainable living—even if that might alleviate the material precarity of occasional teaching for some while intensifying it for others until demographics shift toward a more stable cycle of supply and demand.

Of course, we were often less concerned with the availability and duration of employment contracts than we were the impacts of precarity on our opportunities for professional growth and development. What is most at stake for us during this eternal while is the professional identity we imagined awaited us—even for those of us, like Amanda, who are consistently employed in long-term contracts. Providing access to professional learning in the form of workshops, mentorship programs, and paid internships seemed to us to be viable strategies to support meaningful development even in the face of employment uncertainty. “Think of all of us who are doing daily casual work who aren’t getting access to NTIP who could use something like that,” Cameron suggested, for example. He was gesturing to the fact that despite having over 30 combined years of teaching experience, not one of us had qualified for
the province’s mandatory New Teacher Induction Program (NTIP) because current regulations necessitate that teachers must work 97 or more consecutive school days to be eligible. Instead, most of the professional development opportunities we had pursued came at our own expense and with little or no support from our employers and administrators. “There is a skill that’s involved that you learn through doing it multiple times,” Cameron said of daily occasional teaching specifically. We agreed that systematic interventions tailored to the unique needs of occasional teachers might foster necessary skills and perhaps even alleviate some the anxieties we described in Chapter 3—that is, of course, so long as eligibility is not tied to employment status or reserved for those privileged enough to pay the price.

At the very least, we agreed that school leaders and administrators could do more to help elevate the professional status of occasional teachers in the eyes of other education workers and students. “I’d like to see teachers finding out more about occasional teachers, don’t you think?” Melanie suggested at one point. “It would be nice to have a staff meeting to maybe have an occasional teacher come in and say, ‘This is who we are.’ It would just take 10 minutes.” Shelby pointed out that “a lot of [full-time] teachers have zero experience being an occasional teacher. They have no idea.” Providing networking opportunities and involving occasional teachers more intentionally in the everyday goings on of school life could go a long way in shifting attitudes about what we can and do offer. Relieving occasional teachers of the sole burden of “juggl[ing] through to kind of get where we want to be” would likely pull more of us much deeper and more meaningfully into the fold.

5.2.2 Implications for teacher educators

Our sharpest critiques seemed to be reserved for faculties of education and the extent to which teacher education programs adequately prepare candidates for the uncertainties they will have to navigate upon graduation. Shelby put it bluntly: “The fact that the system of creating teachers hasn’t changed to accommodate the reality of teachers graduating is ridiculous.” As the most recently certified among us, her pre-service education was still fresh in mind. She told us that “there was a lot of talk” about the over-saturated job market in her curriculum classes, but “no actual focus for incoming new teachers on, like, how to be an occasional teacher” despite demographics and provincial hiring regulations funneling all newly certified teachers down that
path. “We were basically told that there were no jobs,” she said. “Good luck trying to get into a board!” was the only comfort her instructors offered.

We agreed that faculties of education do need, at the very least, to be transparent about their students’ and potential applicants’ prospects for future employment—and to communicate that reality sooner than later. The latest report from the Ontario College of Teachers (2016) does suggest that the number of applicants to Ontario’s education faculties has been falling dramatically because of a “heightened awareness of the more competitive teacher employment market” and “the enhanced requirements for teacher education” (p. 4). According to their figures, the numbers have dropped nearly a third from where they were a decade ago when Cameron and Melanie were first certified—from 17,500 to roughly 4,300 applicants in 2015 and 2016 (Ontario College of Teachers, 2016). Each of us had graduated from pre-service education programs in the years between and yet none of us felt that the realities of that market had been adequately addressed. “They should tell you in September so you still have a chance to take your tuition out and say, ‘Maybe this isn’t for me,’” Melanie suggested. “Or at the welcome session in April after they accept you,” Shelby said, “before you pay.”

“What do you think you would’ve liked to have seen?” I asked Shelby of her experience as a teacher candidate.

“Something realistic,” she said, “There was never a conversation about, ‘Ok, here’s a really easy set of tips and tricks that might work if you’re in a class for only one or two days. And if this is the topic they’re covering, these are kind of one-off things that could be useful in those spaces.’” She even suggested “having 20 one-day drop-ins at different schools [...] just so you have the experience of parachuting in and leaving” as daily occasional teachers do.

We agreed that “practical sessions” which address the unique needs of occasional teachers ought to be an integral part of a teacher education curriculum—that there is a real skillset required in order to do that work successfully, and that these skills ought to be developed “across the program.” Jeremy, who has taught in pre-service education, pointed out that teacher candidates already “do lesson planning and assessment and unit planning.” Requiring pre-service candidates to “come up with one-off assignments and [...] build a whole portfolio of occasional teacher tricks” would also serve graduates as they navigate the early years of their careers. “If you have a package of 25 possibilities,” Shelby said, “you’re golden.” She also suggested “some
kind of session on resilience and self-care” since managing anxiety and feelings of alienation is part of the work of occasional teaching. “There are so many different ways we could talk about being an occasional teacher throughout a teacher education program,” she reiterated. Teacher educators simply need to start by acknowledging “the way it is.”

5.2.3 Directions for future research

I presented initial findings of this work at OISE’s Graduate Student Research Conference in the spring of 2016, just before I recorded and transcribed our meetings for the last time. Two occasional teachers I had never met—one an OISE alumnus—attended my session. Both were non-white, non-native English speakers who had been working as daily occasional teachers for over a decade. One of them told me after the session that she had recently interviewed for a long-term occasional position—her first in many years. She said that she was no longer fluent in the current “buzzwords” and unfamiliar with the school, board, and Ministry initiatives that the interview panel had asked her to reference in her responses. She did not get the job.

Our brief conversation not only underscored what the previous sections emphasize—that occasional teachers would benefit from intentional and sustained institutional supports—it also reminded me that the members of our inquiry community, myself included, are a relatively privileged bunch. “We are all white,” as Shelby pointed out during one of our meetings. She wondered aloud how different our conversations might be if all of us had not been white, able-bodied, cisgender, Canadian, and English speaking. Pollock’s (2010) investigation into the experiences of internationally educated occasional teachers who were also racial and linguistic minorities offers a few clues of how our experiences may differ. She describes her participants as being locked in a “cycle of marginalization” as they engage in unpaid labour and seek additional learning opportunities to compensate for being “doubly disadvantaged” (p. 4). “[N]on-permanent teaching is by default marginal work and those who work in these arrangements are set up for marginalization,” Pollock writes (p. 4). For her participants, that marginalization was compounded by practices that can only be described as institutional racism. Shelby pointed out that daily occasional teaching also presents unique challenges for gender and sexual minorities—especially those who may be visibly gender non-conforming. She admitted that she had intentionally concealed her own bisexuality in certain contexts for fear of professional
repercussions. It is an experience both Cameron and I as gay men could easily relate to. Especially in a policy climate that has legislated occasional teaching as the mandatory starting point for all teachers in Ontario, the experiences of occasional teachers who are culturally, ethnically, linguistically, and racially diverse warrant far greater attention, as do those of gender diverse and non-binary peoples.

Both of the occasional teachers who attended my talk at the grad student conference said they were heartened to see work of this nature being taken up in the academy. As I stated in Chapter 2, literature about occasional teaching—especially in Canada—is limited to the point of being virtually non-existent. And occasional teachers are not the only occupational group in the education sector that finds themselves in casual, non-permanent, or otherwise precarious work arrangements, as the sessional professors I rallied with in Chapter 1 could attest. There is much more work to be done as neoliberal ideology and austerity economics continue to drive educational and labour reforms, and as the logics of market capitalism become ever more firmly entrenched in the project of schooling (Prain, 1997). Amanda suggested that “it’s not great” for full-time teachers in the current labour and economic climate either, as declining enrollment in Ontario brings with it redundancy and lay-off notices. Future studies might consider how education, labour, and economics intersect from the standpoint of other education workers, including teachers, but also educational assistants, office and clerical staff, social workers, child-youth workers, custodial and maintenance workers, and others who find themselves navigating employment precarity.

When I first proposed this study, my intention was to explore the consequences of precarious employment for occasional teachers’ abilities to improve the learning and life chances of students. It was quickly apparent that ascertaining those consequences was beyond the scope of this project. Our inquiry gestured towards a few of them—like “lost” instructional days—but we would need opportunities to be in classrooms and in conversation with students to flesh those out more substantively. Clifton and Rambaran (1987) accounted for the experiences and perceptions of students in their seminal work on daily substitute teaching; I believe those viewpoints warrant further attention. Occasional teachers figured prominently in my own schooling journey, as Chapter 1 attests, and I would be curious to learn how they figure in others’. Inviting student voice into the conversation about how best to utilise the skills and expertise of occasional teachers seems a logical next step for this work.
5.3  “I’d love to tell you a better story, but that’s the reality”: The road beyond

Our “final” meeting happened to fall on the night of OISE’s 50th anniversary celebration. The event included a panel discussion moderated by TVO’s Steve Paikin, which invited four distinguished OISE scholars together to weigh in on the state of education in Ontario, and OISE’s continuing role in shaping it. Melanie and I scurried down to the packed auditorium after our meeting wrapped up and listened carefully as each of them thoughtfully responded to Paikin’s queries. Among his questions was one about the skills and competencies that today’s young people might need in order to adapt to a rapidly evolving, technology-driven globalized economy that continues to shift not only how we relate to one another as citizens, but also how we relate to work and labour. “Teachers are preparing students for jobs that don’t yet exist,” Carol Campbell, one of the featured panelists, observed. Her colleagues agreed that in order to shepherd students towards the unknown, teachers must nurture “21st century competencies” such as creativity, critical thinking, and collaboration. The job of places like OISE, in other words, is to prepare teachers to keep a close eye on a future they cannot yet see.

A question-and-answer period followed the nearly two-hour discussion. By then I was sitting on my hands, my leg bouncing up and down as though I were pacing the entire room in my seat. I had asked the members of our group beforehand if there were any questions I ought to bring to the panelists’ attention. As was our habit, we did not settle on any concrete proposals. I watched as other audience members trailed their way to the microphone and aired out their most pressing concerns and wonderings. As I listened, I played Dr. Campbell’s comment over in my mind until finally, I found myself wandering down to join the line of concerned spectators.

“Dr. Campbell, you mentioned that teachers are preparing students for jobs that don’t yet exist,” I said into the microphone, “but I think that OISE is also in the business of preparing teachers for jobs that don’t exist.” The crowd erupted in laughter. “I guess my question is, what responsibility does OISE have going forward to respond to shifts in the teacher labour market and the increase in casual and under-employment?”

Dr. Campbell smiled, and offered the following response:

Great question, thank you. I mean, I teach in our teacher education program as well as in our graduate program and it’s a moment of delight but also concern when people walk
across the stage on graduation day. Because I know for so many of you finding a job at the moment is a really tough situation to be in. You may end up going to another province, or another country, or not being in a school but in another area where you’re using your teacher skills. On average, it takes seven years to get a full-time position in Ontario at the moment. So there’s a lot of supply teaching. There’s rules around seniority that were negotiated as part of the collective agreement. It’s not a great job market for teachers and that really does concern me.

What’s OISE’s responsibility? I feel part of our responsibility is to be communicating what the options are—what the range of options are. To share around mentorship. Sponsorships and mentorships and networks are really important in being able to navigate such a tough job market. Being as transparent as possible. If someone wants to come and train to be a teacher, then come. We don’t say to somebody, “Don’t do an MBA because you won’t be a chief exec.” If that’s your passion, come, learn, apply those skills. Be really perseverant and persistent in seeking a job. But the current reality at the moment is not great around opening up jobs. I’d love to tell you a better story, but that’s the reality. So stick at it is what I’d say, and use every network you’ve got.

I was stung at first by Dr. Campbell’s cheery “stick at it” refrain. Her words seemed to epitomize the institutional abandonment that Butler (2011) and Standing (2011) write about, the same abandonment Jeremy alluded to when he observed that the current system has “plac[ed] the ability to get a job […] solely on the individual,” and absolved itself of the responsibility for “providing those spaces or not.” Many of us have already been “stick[ing] at it” for a decade or more. We are tired, deflated, and often hopeless. But what Dr. Campbell said is also true: this is the reality. We do need to “be really perseverant and persistent”—to “juggle” and steer ourselves down those “creative avenues” as Amanda did. We also need to “use every network [we’ve] got.” The community born of this work is proof of that.

It must be said also that we are privileged among the precariat—that occasional teachers may not, in fact, qualify for Standing’s (2011) class-in-the-making anyway. Some of us have willingly chosen to piece together a livelihood through precarious works as we pursue other ventures. As the benefactors of “illegal LTOs” and other forms of favouritism, we are also often complicit in perpetuating a system that keeps many of our fellow colleagues underemployed in the early years of their career. Many of our frustrations seem borne of a certain entitlement—a professional birthright—that is perhaps only temporarily not available to us. Maybe in this way occasional teaching, and all it entails, is simply a due each of us must pay on the road to full-time teacher employment.
Amanda suggested, however, that we occasional teachers need to “get away from the mentality of, ‘I’m just going to pay my dues.’” Precariousness, she said, “is a reality of this life. So what’s a day or a week or a year of this life? I never knew that going into [teaching]. It was never spoken about.” Cameron put it this way:

The landscape is changing the trajectory for a teacher so much. I mean, you’re looking at the same amount of schooling as someone who’s going into medicine or going into law now. You have your four-year degree and now you have your two year [post-graduate degree], and then you have to do at least your year just as a supply teacher—you’re not even allowed on an LTO list—and then you have to put your time in as an LTO. And then, if you’re lucky, after a few years you’ll have a [permanent] contract. And so, we’re all saying here it’s taking a while for us to understand that this is part of the job. We still think it is what it was, but it’s not anymore. People who are getting into it still think it is what it was but it’s very different.

Part of the difficulty for me in finding a coherent narrative in our experiences of precarious employment has been my own complete immersion in a system fueled by uncertainty. It has shaped me more profoundly than I can possibly put into words. Indeed, had I found myself in a stable, full-time teaching job, these words would not have been written at all. Precarious jobs are the only ones I have ever known—my trajectory from retail associate, to teacher, to graduate student, a patchwork of short-term and part-time contracts. I came up in an education system that was beginning to employ greater numbers of occasional teachers to carry out its mission. And as I look ahead to a possible future trajectory in the university sector, I see the faces of my many former professors who pieced together employment the way I do now. Ingenuity, mobility, and flexibility—the ethics, really, that precarious employment demands (Standing, 2011)—have slowly melted into the bedrock of our collective morality. They are the same ethics that teachers have been asked to foster as they prepare students for “jobs that don’t yet exist.”

In the end, I am resistant to quantifying with exact certitude the tolls that precarity takes on our lives and livelihoods because I think there is a more interesting story to tell than that one. Maribel Casas-Cortés (2014) suggests that

the value of the concept of precarity should not [...] rely solely on the accuracy of its analysis but rather on its potential to regenerate imaginations and lifestyles in the midst of an ongoing decline in traditional union organizing and a perceived fragmentation of the collective into singular identities. (p. 222)

For her, precarity is a “tool to develop unfixed understandings of the world and fluid ways of inhabiting it” (p. 222). We put this tool to work in and through our collaborative inquiry into our
own livelihoods and, in the process, began recalibrating our relationship to teaching and working. The lines of inquiry I trace in the preceding pages are as deeply tied to the “lived world of real problems of practice” (Cochran-Smith & Lytle, 2009, p. 151) as they are emblematic of a different sort of educative work: one that resists the “idea that practice is simply (or even mostly) practical” (Cochran-Smith & Lytle, 2009, p. 134). As Melanie reminded us, “we’re all very good at something”: we can and do, in fact, affect changes big and small even from a site of seemingly limited privilege. From our vantage point as both insiders and outsiders (Lytle, 2000), we are uniquely poised to offer insights that might otherwise remain unseen. Creating the space and time to come together has given each of us, in Amanda’s words, “something to hold on to” during this time of uncertainty: it has recast our precarity as a generative site from which we work “within and against” (Simon & Campano, 2013) the current system as we imagine possible futures for ourselves, our colleagues, and our students. I expect that our ongoing work together will continue testifying to this truth.

Guy Standing (2011) writes that “[i]t is part of humanity to define ourselves by what we do and to do what we are” (p. 23). The precariat, he says, “has a weakened sense of ‘social memory’” because that memory “arises from belonging to a community reproduced over generations” (p. 23). Ultimately it “provides a code of ethics and a sense of meaning and stability, emotional and social” (p. 23). I believe our group continues to come together because we are in the process of forging a new social memory: we are writing a blueprint for a pathway we are already treading. The stories we so often hear and tell about teaching and learning come from a time when the transition to teaching was a relatively straightforward one, and the relationship between working and living was more or less given. The six of us continue to meet because we need new stories, more stories. We keep coming back because our futures are uncertain, and they are ultimately hopeful.
References


Appendices

Appendix A: Letter to Participants

Dear colleague,

My name is Ty Walkland, and I am a graduate student at the University of Toronto who is interested in learning more about the experiences of occasional teachers in Ontario. Having been an occasional teacher in a public school board since 2010, I know firsthand that our work can be as challenging as it is rewarding. Like me, you have probably found it difficult at times to obtain regular employment and gain steady access to professional learning opportunities.

I want to create a space for a group of occasional teachers like us to collaboratively explore what it means to do our job in this current climate, and to learn from and with one another while we attempt to gain permanent access to our profession. You have been invited to participate in this group because of your interest in investigating with me and other occasional teachers about the nature of our work and the ways we can impact student learning. I will be documenting our meetings and sharing our findings as part of my final master’s thesis. My hope is that by sharing our inquiry with various stakeholders, we can help improve supports for occasional teachers in the early stages of their careers.

Participation in this research will include attending five (5) sessions and participating in a collaborative inquiry group with seven other occasional teachers (myself included). During these sessions, you may be asked to reflect upon your experiences as an occasional teacher and share specific materials (e.g. lesson plans, curriculum documents, etc.) that are significant to your work. You will also be invited to share your thoughts and reflections in writing on a dedicated website.

Your participation in this research is entirely voluntary. You may use discretion when deciding what or how much you choose to disclose to the group, and you may withdraw at any time for any reason, even after you have consented to participate. This research will also in no way negatively impact your employment. The names of any specific people or places you share will be kept in strictest confidence.

Signing this form means that you grant permission for ideas and artefacts you share with the inquiry group to be included in my research. If at any point you like any ideas or materials to NOT be included, please let me know. You can also contact the University of Toronto Office of Research Ethics at ethics.review@utoronto.ca or 416-946-3273 at any time if you have questions about participant rights.

If you have any questions about any aspect of this project, please do not hesitate to email me at ty.walkland@mail.utoronto.ca, or to respond in writing on this form.

Sincerely,

Ty Walkland
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