

**Teachers' Narrative Understandings of Parents:  
Living and Reliving "Possible Lives" as Professionals**

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**Abstract**

In this article, I explore aspects of a narrative inquiry with former teacher candidates to understand how living out a *curriculum of parents* (Pushor, 2011; Pushor, 2013) in their university coursework deepened their knowledge and prompted questions about discourses and representations of parents and families. I focus on two former teacher candidates, Cat and Carly, who tell stories of their experiences within a curriculum of parents and then subsequently as teachers. I explore the "possible lives" (Bruner, 1987/2004) they imagine for themselves as teachers and what teacher "life narratives" (Bruner, 1987/2004) they construct and reconstruct in their practice. What is made visible is that when preservice teachers are supported to unpack and examine, with deliberation, ways of living and telling stories of parents, and the philosophical, pedagogical and practical conceptualizations that underpin such living and telling, a *curriculum of parents* offers preservice teachers possibilities for interrupting habitual teacher life narratives and for guiding the construction and reconstruction of new teacher life narratives (Bruner, 1987/2004).

**Exploring with Teachers the Place and Voice of Parents on School Landscapes**

**A Personal Story of Experience**

I stood at the doorway of the bright and modern junior high school classroom, welcoming educators into the professional development session I was about to facilitate on creating a place and voice for parents on the "school landscape" (Clandinin & Connelly, 1995a, 1995b). When the room was filled and everyone was seated in clusters around the tables, and with the formal introductions behind us, I opened the session by positioning myself first as a parent. I told stories of experiences I had had on the school landscape as a parent of my three school-aged sons. As I described these experiences – experiences such as being scheduled for a six or seven minute parent teacher conference, volunteering at the school but not being allowed to enter the staffroom, having my main role as a parent be one of fundraising or preparation of classroom materials, being asked to sign a form affirming that I had read the school newsletter, and being requested to address teachers by Mr., Mrs. or Ms. but being addressed by my first name in return – educators nodded, shared comments in response or told their own stories of how these practices were being lived out in their particular contexts, affirming that these were typical scenarios in their schools as well.

After this storied exchange, to provide the educators with time for an in-depth examination of these common practices, I gave each group a piece of chart paper with one of the practices listed on the top. I asked them in their small group to discuss the practice they had been given and to determine what teacher beliefs or assumptions about parents, about teachers, or about schooling underlie the practice. I invited them, first, to make visible the beliefs and assumptions and then, second, to interrogate the identified beliefs and assumptions more deeply, collectively or individually affirming them as ones they supported or challenging them based on their own lived experiences and teacher knowledge. Conversation erupted quickly and passionately as the small groups of educators discussed the practices, focusing on why these practices were in place and if the practices reflected beliefs and assumptions to which they subscribed.

As I moved throughout the room conversing with each of the groups, and as I listened to each group share some of their thinking with the whole group, I was taken aback by how deeply rooted their notion was of teacher as holder of expert knowledge and how strongly they defended the hierarchical positioning of teachers implied within practices such as the out of bounds staffroom and their requests to be addressed by parents as Mr., Mrs. or Ms. There was a great deal of discussion within the group about how they had earned their degree as a teacher and had therefore earned a position of authority. Many of them spoke of parents as less knowing than teachers or unknowing about children, teaching or learning, and in some instances the teachers spoke of parents as uncaring or deficit. The educators justified six or seven minute parent teacher conferences in light of their workload and their feeling that six or seven minutes was enough time for them to impart essential information to parents. Throughout the conversation, the focus remained on their agenda, what they needed to do their job, and how parents assisted them in doing their job well or got in their way.

### **The Story of School, The Story of Teacher**

I left this session with so many wonders. The group of educators with whom I had spent the last few hours were obviously “good” teachers: committed to their profession, caring about students, and desirous of achieving strong outcomes. Why, then, were they resistant to seeing things as if they could be otherwise with parents? Why did the educators hold on so passionately to the familiar and taken-for-granted story of “teacher”? Why did they struggle to see common practices occurring on their school landscapes through the eyes of a parent? What might it take to have them awaken to and problematize the often unconscious, unstated, or implicit beliefs and assumptions about parents, teachers, and schools that underlie their lived actions as educators? What might it take to have them imagine new possibilities for living out the “story of teacher” and the “story of school” (Clandinin & Connelly, 1995b), possibilities in which teachers work *in relationship with* parents to educate children?

The story of school is a well-known and well-rehearsed story, with a long and complex history. Typically, teachers are cast as protagonists within this narrative of school, seen to be principal characters who possess the knowledge, skills, and positioning to support and facilitate the learning and development of the children in their care. As teachers enter the field, it is common for them take up their prescribed role as characters within this story as they live and relive versions of the plotline (Pushor, 2001). Bruner (1987/2004) stated that the construction of

“life narratives” is dependent upon cultural conventions and language usage (p. 694). Therefore, “life narratives obviously reflect the prevailing theories about ‘possible lives’ that are part of one’s culture” (p. 694). What teachers see as “possible lives” for themselves as teachers is shaped by the curriculum of their preservice teacher education programs, the conventions and conceptions being lived out on the school landscape of which they become a part, and dominant societal narratives about schools and teachers.

### **Preservice Teacher Education: Explicit, Null and Hidden Curriculum**

Preservice teacher education curriculum, as with any curriculum, has many forms: the explicit curriculum which reflects what is present in the curriculum, the null curriculum which names those things which get left out and go unaddressed, and the hidden curriculum which is latent (Turner-Vorbeck, 2008) and which is learned, in this instance, through such things as the behaviors and attitudes of the teacher educators and the design or organization of the teacher education program and the experiences within it. What is important to note is that “[c]urriculum sends messages to [teacher candidates]. Some messages are acknowledged and openly sanctioned, some are implicit and silently supported, and others are unrecognized or even subliminally suggested” (Turner-Vorbeck, 2008, p. 178).

#### **Explicit curriculum.**

In the College of Education at the University of Saskatchewan at which I teach, our faculty is in the first year of the implementation of a new teacher education program. After three years of intense debate about what the essential curricula are in preparing teacher candidates for the profession of teaching, and after one year of a partial pilot offering, we are fully immersed in teaching our new curricula. Our explicit, required curricula include the courses *Educator Identity in Contexts: Anti-Oppressive and Ethical Beginnings*; *Situated Learners: Contexts of Learning and Development*; *Education in Society: Structures and Systems*; *Languages of Knowing*; *Relational Curriculum Making: Intersections of Educators, Learners, Contexts and Subject Matters*; *Pedagogies of Place: Context Based Learning*; *Field Experience: Learning in Context*; *Field Experience: Relational Curriculum Making in Practice: Planning, Adapting and Assessing*; complemented by specific subject matter courses in core curriculum areas. As deMarris and LeCompte (1999) noted,

Since schools [and universities] are highly political institutions, the content and form of instruction depend in part upon which socioeconomic interests wield power in society ....  
...[I]nterest groups differ radically in their beliefs about the purpose of schooling [and teacher education], its role in transmitting ideas and values, and which ideas and values should be taught. (p. 228)

The ideas and values of our new teacher education program are readily apparent, in the titles of the courses and, particularly, in the course descriptions. There is a strong emphasis in our curriculum on anti-racist pedagogy, on issues of social justice, and on the significance of context to both teaching and learning. It is interesting to note, though, that families are not named explicitly as a societal structure worthy of attention nor are parents explicitly named as a marginalized group in discussions of power, authority and hierarchy within schools. Further, the contexts to which our courses attend center around place in environmental ways, societal issues

such as contexts of poverty, and cultural contexts, but not explicitly to contexts of homes or families. While there is a large – and growing – body of literature on parents and schooling which calls for a rethinking of the representation of families in schools and in curriculum (see the edited works of Miller Marsh & Turner-Vorbeck, 2010 and Turner-Vorbeck and Miller Marsh, 2008) and which foregrounds the positive impact the engagement of parents has on children’s academic achievement and their attainment of other educational outcomes (Henderson & Mapp, 2002; Hoover-Dempsey et al., 2005; Jeynes, 2005; Redding et al., 2004), it is a body of literature that was not made central in our newly revised teacher education program. My concern with the creation of an explicit teacher education curriculum in which a discussion of families and the role they play in children’s schooling and education is backgrounded or rendered inconsequential is that it will continue to reproduce a “story of teacher” and a “story of school” (Clandinin & Connelly, 1995b) that will go unquestioned and will continue to perpetuate a public education system which is hierarchical in relation to its positioning of parents and family members.

### **Null curriculum.**

The absence of explicit curriculum about parents, families, and schooling is not unique to our newly revised teacher education program.

In programs in [English-speaking] colleges and universities across Canada it is difficult to find curriculum, in the form of designated courses within a calendar of offerings, intended to invite teacher candidates to develop philosophical, theoretical and practical underpinnings related to engaging parents in their children’s teaching and learning. While the topic of parents may be touched on briefly in some courses, it is a topic which is largely absent in the curriculum of teacher education. (Pushor, 2011, p. 219)

When the topic of parents is addressed, particularly in courses that address legal aspects of schooling or teacher liability or safety, teacher candidates receive messages about being cautious with parents – keeping careful records and documentation as evidence to support their judgments or decisions in case they are challenged by parents, having their principal sit in on a parent teacher conference they perceive may be difficult, avoiding home visits. Implicit in this teaching is the message that parents are people to be wary of or individuals who pose a potential threat to a teacher. As Eisner (1994, as cited in Turner-Vorbeck, 2008, p. 181) stated, the gap left by null curriculum “is not simply a neutral void; it has important effects on the kinds of options one is able to consider, the alternatives that one can examine, and the perspectives from which one can view a situation or problems” (p. 9). A null curriculum sends messages to many prospective teachers that working with parents is work done with care and caution, and only when necessary.

### **Hidden curriculum.**

I dropped into the faculty lounge within our College of Education one day at lunch time. A colleague, who was supervising a group of teacher candidates’ internships in the schools, was animatedly telling a story. He recounted how he had recently arrived in one teacher candidate’s classroom to find her distraught that one of her students had brought a lizard to school that day which the child’s family had captured and was keeping captive in a container. When the teacher candidate expressed to him her concern about a living thing being kept in captivity, he advised her to take it outside and let it go. When the child returned home without the lizard and told her

mom what had taken place, the mom called the school. The parent was emotional, explaining that the lizard had been a family pet, and distraught because all of her children were in tears. What surprised and puzzled me about the unfolding conversation taking place in the faculty lounge was that no one problematized the actions of the college supervisor or his advice to the teacher candidate. No one acknowledged that his actions in that moment, to advise the teacher candidate to let the lizard go without discussing the situation with the family who owned the pet, were an enactment of a hidden curriculum in which his norms and attitudes about the lack of importance of interpersonal relations between teachers and parents and about the marginalized positioning of parents within the organizational structure of schooling were being taught to the intern. Instead, the listeners to his story focused on how to deal with difficult parents. No one stood in the position of the parent or her children as they unpacked this story. As a result, the unacknowledged or subliminal message communicated by the college supervisor to the teacher candidate, through his hidden curriculum, legitimized a hierarchical sense of the teacher's power and authority over parents.

Moving from my story of experience back to the research, I noted that participants in this narrative inquiry<sup>1</sup> also wrote and spoke about the presence of unspoken, implicit, or subliminal messages arising out of a hidden curriculum in their teacher education programs which reify a notion of teacher as someone in a position of power, not just over children but also over their parents and family members, someone who is intended to be in charge rather than someone who is engaged relationally in knowledge sharing and decision making with children and their families.

Caitlin [Miazga] wrote [in a course reflection in the final term of her undergraduate teacher education program] of the “sense of entitlement” she believed her education degree would – and should – give her as a teacher; as someone with five years of university education, and the professional knowledge and status resulting from a degree in education. As a second year teacher at the time of our first research conversation, Ryan [Digneau] began his conversation by moving back to the time and the place of his undergraduate education. He spoke of the sense that was instilled in him that a teacher should have control – control of children, control of time, control of the plans. Knowing that such an image of control was impossible to live up to but feeling the need to maintain the image, Ryan accepted the plotline of teaching behind closed doors. “I can’t let [parents] in because I’ll be judged.” [Apparent] in Caitlin’s and Ryan’s acceptance of this dominant plotline [is] their sense that to be a professional is to be the one in charge. (Pushor, 2011, p. 231)

Caitlin and Ryan were inducted into an unquestioned and hegemonic teacher life narrative in two different ways. First, they experienced a lack of explicit teacher education curriculum which attended to philosophical, pedagogical or practical considerations underpinning teachers’ positioning in relation to parents. Second, they experienced a hidden curriculum which perpetuated and silently supported a story of school in which teachers are positioned as *the* expert knowers of children, teaching and learning, discounting parents as also being legitimate

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<sup>1</sup> The four participants in this narrative inquiry include Caitlin Miazga, Ryan Digneau, Cat Terleski and Carly Robson.

knowers in these areas, discounting parents as being holders of complementary knowledge valuable in the processes of schooling. Bruner (1987/2004) asserted,

... the ways of telling and the ways of conceptualizing that go with them become so habitual that they finally become recipes for structuring experience itself, for laying down routes into memory, for not only guiding the life narrative up to the present but directing it into the future. (p. 708)

Returning to the story I recounted of teachers' responses during our professional development conversation on the place and voice of parents and teachers on school landscapes, it is clear how a teacher life narrative, influenced by null and hidden curriculum relating to parents in a preservice teacher education program, is taken up and lived out by teachers on their school landscapes. "Prevailing theories" (Bruner, 1987/2004, p. 694) in teacher education, hegemonic school structures, and dominant societal conventions all perpetuate a story of school in which teachers take up their habitual and unquestioned position on the school landscape, living out their teacher life narratives as individuals possessing knowledge, power and authority, while parents continue to be habitually positioned in the margins of the school landscape as individuals without knowledge, or with less valued knowledge, of children, teaching and learning.

### **A Narrative Inquiry into a *Curriculum of Parents***

So how do we, as teacher educators, present teacher candidates with alternatives to taking up this dominant teacher life narrative? How do we create opportunities for teacher candidates to imagine other "possible lives" (Bruner, 1987/2004, p. 694) which they may live out as teachers on school landscapes? Bruner asserted that the cognitive and linguistic processes that we engage as we tell our life narratives enable us to structure our perceptual experiences and to "purpose-build the very 'events' of a life" (p. 694). How then can an explicit and deliberate teacher education curriculum – a *curriculum of parents* (Pushor, 2011; Pushor, 2013) – invite teacher candidates to engage in a cognitive and linguistic exploration of a range of philosophical, theoretical, and practical considerations relating to their present and future work with parents and families? How might purpose-building curricular experiences with teacher candidates provide them with opportunities to create and live out new teacher life narratives?

The field text to which I now turn is situated within a larger "narrative inquiry" (Connelly & Clandinin, 1990; Clandinin & Connelly, 2000) in which I am engaged with Caitlin, Ryan, Cat, and Carly. The purpose of the larger study is to come to understand how living out a *curriculum of parents* in their university coursework may have deepened their knowledge and prompted questions about discourses and representations of families, and the influence these representations have on curriculum making in schools; conditions which invite parent/family engagement in children's teaching and learning; and the complexities and multiplicity inherent within parent/family engagement. Specifically, with each teacher I am exploring if and how living out a *curriculum of parents* impacted her/his beliefs and assumptions as a teacher, curricular and instructional practices, and positioning in relation to parents. As the teachers tell stories of their experiences (Connelly & Clandinin, 1990) within the *curriculum of parents* and then subsequently as teachers, I am interested in understanding what elements (content/processes) of the *curriculum of parents* they foreground and why, and what the implications may be for teacher education and for ongoing teacher professional development.

The four participants in this narrative inquiry were in their teacher education programs at different times, and/or worked with me in varied courses with different purposes and outcomes. Two of the participants, Cat in 2007 and Carly in 2009, enrolled in an elective course I offer entitled, *Teaching and Learning in Community Education*. Within this course, they both chose to engage in a women's empowerment book club. Because this was the only common experience shared by the four participants, I use it now to examine the impact of the two women's engagement in one aspect of a *curriculum of parents*.

### **One Purpose-Built Curricular Event: A Women's Empowerment Book Club**

The context of Cat's and Carly's experiences with the women's empowerment book club, one purpose-built event in the course entitled, *Teaching and Learning in Community Education*, is situated within the aim and outcomes of the course.

My aim is to enhance teacher candidates' knowledge of and experience with community education. Among the breadth of course outcomes, my specified outcomes around a *curriculum of parents* include: developing a sound philosophy of parent engagement and understanding how to translate that philosophy into practice, developing an understanding of what parent knowledge is and how to use parent knowledge alongside teacher knowledge in decisions regarding teaching and learning, re-conceptualizing the schooling of children in the context of family and community, and learning ways as an educator to step out of the school and into the community.

A significant element of this course is the teacher candidates' engagement in a 20 hour community education project. Situated in one school for the term, teacher candidates design their project alongside school staff. (Pushor, 2011, pp. 227-228)

Both Cat and Carly facilitated a women's empowerment book club with mothers at the schools in which they were situated. Cat, alongside another teacher candidate Amy, established a book club at a school which had never before offered this possibility to parents. They created an invitation which the school sent home to parents in the school community. Parents who chose to join the women's book club gathered at the school for an hour or two each week while their children were in class. At the first book club gathering, Cat and Amy introduced a number of novels to the group of women, and the women collectively decided what book they would like to read. Cec Chambul, the community school coordinator, purchased copies of the selected novel for the book club participants. As the book club unfolded over a three month time period, Cat developed a close friendship with one of the mother's in the group. Occasionally they would go for lunch or coffee, apart from the scheduled book club time. In one recorded conversation, Cat told a story of her experience with the book club.

#### **Cat's story of experience.**

It wasn't something I would have thought teachers could do. Thinking about your role as a teacher and thinking about how, basically, you should be interacting with students and with parents. Interacting with parents is usually seen as in conferences or in a setting where the teacher is behind the desk and parents are on the other side of the desk. It was

really interesting to step back from that role as a teacher candidate at that time. It was a really nice way to start my career.

... What was so interesting about [the book club] was being able to get a chance to talk with women - not about their kids, and not about what their kids were doing in class, or what about their grades, or things like that. That wasn't my job there in the book club - my role. It was funny, we met. We had this book we were supposed to read - but - sometimes that didn't happen and we ended up talking about other sorts of things. It was really nice to come together - Amy and I, we would bring in food. There's something about sharing conversation and food together that really brings people together. Out of that book club I ended up developing a relationship with a woman there - Rebecca [a pseudonym] - a parent there.

So many of those women had completely different lives than I had. And yet we could connect. A lot of the time there's such a disconnect between parents and teachers. And you're seen just as that. You're seen only as parent, only as teacher. With the book club, and meeting the women in that way, you're able to develop friendships. They shared things with me that really helped me learn about the community and about experiences they are living and their children are living that otherwise I would have had such a superficial understanding of.

[From the book club,] you could start the year with so much extra knowledge and understanding. You're able to make connections. Then people are more apt to open up to each other. Like even the women in the club, some of the women knew each other but some not. And they could develop friendships and connections through that. That would just open up the opportunity for such a rich environment. And the stories that I learned from those women, they have valuable knowledge to share with me, with other teachers, and in terms of what happens in the classroom.

Rebecca had really been involved in a lot of gang-related activity and drugs and all this sort of thing. She had actually spent time in the penitentiary. I remember leaving that lunch and thinking, "Wow, this woman had this life that seems so extreme and so hard and with so many challenges and yet here we are together talking about *Where the Heart Is* (Letts, 1995). It really makes you take a step back and think about things that are important. Honestly, I would have never thought I could connect in the way that I did with someone who had a life so different than mine. It was humbling. I realized how we can come together and connect over our commonalities.

You know, Deb, going into that book club I didn't know anything about the women. ...I didn't have any information. It was only what [Rebecca] shared with me that I was able to come to know and just look at it and connect on commonalities. I wonder if knowing that information initially, if people would tend to disconnect and say, "Oh, that person is unlike me."

From the book club, I learned I can connect with people that I don't know - based on something that can be set up. I can create situations or circumstances that can enable relationships to be formed and I guess just really break down barriers that might happen with assumptions and beliefs that we've grown up with, that we've been engrained with. It's a good thing to know I can connect. (Recorded conversation, April 20, 2010)

Carly, in contrast to Cat, facilitated a women's empowerment book club at a school in which such an offering to parents was already established. She worked with Shannon Peters, the Community School Coordinator, to get a sense of the novels in which the mothers and other family members may be interested. She began her new offering of the book club by discussing with the women a selection of possible novels. Through school funds, Carly then purchased copies of the selected novel, *Firefly Lane* (Hannah, 2008), for each book club participant. One morning each week, after the women brought their children to school, they gathered in the nutrition room around a kitchen-style table, with a cup of coffee or tea and a plate of fresh muffins, to discuss the novel and their lives.

### **Carly's story of experience.**

I have very fond memories of the book club. I have an overwhelming sense of belonging in the women's empowerment book club. We met in the nutrition room and we sat at the table in the kitchen. I think I was really taken by how we all just took to one another. Not that our conversations were all in agreement but I just felt that was a time that was very - almost sacred. We would talk about the book and then the conversation would just carry us somewhere else. It was a safe place to have conversations with parents and community members, to build relationships with them.

I think I had a misconception that engaging parents has to be in direct relation with the curriculum. I was engaging with parents. I wasn't specifically sitting down with parents to talk about their kids' grades - or their homework. The book club was a way to engage with parents, to build relationships with them.

### **Unpacking Cat's and Carly's living and telling.**

In any narrative inquiry, the researcher, together with participants, is working to capture the multiple levels on which the inquiry is unfolding. As Connelly and Clandinin (1990) noted,

[P]eople are both living their stories in an ongoing experiential text and telling their stories in words as they reflect upon life and explain themselves to others. ...[L]ife is also a matter of growth toward an imagined future and, therefore, involves retelling stories and attempts at reliving stories. A person is, at once, engaged in living, telling, retelling, and reliving stories. (p. 4)

In our *curriculum of parents* in the preservice teacher education course, *Teaching and Learning in Community Education*, Cat and Carly lived stories of experience in the women's empowerment book clubs. Through our narrative inquiry, they pulled forward those stories and they told them in our research conversations. I turn now to unpacking these lived and told stories, with the purpose of making visible Cat's and Carly's developing reconceptualization of schooling as situated in the context of parents, families, and communities. I then move to unpacking their retold and relived stories which unfolded as they entered the field of education.

In this second unpacking, I attend to how their engagement with parents in the women's empowerment book clubs shaped their beliefs and practices in their early years as inservice teachers.

***Attending to parents – challenging engrained beliefs and assumptions.***

In their narratives, both Cat and Carly used language which captured the profound impact of their lived experiences alongside the mothers in their book clubs. Cat spoke of how her book club experience caused her to “take a step back and think about things that are important” and to feel humbled by her opportunity to connect with Rebecca, a mother with a life so different from her own. Carly spoke of her “fond memories” of her book club experience and of how “almost sacred” that time felt for her. In their tellings, we witness the significant impact their experiences with the women had on who they are and who they are becoming as teachers. Bruner (2002) stated, “There is no such thing as an intuitively obvious and essential self to know, one that just sits there ready to be portrayed in words. Rather, we constantly construct and reconstruct our selves to meet the needs of the situations we encounter ...” (p. 64). Cat and Carly made visible their processes of reconstructing themselves in regard to how they attend to parents and why they see this as important, challenge their previously engrained assumptions and beliefs, and imagine new possibilities for their future practices as teachers.

***Engaging with parents – outside of “ritualized encounters.”***

Living alongside the mothers in their book clubs, Cat and Carly were introduced to a ‘possible life’ – a teacher life narrative – that was previously unimagined. Cat expressed this sense of interruption when she said, “It wasn’t something I would have thought teachers could do.” Carly, too, demonstrated that her former understanding of interactions between parents and teachers fell within the bounds of “ritualized encounters” (Lawrence-Lightfoot, 2003), those regularly scheduled and structured interactions such as when the teacher is at the front of the room, speaking about curriculum at a parent night, or across a desk or table at a parent-teacher conference. She shared, “I think I had a misconception that engaging parents has to be in direct relationship with the curriculum.” Through their engagement in the book clubs, Cat and Carly came to see the value of attending to parents as people in their own right, as valued individuals with more identities than a single identity as mothers. They saw the value of engaging with parents in informal contexts, in conversations around kitchen tables or over lunch or a cup of coffee. Rather than perpetuating their separate and distanced role as teachers, Cat and Carly joined the circles of women, enjoying the women and their place alongside them.

***Developing deep and authentic relationships.***

Within this new teacher life narrative, the friendships Cat and Carly formed with the parents in their book clubs marked a significant reconstruction of their notion of parent teacher relationships. While “partnership” is a common word used in the field of literature on parents (Epstein, 1995, 2001; Henderson, Mapp, Johnson & Davies, 2007), partnership is often understood by teachers to reflect the compliance of parents to do the things which teachers request of them – supervising on field trips, attending meetings, supporting school events and

initiatives, helping their children with homework (Benson, 1998; Cairney & Munsie, 1992; Pushor, 2001). Cat and Carly, in contrast, moved beyond this understanding of partnership to take up a notion of relationships defined by deep and authentic connections. Carly spoke of how the members of her book club “all just took to one another” and of how “the conversation would just carry us somewhere else.” Cat noted that “meeting the women in that way, you’re able to develop friendships.” She spoke of the sharing they did, the stories they told and the connections they made because of the personal and intimate nature of their interactions. During their experiences in their book clubs, Cat and Carly constructed for themselves a new teacher life narrative in which they see themselves as friends with parents.

### ***Deconstructing the notion of “other.”***

Some of what occurred for Cat and Carly as they reconstructed themselves in the context of the book clubs is that they deconstructed their notion of “other.” “Constructions of ‘otherness’ occur through various discourses, wherever *we* are *it* and *they* are *the other*, in the definition of the *essential* versus the *inessential*, when *one* is *the absolute* and *the other* is *the subject*, and when we define *the other* relative to *ourselves*” (Madrid, 2001, as cited in Turner-Vorbeck & Miller Marsh, 2008, p. 2). Carly shared her “overwhelming sense of belonging in the women’s empowerment book club.” Cat noted that Rebecca, a mom with whom she became friends, had a hard life, one that in many ways was extreme and very different from Cat’s own. As she spent time alongside Rebecca, Cat connected with Rebecca, coming to know and value the commonalities they shared. Cat formed a relationship with Rebecca in which she saw Rebecca “big” (Greene, 1995).

To see things or people big, one must resist viewing other human beings as mere objects or chess pieces and view them in their integrity and particularity instead. One must see from the point of view of the participant in the midst of what is happening if one is to be privy to the plans people make, the initiatives they take, the uncertainties they face. (p. 10)

As Cat reconstructed a teacher life narrative in which she saw Rebecca big, with humanity and strengths, she stepped away from the judgments, hostility, and deficit thinking prevalent among teachers about parents whose race, class, culture or language diverge from the white, middle class norm (Noguera, 2011). She acknowledged that being in relationship with Rebecca, and with the other members of the book club, broke down barriers “that might happen with assumptions and beliefs that we’ve grown up with, that we’ve been engrained with.” Cat and Carly both developed a sense of ‘possible lives’ as teachers in which they saw themselves as a part of the parent community rather than set apart from it.

### ***Learning from parent knowledge.***

Something else that occurred for Cat and Carly as they reconstructed themselves in the context of the book clubs is that they simultaneously reconstructed their understanding of parents as individuals who hold knowledge critical to schooling. Earlier in this piece, I told a story of how teachers at a middle school conference, when I asked them to make conscious the

assumptions and beliefs underlying their practice, defended their scheduling of six or seven minute parent teacher conferences, justifying the short time frame in light of their feeling that six or seven minutes gave them enough time to impart essential information to parents. Living out a dominant and unquestioned teacher life narrative in which they were positioned as the ones who know about students, teaching and learning, these teachers did not see the need for more time in parent teacher conferences in which parents could share their knowledge – and teachers could learn from what parents know. Cat, in contrast, having spent time listening to the stories of the women and being in conversation with them, learned that parents “have valuable knowledge to share with me, with other teachers, and in terms of what happens in the classroom.” She spoke of how she learned about the community from the women, about their lived experiences as parents, and about the lived experiences of the children. Cat recognized that without this knowledge, she would only have a superficial understanding of them and their lives. She noted that she would begin her year differently as a teacher, having such a depth of knowledge and understanding. In the context of the women’s empowerment book club, Cat reconstructed a ‘possible life’ in which she saw herself as a learner with and from parents as well as a knower. Reciprocally, she reconstructed a ‘possible life’ for parents to live alongside her as a teacher in which they are cast as knowers as well as learners with and from her.

### ***Doing something.***

Within Cat’s and Carly’s ongoing reconstructions of their teacher life narratives, there is a sense of agentivity (Monteagudo, 2011), a sense that they can create a new story for themselves as teachers. “On one hand, self is a product of the conditions and contexts in which it operates. On the other hand, self is constructed and transformed through the stories it receives, creates and shares” (p. 299). By living alongside mothers in the women’s empowerment book clubs, Cat and Carly situated themselves in a new context of parent teacher relationships. They took up a new story of what it means to be *in relationship with* parents. As the women shared their stories with one another inside of that relationship and as they created new stories together, Cat and Carly learned that as teachers they can be active agents who, in future contexts and possible lives, “create situations or circumstances” to engage with parents and to build relationships with them. They can “do something” (Amendt, 2008) to create a new teacher life narrative.

Bruner (1987/2004) stated, “In the end, we become the autobiographical narratives by which we ‘tell about’ our lives” (p. 694). As Cat and Carly told about their experiences within the women’s empowerment book clubs, how much of their “self-telling” has “achieve[d] the power to ... purpose-build the very ‘events’ of a life” (p. 694), particularly a teaching life? How may their reconstruction of their teacher life narratives through their book club experiences, have carried forward into the future and influenced their “ways of life” (p. 695) as practicing teachers? I turn now to stories from their early teaching experiences, to consider these questions in their retelling and reliving of their stories of experience (Connelly & Clandinin, 1990).

### **Purpose-Building the Events of a Teaching Life**

#### **Cat.**

After graduation in 2006 with her Bachelor of Education degree, Cat moved from Saskatchewan, Canada to Mexico to teach. At the end of her first year, wanting to continue to

expand her international teaching experience, Cat accepted a teaching position in Ecuador. When I spoke with her to learn if or how her experiences with a *curriculum of parents* in her undergraduate teacher education program had influenced her beliefs and practices as a teacher, Cat was a third year teacher, in the spring of her second year of teaching in Ecuador.

### **Cat's story of retelling and reliving.**

At this point now I find myself thinking back to those times [in our *Teaching and Learning in Community Education* course]. [The women's empowerment book club] was an ideal situation. My current situation is very different. I'm trying to make some changes in my practice now with how I interact with parents. ...There is a sign right outside my school that says, in Spanish, "Parents are not permitted beyond this point. Students only." If they need to see me, they have to make an appointment, but only on Tuesdays and Thursdays.

I wanted to send like a welcome letter to the parents, introducing myself, things like that, and my admin says, "Don't put anything in writing." I sent something anyway. That was really valuable. I'm teaching four classes. I sent a parent input form - a getting to know the kids in my class. I sent this kind of basic form - 'cause I'm not always sure of the language. They're telling me strengths of their child, an area where they can improve, how they see their kids academically, socially. And Deb, you would be surprised at the things they told me. Some parents told me one word answers. Others attached another whole sheet.

It's funny; I've been here for almost two years. Parents have always been told, "No you can't come in, stay out, make an appointment, talk to the secretary," that kind of message. Just opening this up was big. The things the parents told me - we're going through a divorce, the child's grandma died, or just a huge wealth of knowledge they shared. They've never had a voice in anything, you could see. They're surprised, "I have a say?" They're surprised someone has asked them to share what they know about their child. (Recorded conversation, April 20, 2010)

### **Carly.**

After graduation in 2009 with her Bachelor of Education degree, Carly accepted a teaching position in a rural Saskatchewan community, near where she grew up. When I spoke with her to learn if or how her experiences with a *curriculum of parents* in her undergraduate teacher education program had influenced her beliefs and practices as a teacher, Carly was in the spring of her first year of teaching in a Kindergarten classroom.

With her previous experience with the women's empowerment book club being so positive, Carly decided she would like to facilitate a parents' book club in her first year as a teacher. At a staff meeting during the opening non-instructional days of the new school year, and during the staff's selection of their extra-curricular activities, Carly spoke up, indicating that

she would like to host a parent book club that year as part of her extra-curricular responsibilities. She received the approval and support of her administration and the school staff.

Carly set the stage for the establishment of the book club at parent teacher conferences in November. She also advertised it in the school newsletter and through word of mouth. Although Carly promoted her new book club as a parents' book club, she ended up with only women joining. While the book club was smaller in January when it began, it had grown to a group of 12 women, with at least eight in attendance any time they gather, when she told me of the book club in spring. Of note is that while all of the women who were attending the book club were parents in this rural community, approximately half of them were also members of the school staff.

The book club meets in a common room in a family centre attached to the school that has a big board table. Carly brings in living room lamps, tea and food to create a more inviting and home-like atmosphere. Carly said that the way it had played out to date, they had never met for less than two hours when they gathered together. They had just chosen their third book, at the time of our research conversation.

### **Carly's story of retelling and reliving.**

The book club is about the parents, not about their kids. We have lots of conversations that are mom conversations. It's not so much about the students.

I'm thinking about one mom in my current book club. She attended the school her daughter does now. Her daughter is in my Kindergarten class. This mom talks about how she really struggled with school. For the sake of her children she is working to do everything she can in the best interests of her children. She is very open about her own struggle with reading as a child and that she didn't do well in school. She is anxious because she wants her children's experiences to be different than her own. I have so much of a better understanding of her hopes and dreams for her child and of all the worries she has because of the things we've shared in the book club. Because of the book club, this mom is now reading, she is reading with her child, and her child is seeing her read. I think it does a lot more for me to support the mom so she can model for her child rather than me telling the child reading is important. I have the opportunity to work with her child for 10 months. The mom will be with her for her whole life. (Recorded conversation, April 20, 2010)

### **Unpacking Cat's and Carly's retelling and reliving.**

Both Cat and Carly began their teaching careers with a conscious and well-articulated stance regarding the place and voice of parents on school landscapes. Their experiences alongside the women in the book clubs had challenged them to explore a range of philosophical, theoretical, and practical considerations relating to their positioning as teachers in relation with parents. Shaped by these experiences, they carried a possible teacher life narrative with them to their new school landscapes, one that diverged from the habitual and taken-for-granted life narrative taken up by many teachers. Cat's reconstructed narrative gave her the strength to reach out to parents and to invite their telling of their stories of themselves and their families, even when Cat was told not to. "My admin says, 'Don't put anything in writing.' I sent something

anyway. That was really valuable.” Carly’s reconstructed narrative prompted her to establish a parents’ book club as a way of building relationships with parents and coming to know the community, even though she was a first year teacher on an unfamiliar school landscape far different from the one she had just been on. What strikes me with both Cat’s and Carly’s decisions is that, regardless of the vulnerable way in which they were positioned, they lived the teacher life narrative that they had created for themselves. Indeed, as “[their] way of telling about [themselves] change[d], ... [their] accounts [came] to take control of [their] ways of life” (Bruner, 1987/2004, p. 295). Who they became in their living of an explicit *curriculum of parents* in their preservice teacher education was who they continued to be as teachers.

### ***Changing the positioning of teachers and parents.***

A significant impact of Cat’s and Carly’s choosing to live a new teacher life narrative is that it created new possibilities for parent life narratives on their school landscapes as well. When Cat sent her parent input form home, she not only shifted how she was positioned as a teacher but she also shifted the positioning of parents. “They’ve never had a voice in anything, you could see. They’re surprised, ‘I have a say?’ They’re surprised someone has asked them to share what they know about their child.” Carly, too, created a change for parents on her school landscape. “The book club is about the parents, not about their kids. We have lots of mom conversations.” “This capacity of narratives for imagining and constructing other worlds, and for trying to make them a reality, is an essential feature of the human capacity to transform our own selves as well as our social contexts” (Monteagudo, 2011, p. 298). As Cat and Carly lived new narratives, they created possibilities for repositioning parents on their school landscapes and, thus, for transforming the contexts of those school landscapes.

### ***Honoring parents’ role in the education of their children.***

In Carly’s story of reliving, she positions the mom of one of her Kindergarten students as the most significant individual in her daughter’s learning. As Carly stands alongside the mom in her daughter’s schooling, she honors the parent’s hopes and dreams for her child’s lifelong education and she foregrounds the mom as the person who will be with the child for her entire journey. In living out her new teacher life narrative, Carly spends time with the mom in the book club, supporting the mom so that the mom can model literacy for her child. “Because of the book club, this mom is now reading, she is reading with her child, and her child is seeing her read.” Carly lives a teacher life narrative in which she, as a teacher in school, redefines her role as one in support of the parent, an educator of her daughter “from birth to forever” (Pushor, 2013). In Carly’s teacher life narrative we see the distinction she is making between schooling and education (Pushor, 2013) and the way in which she understands how schooling experiences can play an important part in supporting a child’s lifelong education. Rather than seeing the school as “the site of the ‘main game’” (Cairney & Munsie, 1992, p. 1), Carly sees the school, and her role within it as a teacher, as a support to the main game.

Returning to Bruner’s (1987/2004) statement, “In the end, we become the autobiographical narratives by which we ‘tell about’ our lives” (p. 694), we see that this is indeed so for Cat and Carly. They entered their early years of teaching with a reconstructed teacher life narrative, arising out of their experiences with the women’s empowerment book clubs. Cat felt so embedded within her reconstructed teacher life narrative that she continued to live it out, even

when her administration advised against it. In taking the risk to invite parents to share information with her about their families and their lives, Cat received an overwhelming response from parents. Seeing this response, the administration changed their position regarding teachers' contact with parents and began encouraging other teachers to reach out to parents in similar ways. Carly, also embedded within her teacher life narrative, shared her belief in the possibilities a parent book club offered both the families in their community and them as a staff. Given that no other such book club opportunity existed in their rural community and that Carly was strongly committed to such an extra-curricular offering, her administration and staff embraced her proposal. Taking an initial risk, then building from the support they subsequently received, Cat and Carly used the power of their reconstructed teacher life narratives to "purpose-build the very 'events' of a life" (p. 694). Cat purpose-built her parent input form as a way to continue to invite and honor the knowledge parents have to share with her and to contribute to what happens in the classroom. Carly purpose-built a parent book club, as attending to parents – as individuals in their own right – had become an engrained plotline in her teacher life narrative. We see, in fact, in both Cat's and Carly's "ways of life" that their valuing of being in relationship with parents, of walking alongside them in the schooling and education of their children, carried forward from their preservice teacher education program into their life narratives as practicing teachers.

### Closing Thoughts

In the first story I recounted in this paper regarding teachers' conversations about parents during a professional development session and again in my later story about a College supervisor's direction to a teacher candidate to release a child's lizard, I made visible how a teacher life narrative, shaped by null and hidden curriculum relating to parents, is habitually and unquestioningly taken up and lived out by teachers on their school landscapes. Cat's and Carly's stories of their experiences in the women's empowerment book clubs and then as beginning teachers enable us to see how this can be otherwise. When the typical and taken-for-granted teacher life narrative is interrupted by an explicit *curriculum of parents*, reconstructed teacher life narratives in which teachers and parents are positioned alongside one another on the school landscape become possible to imagine and to live.

An explicit *curriculum of parents* affords preservice teachers the opportunity to imagine 'possible lives' in relationship with parents. When they are supported to unpack and examine, with deliberation, ways of living and telling stories of parents and the philosophical, pedagogical, and practical conceptualizations that underpin the living and telling, a *curriculum of parents* offers preservice teachers possibilities for interrupting habitual, unquestioned or perhaps hegemonic teacher life narratives and for guiding the construction and reconstruction of new teacher life narratives in the present and into the future (Bruner, 1987/2004). When they become practicing teachers who live out these new teacher life narratives, they have the potential to redefine what it means to be a teacher, to position parents in integral ways in the schooling of children, and to transform classroom and school landscapes.

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