BREAKING THE SILENCE: BEGINNING TEACHERS SHARE PATHWAYS OUT OF THE PROFESSION

by

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A THESIS SUBMITTED IN PARTIAL FULFILLMENT OF THE REQUIREMENTS FOR THE DEGREE OF

MASTER OF ARTS

in

The Faculty of Graduate Studies

(Literacy Education)

THE UNIVERSITY OF BRITISH COLUMBIA
(Vancouver)

August 2010

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ABSTRACT

This thesis explores the story of teacher attrition, the story behind the statistic that tells us that as many as 50% of teachers leave the profession within their first five years (Clandinin, Downey, & Huber, 2009, p. 145; Glassford & Salinitri, 2007, p. 5; Ingersoll and Kralik, 2004, p. 2). Research also tells us that this is not all ‘healthy’ attrition (Borman, & Dowling, 2008), and that unhealthy teacher attrition places many burdens on the education system.

Using narrative inquiry, this thesis creates a space for the stories of beginning teachers. The reader is invited into a dialogue where these teachers share their experiences of induction, mentorship, bureaucracy, accountability, and their many experiences in the classroom in order to explore the complexities behind their decision to leave the classroom early.

As the practices of teacher mentorship and teacher induction grow, it is essential that beginning teachers be allowed to meaningfully contribute to the dialogue in a candid way. Narrative inquiry allows the complexity of teacher induction to remain complex. This inquiry leaves space for the reader to engage in the dialogue, to bring the inquiry into his or her own context. “It is a living composting” (Leggo, 2002, p. 2); fertile ground for future inquiry and critical discussion.
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ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

Thank you to my family, friends, and peers who have supported me throughout my time as a beginning teacher and during this degree. I know that I could not have accomplished anything without your generosity of spirit.

Thank you to the many mentors I have had. I have been so lucky to be supported both academically and creatively. I have had many ‘ah-ha’ moments over the past two years, some of the individuals responsible for inspiring these moments include (in alphabetical order): David Beare, George Belliveau, Diane Conrad, Julie Dunn, Kit Grauer, Rita Irwin, Carl Leggo, Lisa Loutzenheiser, Anne Phelan, Wayne Ross, Shifra Schonmann, and Belarie Zatzman. A special thank you to those who were part of my committee. I am very grateful for your support, encouragement, and validation.

Thank you to Peter and Holly Horwood for sharing their home. Thank you to Nelson and Brit for keeping me company and taking me for walks.

A special thank you to Nora and Katherine for sharing their stories with me.
DEDICATION

To members and friends of the EBS Education Consortium, and to beginning teachers everywhere.
Prologue

The first profound thing Maggie ever read was within the book *Cat’s Eye* by Margaret Atwood. She found the book in grade six, on the night the junior high school next to her elementary school had a fundraiser for their library. Maggie asked her Mom to take her, wanting to sneak a peek inside the school she would attend the following year.

Walking into a school in the evening time was strange; the darkness of the night was such a contrast to the fluorescently lit building. The library was surprisingly busy, and much larger than the one at Maggie’s school. The fundraiser was a book sale and the school was selling used books as well as many new ones, which were stacked in large piles on carts placed around the room.

Maggie had always enjoyed reading, but this was the first time she was met with the overwhelming scent of a vast number of books whose covers had yet to be opened. It is the smell of possibilities, one that wafts up and hits you in the nose when you crack a cover and begin to read a first page. *Cat’s Eye* caught her attention. She could not yet identify why but even then she was fond of nostalgia. She liked to envision the life she was going to lead from the perspective of her senior years. She wanted fond memories, to make the right decisions, and to not suffer from regrets. Perhaps the title intrigued her? What did *Cat’s Eye* mean? There were no cats on the cover, just a strange women in a cloak holding an orb and hovering above the stars. The book promised to be full of magic. Maggie held the book reverently and read the back cover. This was also the first Canadian story Maggie ever encountered.

Maggie was contemplating the possibilities of such a story when one of the librarians approached her and abruptly asked, “How old are you?”
“Eleven,” Maggie replied, wondering what she had done wrong. Perhaps the librarian knew she was just an elementary student, perhaps she should not have been there at all.

“That book is too old for you,” the librarian spat. “I’ll show you something more your age.”

“It’s for my Mom,” Maggie lied coolly. Maggie had already learned to rebel against such attempts at categorization, and she knew she read well above her grade level. “It’s a gift,” she finished.

Satisfied the lady went on her way and Maggie hugged the book close to her chest, now wondering what scandalous secrets it had to reveal. She looked for her Mom and found that she had already made a few selections and was lost in thought over another. Thankfully, her Mom did not look closely at Cat’s Eye as Maggie slipped her book in with the others.

As Maggie began to read Cat’s Eye she was overwhelmed by an intense feeling of identification. Elaine, the woman in the story, lived in Canada, and she was walking around the city of her childhood awash in nostalgia. Most chapters were about Elaine as a young girl and for the first time Maggie read about somebody who was just like her. Like Maggie, Elaine was subject to the various discomforts of winter; she too was sensitive to the swish-swish of snow pants that covered ill-fitting and unfashionable hand-me-downs. Elaine swished her way to a school-yard that like Maggie’s, had two entrances from the playground: one marked ‘boys’ and one marked ‘girls.’ The only difference was that Maggie’s school now used the ‘boys’ door for the younger grades and the ‘girls’ door for the older ones. (Maggie had always wondered if the doors had once been used as advertised, and now she knew!) Maggie noticed that Elaine’s playground was also filled at recess with groups of girls standing in clusters or skipping on the pavement, and of boys jumping and kicking and running. Like Maggie, Elaine also understood
the unwritten rules of boys. They knew the value of injuries obtained in sports, of grass stains on
the knees of jeans. Foreign to both of them were the rules of girls, mysterious and ever-changing.
As Elaine became a teenager, Maggie became even more fascinated, for now she was reading
into her future. Elaine and her friend Cordelia sit on a bus, staring defiantly at an elderly woman
who is silently sizing up their outfits. Elaine, the older Elaine who is remembering the story,
thinks that perhaps the old woman wasn’t sizing them up at all, ‘perhaps,’ she thinks, ‘I looked
like someone she once knew, her sister, or her mother.’

For Maggie this perspective was profound. It was a glimpse into what it felt like to age.
Age just meant you were older, you were still you, with all your memories intact. One day when
Maggie was old, she might look at a young girl who reminded her of her own mother. Maggie
also learned that the *swish-swish* of snow-pants and the games you play with girls, the hurts and
the transgressions, stay with you. They do not magically disappear when you finish high school,
as she had been told.

Perhaps reading *Cat’s Eye* is one of the things that inspired Maggie’s desire to teach
English. She had always wanted to be a teacher, but in elementary school teachers teach
everything. They are defined more by their routines and mannerisms than by what they teach.
Maggie was a keen observer of these details: Do they mark in coloured pen or in pencil? Do they
give stickers on homework? Do they tolerate talking during silent reading? Do they choose
partners for you or do they let the students sort themselves out?

Choosing partners was of course preferable. Though Maggie was usually able to find
somebody desirable to work with, she hated watching those who could not. In second grade for
example, when Ms. Anderson failed to select partners for the class, Maggie invited a girl who
was often left out to be her partner. Maggie thought she had done a good deed, but a few days
later this same girl stole the chocolate off Maggie’s Easter hat, leaving it in shambles. Maggie was devastated. She and her mom spent considerable time on things like jack-o-lanterns and Easter hats; Maggie was used to winning prizes. Maggie had reached out, and now felt betrayed. As she read *Cat’s Eye* she understood more and more that the Easter hat incident would stay with her, had probably already shaped her in ways she could not imagine. She also now understood that stories were in themselves experiences: you could understand things like growing up, or friendship; stories create their own memories. Maggie remembers the Easter hat incident as vividly as she remembers those two girls in Toronto sitting on a bus, staring at an old woman.

As Maggie progressed through the grades she continued to observe her teachers and to imagine the kind of teacher she might become. In junior high, she decided that she never wanted to teach junior high. The students were generally awful to each other and to the teachers, especially substitutes. English class was an exception, so Maggie observed her English teacher closely. Her classroom was an oasis, a calm and safe haven from the tumultuous world of adolescence. Maggie would daydream about creating such a classroom. She noticed that this was no easy task, but she would relish marking on weekends and putting in extra time to create exciting classes. From that time forward, Maggie began keeping her English binders and all her marked assignments. In part, she kept them because she was proud of them, but she also thought they might come in handy while planning future lessons. Looking back later, Maggie can remember where many of her ideas for teaching English began: there was Ms. Thompson’s lesson on a Tracy Chapman song; Mr. Gary’s many lessons on creative writing; Ms. Ball’s *King Lear* unit and her effective method for teaching essay writing; and though Ms. Lingham taught Math there was something about her tough love that took Maggie from failing Math in grade 10
to the top of her class in grade 12. These teachers made Maggie feel like she could do anything, and then they showed her how.

Maggie persevered through her first two years of an English degree, dutifully learning the phonetic alphabet, caffeinating through the dryness of The History of the English Language, and reciting lines of Beowulf by heart. During these years Maggie learned many of the lessons of life as well, having moved cities at 19 and working full-time as a cook, and then a hostess, and then a server. She travelled whenever she could and looked forward to the day when she might teach all over the world.

When Maggie began her third year courses, she felt again the spark that had been lit with Cat’s Eye in courses on Canadian history and literature. She felt at home within the slightly sarcastic musings of Mordecai Richler and within the sombre reflections of prairie life by Margaret Laurence. While taking a course in Canadian theatre she became truly caught up with the Canadian identity and its many expressions. The course, which she was taking by correspondence, came with a cleverly made video created by local theatre Professor Alastair Kesler. Every morning, coffee in hand, Maggie delighted in plays like Les Belles-Soeurs, Walsh, and Billy Bishop Goes to War. Even more exciting than the stories was the fact that they surrounded her. Mordecai Richler had a column in the National Post, Margaret Atwood lived a mere hour’s drive away, and she spotted Alastair Kesler driving down her street in a red Mustang convertible. This, Maggie thought, is what I need to teach – literature that is alive and all around us – why on earth didn’t I read any of this in high school?

Once her English degree was complete, Maggie, eager for a break from school, signed up for a teaching position in South Korea. She couldn’t wait to live her dreams of travelling and teaching. Someday – the someday when she would have her own high school English classroom
– could wait a little longer. After finishing her extended 16 month contract in Seoul, and
spending some time travelling through Asia, Maggie returned to Canada with her identity as a
teacher confirmed, and newly resolved to make her way into the classroom.

In her Teacher Education program Maggie was not disappointed. She met so many others
who were, like her, inspired by their own experiences, and passionate about teaching. They also
shared stories of their passions for literature, math, science, or athletics. Some, like Maggie, had
felt saved by their teachers, and were ready to do the same for their own students.

Maggie also gulped in theories of teaching: strategies that would help ensure a safe
classroom for her students, constructivist teaching styles, multiple-intelligences, and
differentiation. She developed a philosophy of teaching and began immediately to plan lesson
and units on Canadian themes, and of course she did it all while engaging in deep levels of
reflection. Maggie was no longer patiently awaiting her someday, she was ready.
Chapter 1 – The Checkbox

It is like emerging from a long tunnel, it takes time for your eyes to adjust. Sometimes the things you have seen or experienced in the dimness will always feel slightly surreal. I do not know if I will ever fully understand my experiences of teaching or the effect that those experiences continue to have for me. Nor does it seem likely that I could ever fully articulate what others have shared with me about their experiences of teaching. What I can do is to attempt to honour the experiences I have had, and honour the experiences of others, by telling our stories without judgment.

For so long I have been silenced by the worry that these stories are too – well – too everything. These stories are too sad, too dramatic, or too self-deprecating. They are too unbelievable, or too common. They are too secret, or too embarrassing. They are too confusing, or simply too hard to tell. At worst, I have felt that these stories have happened to me because of some Shakespearian flaw in my character. While I have done much to work through all of these worrisome feelings, they still linger. I will attempt to let them rest now so that I might simply explore these stories of those who have found their brightest and darkest moments in their early teaching careers.

* * *

It is early December and the three of us are gathered in my sister’s chilly basement suite. No funding has come through for our focus group, which we are calling our research summit, so we are making due in terms of location, snacks, and other creature comforts. Even so we are excited to be together. I feel none of the tension or fear that I was so worried would be present. At many points leading up to the summit I considered seeking an alternative project. These
women have been through enough, I thought, and now I am asking them to drag it all up again for the sake of my thesis.

On our flight into town to meet Nora yesterday evening, Katherine was distant and uncharacteristically sad. Since leaving her classroom teaching position six months ago, she has been maintaining ties with her students by continuing to work with them extra-curricularly. She met with them briefly before heading to the airport and discovered that one of them was engaging in high-risk behaviour and was becoming isolated from his peers. On the plane, I could feel that she just wanted to support her students, but that is hard to do when you are no longer their teacher. Participating in this research requires that Katherine, and Nora, and I, all reflect further on this painful loss.

In preparation for our summit, I shared a few pieces of creative non-fiction and a series of visuals reflective of my relationship with teaching. Nora, who except for one quarter-year contract, has not been in the classroom for more than a year, also contributed some writing about her experience of leaving teaching. Katherine, having left the classroom such a short time ago has had less time to process her experiences. Part of her motivation for participating in the summit is to sort through some of her own thoughts and feelings about her journey. Nora and I contributed the narratives and the visuals as a starting point for our two-day summit, making them required reading. The whole flight I felt only guilt-ridden anxiety as Katherine dutifully flipped pages, pausing occasionally to exhale a deep sigh, or to stare blankly out the dark cabin window.

This morning though there is a different energy among us and my anxieties are being put to rest. Two days to talk together feels luxurious compared to the time we normally dedicate to the complexities of our teaching journeys. Also, after our summit the winter break stretches out
before us. We are all settling into holiday mode, our shoulders free from looming deadlines. As we begin talking, we quickly realize that there are other, deeper reasons why we are not fearful, or full of the usual tension that accompanies discussions around our leaving of teaching.

Nora hits upon the first reason almost immediately as we open the summit with our reasons for being there. “I guess I am looking forward to having a discussion with other people who get it,” she begins. “I spend so much of my time trying to legitimize what happened in this strange way. It’s kind of nice to be in a room of people who are all on the same page so we can just talk about it.”

As she makes this last statement Katherine and I nod in agreement. It is in fact so difficult to talk to people about leaving teaching that we have all done our best to avoid it.

“It really depends on the person,” Katherine explains, “I mean, I don’t even try if they don’t ask, and even if they ask I’m very selective about what I say.”

“So what’s your line?” I probe.

“Usually it’s that I decided to do a PhD, that a PhD was always part of the plan. And it was, it’s not like it’s a total lie.”

“That was my story as well,” Nora agrees, “and how I got my first leave. It was easy to tell people I was doing an MFA while taking some additional courses in order to gain another teachable subject.”

“Yes, that was my line when I left two years ago,” I respond, “that I had always planned to go back and do a Master’s, which was true. But now I am starting to tell people a little bit more of the truth, because I’m beginning to find some humour in how people respond.”

Katherine laughs, “I hope you’re writing them all down, let’s hear one!”

“Yes, tell, tell!” Nora urges.
I tell them the story of a recent conversation with a friend who was visiting from out of town. She was telling me how much her cousin had enjoyed his first year of teaching high school science. I decided to test the waters and said, “I guess, well, I found it quite challenging. I kind of got a bit burnt out,” I remember that I said the last words slowly, searching her face for signs of understanding, “I don’t know if I’ll be able to go back, but I’d really like to.”

“Yeah,” my friend replied, “my cousin doesn’t have the same problem, he’s a really big guy and when he gets angry people listen to him, so he knows how to keep those kids in line.”

At this Katherine and Nora both audibly gasp.

“That’s revealing,” says Katherine.

“It’s interesting that the assumption is that the problem is the kids,” Nora responds.

“Yes, it’s interesting, but I think it’s a common assumption,” I say. “Think of all the stories about teenagers claiming to have driven their teachers so crazy they quit!”

“When really,” Nora continues, “their part may have been small. Or it may have been the final straw, and the teacher became emotional in front of them, so they made that assumption.”

“Did you take it from there?” Katherine asks, “or did you just let it go?”

“In that case,” I reply, “I went a bit further. I told her that I never really had problems with the students, that it was more all the other parts of the job.”

“Then the response is, ‘oh yes the marking,’” Katherine imagines, “I can just see the 10 billion steps to where the truth lies.”

“But then, it’s hard for me to articulate the truth as well,” I sigh.

“There is no one truth either,” Katherine agrees.
“Yes! It is, in fact, not a checkbox!” I quip, referring to the common exit surveys teachers are given, and the difficult task of selecting a single checkbox in response to the question of why you are leaving the classroom.

“Whaaaatt?!!?” Nora shouts with mock shock, “not a checkbox? I’m here for the capital ‘T’ in Truth!”

“Yeah!” Katherine exclaims, “I thought that’s where we were going with this!”

As we all fall into laughter I know that the proverbial ice has been broken; we have become comfortable with each other and with the presence of the audio recorder. I am also reminded of the checkboxes we are referring to; those that help to contain and organize the stories of teachers who leave teaching. As I think of these boxes, I feel my laughter grow. In this moment, the task of fitting our stories into a checkbox seems so absurd it is literally laughable. Yet I can also recall moments when the checkbox elicited other feelings; feelings of frustration, of anger, of confusion, and of being silenced.

* * *
Figure 1. The Checkbox

WHERE

DOES

YOUR

STORY

FIT?

The tyranny of the checkbox....
Of course the statistic that has become the tagline to teacher attrition is that as many as 50% of teachers leave the profession within their first five years (Clandinin, Downey, & Huber, 2009, p. 145; Glassford & Salinitri, 2007, p. 5; Ingersoll and Kralik, 2004, p. 2). A longer look into the research tells us this is not all ‘healthy’ attrition (Borman, & Dowling, 2008), and that unhealthy teacher attrition places many burdens on the education system. High teacher turnover prevents teachers from becoming experts in their field, thus creating a disconnect between research and practice (McLeskey & Billingsley, 2008). School community suffers as working relationships are strained (Brill & MacCartney, 2008). Student achievement is negatively affected as teacher effectiveness represents one of the most significant predictors of student success (Brewster & Railsback, 2001; Brill & McCartney, 2008; Darling-Hammond, 2000).

Nora and I found that we both spent considerable time searching for the ‘why’ of teacher attrition. At the very least, we wanted to find some reflection of our stories in the available body of literature. Nora turned to research when she realized that the bad days she was having in teaching were beginning to outnumber the good. Her search was for ways to understand what was happening to her, and for strategies that could help her change her situation. My own search began as a graduate student. In addition to searching for a reflection of my own story, I also wanted to know what was being done to support beginning teachers, and what the research was recommending could/should be done.

Even with access to academic databases Nora and I both failed in our first task; we could not find the reflection we were looking for. The voice of new teachers was almost completely absent in available research. Instead of the longitudinal qualitative studies we craved, what we first met were statistical analyses of quantitative data.
For example, in his 2002 article American researcher Richard Ingersoll analyzes the results of several years of teacher exit surveys in order to determine why teachers leave the classroom. The analysis reveals that:

12% of teachers leave for retirement,
28% because of School Staffing Action,
39% for family or personal reasons,
25% to pursue other jobs, and
26% due to dissatisfaction. (2002, p. 25)

For beginning teachers seeking to understand their experiences this kind of information has several shortcomings. First, statistics like these provide little insight into the day-to-day experiences of teachers who are considering leaving. Second, these statistics do not differentiate between beginning teachers and veteran teachers, so there is no way of knowing how much of one’s negative experience is the result of simply being new. Third, these categories are oversimplified; there is no option that sufficiently describes the myriad of reasons behind leaving. Nora, Katherine, and I all chose to “respond to these surveys and questionnaires … from within [our] cover stories” (Clandinin, Downey, & Huber, 2009, p. 147). The box we checked and the story we told about leaving teaching had to do with developing a story that others would not question, not with revealing a painful and complicated truth. Finally, all context has been removed from these statistics. Are the 25% of teachers who left to pursue another job happy with their choice? Do they ache to be back in the classroom? Can there be satisfaction in any job once you have been a teacher?

Another shortcoming of using survey data to illuminate the experiences of beginning teachers is identified by Canadian researchers Charlie Naylor and Anne Schaefer. In their report
released by the British Columbia Teachers’ Federation (BCTF) in 2002, entitled “Teacher workload and stress,” they analyse data from *The English Teaching Workload Survey Questionnaire*. However, they point out that beginning teachers are underrepresented in the sample. They theorize this is “because new teachers, who generally spend more time on activities such as preparation and marking, may not have had time to complete the survey” (p. 34). This theory is disheartening for a beginning teacher looking for answers, or for those hoping to contribute to research that could impact their situation directly.

Of course, statistics are a vital part of research. They are essential to an understanding of the ‘big picture,’ and they can be very effective calls to arms. However, for beginning teachers, these statistics, and the processes that create them, can be silencing and isolating. This type of research fails to provide beginning teachers with the opportunity to become part of the dialogue around why they leave, or what they need to be successful. For beginning teachers who find themselves in challenging and difficult situations, statistics offer little hope for solution. Nor do they offer the possibility of comparing ourselves or our circumstances to those of our peers.

When I could not find the detailed ‘why’ of teacher attrition in the literature, I searched instead for recommendations for improving teacher retention rates. Here, the literature proved more abundant and diverse. Since the 1980s, initiatives aimed at recruiting and retaining teachers have been appearing, often in response to teacher shortages (Carter & Francis, 2001; Borman & Dowling, 2008; Ingersoll & Kralik, 2004). Though the main goal of these programs is most often increased teacher retention, the foci of these programs vary and may include: psychological support, pedagogical support, socialization to a school or district, or even teacher assessment, accountability, or gate-keeping (Ingersoll & Kralik, 2004; Wang, Odell, & Schwille, 2008; Yusko & Feiman-Nemser, 2008). Teachers entering into structured induction programs may be
offered signing bonuses, increased salary, increased professional development opportunities, peer support networks, or mentorship. The latter has been the core component of most induction programs and takes a number of different forms. In fact, the differences between individual mentorship programs are so vast that researchers face considerable challenges in determining best practices (Guarino, et al., 2006; Ingersoll & Kralik, 2004; Wang, et al, 2008). While I am not suggesting that prescribing a single ‘best practice’ across diverse educational contexts should be a goal of research or practice, the fact that the approaches to teacher retention are so varied may indicate that not enough is known about the day to day struggles beginning teachers face.

Interestingly, it was while reviewing this literature on teacher retention that I was finally able to piece together a more comprehensive, research-based picture of why teachers leave. I was surprised to find that existing research does in fact document the life of a beginning teacher as a ‘trial-by-fire,’ ‘sink-or-swim,’ a ‘hazing,’ or even as a ‘boot-camp’ experience (Anhorn, 2008; Darling-Hammond, 2003; Ingersoll & Kralik, 2004). We know that teachers entering into current systems are often given difficult classes or placed in challenging schools; are assigned several different subject or grade levels; or are assigned courses outside of their area of specialization. At the time in their careers when classroom management is the greatest challenge; when they possess the least amount of resources; and when they must learn the policies and professional culture unique to their districts and schools, beginning teachers receive teaching assignments that are more challenging than those of their veteran colleagues. These conditions make it difficult for a beginning teacher to experience feelings of success in their induction years (Johnson & Birkeland, 2003). Over time, this can reduce the capacity beginning teachers have for growth, encouraging them to cling to methods of teaching that allow them to survive the profession but do not represent best practice (Feiman-Nemser, 2003; Ingersoll, 2002). For other beginning
teachers feelings of failure, combined with the low-pay and low-prestige of teaching, make attrition from the system an attractive option (Darling-Hammond, 2003; Guarino, Santibañez, & Daley, 2006; Hahs-Vaughn & Scherff, 2008).

For Nora, Katherine, and for beginning teachers still in the classroom, access to this research, and the time required to read, understand, and synthesize this information, represent formidable barriers. Even if beginning teachers could reach this research, it would not help them overcome any of these challenges. The literature forgets (or ignores) the very powerless situations beginning teachers are placed in. We are often unable to advocate for any improvement in our working conditions or support systems, even if research were to present us with suggestions.

As the practices of mentorship and teacher induction continue to grow, it is essential that beginning teachers have a voice in directing this growth. The stories of teachers must break free of the checkbox. Beginning teachers need to be allowed to, even empowered to, meaningfully contribute to the dialogue in a candid way. “Needed are teachers and students [and mentors, administrators, and policy makers] who are devoted to interrogation and critique and discovery, who are willing to be challenged and surprised, who are eager to enter into relationships founded on dialogue” (Leggo, 2007, p. 34).

Creating space in research for the stories and for the interrogation of stories is especially needed in order to counter the prevailing images of teachers and teaching in popular discourse. Much of “educational imaginary….is, to a large extent, educationally debilitating” (Barone, 2003, p. 202). After spending 12 or 13 years in the classroom, while being fed a steady diet of Hollywood films like Dead Poets Society (Weir, 1989), and Dangerous Minds (Smith, 1995), it is easy to assume that we know what teaching is all about. The stories that we tell of our
schooling and our teachers – like Ferris Bueller’s Day Off (Hughes, 1986), or even The Simpsons (Groening, 1989), create a mythology of education; and in the case of movies like Freedom Writers (LaGravenese, 2007), a mythology about why teachers leave. These popular images have shrouded the mystery of teaching in the certainty of myth.

For example, when Maclean’s magazine published their 2009 university rankings, they included a series of one-page articles about career choices: So you want to be a doctor; So you want to be an engineer; and of course – So you want to be a teacher (Near, 2009). Underneath this title is a picture of the teachers from the popular Harry Potter films (Heyman, 2001); beneath that rests a by-line about how you can be a role model (like Professor Snape?) for hundreds of kids “if you want it bad enough” (p. 78). According to the dominant narrative of teaching, the life of a teacher is not easy, but those who are successful are the ones who really want to help students succeed. The implication is that if you do not succeed, perhaps making a difference simply was not worth enough to you.

This article, and the canon of prevailing teacher imagery, inspired the first of 12 visuals I created in the early stages of this project. Inspired by postsecret, a website dedicated to creating a space for anonymous secrets sent by mail in the form of postcards, Teacher Secrets are related to my teaching practice and my leaving it. The Maclean’s article motivated my desire to literally reclaim some of the popular discourse around the teaching profession, so each of the secrets is presented on an appropriate piece of Teacher Magazine, a monthly publication of the BCTF.
Figure 2. Enough
This first secret reveals how the myths of teaching work to make teachers ashamed of leaving the classroom, and afraid to speak out about why. Clandinin, Downey, and Huber (2009), who are attending to the stories of beginning teachers through narrative inquiry, describe how the prevailing mythology forces many beginning teachers into silence:

Teachers who leave teaching early, like youth who leave school prior to graduation, know that from within the dominant institutional narrative, they will be seen as ‘deficient’, as having something wrong with them. Finding an acceptable cover story helps them ‘save face’ by leaving, not because they could not hack it but rather because they had something better to do. (p. 147)

During our research summit, it became clear that we were not, in that moment, concerned with saving face because we were not concerned about the false dichotomy between wanting it bad enough, and not. Instead, we were able to explore the reasons why we left the classroom without worrying that our identities as caring and committed educators would be questioned. Clandinin, Downey, and Huber go on to argue that:

If these teachers’ stories to leave by were not covered over and if we were making spaces for teachers to tell of their shifts from stories to live by to stories to leave by and of the pain and sadness of that shift, we imagine we might, as Eliot (1874) wrote, ‘die of that roar which lies on the other side of silence.’ (p. 147)

It was the desire to not cover over our stories that informed the final form of this thesis. After our research summit, I initially felt compelled to reduce our thoughts into neatly packaged themes; to abstract our discussion into a tightly written qualitative analysis report. However, somewhere between transcribing and coding our eight hours of dialogue, I realized that the words of the articulate, compassionate, and dedicated educators who took part in the summit
can tell their stories better than I. I also began to question any process that would result in a document similar to those we found so wanting in our own searches of the literature.

Instead, I have taken a creative non-fiction approach in presenting the results of my inquiry into teacher attrition. Narrative inquiry allows for an escape from the checkbox, or rather, it offers the possibility of exploring the ‘temporal’ nature of the teacher attrition experience where the act of leaving the classroom is merely a single event that is an “expression of something happening over time” (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000, p. 29). When we view teacher attrition as a temporal phenomenon, it immediately becomes more complex. It becomes more dependent on the people involved, their actions with a specific context, and therefore difficult to generalize from; it can only be presented with “a sense of tentativeness” (p. 30-31). This tentativeness of narrative inquiry represents an opportunity; it leaves space for the reader to engage in the dialogue, to bring the inquiry into his or her own context. “It is a living composting” (Leggo, 2002, p. 2); fertile ground for future inquiry and critical discussion.

Throughout the process I was also aware of the mandate given to me in an inspiring lecture by Shifra Schonmann. “To research” she said, “is to create new knowledge, to transform it into knowing, and then, you give it as a present.” I sought to present my inquiry in an engaging way, and in a way that allowed for a knowing of the teacher attrition experience. Several sources informed the final narrative, these include: my own experience; narratives presented for discussion at the research summit; the series of 12 Teacher Secrets; the focus group data gathered during the summit; existing research into teacher attrition and related topics (introduced by myself or by the participants).
All sources informed the two main branches in the creative non-fiction presentation. The first branch is the narrative of one beginning teacher. The second is a series of reflections of that story found within the discussion of three teachers who left the classroom within their first five years of teaching.

The single story is very much where this research project began. Through autobiographical writing I began to make meaning of my own experiences. Sharing these initial pieces with others began a process of “echolocation,” where the participants and I shared our stories in an attempt to “know our locations in connection with the past, the future, and others, as well as with our unfolding sense of self-identities” (Hasebe-Ludt, Chambers, & Leggo, 2009, p. 4). This process is reflected in the story of the research summit. In many instances, dialogue from the summit is verbatim, however, many details have been fictionalized for ethical reasons. Also, all source
materials worked their way into all branches of the work. Throughout the narrative I chose also
to weave in references to relevant research. During the summit it became clear that we were
seeking to place ourselves, and to gain a voice within this existing work.
Looking back

70 years ago
The sponsors of education are
wishing us a wall. We wish
it as the children of
Reading are
above the gentry of the Dark Ages.
This is the case.

A few of us practical long years ago
in this subject: that it was well
that children were reading too
slowly, perhaps only a word at a
time. So Silent Reading was
introduced on high authority and
the teachers loved it, for they
silently watched as the children ran
their eyes over the pages to see
which could finish first. The average
which could not be read at the eye
mind.

other rights protected
Agreement are protected

I'm afraid that when I read my

I'm afraid that when I read my

30 years ago
A teacher's interaction with the
class in the first few weeks of
school determines. In large mea-
sure, how they will work together
for the rest of the year. It is during
this crucial time that either a nega-
tive or a positive pattern is estab-
lished. If the pattern is a negative
one, it may be very difficult to
change.

Figure 4. Fault
On the first day of her first practicum, Maggie’s alarm goes off well before dawn. By the time dawn breaks she is already standing in front of a deserted shopping mall parking lot waiting for a second bus. Today is the first time she will see her practicum school and meet the teacher she will be working with. The two buses it takes to get her there do not make a good connection and Maggie, full of anticipation, is finding the 15 minute wait difficult. Once the bus arrives it is only a few more minutes before Maggie is standing in front of Edward Sheffield High School. It is 7:00 a.m., a bit early, but she hadn’t wanted to risk being late. The school hallways are still dark, as is the front office when she finds it. She crosses the office into the staffroom where she is supposed to meet the others. It surprises her to see that she is not the first one there.

Three of the eight student teachers embarking on practicum at Edward Sheffield High School are already waiting. There is one other English teacher but Maggie has not met her before. Nor does she know any of the other student teachers who trickle in: three Math teachers, one Social Studies teacher, one Wood Tech teacher, and one Business teacher. The Math teachers arrive last and together, they are the only ones who know each other. As Maggie discreetly scratches the unwashed tag on the back of her new blouse she glances around: they are all newly dressed in professional wear, a stark contrast from the student uniform of t-shirts and jeans they were wearing the week before.

Maggie watches as their Faculty Coordinator approaches, travel mug in one hand and a worn brown leather satchel in the other. Larry Evans is a retired shop teacher, which explains the plaid dress shirt, and the dusty brown satchel. All eight of them will share a single F.C. (though normally student teachers are placed with an F.C. in their subject area) because Sheffield accepts a group of student teachers each year. Maggie listens to Larry joke about early risers and notices no one laughs – this is serious business. Maggie takes stock of Larry’s eyes, they are kind, but
also mischievous, like his satchel holds the secrets to teaching and he’s not going to share. Or maybe Maggie is just tense. For his part, Larry does not seem to notice the tension, or that no one is laughing at his jokes. He just continues to chit-chat the time away, which is actually a nice way to fill the silence.

Larry mentions that they are waiting for Devon Matheson, a Science teacher at Sheffield who helps to coordinate the student teachers every year. Usually Devon has a student teacher as well but this year he does not. Larry then talks about how lucky they are to be placed at such a good school, about how much effort Sheffield puts into practicum when they don’t have to.

Maggie tries to feel glad for this despite the long commute, but she finds it difficult to feel anything but nervous. Then, somewhere in the back of her mind Maggie realizes that soon she will be standing in front of a group of students, and for that, she cannot wait. That moment, she thinks, will make all these others worth it. For the first time that morning Maggie smiles.

As the school comes to life Maggie and the others continue to sit, clumped awkwardly, on the staffroom couches and chairs. Larry continues to chat. The principal and assistant principal come in and introduce themselves. Some of the teachers walking by stop and say hello, some pass quickly without an upward glance.

Devon arrives and struts excitedly up to the group. Maggie can tell he’s been awaiting the moment, which is reassuring. He looks briefly at the folder he is carrying as he approaches, then he looks at Maggie and the others, counting them off with one finger. “Good, you’re all here on time,” he grins. Maggie looks at the clock on the wall and realizes that most of them have been there for more than an hour already. Devon greets Larry warmly and the two exchange pleasantries. It’s immediately evident that they have been working together for some time, which is also reassuring.
Devon begins by telling the group that he has been helping to co-ordinate the practicum at Sheffield for a number of years and that this, this practicum, is going to be hard. He adjusts his glasses and his stance, he seems to straighten up as he talks. The student teachers start to straighten up too, which for some of them is difficult because of the soft couches. Maggie is glad she is seated on the arm of one of the chairs.

“Practicum is hard because teaching is hard, and it’s not for everyone. Not everyone makes it through long practicum. Some of you may even decide to leave the program during this short practicum.” Maggie glances over at Larry, searching his expression for the truth (or appropriateness) of Devon’s statement. Larry is wearing his usual grin, is this agreement? “That’s okay though,” Devon continues, “if this job is not for you the sooner we can figure that out the better.” Maggie lets this statement roll off her, she knows this job is for her. “For those of you that do stay, you want to spend your time here earning a great practicum report, not just a good one, a great one.” He pauses to let these words hang in the air for a moment before continuing. “The reality of this profession is that having a good evaluation might not get you the job in the district you want, you want to have a glowing evaluation.” Maggie feels herself straighten a little bit more, she wants the glowing report.

Devon it seems wants to help them, that’s why he volunteers to co-ordinate the practicum even though most schools do not assign anyone to this position. He has set up a tour of the school and has two maps for them. One is a standard school map and the other he has drawn himself and is just of the office.

“We’re going to start our tour right here.” Devon walks through the group and leads them into the now brightly lit and bustling front office. He stops at the first desk and picks up a clipboard. “This is the sign-in sheet. We ask that you sign-in every morning with the time that
you arrive. Your teacher education program expects that you will arrive at least 30 minutes before class. However, you don’t want to always be the last one here in the mornings, that won’t make the best impression. But, if we look at the sign-in sheet and see that you’re always the first or second one here, that will look very good for you. Though you don’t have to sign-out, it’s always a good idea for you to stay later than your sponsor teachers. Plus, if other teachers leave late and see that you’re still here, that will impress them.” Maggie remembers that despite being a full hour-and-a-half early this morning she was only the fourth one here. She wonders if, now that Devon has said this, the others will show up earlier as well. Here her commute puts her at a disadvantage.

As Devon leads them from desk to desk he introduces the administrative secretaries. One is in charge of attendance, one is a receptionist, two are assistants to the administration. Devon outlines each of their differentiated roles in order that the student teachers know who can help them with various issues. “Also, make sure you say hello and develop a good relationship with these ladies, they do a lot of work to keep this school running and, if you do some baking at home for example, consider bringing them something too. It just looks good to develop positive relationships with the other staff. Also, you want to find ways to show your gratitude for being here, taking on so many student teachers can create more work for them.” Maggie begins to worry as she knows from this morning that the office staff do not arrive until 8:00 a.m. If she arrives earlier than that then she must devise ways to talk with them throughout the day instead. Also, she doesn’t bake.

The tour moves on to the student records kept along the back wall of the office. Devon demonstrates how to find a file and leave a bookmark in its place so that the file can be returned correctly. Devon warns that the administrative assistant in charge of student records has little
patience for files that are out for more than an hour or those that are misfiled. “Of course, you want to be the kind of teachers she never has to go looking for.” Some of the cabinets are for students with specialized programs, the other cabinet is for all other students. The files for students with specialized programs cannot leave the office, the ones for all other students can leave, but not for more than an hour.

Maggie looks at the cabinets again and does not remember which one is which. She looks at the map Devon has drawn, but it just says ‘student files.’ She will have to figure it out later, deducing it by looking up a file for a student in a specialized program and seeing which cabinet it is in.

On top of the cabinets there is a big book with the contact information for each student. “When you make home contact, please log it in this binder. Before making home contact you could also read the log to see if other teachers are phoning the same parents for the same reasons. You should also come by and check the attendance book regularly, so you can see if your students are skipping classes.” Devon goes on to point out that though there is an attendance secretary, they should always check the books before asking her for information. “Of course, you don’t want to be the kind of teachers who create more work for her.”

Going for coffee is allowed so long as one of the admin assistants knows, but it doesn’t look good to leave the building too often, that would make it seem like you don’t really want to be there. While Maggie is thinking about how to determine which filing cabinet is which, she misses hearing which assistant to sign out with when leaving the building. She decides it will just be easier to never leave the school.

As the group heads towards the photocopy room Maggie looks back at where they have been, she reviews: get to know the office staff but do not bother them with attendance or file
questions. Maggie is not good at chit-chat and has already forgotten their names. This after only half of the office tour is done, after which they will tour the school.

The photocopying room is a small room within the main office. Devon opens his file and gives each student teacher an individual copy code. “Your teacher education program provides us with a photocopying fee for each of you. We hope you will stay within that but we understand that new teachers sometimes go over. We had a new teacher go way over before and we had to talk to him, we don’t want to do that but we might have to. Plus, it always looks good if you’re one of the few who uses very little paper, that helps put a bit back into the budget of the school who is hosting you.” Maggie’s stomach begins a slight churning. English is a paper heavy subject, certainly heavier that wood tech, and likely heavier than math. “Also, remember that you are, to a certain extent, disrupting the regular routines of the school. Keep in mind that it might be frustrating for our teachers if they come in to photocopy something just before or after class and find that the student teachers have formed a long line-up. It will impress them if you let them in front of you and try to disrupt them as little as possible. Maybe it’s a good idea to do your photocopying after most of the other teachers have gone home, or really early in the morning. There are also little things you can do to show that you understand that you are guests. Fill the paper trays, even if they’re not empty, and of course don’t leave a jam behind. Also, once a week the paper comes in boxes and must be stacked on these shelves. It would be a nice gesture if while you’re here our teachers and office staff don’t have to unpack the boxes as often.”

The tour continues for the morning, the student teachers meet everyone and everyone meets them. Devon reminds them to be on good terms with the custodians (it will look good if you’re friendly with them). Back in the staff room Devon talks about the dishwasher protocol and advises them to be generous with loading and unloading. Devon gives them an idea of who
sits where in the staffroom and suggests that they figure out these patterns before taking up seats. Also, there should never be a whole table of just student teachers. Devon shows them where to leave their lunches, how not to take up space in the fridge, how much to contribute to the coffee fund (it would be nice if while you’re here you pitch in enough for the other teachers to get a bit of a break).

The group meets the guidance counsellors where there are more forms and more protocols. Dress code is mentioned (they should be more dressed up than all the other teachers), they should join some extra-curricular, they should supervise the school dance so that other teachers can take a break, they should not mark or plan during spares but go observe other teachers.

The afternoon is spent observing two teachers in their discipline. Maggie observes two English classes, taking notes on the template for observations that Devon has given them. Tomorrow they will spend the full day with their sponsor teachers.

Maggie goes home that evening, feeling a little queasy from getting up so early and being so full of anxiety all day. She looks over the documents that she has been given and takes it all in. She remembers as much as she can about what Devon has said: they might not all make it, this is important, you need a glowing report, be on good terms with everyone, don’t ask questions or lose files, be the ones who unload the dishwasher, unpack the paper, and bring baking. Maggie hopes that she can remember all of this information in three months, when their long practicum begins. She sighs as thinks about tomorrow, and how much more she doesn’t know.

***
Once back at university Maggie wastes no time in beginning her planning. She works through the list of short stories her sponsor teacher has asked her to cover, and begins planning how she will approach each one. She also has two novels to teach: *Lord of the Flies* for the grade 11 class and *All Quiet on the Western Front* for the grade 12 class. She knows *Lord of the Flies* well and begins her unit plan immediately. She is now reading *All Quiet on the Western Front* for the first time. It isn’t long before the story of Paul Baumer, a young German soldier fighting in World War I, begins to remind her of a Canadian play with a similar story. *Main Street Hero*, the story of Robert Cardinal, is a perfect fit! She feels a surge of excitement as she makes this link, this is what she’s been waiting for.

She hopes connecting the students with things she is passionate about, as well as having creative and motivating lesson plans, will also put her sponsor teacher’s mind at ease. During Maggie’s first practicum she learned that her sponsor teacher, Gillian Spurk, had not expected to be teaching the grade 12 courses that year. Gillian felt uneasy about having a student teacher teach them but she decided to go ahead with a student teacher anyway. Maggie feels ready to rise to the challenge in order to earn Gillian’s trust.

At the library one day she does a catalogue search for *Main Street Hero*, looking for any materials that might help her integrate the play into her novel unit. As she scans down the list of titles the search produces, she notices a video icon beside one of the entries. Video? Of the play? Perhaps it is Alastair Kesler’s teaching video? No. It seems to be a video of the play. She wonders if it is Ray Cresting and Adam Kevlyn, or perhaps some kind of adaptation? She looks for the call number and finds that the video is in the library vault. She makes the necessary special request and learns that her request will take at least one week.
Two weeks pass, and Maggie has still not heard anything about the mysterious video, so she heads back to the library. At the special collections circulation desk, the librarian notices that Maggie’s request has been flagged because the video is lost. The librarian begins to talk about the play, “It’s such a wonderful play,” she says, “I saw it for the first time at Culture West theatre where it premiered. It is such a wonderful story! Did you know Adam Kevlyn did his theatre program here?” Maggie is delighted to discuss the play’s history and hear from somebody who saw the original production. Maggie explains her plans to use the play on her practicum and asks whether the librarian knows more about the video. “Well, it’s the play. CBC filmed Ray Cresting and Adam Kevlyn performing the whole thing!”

“Where is it?” a now very excited Maggie pleads.

The librarian looks thoughtful for a moment, then her face lights up, “Well, you know, Ray Cresting lives here, why don’t you just call him and ask him to borrow a copy for your students?” Maggie is flabbergasted at the very idea of phoning Ray Cresting, but now that she knows it is a video of the entire play, she has become even more determined to get her hands on it.

“Well, I’ll think about it,” she says. Then she thanks the librarian and walks away.

A few days later Maggie is having coffee with Liz and Kate, two other student teachers in her English teaching methodology classes. She recounts her journey with the video, expressing how desperately she wants to see it.

“You should absolutely call him!” says Liz, “you can use teaching as your excuse to meet him!”

“Yeah, I’m going to call up Ray Cresting! He’s a Canadian icon.”
“Do it,” Kate encourages. “This is the kind of story that your students will love!” At this Maggie nods, Kate’s right.

That Saturday Maggie finds herself sitting on the couch with a phone book in her lap. The book is open to the ‘Cresting’ section, ‘Cresting, R.’ There are about 17 ‘R.’ or ‘Ray Crestings,’ Maggie has no clues to help narrow things down. Might as well start at the beginning.

The phone rings.

“Hello?”

“Hello, may I please speak with Ray Cresting?”

“No! This is not Ray Cresting’s house, I am Rita Cresting!” Maggie pulls the phone away from her ear as Rita Cresting expresses her anger at being disturbed on a Saturday afternoon. Maggie apologizes and puts down the phone. She wonders if Ray Cresting dislikes being disturbed on a Saturday afternoon as much as Rita Cresting does. Perhaps she needs a new approach.

A quick Internet search reveals Ray Cresting’s current publisher. Maggie writes a polite note explaining who she is and what she is looking for, and hopes that somebody at the publishing house can get in touch with Ray Cresting. Once the email is sent Maggie is satisfied she has done all she can. She goes back to her planning and puts the whole thing out of her mind. Two days later Maggie answers her phone absentmindedly, “Hello?”

“Hello, is this Margie?”

“This is Maggie,” she says, not recognizing the voice on the other end, “maybe you have the wrong number?”

“No, Maggie, that’s right. Hello, this is Ray Cresting calling.”
Maggie feels a large pack of butterflies leap out of her stomach and charge for her throat, momentarily blocking her voice. “Hello, Ray Cresting,” she manages to get out awkwardly.

“Yes, I got your email today, you’re a teacher?”

“Yes, well a student teacher, I was hoping to teach Main Street Hero on my practicum.”

“Yes, a wonderful idea. Listen, I know it’s ridiculous but I only have one copy of the video, and somebody else has borrowed it. But she should be returning it this week, after that you can come by and get it.”

“Come by?”

“Yes, I live at 30th and Bayswater, I hope that’s not too far.”

“I live at 21st and Bayswater,” says a stunned Maggie.

“Great! So give me a call later this week and you can come ‘round for tea!”

“O.K. Thank you so much!”

“O.K. Bye now!” Maggie hears Ray Cresting hang up the phone. She stands frozen for a moment before leaping into a dance of joy. She is going to meet Ray Cresting! And she is going to teach Main Street Hero!

* * *

Six weeks into her practicum, Maggie finally finds herself walking over to Ray Cresting’s house. Though she made initial contact with him several weeks before, it had turned out that simply swinging by for a cup of tea and the video was not as easy as originally planned. First of all, whoever had borrowed it initially was slow in returning it. This in turn had made the Crestings wary of lending it out again. Maggie had made her case to the whole family about the importance of sharing this play with her students and finally, it had worked. Maggie was on her way. As she walks she imagines telling her students this story, which prompts the realization that
she’s forgotten her camera. She looks at her watch, not enough time to go home. Instead she dashes into the nearest corner store for a disposable. As she scans the selection of cameras behind the counter, she realizes that this is the first Saturday since practicum began that she has had something other than marking or planning to look forward to. Actually, she thinks, this is planning, or maybe it will be.

Though she resolved not to think too deeply about this until her next meeting with Larry, she can’t help but remember her conversation with Gillian the day before. Maggie had been waiting her whole practicum for the moment when Gillian would begin to trust her with the senior English classes, but it hadn’t happened yet. Gillian still observed every lesson, at times she would even jump into a lesson to ask Maggie a question or to make a comment to the students. While with most classes this was usually okay, in the case of the grade 12 class it made the students reticent to fully accept Maggie as their teacher.

When Maggie gave Gillian her unit plan earlier that week, she also gave her an update on her meeting with Ray Cresting. “I’m going over there on Saturday! I’m so exited,” Maggie had told her. Maggie was hoping that if Gillian knew that Maggie was bringing in a well-known Canadian play that she was passionate about, she would encourage Maggie to fit it into her novel unit.

“Great! It sounds like a great play, I am looking forward to hearing how it goes.” Then Gillian tucked Maggie’s weekly plan into her bag and left for the day.

Somehow, Maggie was never quite sure how to read Gillian. That she had high standards was clear, but Maggie usually responded well to pressure and enjoyed being challenged. With Gillian, however, it seemed that Maggie’s efforts weren’t hitting the right mark, and Maggie didn’t know what to do differently.
When Gillian came in that Friday, Maggie noticed right away that she was carrying the weekly plan right. “Good morning,” Gillian said as she approached.

“Good morning,” Maggie smiled though she could tell something was not quite right.

“So I was looking at this plan, and I guess I didn’t realize that you were going to show a movie of Main Street Hero.”

“Not a movie,” Maggie tried to explain, “but a filming of the play itself.”

“Well, that may be the case, but I noticed you are also showing the movie of All Quiet on the Western Front, and I just think it may be too much to show two movies in one week.”

“Yes, I know you wanted them to see it,” Maggie too had thought that the students might tire of watching video, but she had decided it would be better to make sure she included everything Gillian had wanted her to teach.

“Yes. I really think it’s important for them to see the movie of the novel – I do it every year and I think it helps with comprehension. It’s a well-done film. Plus, it’s a nice way to end a novel unit, I think.” Gillian stopped and looked at Maggie inquisitively.

Maggie sat speechless, unsure of how to navigate the situation, unsure of what Gillian wanted to hear, unsure of what it was okay to say. “Okay,” was all she could manage.

Maggie chooses a disposable camera with a flash, pays for it, and continues her walk. No time to think about Gillian or what she would do about the week ahead, she was on her way to meet Ray Cresting! That she may no longer have a reason to meet him, well, he didn’t have to know that.

As Maggie approaches the house she smiles to herself, it is just as she imagined. The walkway begins with a large archway, through which there is a beautiful but slightly wild green space. Beyond that there is a porch full of wooden chairs. Maggie bounds up the steps, pauses for
a deep breath, and rings the doorbell. Immediately a dog barks – Ray Cresting’s dog! Okay, thinks Maggie, get a hold of yourself! The door opens to reveal Ray Cresting himself holding onto the collar of a large border collie that is now wagging its tail excitedly. “Hello!” says Ray Cresting, “come on in!!”

Maggie spends the afternoon sharing tea with the Cresting family. Ray’s wife Sylvia even plays parts of the video. As she flips from section to section she shares some of the stories of the production with Maggie. It’s all a little too good to be true. In the excitement, Maggie almost forgets about the disposable camera in her bag. When she remembers, she pulls it out hesitantly, not wanting to push her luck.

“Oh, you’ve got to get pictures to show your students!” Ray encourages. “Come on into the study, I have some of the props from the play in there, we’ll get a picture with them. Ray leads them into the study and poses for several pictures, making sure Maggie has a good shot.

“Ray, you should put a decent pair of socks on!” Sylvia scolds, “you’ve got a big hole in one toe and they don’t even match!”

“I’m an artist,” Ray retorts, “they should see the real me, this is how artists dress!” Maggie laughs and takes a few more pictures. Then Ray reads Maggie’s mind and says, “of course you’ll need to get one of you and me, let’s head out onto the porch!”

Now this really is too good to be true. Maggie is sitting on Ray Cresting’s porch steps, with Ray Cresting and his lovely dog, as Sylvia snaps their picture. “Now your students will believe you when you tell them you were here,” Ray winks.

“Yes, yes they will,” Maggie replies, trying not to think about the fact that they may not ever hear anything about this.
“Of course you have to teach it!” Larry replies almost immediately. “This is the only time you’ll be able to tell your students that you borrowed the video just for them! Also, he’s someone local, and you’re passionate about it. This is the kind of thing we hope you’ll do!” At this, Maggie breathes a sigh of relief, but still she doesn’t know what to do next. The thought of Gillian disapproving of, and therefore interrupting her lesson, is very intimidating. Larry reads her mind, “I’ll tell you what,” he suggests, “I’ll come in and observe your lesson that day, and that way you won’t have to worry about anything. Plus, I’d like to see what you do with it, this sounds very exciting!”

The morning of her Main Street Hero lesson Maggie arrives at 7:00 a.m., as per usual. It’s funny how arriving at the school when it’s still dark outside continues to feel strange. The night before Maggie hadn’t sleep. Instead she went over her presentation again and again in her head. Then she went over the possible reactions of her students, and the reactions her sponsor teacher might have if her lesson fails.

Maggie is thankful when Larry arrives early and before Gillian, who found out just the day before that Maggie had decided to go ahead with Main Street Hero.

“Can’t wait to see this!” Larry encourages as he took his seat at the back of the room.

The students file in and check out the agenda on the board. “Robert Cardinal?” questions one student, “he’s a fighter pilot right? We are learning about him in Social Studies right now.” Maggie can’t believe her luck; she never even considered interdisciplinary possibilities of the play.

“Great!” Maggie responds to the student, “I hope you’ll share some of your knowledge with us!” As the bell goes Maggie peeks out the door for Gillian, no sign of her. Although Gillian doesn’t usually sit in on the class when Larry is here, Maggie had kind of expected her to
come to this lesson. Once the students are seated and the bell goes, she has no choice but to begin.

Her PowerPoint starts, and the students jump in right away. Maggie is thrilled to find out that they know more of the history of Robert Cardinal and about the actual time period than she does. The excitement in the room begins to build as they are telling her about it. Just as the class discussion is really growing, Gillian comes in.

“Sorry I’m late,” Gillian says. Gillian notices Larry sitting at the back table, she glances at the PowerPoint slide, and then she grabs a seat in the back corner opposite Larry.

Immediately Maggie feels her heart start to beat a little faster as blood creeps up into her cheeks. The students though just continue to talk excitedly. Maggie sends them a silent thank you and continues. She notices that Larry too is smiling in her direction.

She moves out of the actual historical setting of the play and begins talking about the authors. She gives them a bio of Ray Cresting and then clicks to a picture of Adam Kevlyn.

“Hey, that’s the guy from Town Station!” one student says, referring to a popular Canadian sitcom. They are right back into the conversation and are leaning in to the story of how two broke Canadian artists took a two-man show, with no set, all the way to Broadway.

By the time Maggie starts telling the story of how she tracked down the video of the play, just for them, the students are enthralled. She tells them every detail, from the librarian who gave her a crazy idea, to cold-calling the wrong ‘R. Cresting,’ to getting the surprise phone call from Ray Cresting himself, to the Cresting’s changing their minds about lending her the video.

“I’ll call them for you,” one student volunteers.

“Yeah, we’ll convince them, we’ll just tell them what an awesome student teacher you are, and that we really, really want to see it,” another chimes in.
“Thank you very much, but I can be a smooth talker when I want to be,” Maggie replies. Slightly worried that the discussion had become too informal she steals a glance at Gillian. “I was finally able to convince them, and on Saturday, I went to their house, which is just a few blocks away from mine!” The picture of Ray Cresting with the non-matching socks pops up on the screen, and the students cheer. Maggie points out the original props Ray is standing beside, as well as all the artwork and scripts-in-progress that cover Ray’s piano. She also points out the socks that the artist insisted on having in the picture. She tells them how nervous she had been to ask Ray for a photo with her, and how Ray had actually suggested it. For a moment, she forgets about the two evaluators in the room and just enjoys the students’ excitement as she shows the photo of her and Ray on his front step. Then she realizes that in the photo she is wearing jeans and a casual plaid shirt, and she wonders if that’s okay to show the students. She doesn’t linger too long on the photo and moves into viewing instructions for the video. She sets up a compare and contrast lesson with the novel and the play – a German soldier’s story compared to a Canadian soldier’s story. The students take out pens and paper right away and Maggie sends them another mental thank you. As she starts the video she realizes that except for the clips she watched with the Crestings, she has not seen the video either. Excitedly she hits play, and as she does so she notices Gillian walk out of the room.

** * * *

April 2\textsuperscript{nd}, eight weeks into practicum. It is long past the end of day and the school is quiet. Maggie is doing some photocopying and reflecting on the past few weeks. She has just finished marking the essays the grade 12 students submitted on \textit{Main Street Hero}.

She thinks back to the class discussion that followed the viewing of the play. She was surprised at how insightful they had been, at how much they were able to grasp about the issues
that the play touched on. They discussed what it must have been like to be a Canadian fighting for another county; they discussed the dehumanization that happened in both stories; as well as those moments when the main characters remembered their humanity. They even had a lively debate about whether these characters were in fact ‘heroes.’ To ice the cake, the students had written to Ray Cresting, who responded immediately and humbly.

“This is what teaching is all about kid,” Larry had told her.

Even before a single moment had been savoured however, Maggie found herself back in the mire of planning the next day and the next. Though Gillian had conceded that sticking with Main Street Hero had been the right thing, it had not earned Maggie the independence or trust she was striving for. In fact, Gillian had asked to take her grade 12 class back earlier than planned. Maggie had experienced so much success, not only with Main Street Hero but also with her other courses, yet she still feels emotionally drained.

Maggie’s thoughts shift to what is waiting for her at home. The night before, April 1st (the date was not lost on her) her landlord’s hot water tank had sprung a leak. Unfortunately, the hot water tank was adjacent to her room and her room had flooded. She hadn’t discovered the leak until she arrived home, which last night was not until 10:00. She had spent a few hours moving everything out of her room into boxes before grabbing a short sleep on the couch. She tries not to think about what might be waiting for her tonight, and concentrates instead on the repetitive drone of the copier.

“Hello, Maggie!” Maggie jumps as she turns to see Devon come into the photocopier room.

“Hello,” Maggie replies.
“We’re in the thick of it now, almost done your full course load! How’s everything going?”

“Well, today I feel a bit stressed, my place flooded last night. Full-load is probably not the best time to be living out of boxes.” Maggie is not certain why she has chosen to be honest. Perhaps Devon has come in at just the right moment to lend some support. Whatever the reason, the act of verbalizing taps into the well of emotion just below the surface and she can feel her eyes begin to tear.

Devon looks at Maggie for a moment, and then offers, “Oh, well I’m sorry to hear that. Hope everything gets back to normal soon.” Then, just as quickly as he entered, Devon leaves the office.

When Maggie gets home that evening she finds her bedroom carpet suspended above the underlay while high-powered fans work to dry the room. One more night on the couch, one or two more days living out of boxes. At least her lessons are planned for the rest of the week.

Despite the chaos of her suite, she arrives at Sheffield the next day at 7:00 a.m. Though she enjoys all the students, she is looking forward to having fewer courses the following week. Gillian doesn’t observe her first class, but instead comes in a few minutes after second period begins. The students are already settled into silent reading and Maggie is doing some marking at her desk. Maggie smiles as Gillian approaches but waits until she is near to say hello as the room is so quiet.

“So, I just saw Devon in the staffroom,” Gillian says. “He and I have some concerns. He said that you were visibly stressed in the school yesterday.” Maggie begins to panic, this feels like a confrontation, though Maggie is not sure what she has done wrong. Gillian continues, “I have already called Larry and we’re going to have a meeting after school today. I’m concerned
about your ability to handle the stress of this job. It is inappropriate to be visibly upset in front of co-workers.”

Maggie is caught off-guard. She is also acutely aware that the students are listening to this discussion. How will she teach them now? Unwillingly, she begins to tear up again.

“Hey, you can’t get upset in front of your students,” Gillian warns. “If you need to step out I’ll be here for a minute.”

Maggie takes a breath and manages a smile. “No, I’m fine, but I should really get the lesson started.”

Maggie knows that what is about to happen is a very bad sign. A triad meeting is the first necessary step in the process of failing a student on practicum. They have to document that they have given you warning. Larry, for his part, seems a bit confused at what is happening. At the meeting, Gillian produces the report she has created, and once again outlines her concerns about Maggie. She feels that Maggie may be unable to handle the demands of teaching. After all, if you can’t handle the stress of your practicum, it is unlikely you will handle the stress of teaching your own classes.

Larry acknowledges what Gillian has said and signs the paperwork. Maggie says nothing, she is wary to misstep again. She feels as if she is once again surrounded by the mysterious world of girls from her youth; expectations are everywhere, and she has missed them. She realizes that the concerns being raised about her are not about her teaching. Indeed Gillian usually has very good things to say about her lessons. Rather it is something more fundamental, it is really about her.

When Gillian leaves, Larry asks Maggie to explain. Maggie is beyond being able to suppress the tears that have been right behind her eyes since Gillian came into her classroom this
morning. Inappropriate or not, she tells Larry about the flood, the boxes, and the photocopy room.

“Well, all that seems very understandable,” Larry looks again at the report Gillian has created. “It also says you were crying in front of the students.”

Maggie explains how Gillian had told her about this meeting in front of one of her classes. Larry sighs. He tells Maggie that though he is still going to add this report to her file, he feels that Gillian should not have spoken to her about her concerns in front of the students. He assures Maggie that a flood during full-load is justifiably stressful. Maggie is thankful for his words, but in many ways, the damage has already been done.

Maggie cannot linger very long with Larry as she is already late for one of their weekly mini-lessons. Sheffield organizes weekly lessons for their student teachers, one of the perks of a project school. Today, Devon is giving a mini-lesson on having fun with students. She pauses at the door to arrange her face in a smile before sneaking into the room. Devon makes eye contact immediately. Maggie wonders how much he knows of what has just happened, the meeting could have been his idea. Maggie just smiles at him and sits down.

Devon is telling them about a game he plays with his students once a year in spring. It’s a series of challenges, and the student who wins gets to put his/her name on a trophy he keeps in his room. The first challenge is a quiz, which Devon is passing out to the student teachers. Maggie is reaching for a pencil just as Devon is shouting, “ready, set, go!” Maggie suddenly finds herself trying to remember her high school science lessons. Even though it’s only a game, Maggie now knows that Devon is watching them, and that things like this matter. Everything matters.
Devon continues shouting as they complete the quiz, “It’s not only about who can complete the quiz the fastest, it’s about who can do it with distraction. So, I move around the room, and I’m shouting at them and distracting them, and then maybe I’m knocking their desks a little.” Devon moves around the room kicking the legs of their desks, Maggie feels her heart begin to race. She focuses on the quiz, and on smiling, as Devon moves towards her and kicks her desk. “Then,” Devon continues, “once they’ve completed the quiz, they have to do a lap around the school.” Now Maggie is truly panicking, she hates running, and can’t imagine anything more uncomfortable than running in her teaching clothes at the end of what has turned out to be a very long day. Underneath the stress of the moment though is something even more disturbing. It is the realization that if Devon asks her to, she will run around the building, and she will try to run faster than her peers, and she will do it while smiling.

* * *
I’m afraid that people who see these secrets will think I was (am) a bad teacher.
Once Nora, Katherine, and I had established the safety of our summit, we began to break silences in earnest. I imagine that all researchers are worried about generating candid discussion with participants, but almost immediately this worry left my mind. I had also been plagued by a desire to define my own role at the summit; was I a participant? a participant observer? a detached observer? These thoughts too became almost immediately irrelevant. What took precedence was the feeling that this was our chance to unpack our experiences and all of our old and new conceptions of the teaching profession.

“One thing I wondered about this secret is, are you afraid, really, that people who see these secrets will think you’re a bad teacher?” Nora asks, “Or is that fear more personal?”

I pause for a moment before I answer, “I sometimes worry that people will think that if I couldn’t make it, then maybe I shouldn’t have been in the classroom to begin with – for whatever reason.” As I speak I remember the first time I shared the Teacher Secrets, and how this secret was the last one I created. “I think being thought of as a ‘bad teacher’ is overly simplistic but I had to name this fear in order to share the other secrets. I do think that there is a perception that the attrition process is healthy, that it’s, well…”

“It’s a weeding out,” Katherine nods.

“Which is funny considering how much people complain about the teachers they’ve had or question whether or not certain teachers should be in the classroom,” Nora says. “So it should be obvious that simply staying does not equal ‘good teacher,’ just as much as leaving does not equal ‘bad teacher.’”

“Right,” Katherine adds, “It’s not the naturally gifted teachers who are also perfectly balanced and perfectly suited to handle the demands of the job that fill the classrooms. This ideal person that we imagine might be one person in a million.”
“A lot of it has to do with how things are framed for us during practicum, or even before then in teacher education. I remember being given the attrition rate on the first day of our program, and at the time,” I laugh, “I remember looking around and wondering who didn’t belong there! Then later I was at the same school with somebody who left really early during practicum, and because of this framing, I thought, ‘well, I guess that’s normal.’ But now, I really wonder – “

“If that person had been at a different school,” says Katherine,

“Would it have been different” Nora finishes. “Even during practicum teaching is not really demystified, the whole profession is shrouded in mystery; you’re called from this mysterious place, to do this mysterious work that nobody seems to be able to define for you. Even now I’m not sure I can define the characteristics that enable someone to be successful in the profession.”

“Also so much is dependent upon the immediate school context,” I add quickly, “it’s all about where you end up. So you end up navigating the profession by intuition, and if you don’t have the right intuition, if you’re not ‘getting it,’ then they lose patience for you.”

“I think early on, I felt like practicum was where they were finally sharing all the secrets of teaching with me, but they turned out to be the wrong secrets. They’re not these ones,” Katherine says as she picks up the pile of Teacher Secrets on the coffee table in front of us, “they’re all the logistics of how you get a job and things like that.”

The observer part of me is surprised at how quickly we have entered rapid exchange, yet the exchange is not angry or accusing, just a searching, a circling around things. The next moment the thought is gone as I find myself absorbed in the discussion. “Well, and even though being balanced and efficient are key skills in teaching, there is little direct mentoring in terms of
what efficiency in teaching looks like. In the beginning it seems like unrealistic expectations are even encouraged. I remember saying in one of my teacher education courses that I was never going to be one of “those” teachers who had a binder of lesson plans, that each year I would develop stuff from scratch based on my students,” I laugh again as I remember an idea that now seems so naively idealistic.

“Right, and not only is that unrealistic,” Nora laughs, “but it’s the wrong way to conceptualize ‘the binder.’ Some binders are just materials that can be applied in many different ways for many different groups of students, it’s not a ball and chain.”

“Maybe they could talk about what a good binder looks like,” I offer, “and ways you can use it. But in teacher education they don’t talk about or consider the workload, I felt like they just said – “

“Good for you! Sure, do it all from scratch, you totally can, and stomp on these grapes while you’re at it!” We all laugh again at the image Nora has created.

“That’s it!” Katherine exclaims, “I couldn’t put my finger on it until right now, but this was why I was so disturbed after the last professional development day I attended at my school. We had somebody come in who gave us what was essentially the ‘anti-binder’ talk. Which at my school seems so ridiculous because most of our teachers are constantly working outside of the box, and I just thought, who is this guy? But he does a lot of pro-d for teachers, and so much of what he was suggesting that we do, and so much of what we were already doing, is so unsustainable in the current system. Yet it seems these expectations are everywhere, and nobody is advocating for a change in the system.”

“Well and this is just setting teachers up for failure, absolutely,” Nora sighs, “and setting them up for devastating failure too because, it’s one thing to struggle with classroom
management, or all of those things that beginning teachers struggle with, but it’s another thing to feel like you’re not, nor will you ever be able to, meet your own personal standards.”

There is an audible level of reflection in the room as we all pause to absorb Nora’s last statement. Katherine is the first to regroup, “I just feel like, that even if they would have been more realistic with us early on, would we have heard it? For example, I remember I was in the staff room at my first school, and one of the teachers was talking about how she had been trying to convince her daughter not to go into teaching. She was speaking, not to me but to other teachers, about specifics that I wasn’t understanding yet, but it had to do with stress and responsibilities, etc. Then there was this awkward pause as everyone noticed me, because they all knew I was a new teacher. Later on she approached me and she apologized, but I remember thinking, ‘what’s wrong with this woman, she must be all jaded and stuff!’” Katherine finishes this last sarcastically with a slight chuckle.

“She sounds burnt out,” Nora joins, “cause that’s what burnout is.”

“Right, ‘time to make room for me,’ you know?” Katherine adds.

“It’s true, you just don’t hear that stuff, the negative stuff, when you’re being called,” I remember, “because the myth of teaching is powerful. It’s hard to even remember where it begins, but I know for me, movies like Dead Poets Society definitely played a role in shaping my own expectations of what the profession was like and now, I don’t even want to think about that movie!”

“Or what about Freedom Writers?” Katherine asks. “For the longest time my students kept telling me that I should watch that movie, because I reminded them of her.”

“Oh my, such an archetypal narrative!” Nora exclaims, “but really, she only taught for one year.”
“Yes, and during that time loses her husband, works a part-time job to provide her students
with books, all the while fighting against administration,” I say, “not the picture of a healthy
teaching situation.”

“When I finally watched that movie, just to see what my students were talking about, I was
so upset, I identified so strongly with her situation,” Katherine says, “but what really confuses
me now is, the whole story is there right? She is a great teacher, unable to sustain her practice
within the current system. She gives up so much and in the end she has to leave the classroom!
Also, when she leaves, she has still lost all the things she has sacrificed.”

“But it’s again with this idea of framing right?” I theorize, “That movie was promoted as
an exploration of race relations among the students, and by the way, an inspiring story of a
teacher who made a difference.”

“Right, it’s the ‘it will all be worth it, won’t it?’ from that first secret,” Katherine mocks,
“or the ‘don’t you wish all teachers cared that much?’”

“Do you wish all teachers had a shelf-life of one year?” I retort. More laughter fills the
room for a moment before another reflective pause.

“Maybe mentors are the ones who can help demystify these expectations. I think that one
of my practicum teachers was able to help me establish some more realistic ideas,” Nora reflects.
“In my program, we had two longer practicums over two years, and during that first practicum,
he helped me to establish some manageable routines. The first couple days I remember I brought
in these perfectly typed eight-page lesson plans, and after he observed me a couple times he said,
‘Are you really going to do this everyday?’”

“I said, ‘Well, that’s the program expectation.’”
“‘Let’s talk about what you might actually do when you teach,’” he said, which from then on meant that my lesson planning was three bullet points on a sticky note, and he would just watch, and hang out, and afterwards we would talk books and philosophy and we’d talk about the class. It was really just about knowing where you are with the kids, and where you want to go. He was a mentor and a friend, actually we’re still friends. So, because that experience was so positive, I really felt that there was a place for me in this system, even though that’s something I had been nervous about initially.” Nora pauses for a moment before continuing, “My second practicum though, the expectations were completely different. My sponsor teacher was very adamant about the full daily lesson plan, and I learned very quickly I couldn’t trust her. So my second practicum was defined by stress and emergency phone calls to that first mentor teacher. What would I have done if the order of my practicums had been reversed? I might have left. So, the role of the mentor is so critical.”

“I had a similar experience in terms of having two very different practicum teachers,” Katherine begins. “Different for me though because I had them concurrently. I was working in both of their classrooms during the same practicum. But also similar because one of my sponsor teachers was very eager to talk to me about things I thought were silly at the time, like how to deal with paper. At the time I thought, ‘are you serious? You’re telling me how to deal with paper?’” Katherine laughs, “but these things are what you need to do, simple things like keeping different stacks within a folded piece of coloured paper so they’re organized!” Nora and I both nod. “Also eerily similar is that my other sponsor teacher was less supportive, but in different ways, and I’m realizing now, in unclear ways. For example, I mentioned to him that my goal was to teach a global education course, and he sort of chuckled and gave me a ‘wouldn’t we all.’ I was never quite sure what to make of that. But then later on, and what was most upsetting, is that
in the final report he wrote for me, he wrote that I needed to work on ‘establishing respectful relationships with students.’ It was so disheartening, because I didn’t know he felt that way for one, but also because my relationship with my students is so key to who I am as a teacher. I never quite shook that comment off, even in my third year of teaching.”

“That’s so interesting because I can definitely see how my practicum teacher shaped my expectations, of the profession and of myself,” I say. “She really wanted that detailed daily lesson plan as well. She showed me her planning one day, which was a sentence or two per class in her daily planner, but from me she was clear that she wanted something much more detailed. When I was at my first school, I thought that when I was evaluated whoever was evaluating me would have the same expectation. So I tried to maintain the daily detailed lesson plan for all of my classes – even though I realized by then that such a high level of detail really wasn’t useful to me later. I found that what was useful to me later was my unit overview, which had the unit objectives and then one or two sentences per lesson. Anyways, this planning expectation had consequences for me later, because when I was unable to maintain daily detailed lesson plans, I began to feel like I wasn’t meeting my professional obligations, like I wasn’t doing my job. I was really afraid that when my evaluation came along, I would be ‘found out.’ Of course when my evaluation happened, which was near the end of my first year, he didn’t ask to see any lesson plans. That was the first time I realized that this was what turned out to be one of many, false and unrealistic expectations that I took on. Until that moment though, I didn’t have anybody else to challenge or change that expectation.”

“So it seems like expectations are important here,” Nora concludes. “If we’re trying to define a new teacher archetype, there is something about the expectations, and our relationship to expectations that is key.”
“Right and all expectations, right?” I add.

“Yes, external and internal, as well as how expectations become internalized,” agrees Katherine. “But also, if our expectations of the job were wrong, and it’s not the ability to inspire your students, and be caring and interactive and so forth, but if instead it’s other things that determine whether or not you will survive, like your ability to navigate complex political and bureaucratic systems then –”

“Exactly!” Nora affirms, “What’s the hidden job description?”

* * *

The teacher imagery that was often referred to throughout our discussion is defined by Tom Barone (2003) as supporting “a master narrative, a grand, total, smooth, meta-story designed to give final meaning to cultural (here educational) phenomena” (p. 203). Not only do these meta-stories influence the expectations of beginning teachers, they have also been “generated and disseminated through reports from governments and foundations” (p. 203), and thus serve to influence education policy that can be detrimental to education systems, and individuals working within these systems. Barone cites Dalton’s (1999) book The Hollywood Curriculum as identifying the image of the ‘good teacher’ “acting heroically in isolation from colleagues but ultimately failing to change the status quo” (p. 204). Katherine’s confusion at the depiction of the teacher in Freedom Writers (LaGravenese, 2007) speaks to the need to reframe this archetype. Instead of being the ideal to aspire to, we might see how these images of “rare teachers who act as isolated heroes . . . diminish the possibility of transformation through collective struggle” (Barone, 2003, p. 204). Perhaps we can begin to imagine ways we might change the system in order to support and sustain exceptional teaching.
My own search for narratives of the counter-archetype we sought to define during our summit yielded only a few results. The memoir *Tomorrow Is School and I’m Sick to the Heart Thinking about it* by Don Sawyer (1998) is one example. Within this story I found two teachers who share some of the difficulties faced by Nora, Katherine, and myself. However, I also found that, similar to *Freedom Writers*, the teachers’ stories took a back seat. The back cover frames the story with, “best of all, you’ll come to know a part of Canada that is unknown to most Canadians,” essentially directing our attention to the travel narrative, rather than to the narrative of two excellent teachers forced to leave a confused and often hostile system. The current framing of these stories in popular discourse is problematic because it leaves us unable to articulate our struggles, and without this naming it is difficult to imagine alternatives.

Telling the story of teacher attrition in a subversive way also causes, or is reflective of, the difficulties teachers face in trying to speak about these challenges, even amongst ourselves. The idea that Katherine’s presence in the staffroom could prompt not only the end of a conversation about the stresses of teaching, but also an apology from a teacher is telling. This is the “I shouldn’t be telling you this” (Nassef, 2009) of teaching that prevents many beginning teachers from proactively navigating the stresses of the profession until it is too late. This is the hidden expectation of not complaining, after all, we get to “make a difference in the lives of our students, and it will all be worth it, won’t it?” (Near, 2009).

Katherine’s comment that during practicum she learned “the wrong secrets” about the profession links these silences to the possibilities inherent in teacher mentorship. We each noted the positive and negative influence mentors can have in the professional growth of beginning teachers. Some of the literature focused on teacher retention also reflects these possibilities, and accurately describes some of the experiences that our summit discussion reveals.
The literature suggests that any kind of formal or informal mentorship, or even general collegiality with veteran teachers, can increase teacher retention, reduce teacher isolation, and encourage professional growth in beginning teachers (Borman & Dowling, 2008; Carter & Francis, 2001; Hobson, Ashby, Malderez, & Tomlinson, 2009). However, negative outcomes of mentorship have been identified, outcomes largely dependent upon mentorship style. First, mentorship can increase the workload of mentee teachers to unmanageable levels and can impose high standards on beginning teachers (Hobson, et al., 2009). There is some indication that a transmission style of mentorship, one that encroaches upon the independent growth of a beginning teacher, will also negatively impact a mentee’s growth (Wang, et al., 2008). Beginning teachers conceptualize the mentor-mentee relationship as one that provides support with classroom management and with curricular resources (Wang, et al., 2008). Though psychological and emotional support from potential mentors is valued by mentees (Carter & Francis, 2001; Wang, et al., 2008), beginning teachers who struggle often cite a lack of curricular resources and pedagogical support as a main source of dissatisfaction (Johnson & Birkeland, 2003; Wang, et al., 2008). The literature also indicates that mentees positively respond to mentorship focused on lesson observations and discussions (Hobson, et al., 2009; Wang, et al., 2008). Additional mentor characteristics valued by beginning teachers include: availability, friendliness, approachability, openness, interest level (Carter & Francis, 2001), as well as personal encouragement (Johnson & Birkeland, 2003).

It is important to consider that just as beginning teachers require positive environments for positive growth, so too do mentor teachers. Providing effective mentorship is seen in the literature as a skill-set that is unique from the skill-set of teaching, therefore specialized training for mentors is seen as a quality of effective induction (Carroll, 2005; Hobson, et al., 2009).
practice, however, mentor teachers often volunteer to host student teachers in addition to their regular teaching responsibilities, and are therefore denied the opportunity to spend time developing mentorship skills. Carroll’s (2005) study suggests something as simple as a collaborative mentor study group can provide an effective vehicle for helping mentors develop. This recommendation is supported by Carter & Francis’ (2001) finding that the mentor-mentee relationship is so dependent on context that standardized mentor training has limited potential benefits (p. 258).
Maggie is excited about her second year at William Aitken High. As she enters the parking lot and pulls into her assigned spot, she thinks back to the first day of her first year. She smiles as she remembers how even knowing where to park was a mystery. This year the first day of school is a new adventure. She walks confidently into the building, checks her assigned mailbox, and heads up the stairs to her classroom. She is a bit startled to find that she has no desks, but she imagines that the custodial staff will bring some by within the next couple of days. She has a week before classes begin, plenty of time to sort out the furniture situation. She smiles again as she remembers her first year and how she had been hired the day before the start of term. By comparison, a week to prepare is more than comfortable.

Maggie heads down to the staff meeting and greets her colleagues warmly. Many teachers had been hired the year before and she found herself part of a large and supportive community of beginning teachers. It had been so much easier to find her way through the days with other people. They had even compiled a list of the many questions they had as they went through the year. The questions totaled 35 pages, unanswered. Yet even this experience was empowering as the administration had agreed to make the answers to all their questions accessible to future beginning teachers. As the meeting begins Maggie smiles again, now noticing that the plethora of acronyms that fill the room are no longer unintelligible or intimidating.

Despite all the questions and small fumbles of the previous year, Maggie had felt successful. She had become active in the school community by taking on one of the Student Council teacher liaison positions, by helping to develop a reading program that many teachers in
her department had adopted, and by forming a teacher lunch club. She was looking forward to how much more she could accomplish now that the first year fog had lifted. She was also looking forward to repeating a class or two, which she hopes will help her get her workload under control.

In the classroom, Maggie was able to repeat the successes of her practicum with some of William Aitken’s most difficult students. Her teaching philosophy had become characterized by her desire to create safe classroom communities, a goal at which she had felt genuinely successful. She also tried to capitalize as much as possible on the power of teacher passion she had tapped into while teaching Main Street Hero. With her grade 10 classes, she created an ‘I Am’ paragraph writing lesson, and to model, she had shared a paragraph about her adventurous eating habits during her travels through Asia. For her grade 11 poetry class, she had encouraged them to explore the poetry of musical artists by first sharing a few songs by her favourite band. Finally, for her grade 12 class she had once again taught Main Street Hero. She had done this not only because she loved the play, and had a great story to go with it, but also because after her success with the students on her practicum, Ray Cresting had agreed that Maggie should be the one to develop a curriculum unit for the play. At the time, Maggie had been so excited about this possibility that she had approached a professor in her teacher education program about creating the curriculum unit as a Master’s project. He had been very encouraging, and was also supportive of Maggie’s desire to spend some time in the classroom first. Maggie, though enticed by the possibility of a Master’s, and by the project, was now so eager to get into the classroom that little could have stopped her.

Maggie had been just as nervous the second time she taught Main Street Hero as the first time, but for different reasons. The students at William Aitken were very different than those at
Edward Sheffield. Most of Sheffield’s students were very academically oriented, and had been enthusiastic students of literature. At William Aitken, the students were interested in the more practical aspects of communication. Maggie was thrilled to discover that the story of her journey with the play, and the story of the play’s authors, interested her new students as well. She was also thrilled to realize that they had just as many insights into the play, though their insights were different from those of her previous class. The character of Robert Cardinal intrigued them because he too was leaving high school and trying to find his path in life. Also, like many of them, Robert had been in his fair share of trouble. This year Maggie hoped to share her Main Street Hero unit plan with one or two other teachers, in order to make some progress towards the curriculum unit she hoped to create.

As Maggie leaves the staff meeting to begin her planning, she thinks about all the wonderful things she has to look forward to.

* * *

October

The only reason Maggie knows today’s date is because her Dad called yesterday to invite her to her step-mom’s birthday dinner. Anne’s birthday is October 12. They have invited Maggie to a make-your-own-stir-fry restaurant near the school. Maggie recognizes that this is an unlikely restaurant choice for Anne to make – it is a long way out of their way. Her parents must be enticing her to leave the school early enough to join them for dinner.

For the past two weeks Maggie has been experimenting with a new strategy. She has been refusing to go home before her desk is cleared of to-do items, and her plans for the following day are sorted out – photocopying included. There are no windows in Maggie’s classroom, and usually the hallway lights in the school are off long before she leaves every day,
leaving her isolated within the too-bright fluorescents. Though she has stayed at the school sometimes until 10:00 p.m., there is always something left undone. In part this is due to the fact that at some point everything starts to take much longer than it should. If only I could make some kind of system work, Maggie thinks, then things would get easier.

As Maggie reluctantly leaves the school at 6:00 p.m., she thinks about some of the other teachers she has met and how they manage their time. There was a teacher at Edward Sheffield who was always there when she arrived in the early morning. One day she finally asked him when he came in. He told her that he arrives at the school at 4:30 every morning, and uses that time to get all of his work done. This way, he doesn’t have to take work home in the evenings and his weekends are free. One of the teachers in her department has a similar strategy. She wakes up around 4:00 a.m. and does all her marking during that time. Maggie has noticed she is also at the school some nights until 7:00 or 8:00 p.m. Another teacher in the Science department is often at the school on Saturdays. And despite the fact that Maggie is at the school sometimes until very late, her car is rarely the last one left in the staff parking lot. Maggie feels like she is finding her own way; she is doing what she needs to do to be a successful teacher.

On her way to the restaurant Maggie stops in at a bookstore for a gift. Usually Maggie is a thoughtful gift-giver, but today she must resign herself to a last-minute selection. When Maggie arrives at the restaurant she finds her parents are already there. She plops herself down in the comfortable booth, appreciating the cozy décor and the wonderful smells. After Anne opens her present (which happily goes over quite well) they begin to chat about other things and of course, Maggie’s Dad soon asks, “So how’s school going?”
Maggie suddenly feels flush as a wave of tension fills her. She realizes with some amount of shock her breath is quickening and that tears are inevitable. She also realizes that she has gone from zero to breakdown in less than ten seconds, and that this must be quite a scene.

“I can’t do this job,” Maggie heaves. Then, as she contemplates the truth of this statement the rest comes out in bits and pieces between choked breaths. “It’s like I have two full-time jobs worth of work to do, I’ve been working for 12 hours a day for two weeks and I’m still not caught up. I can never get caught up, there’s always more. I don’t know what to do. I feel guilty for being here right now, like I should be working, but I also know I should be able to have dinner with my parents sometimes.”

The waiter comes by and leaves before saying a word. Anne attempts to comfort Maggie, asking questions about the kind of work Maggie is spending so much time on. Maggie tries to make sense of things as she talks. It’s not one identifiable thing. She pictures the piles on her desk in her mind and mentally goes through them. “It just never stops. The planning is one thing, and harder than I expected because I’m teaching all new classes again this year. One of my classes has three different levels in it, so even though they’re all grade in 11, they’re all different kinds of grade elevens. There’s a new system for tracking the students with Learning Disabilities, which for me is every student. I now have to have a one-on-one planning session with each of them to establish goals. I thought I’d have them done in the first couple weeks but I’m still doing them.” Maggie pauses for a moment and thinks about these meetings, she feels really good about them, they’re very good for the students, she doesn’t want to cut a corner there.

“Then it’s like, even if I’m ready for the day, there are five little things in my mailbox in the morning. They’re either things I need to do with the students or stuff I need to fill out, but it’s just so much. Every time I think I’ve cleared my desk there’s one more piece at the bottom of the
Maggie doesn’t tell them that the image of the never-ending pile is now prominent in her increasingly disturbing teacher dreams. Lately Maggie has been dreaming that she clears the paper off her desk, but as soon as she looks up to talk to the students, the piles replenish themselves and the whole thing starts all over again. “There’s also a new attendance policy, and I have to call home after five absences or lates. I can never get a hold of the parents, and I have at least one student hit five every day. So, it’s hard to keep up.”

As Maggie continues to itemize the small pieces that make up her overwhelming workload, her Dad just listens attentively. Maggie begins to regain some composure, and looks thankfully at Anne, whose birthday she now feels she has ruined. They all order drinks from the waiter who appears again and sets some extra napkins on the table. He returns and sets an ice tea down in front of Maggie. She takes a sip, and then a deep breath.

Maggie’s Dad waits until this moment to ask, “Do you think other teachers feel this way? Or are you feeling this way because you’re a new teacher?”

Maggie tells him about how some of the other teachers manage their time. Then she adds, “Even my department head is stressed out, she says the workload has increased so much, that it’s worse than it has ever been.”

Her Dad nods thoughtfully before asking, “Has anybody told you specifically how the workload has increased?”

Maggie thinks for a moment, becoming more inquisitive than tearful, “Well, I know there are some things like the school secretaries used to call home for attendance reasons, and there would be someone to help us with photocopying and things like that. Also, class sizes have gone way up. In my grade 10 classes last year I had around 40 students in each one. That’s a lot of
essays. Now, even though I’m teaching special needs classes, they are still overcrowded. I have one class that has 25 students in it. Really, 18 students would be a big class.”

Again, Maggie’s Dad nods. Then he tilts his head thoughtfully for a moment. When he looks back at Maggie he asks, “Who can help you with this? Who has the power to change your situation?”

Maggie is stunned by the perceptive depth of this question. In her mind she searches through all the little things she has heard about the current education system. She stumbles out, “well, the entire system is overburdened I guess. The population has been growing much faster than the infrastructure.”

“So, is it a funding issue?”

“Sort of, I guess, but to me it’s not about salary,” Maggie replies.

“So it’s not that teachers aren’t paid enough, but that they need more of them?”

“Yes, I guess that’s part of it. I mean, I would happily do this job for less, it’s what I’ve always wanted to do, but I literally cannot do it. There’s just too much.”

“O.K., who has control over class sizes?”

Now Maggie’s mind’s eye sees an expanding and tangled web of the bureaucratic system that is education, nothing on the web is clear, “I have no idea.”

“What about your principal? Have you told her about this? What could she do?”

“I don’t know if she could do anything,” Maggie’s thoughts are racing now. She imagines for a moment what it would be like to have this conversation with her principal but realizes that she could never admit this kind of defeat. Even if Maggie could bring herself to that discussion, what could her administration really do? “I think she is as much of a victim of the system as I am, she has people to answer to.”
“Who are those people?”

“I have no idea.” The truth is, Maggie has been so busy she has seen nothing outside of her daily tunnel: alarm clock, car, parking lot, school doors, mailbox, stairs, classroom, desk, students, then desk again and the whole process happens in reverse. Maggie looks at her Dad, smiles, and shakes her head with disbelief. Who has the power to change my situation? Why are things like this? What needs to happen in order to make this better? Where does all this work come from? Maggie remembers the positive response her school administration had to the list of new teacher questions they had worked on the year before. She begins to think that if she could answer her Dad’s questions, perhaps she could change her situation. The questions fill her with hope.

* * *

66
Figure 6. Marking
After pausing to prepare our lunch, the three of us take time to reflect on our own reactions to the expectations of our positions. As we settle back into our seats, which are now marked as blank spaces amid piles of paper, we begin to find commonalities here as well.

“I remember spending one summer at our cabin, which is where we spend every summer,” Nora begins, “but this was the summer after my second year of teaching in the public school system. That year I knew what my courses were likely to be in September, so I spent two hours every day working.”

“Oh my goodness,” Katherine remarks, “that’s huge!”

“Every day! I was determined that I was going to be on top of it that year!”

“I did a similar thing,” says Katherine, “my second year I was so excited to find out that I would be teaching a grade seven course that there was already a textbook for. So I grabbed the textbook and I went through every page. I knew day-by-day plans wouldn’t work, but I put a sticky note on every page with a possible lesson or activity for that material. So I felt like when I started teaching, I would already have an idea of what I was going to do.”

“Exactly,” Nora agrees.

“You two are amazing,” I comment, “I only had one summer where I was going to be teaching again in the fall. I think I just collapsed for the first month, then the second month took some time to do some summer things, to reconnect with some relationships I’d been neglecting, and get back to myself. Then before I knew it school was back in session! Plus they were unable to tell me what I’d be teaching in the fall, so there was little I could have done.”

“Well, that’s what you do after your first year of teaching,” Nora affirms, “your first year is so overwhelming.”
“So, did you feel more prepared once you got back in the classroom after working all summer?” I ask both of them.

“Well, that was my intention,” Katherine laughs.

“I felt more prepared,” Nora laughs, “or I had this illusion of preparedness, which is what made the year so rude. That was the year I had my first of a few groups of students that I just couldn’t reach, no matter what I did.” Nora pauses briefly as Katherine nods supportively. “I really felt the: ‘Why me? Why now? I’m more prepared than I’ve ever been, and yet, I’m having the worst year!’”

“That’s exactly what happened to me too!” Katherine says, “that feeling of preparedness was almost worse.”

“Of course, the first place you go when things are not going well, the first thing I tried to do anyways, was change myself,” Nora reflects.

“Right, ‘if only I could,’ you know, stay at the school until 10:00 every day and not have to go to my step-mom’s birthday dinner!” We all laugh as Katherine makes this link.

“Right, you connect it to your own personality,” Nora agrees.

“Well and that’s something the literature circles around sometimes,” I add, “whether or not attrition is correlated to a personality type.”

“I love reading about personality types,” Katherine says. “According to Do What you Are, a book based on the Myers-Briggs personality types, two of the personality types most suited to teaching are INFP/ENFP, which means Introverted or Extraverted, then iNtuitive, then Feeling, then Perceiving.” Katherine summarizes some of the characteristics of these personality types as representing individuals who are: idealistic by nature; whose work must reflect their
personal value system; and those who have a highly developed sense of intuition (see Tieger & Barron, 2007).

“So though according to this career guide,” Katherine continues, “these personality types are best suited for teaching, but some of these things begin to feel like liabilities.”

“Right,” says Nora, “it’s the idea that those who are attracted to the profession because they are: intuitive, compassionate, generous, open, and driven to meet the needs of students, seem to be among those who struggle the most.”

“Suddenly you are too idealistic, or you just care too much,” I agree.

“On that note, and in regards to the tendency to look inward for ways to change yourself to meet the situation,” Nora says, “I brought an article I found particularly helpful for me during my own process of trying to figure all this out. Of course, I’ve been doing a lot of reading about parenting and child development as we prepare for our first child, but there was one thing I read that I was able to apply directly to my experience of teaching.”

“Yes, let’s reframe this internalizing!” Katherine says excitedly.

Nora smiles and grabs the article, “might as well get this on record,” she says referring to the ongoing recording of our conversation. Nora reads:

Most of us have genes that make us as hardy as dandelions: able to take root and survive almost anywhere. A few of us, however, are more like the orchid: fragile and fickle, but capable of blooming spectacularly if given greenhouse care. So holds a provocative new theory of genetics, which asserts that the very genes that give us the most trouble as a species, causing behaviors that are self-destructive and antisocial, also underlie humankind’s phenomenal adaptability and evolutionary success. With a bad environment and poor parenting, orchid children can end up depressed, drug-addicted, or in jail—but
with the right environment and good parenting, they can grow up to be society’s most creative, successful, and happy people. (Dobbs, 2009)

“Okay,” Katherine says, “I’m feeling a lot of resonance with this idea.”

“Basically, this theory grows out of the vulnerability theory which holds that someone’s genetic make-up causes them to be more susceptible to certain kinds of behaviour, or mental or physical illness. However, unlike vulnerability theory that sees these traits as a deficit, this ‘Orchid theory’ recognizes that when given the proper environment, these individuals excel in our society. So much so that they have found that natural selection is favouring the Orchids. So in connecting this to beginning teaching…”

“There are strengths that become weaknesses, it’s not just that we are inherently weak in certain ways,” Katherine theorizes.

“Yes, I think so,” Nora replies. “I feel like some of the things about myself that become liabilities in the public school system are same things that make me good at teaching, just as you said Katherine, they come from the exact same place.”

“So, we’re also back to the idea of mentorship as a powerful intervention,” I say.

“Yes, absolutely,” says Nora. “In this particular study they helped the parents of these children make six small interventions over the course of a year, and their children’s behaviour not only improved but they began to excel.”

“So, to extend this analogy, it really wouldn’t take much to make a difference for beginning teachers.”

“Yes, but as you mentioned earlier, there needs to be some guidance for mentors as well.”
“Well, and this might be a good way for mentors to understand that the approach of ‘suck it up, you’ve got to pay your dues,’ might really work for ‘Dandelions,’” Katherine laughs at these new labels, “but for Orchids, it might be really devastating.”

“Yes!” I say, “that might be a great way to frame it for mentors, to help them realize that mentorship needs to be responsive to the needs of their mentees, much as we attempt to differentiate for the needs of our students.”

“So we’re Orchids?” Katherine exclaims, “could that be the new teacher archetype? Go Orchids!”

“Yes,” Nora rejoins, “Orchids who have not bloomed as spectacularly as we could have.”

* * *

December

Maggie has had a busy, but in many ways satisfying semester. After realizing how much tension she was carrying just below the surface in October, she had taken some time to regroup. Part of this regrouping involved creating a list of the professional responsibilities teaching entailed. She discovered that several other new teachers at William Aitken had also felt disillusioned during their second year. It seems she was not alone in thinking that year two would be much easier, and finding it was in many ways harder. Together they had discovered that the list of their professional responsibilities was long, and that if they were to constantly keep up with things, they would be working over 500 hours a month. Far from being discouraging, this information had brought them some relief – it wasn’t their fault, keeping up was in some ways impossible. This knowledge ended Maggie’s strategy of attempting to clear her desk at the end of every day, and though the dreams still plagued her occasionally, she tried, in her waking hours, to be gentler with the expectations she set for herself. She had also managed
to find some time to prepare her application for a Master’s program. She had originally planned
to return to her *Main Street Hero* project after two years of teaching. However, now that she had
her own classroom, and had found a niche with the special education students of William Aitken,
she was not entirely certain she was ready to leave. It was also difficult to imagine leaving the
community of new teachers at her school as she now counted them among her closest friends.
Though she did not have much time to investigate all the possibilities, she hoped that it might be
possible to obtain a deferral should her application be accepted.

After enjoying a quick lunch with several colleagues who, like her, were bogged down
with marking for report card time, Maggie heads back to her classroom to make sure everything
is ready for next period. It is the same lesson she taught this morning’s grade 10 class, but the
afternoon group is considerably rowdier so she wants to be organized. One of the difficulties, for
the students and for her, is that it is harder to stay focused in the afternoon, especially right after
eating. Maggie has noticed that most of the students bring in the last few swigs of the giant colas
they have had for lunch; it’s no wonder they are off the wall. Maggie double checks her lesson
plan materials list and starts writing the agenda on the board. Freewrites are always better than
silent reading for the class right after lunch, she thinks, we’ll start there.

“There you are, I’ve been looking for you.”

“Oh?” Maggie says, as Ms. Alfie Hughes, one of William Aitken’s administrators, walks
purposefully through her classroom door.

“Have you got your markbook set-up?” Maggie connects Alfie’s question to some recent
emails offering teachers help with the new marks program. She hasn’t paid much attention to
these emails as they seem to be directed at teachers who have been using other mark programs or
have been doing calculations by hand, and are now being required to switch over to the new system.

“Yes, I have. Thank you,” says Maggie, appreciative of the offer of support. Alfie is the administrator in charge of report cards so Maggie is a bit surprised she has the time for a personal visit.

“Open it up,” says Alfie, taking a seat at Maggie’s computer. Maggie reaches across Alfie to log on, noticing that it is now only two minutes until the bell and her agenda is still not on the board. Once she opens up her markbook for Alfie she hurries back to the chalkboard to finish. It isn’t long before she is again interrupted.

“What are all these blanks?” shouts Alfie from behind the computer screen. Maggie moves again towards the computer and peeks over Alfie’s shoulder, now feeling a bit flush with nerves – maybe this is not an offer of assistance. “You can’t have blanks. Does this mean these assignments are excused? You can’t excuse this many assignments, not unless the student has a doctor’s note, and even then, I mean, they’re responsible for the course work, and if they don’t do the course work how can they pass?”

“Well, some of these assignments are still being worked on, there’s usually quite a few things handed in just before report cards.”

“No. You can’t do this. Look at this kid, Kyle. I know this kid. I knew all four of his brothers too, bad kids. Every one of them expelled. Look. If I enter in zeros where these blanks are…” Maggie watches with shock as Alfie starts entering zeros in her markbook. “Look, now he’s got 30%, that’s where he should be.” The bell rings and students start bouncing into the room, buckets of soda in hand. Maggie is unsure of what to do.
“Thank you so much for pointing that out, Alfie. I will have a more detailed look at that after class.”

“Yeah, because it’s just not fair, they can’t get away with it.” Maggie looks at the students who have entered, hoping that Kyle is planning on being late.

“Okay, sure.”

“You've got to enter in zeros here, you can't do this. I don't know why teachers think they can get away with this.” Maggie notices that the students are unusually quiet, and then she realizes that it's because of Ms. Hughes. Of all the administrators, she is the most feared. Maggie does not want to talk about the students while they are in the room, but she has always thought that making accommodations with assignment deadlines was normal for students in specialized programs. Perhaps she is wrong.

She turns her attention to the students for a moment, “Hello everyone, today we are starting with a freewrite, so please grab a writing utensil and a piece of paper.” Usually Maggie’s tendency to call pens and pencils writing ‘utensils’ elicits a bit of laughter, but not today. As the students get organized, Maggie notices thankfully that Alfie is closing her markbook. She hopes that she can remember what Alfie has changed later.

The following morning Maggie slips into the office to check her mailbox, hoping not to meet Alfie along the way. After Alfie’s comments she sought out some feedback about her markbook and confirmed that she is allowed to excuse students from assignments. Though that had not been her intention (she really was hoping to collect them from the students), this new knowledge leaves her doubly confused about Alfie’s sudden spot check. She hopes she can avoid Alfie, and therefore the confrontation, for the next few days. She looks in her mailbox and notices a small envelope on top of the pile. Inside she discovers a card with two movie passes
inside. The card reads, ‘Thanks for all your work with Student Council, Alfie.’” Maggie is stunned, not for the first time that week. Student Council has not actually done anything but hold meetings for the past several weeks. Perhaps there is more going on here than she understands. Maggie closes the card and heads to class.

* * *

“So, are we making some sense yet?” Katherine asks jokingly.

“Yes, I’m totally analyzing this as we’re speaking, and so far I’ve developed four main themes,” I join in.

Nora laughs, “Anything you’d like us to clarify or expand on?”

“Yes,” Katherine offers, “we could perhaps mention ‘accountability’ a few more times.” I smile at both of them before Nora takes the conversation to a more serious place.

“There is always that looming accountability isn’t there?” Nora sighs.

“Definitely, both the subtle and the not-so-subtle,” I say.

Katherine nods, “My first experience with the not-so-subtle happened as soon as I started at my school. We were going through an audit.”

“Yikes,” I reply, “what was that like?”

“Well, one of the first things I was shown was the files, and you know, the importance of ‘the files.’” Katherine laughs as she says this last in a booming voice.

“My question with things like school audits is what are the actual consequences to the school?” Nora wonders.

“I don’t know, that’s true, it’s another mystery,” Katherine responds. “I’m assuming it’s a fine. I actually remember people taking about losing funding, but I mean that doesn’t make sense. For example, we were funded for a certain number of ESL students, I don’t know how we
could lose that if we didn’t put their names on the right spot on the file. Yet some of the admin staff were passing along some of these fears as they would check up on our records.”

“What are the records they were checking?” I ask.

“We have to keep certain information about each student on file: their language level, their grades, progress checks, and so on. They became the mega-thing I had to do in terms of paperwork. Even though, as a department we boiled it down to the absolute barest minimum, figured out how to digitize the process, and then just mass-produced them. This was of course because we each had our own files in our rooms that were meaningful and useful for us. We would keep writing samples, add the occasional note, and I just didn’t understand – if you want to see my files, look at my actual files! The ones that we were required to do were crap, quite frankly.”

“Right, why does it seem like we are doing one thing for ourselves and one thing for someone else?” Nora questions.

“Well and it just seems so, I mean really, you want some proof that I’m actually teaching my students? And of course the other side of that is they would set some fairly unreasonable in terms of what an ESL student can accomplish each year, like even the amount of time that is officially granted for a student to no longer be designated ESL is so unrealistic.”

“So, then all the paper work becomes absolutely meaningless because it doesn’t reflect your professional judgment,” Nora concludes.

“Of course,” says Katherine. “Then, on the more subtle side of accountability, or maybe that’s not the right word for this but, I remember in my last year of teaching, I shared a room with another ESL teacher. We would always criss-cross through each other’s classes, and there was always something, it was brutal sometimes! She would mention things like: ‘I notice your
students aren’t speaking English in class. I have a rule in my classroom…’ Which I could understand, we’re sharing a room and the students are realizing that we have different rules, but at the same time as I was teaching I just felt, ‘I don’t need to hear this right now.’”

“It’s your classroom, it’s your set of rules,” Nora finishes.

“Exactly. So now, here I am trying to justify my beginning teacher practices to the more experienced teacher without stepping on toes, and honouring her decisions, tricky stuff!”

“It’s that constant legitimization,” Nora says, “and you get into the habit of legitimizing everything.”

“Especially as a new teacher,” Katherine adds, “and you feel like if you have to be legitimizing you’re probably doing something wrong! Because if it’s not obvious that that’s the way it should be then you start questioning, maybe that’s not the normal way, maybe that’s not what I should be doing.”

“That constant second guessing really starts to erode both your ability to make reasonable judgment calls, and your ability to back your own judgment, to feel confident. So you start looking for sources to back up your decisions,” says Nora.

“Well, if you have time,” laughs Katherine, “otherwise you just live in that state of constant second guessing! Now that I’m back at school though, back on the theory side of things, I’m finding a lot of material to support the things I was doing while teaching. It’s all there, I was awesome!” Though Katherine says this last comment in a joking way, there is also a tone of frustration in her voice, “no one ever told me that while I was teaching.”

“I’ve definitely had moments like that since I’ve been back at school,” I say. “I took one class with people who were mostly practicing teachers, and that was really hard for me because I had so much to say. All it did was remind me of how much I still have to offer.”
“All that knowledge going to waste,” Nora finishes.

“Exactly.”

“Also, when I reflect back on some of my other teaching experiences, those that happened outside of public education, I don’t remember having any of the same issues,” says Katherine. “I have taught ESL in other settings, and I was never questioned about the decisions I was making. Also my relationship to my peers was completely different. I can recall moments where we would just get together and talk about our practice, and the discussions of the differences in our teaching became opportunities for professional growth. There was a sense that we were all working towards the same goals, and different ways of achieving these goals were highly valued.”

“I had similar experiences in other teaching situations,” I comment, “there was never a sense of ‘watching you’re back’ all the time.”

“That, and there was never a need to learn to say ‘no,’ nobody was ever going to ask you anything that requires you to set firm boundaries. Unreasonable expectations were not an issue,” recalls Katherine.

For the next few minutes we share stories related to our teaching practices outside of the public education system. Through this discussion we discover a key difference between those experiences and our more recent ones.

“I don’t think I ever realized how much of what we’re talking about today links to autonomy,” I say.

“It all relates to autonomy, in some way,” Nora replies. “In other settings I felt like they trusted that they had hired the right person to do the job, and they relied on my professional judgment.”
“Right, and that’s so important,” Katherine concludes, “I want to be able to trust my own judgment, and I want other people to trust my judgment.”

* * *

January

Travis Wiesner. Maggie looks again at her class list and takes a deep breath. The almost-19-year old grade 12 student is infamous at William Aitken. Known for being in the halls or in the parking lot more often than in class, and for his shockingly callous treatment of teachers and other students, he is not a challenge Maggie is looking forward to facing this semester. If it weren’t for this one picture on her class list Maggie would be ecstatic; the class is full of students from her grade 11 class the previous year. They had been Maggie’s best class yet and together they had formed a strong community. Maggie had learned though, that one student can change a class atmosphere irreparably.

The year before Maggie had a student with a similar profile to Travis Weisner’s in her grade 10 class. Though she had welcomed Stan Dueck into her class optimistically, it had proven to be a disaster. He was usually at least 30 minutes late, during which time the rest of the grade 10 students proved to be a very quiet and sweet group. The minute Stan walked into the room however, the students changed before her eyes. Stan was a year older than the other students, and they idolized him. Immediately the girls would start preening, the boys would start posturing, and Maggie would lose all control. She tried every class to manage Stan, but eventually she had asked if Stan could spend his English period in the student support room. Maggie was surprised when the student support teacher readily agreed, telling Maggie that that was a large part of their role at the school.
Maggie looks again at Travis Wiesner’s picture. She also remembers the trying time one of her new teacher peers had with Travis the year before. Now that she knew about the student support room, she considers asking them to reassign Travis immediately. However, this is not the kind of teacher she wants to be. Her rule with the students in the specialized program, of whom many are constantly at odds with other teachers and with administration, is that in her class, they would get a clean slate. They had her respect until they lost it. She decides to try. Really, the only reason she never feels guilt over what had happened with Stan is that she tried. She had found that she was so focused on her goal of helping her students achieve some degree of academic success, that she had instinctively prioritized the needs of her other students against the need to manage an unmanageable student. If need be, she would do so again. Plus, she had the advantage of knowing the majority of the other grade 12 students well enough to trust them.

The first day of the new semester hits and as is the norm with first days, and often with Mondays, Maggie is running on little sleep. She has learned that these Sunday night jitters are common for teachers; it’s the anxiety of the first day of school repeated again, and again. So today she is running on adrenaline, and anticipating her first meeting with Travis. Almost as soon as the warning bell goes the grade 12 students start bursting into the room.

“Ms. Ellis!! Bet you you’re glad to see us.” Maggie smiles at Emory’s sarcasm, and is glad that some of her students are as happy to see her as she is to see them.

“Holy smokes!” shouts Bryson as he comes in and sees the other students who are already in the room, “everyone’s back? This is going to be the best English class ever!” Though Maggie expected some smiles, she is overwhelmed but the joyous feeling of reunion that fills the room. It is one of the first times she experiences this amount of student appreciation, one of those too-rare moments when she knows, without a doubt, that she is doing a good job.
The students are so comfortable that they begin to move the desks around immediately, something Maggie hasn’t had a chance to do after the last time the custodial staff moved everything to clean the floors.

“We need our circle back,” one comments.

“Yeah, the hippie circle.”

“I never said it was a hippie circle,” Maggie jokes.

“Yeah right!” retorts Chris, “this is such a hippie circle.” Maggie smiles, secretly glad that the students recognize the harmonious atmosphere she always tries to create. She also notices some confused looks coming from the three students who weren’t part of her grade 11 class the year before, she makes a point of saying hello to each of them.

“Don’t worry,” Daphne says to these new faces when she notices Maggie talking with them, “we’re just excited because we were all in this class last year. Ms. Ellis is awesome!”

“Is Travis W. in this class this year?” Amber asks.

Maggie, amazed as always at how students seem to know everything before she does, answers honestly, “Yes.”

“Don’t worry,” says Laine, “he won’t show up.” A few of the students exchange inside glances and laugh, Maggie has no idea what to make of this. However, they are right. Travis does not show up for that entire week.

* * *
I helped a student on a diploma because there was no accommodation available for his learning disability.
“I happened to bring an article about autonomy that was given to me just a few days ago,” I begin.

“How timely,” says Katherine.

“Well, I think it is because it frames some of what we’re saying. So, this is Anne Phelan’s 2008 keynote presentation for the Canadian Association of Teacher Education’s annual conference. I’ll just paraphrase the different kinds of autonomy she defines: first, autonomy can be seen as “exchangeable,” in the sense that it is traded or earned; second, it can be seen as “bent,” as in you are able to do whatever you like within a certain set of parameters; finally, it can be seen as “burdensome,” in the sense that you can be so autonomous that you feel overwhelmed and underprepared for the responsibilities you have.”

“Oh, that last one resonates for sure!” Nora notes.

“But I think even just the main definition given for autonomy fits into this discussion quite well: ‘thinking for oneself in situations that require judgment rather than routine,’” I read.

“Yes, that’s what we’re circling around isn’t it, those judgment situations in particular,” Katherine agrees.

“Well, and so many of the situations in which you must make judgment calls happen in seven minutes or less, and you just sort of cross your fingers that you’re doing the right thing,” says Nora.

“Right, and you hope it doesn’t come back to bite you later,” I nod.

“Or worse, you hope that you make the right decision for your student, and don’t do anything that further upsets their situation,” Nora reflects seriously. “I had so many of those seven-minute crises, and I just felt so unprepared to deal with them. For example I had a student reveal to me in the moment before class that she was cutting herself. Then a whole series of
things happened very quickly. I tell the student to wait in the hall for two seconds, step into the classroom and ask everyone else to pull out their books and start reading, then back in the hall, ‘okay, let’s talk about this.’ Then once I have a basic understanding of the situation I’m taking her down the hall to guidance, where I must make a few personal pleas in order to get the student in to see a counselor who I know is sensitive to the student’s issues, even though that student is supposed to see another counselor, which then brings up issues of professionalism.”

“But it’s so professional in some ways, this is our job,” Katherine interjects.

“Right but still, it’s all happening so fast and you’re constantly wondering,” Nora replies, “you’re trying to meet the needs of your student but also trying to please the administration and stay on good terms with your colleagues.”

“Then, seconds later you’re back in your classroom dealing with a host of other things and you don’t have any more time to think about your other student until you’re asleep!” I finish.

“And we wonder why we have teacher dreams!” replies Nora.

“Teacher dreams, right, I’m curious about the kind of teacher dreams you have,” Katherine requests.

“In the beginning I guess they were sort of novel and cute,” Nora begins, “you know the ‘I forgot my lesson plan,’ or ‘I don’t remember names’ and so on, but they became horrific and awful later on. I think that speaks to some really heightened anxiety, and a lessened capacity for dealing with anxiety created cognitive situations.”

“Same for me, “ I say, “they started off sort of cute or really common, but then all of the things I was not dealing with during the day, really started to affect my entire sleeping pattern. I was sleeping hot, was very restless, and eventually I realized that I was never really winding down at nights, but was just ‘on,’ even while I was trying to rest.”
“I definitely had those restless nights,” Katherine says. “I never slept on Sunday nights, one or two hours at the most, and even though I’m not teaching right now, that sleeping pattern has proven hard to shake. I mean, I have one class Monday evening, but I still get Sunday night anxiety. But when I was teaching, it was all about running through each lesson in my head: block A, block B, block C, block D, I was constantly doing that as I was lying in bed. Then, of course, the other thing was going through conversations either that I already had with students, imagining what I could have said, or conversations that I wanted to have with students, trying to formulate the right approach.”

“So you were ruminating,” says Nora.

“Definitely,” Katherine agrees. “Then later on, I started having Columbine High kind of dreams, and those were really terrifying.”

“Of course they were,” I say, “did they involve specific students?”

“Yes, sometimes a specific student would be doing the shooting, and other times it would be about certain students getting hurt. But it’s just so much anxiety, right?”

“Absolutely,” Nora confirms, “and so much of what happens during our day is so far beyond our control. Then of course if we begin to try to make time to deal with these situations in a way that puts us back in control, that can become very time consuming.”

“Right,” says Katherine, “I had so many people tell me that I was doing too much, that no one notices the last 20%.”

“I was given that advice too!” I comment, “my mom specifically told me that I should do things to 80%!”

“My mom as well,” Nora laughs.
“That’s funny, because both my parents gave me that advice,” Katherine says with a chuckle.

“Some of those things I was doing though were the best parts of my day,” Nora remembers. “As an example, I started writing letters to some of my students in order to have more thoughtful interactions with them. If I, for example, observed a major change in their behaviour or something I would write them a letter, and if they wrote back I would write back and so on, until it took its course. I remember one year I was actively engaged in correspondence with about 15 students, and it took a lot of time yes, but I also really loved it.”

“Similar,” Katherine adds quickly, “when I was leaving the school, which was so difficult for me in so many ways, but in particular I was having a really hard time leaving the drama club. Although that extracurricular came with so much additional work because drama was really outside of my teaching area, but because I had some drama training I ended up with the drama class, and those students wanted to start a club and so forth. But anyways, I ended up forming some really strong bonds with those students, and I was trying to figure out how to tell them I was leaving. The advice I was getting from some of the other teachers was, ‘just tell them on the last day, they’ll get over it,’ and so I kept thinking that I sounded crazy when I was talking about the stress of leaving. Eventually though, I decided to write each of them a letter, and that was exactly what I needed to do, and it turned out to be exactly what they needed in order to deal with the prospect of a new drama teacher.”

“That last 20% is so meaningful,” I comment, “we don’t have control over a lot of things we have to do, for example we can’t change or reduce much of the paperwork, which is the 80%, but to give up that last 20%, well…”
“Exactly,” adds Nora, “we have to do those other things. In the case of my school, even the kinds of comments we wrote on our report cards were monitored. They had to be constructive.”

“Oh, that’s a good example of ‘bent’ autonomy, you can write what you want, but only if it also meets certain criteria!” I say.

“Yes,” Nora chuckles, “and in a way we ‘exchange’ these things in order to be able to do other things we want or need to do to be the kind of teachers we want to be.”

* * *

February

Travis Wiesner is standing in front of Maggie’s desk. Maggie looks at him and continues to wonder about him. When he did finally come to class during the second week of the semester, he had arrived late, but he apologized. Maggie spoke to him in the hall and he made his excuses about his absences. Once in the class, he asked to borrow a book for silent reading, and since then he had been fairly quiet most of the time. For the week or so after that, he had continued to come to class, usually late, but usually politely. The other students did not speak to him often, but simply continued to enjoy their community.

This, however, is unexpected, it’s lunchtime and Travis is still here. “Ms. Ellis, how am I doing in your class?” he asks.

“Well, let’s have a look,” this conversation has become routine for Maggie. Most of her students are always an assignment or two behind so she pulls them aside every now and then, makes a list of their outstanding work and sets new deadlines. This strategy works for many of them and they usually do their best to catch up. Maggie now falls into her routine, she explains what he’s missing, and directs him to the handout folder for the assignment sheets.
“Okay, thanks,” he says.

“You’re welcome.” Maggie waits. Travis does not move.

“There’s something else I wanted to ask you about, like, I mean, how am I doing in your class?”

Maggie thinks for a moment before answering, “Well, you’ve missed several classes, and you are often late. You do not usually participate in discussions, but I have noticed you have been reading your book during silent reading, so that’s good.” Maggie pauses again to see if this is the kind of feedback he is looking for.

“Well, there’s a new admin here,” Travis begins.

“Yes. Mr. Taylor,” replies Maggie.

“Well, I was wondering if you think you could tell him I’m doing okay in this class because all the other admins hate me and I know I’m going to get kicked out soon. But I thought if I could get on someone’s good side, that would help me.”

Of all the things Travis could have said, this is the last one Maggie expected. She jumps at the opening he is giving her, “Mr. Taylor will actually be visiting our class next week.”

Travis’s eyes open wide, Maggie anticipates his thoughts, “He’s not here because of the students, he is doing my teacher evaluation.” Maggie hopes she does not regret telling Travis this: she had actually been wondering how to frame Ryan Taylor’s visit to her classroom. She knows most of the students will be intimidated by the idea of having an administrator in the classroom, so she had been trying to decide if it would be better to tell them about the evaluation, or if some of them would avoid class if they knew he would be there. Too late now, thinks Maggie. She continues, “Why don’t you use that as your opportunity to show him how you are in this class. He won’t know that you and I have spoken, or that you know he will be here. So what you can
do is come to class on time and participate in the discussions. Then, he will see how you are in this class.”

Travis smiles. Maggie realizes she has never seen him smile before. “Thanks, okay, thanks,” he says, and then he hurries out of the room.

Travis isn’t in class for the next few days. Maggie doesn’t know what to make of it. She realizes though that it’s up to him to decide what he wants to do, she hopes that his request was genuine and that he will follow through with their plan. When she turns on her computer screen that morning, she is greeted by a new desktop image. It is a shot of a student making a slam-dunk. Maggie remembers hearing that Mr. Whyte’s visual communication class would be doing the desktop images this semester. Then, with no small degree of shock, she notices the photo credit in the bottom corner of the screen: Travis Wiesner.

Maggie decides that this is a good time to be proactive with Travis. She has a few minutes before the buses arrives, she heads down the stairs to the hallway where she knows Travis’s locker is. She sees him approach with a group of some of the most intimidating students at the school. She takes a deep breath. “Travis,” she calls. Travis gives his friends a wave and walks towards her.

“Sorry I haven’t been in class Ms. Ellis,” Travis begins.

“This isn’t about that,” says Maggie, “though I would like to you to come to class today. I wanted to ask you about your photo of our basketball team.”

Travis blushes and looks down the hallway, “Yeah, Mr. Whyte liked it too. I took it at the basketball game last night, then Mr. Whyte put it on the desktop right away. I’ve been at the last few games trying to get a slam-dunk shot.”
“Well, it’s awesome!” Maggie encourages. “I’m really glad you’ve been participating in some extra-curricular.”

“Well I was just watching.”

“Still, it’s really great,” Maggie senses she can’t push too far. “Listen, I also wanted to let you know that Mr. Taylor is coming into our class on Tuesday, but in order to be able to take part in the class you need to be there Monday. We’re going to be watching a play about a World War I soldier, we’ll start it on Monday, then finish it on Tuesday before having a class discussion.”

“Okay, I’ll be there. I have to go now though,” Travis says before heading off down the hallway.

“Okay then,” Maggie says under her breath, again perplexed yet now cautiously optimistic. She has only a moment more to think about Travis before she too must head to class.

The following Tuesday Maggie spends her lunch break preparing her classroom for her evaluation. This year, since she has already been through the evaluation process once before, preparing just means tidying up a bit and writing a few notes so that Ryan will know where the class is heading. This is also the first time she is being evaluated on a lesson she has taught several times before. Main Street Hero continued to be a success with her students, and this semester she had even partnered with other teachers to bring it into their classes. However, experience is not the only reason she is not nervous: it is also because Ryan has proven to be a very open and welcoming administrator. Since starting at William Aitken in September, he has consulted her often about her students before making decisions about disciplinary actions. Consequently, she knows that Ryan will keep her informed, which means she no longer has to be vigilant about her students’ encounters with administration.
Ryan also began the evaluation in a way that made her feel more at ease. A few weeks ago, he had left a few copied pages from *The Courage to Teach* in her mailbox. He had highlighted passages that reflected his philosophy of teaching and his approach to her evaluation. Maggie remembers the morning she found the pages in her mailbox and how she had read them immediately, sitting on the couch in her classroom, still in her coat, still holding her bag in one hand. It had been a moment of intense reflection, a pause in an otherwise hectic schedule. When she mentioned this to Ryan later that day, he had felt bad for taking up her morning prep time but explained, “you know, there is no one picture of a good teacher, there is no one way. I am looking forward to seeing how you are with your students, I already know that many of them appreciate your class immensely.”

So this morning, instead of being nervous, Maggie is excited. She is looking forward to having an ally to talk with about her teaching practice. Of course, she is also very curious about what Travis will do today. He had been to the last two classes, though late as always. Maggie discovered that between classes he meets up with his friends, among whom there is a culture of heading to class late and meeting each other for a hallway stroll during class. She understands that he must feel some pressure to maintain his image, though he is also trying to change. She hopes that he is able to get to class on time today.

Ryan arrives just as the warning bell goes. She has not told him about Travis and his plan to gain the respect of one school administrator. This is really something that Travis has to do for himself, she thinks. So she just says a quick hello and gives Ryan the notes she has prepared. Ryan grabs a desk just as the students begin bounding into the room.

“Hey Ms. Ellis! Whoa!” Bryson stops short at the sight of Ryan.
“Don’t worry, Bryson, he’s not here for you, he’s here doing my evaluation,” Maggie smiles.

“Hi, Ms. Ellis,” James says as Bryson grabs a seat. “Are we finishing Main Street Hero?”

“Yes, of course!” Maggie notices that as the students are coming into the room they are also moving the desks around so that they all have a good view of the television. Maggie realizes that this is something you would do in your own living room, not usually in a classroom. Maggie realizes just how comfortable the students are in her room, she hopes that Ryan doesn’t see this as disrespectful, or perhaps as too much friendliness. Maybe, Maggie thinks, I’ve taken the classroom community thing too far? Of course, there is nothing she can do about it now, so she dismisses the thought. She pokes her head out of the classroom door for Travis, no sign of him yet.

“Are we reading first?” Daphne asks.

“No, we’re going to watch the rest of the play right away.” The students settle in and Maggie hits play. A few minutes later, Travis appears in the doorway and makes eye contact with Maggie. She waves him in from her desk, he sits down in the first empty seat he finds. If Ryan has noted any of this he gives no indication, he just continues to watch the play intently.

Fifteen minutes later, the video finishes and Maggie prepares to engage with the class’s reaction to the play. They are unusually quiet, of course due to Ryan’s presence. Maggie wishes she had planned a tighter activity for Ryan’s visit. It’s just that they are usually so talkative and engaged, activities can get in their way.

Eventually, after what feels like the longest stretch of silence in the world, it is Travis who speaks. “Well, I think they’re talking about how war, like, it’s not always good because you
end up killing people. Like there was that one part where he’s watching the guy fall out of the plane and he feels really bad.”

“Thank you, Travis,” it was not the most insightful or articulate comment ever, but, Maggie thinks, he put himself out there. She notices the shocked looks on some of the other students’ faces and realizes they are surprised to hear Travis speak. Okay, Maggie thinks, now it’s all up to them. “Other thoughts?” she encourages.

Again, there is a long pause. Though its duration is slightly shorter than the last, Maggie has enough time to think that her sure-fire lesson plan may just bomb.

“Well yeah, that and he’s only doing what he can, right, he hasn’t had much training and he’s just a kid, really,” Amber rejoins. The underlying sense of hesitation in the room disappears, and the class enters into something that is close to their usual enthusiastic discussions. They end by brainstorming possible essay topics for Main Street Hero. As they do so, Travis continues to participate, and the rest of the students continue to treat this as the norm.

At the end of the lesson, Ryan enters the discussion. He gives some of his thoughts on the part of the play he saw, and then he gives the students a challenge. “I don’t know how many of you know who William Aitken, the person who our school is named after, is. But, there is a connection between William Aitken and a minor character in the play. So, I would like to encourage you to see if you can sleuth out this connection. If you do figure it out, come down to the office and let me know. I will be happy to give the first person I see a prize.” The students look around at each other for a moment just before the bell goes. Maggie exchanges some goodbyes with the students before they are out the door and off to their next class. Ryan too is heading for the door. Maggie has another class coming in so there is no time to debrief, but he leaves her some notes and a brief scan of them reveals some positive comments.
Friday after school, Maggie is looking through a pile of *Main Street Hero* essays and is pleasantly surprised to find an essay from Travis among them. After Tuesday’s class discussion, he came to every class and continued to participate. This was the follow-through that Maggie had been waiting for. She puts the essays aside and checks her email. She scans through several before noticing there is one from Ryan with the subject heading ‘Travis W.’ She opens it immediately and finds that Travis has won Ryan’s contest. He came to see Ryan at lunch and brought with him information about the link between William Aitken and *Main Street Hero*. Maggie laughs out loud. She is no longer cautiously optimistic but genuinely optimistic that Travis could turn things around in time to pass his classes this semester. She decides that Travis has earned her support and thinks that other teachers should know about the efforts he has been making, not just in her class, but also in his Visual Communications class and with the administration. She reasons that if they knew what he was up to, they might be generous enough to offer him another chance.

The following Monday Maggie checks her email again and finds several replies to her Friday email, which she had entitled ‘Chicken Soup.’ She had chosen this title for her email about Travis’s recent successes because she had recently been given *Chicken Soup for the Teacher’s Soul*. Within this book she had found many stories about small successes with individual students. She now understood that these small moments were rare gifts to educators who are usually too busy to cherish them, and this described her experience with Travis perfectly. The replies are mostly congratulatory notes for Maggie, which she finds a bit confusing. The success belongs to Travis, she thinks, who merely took advantage of the
opportunity of a new teacher and a new administrator. There is also a note from Mr. Whyte confirming that Travis was continuing to do well in his class.

At the end of the day Maggie gets a call from one of the school secretaries asking her to come down and see Ryan. Maggie remembers that they have not fully debriefed his visit or planned the rest of her evaluation and assumes that this is what he wants to see her about. Though of course, the experiences of her youth had taught her to always be a little bit worried when the principal wants to see you. She shuts her classroom door behind her and starts down the hall. The day has just ended but the halls are virtually deserted. The city buses that carry the bulk of the students to and from their suburban homes only wait a few minutes after the final bell before speeding away. She takes a few extra steps in order to enter the office through the back door, it is easier sometimes to avoid the idle chitchat required when passing all the office staff. Ryan Taylor’s office is closest to the back. Maggie knocks on the door and sets aside any more thoughts of wondering what he wants to see her about, unless it’s about a student it must be about her evaluation.

"Hello Maggie," Ryan says before turning from his computer. "Just give me a minute, I have to submit this report by 4:00 and I’ve run into some snags." It had been completely obvious all year that Ryan was struggling to keep his head above water. This is his first administrative position and in addition to learning the role, his approach was obviously generating some friction with his new colleagues.

Maggie sits down in a chair and examines the office walls, much as any student visiting a classroom or office does. There is a corkboard full of reminders and schedules, and on Ryan’s desk, behind the piles of papers and folders, is a picture of his family. The office is void of the
usual pieces of teacher flair, nothing that identifies his approach or philosophy. Maggie wonders if this neutrality is intentional, a defense mechanism of sorts?

Ryan finally swivels in his chair, rolling closer to Maggie as he takes his glasses off and leans forward. Maggie takes in the unusual lack of eye contact and the forced smile. Her stomach begins to twist her shoulders up to her ears as her senses tell her that something is genuinely wrong.

"First, I want you to know that I think you are doing an excellent job, and that you are a great teacher. What I witnessed in your classroom was excellent teaching. Your students came in and moved the room around to make it their own; they were respectful and engaged with the lesson. It was clear that they like you, feel comfortable with you, and also see you as a valuable source of academic support. I also want you to know, even though I shouldn’t be telling you this, that I am not in agreement with the things I am about to say to you. However, the administration has decided on a course of action and I am obligated to follow through. I also thought it was best if this came from me." There is an awkward silence while Ryan swivels again to his desk and tosses his glasses on a stack of paper. Before turning back he sighs and brings the heels of his hands up to rub his eyes. Maggie sits, still oblivious but now desperately searching her memory for what she has done to warrant what is obviously quite a serious act of discipline. Ryan swivels again to face Maggie, Maggie searches his face for clues.

"Over the weekend, there was quite a flurry of activity between the administrators about this. I want you to know that I took your side, but we are dealing with people who come from a different school of teaching. And this school, well, they have concerns about the effect that praise can have on students." The wheels in Maggie’s head begin clicking into gear; this is because of how she has treated a student. Which one? Maggie is often full of praise for all her
students. Maybe one of her students is being expelled? She senses Alfie’s influence here. After the incident with Kyle’s missing assignments, they had continued to have small confrontations about students.

"Officially, I am now to tell you that the administration disapproves of the school-wide email you sent Friday afternoon about Travis Wiesner. Please understand that I don’t agree, but several phone calls between us five administrators happened over the weekend, and the general feeling is that this kind of praise for a student who has been in so much trouble in the past is inappropriate. Actually, the worry is that it can be harmful for the student if expectations are set too high. Also, we don’t want to imply that what he has done in the past is ‘forgiven’ or that he has been somehow ‘transformed.’”

Maggie senses tears welling up in her eyes and tries desperately to suppress them. She wants to remain professional but there is just so much tension in the room. The threat of tears makes it impossible for her to speak. Ryan continues, “Now, I don’t think you were trying to say that he is transformed, I think you just wanted to tell people about what had happened.” Maggie nods. “But the administrators feel that this kind of school-wide discussion about a student is inappropriate. They felt if you wanted to share this story with his other teachers that might be okay, but even some of the wording, about him being a ‘professional hall wanderer,’ well, they took issue with that too.” Ryan lets out a great sigh. “I don’t know, I can’t even really explain the logic. I’m so sorry.”

Maggie is still speechless. Even if her words were not being choked off she could not respond. This is the most unexpected confrontation she has yet to face. She grasps for some articulation of the pedagogical reasons behind her unintentionally rebellious actions, but they elude her. “But I received so many positive responses, I really don’t understand.”
“It might be a wise idea to forward me those positive responses so that I can keep them on record in case this escalates to a formal warning on your file. But I don’t think it will, they just wanted you to know that they felt it was inappropriate. You should also know that they received some disapproving emails from teachers too, so it would be good if we had both sides documented.” Maggie realizes with horror that she is right in the middle of an evaluation. She wonders what might have happened if she had been working with an administrator other than Ryan. “Again, I’m so sorry to be giving you this news, but I thought it would be better coming from me. You should know that I’m really putting my neck on the line by telling you that I am not supportive of this decision, but I think any encouragement we can give students should be given. I know exactly what you were talking about with Travis. When he came down to the office to tell me that he had researched William Aitken he was so excited, like he was a small boy instead of the very rough young man he can sometimes be. I think that you did the right thing by rewarding his good behaviour.”

That Ryan is ‘on her side’ is little comfort. Up until now Maggie thought that the school was supportive of her work, and the prospect of becoming part of an underground rebellion of teachers that believe in positive reinforcement held little appeal. Maggie also knows what can happen to teachers who do not fall on administration’s good side. She leaves Ryan’s office after having said very little in her own defense. What could she really say anyway?

Once again Maggie is thankful for her new teacher colleagues. They have a standing pub date after school every Friday, and this week Maggie really needs it.

“I don’t understand how people could be upset about that email,” Gwen commiserates.

“I’m not sure I can articulate the argument,” Maggie says. “Ryan didn’t do a very good job of explaining it to me either, but even the kind of email was inappropriate apparently.”
“Well, it was clearly labeled ‘Chicken Soup,’ obviously it’s going to be a student story like that. Don’t read it if you’re so bitter you can’t handle it.” Maggie smiles thankfully at Gwen, who is always so supportive.

“So what now?” Aiden asks.

“Nothing I guess, I don’t know. The worst part is, I wanted other teachers to give Travis a chance, but now if they’re in a twist about this email, things could get worse for him.”

“Well, I sort of understand where they might be coming from,” Hugh offers. “When I had Travis in my class last year, he really made my life a living hell. Like he did some really, really awful, and inexcusable things and when I asked other teachers about him, many of them had similar stories to tell.” Maggie takes in this comment thoughtfully; she remembers Hugh’s struggles with Travis the year before.

It is a few weeks before Maggie has had enough time to formulate a response to Hugh’s feelings. When the answer finally comes to her, it leaves her even more confused. If we don’t believe the students we teach can change, she thinks, if we believe that they already are the people they are going to be, then what are we doing here?

* * *
I once convinced a student to practice writing by suggesting he might one day want to write a love letter. I wanted to write a love letter that year.

He passed his diploma.

Education and politics for a better world.

The first panelist to speak, California longshoreman Clarence, had some background on the union.
“It’s so interesting that the word ‘love’ goes underground in education. When I read this secret I just thought, ‘what an awesome link to a student’s real life!’” Nora laughs.

“That’s what I thought too!” Katherine says joining in Nora’s laughter. “It’s so true that we don’t know what to do with the word! When I was seeing a psychologist, who I saw while I was trying to make up my mind about taking the education leave, she said that we should ‘embrace the word love. She said that a lot of teachers are scared of that word, but teachers do love they’re students. I also feel like, this is what we’re missing as well – who is loving us? There should be so much love in the education system, it should be brimming with it!”

“Yeah, and there’s no reason why it isn’t except that it’s taboo,” Nora agrees.

“That’s something else that has to do with the media and teacher image,” says Katherine.

“Right, but you can love, without the loooovvvve!” We all laugh as Nora exaggerates the romantic qualities of the word.

“But even in this same MacLean’s issue, a few pages after the So You Want to be a Teacher article, there’s another article dedicated to romantic relationships between students and teachers,” I add, “It seems that you can’t talk about university rankings without talking about that as well! Of course, they’re speaking about professors and adult students, but it’s just always there! The other time this comes up usually right after I tell people I’m a teacher. I get the comment ‘oh, I bet you have no trouble keeping the students’ attention,’ even my Grandma says things like, ‘oh, I bet all the students have crushes on you.’” At this we all laugh heartily, we have all experienced this so often.

“Right!” Katherine laughs, “what is that?”
“The sheer number of people who said that to me, I was just, well, it’s gross!” Nora finishes.

“But as sarcastic as I can be sometimes,” I admit, “I could never find the right rejoinder to the suggestion that my main classroom management strategy has something to do with my, you know, grooming or wardrobe!”

“Okay, well, let’s figure this out,” Nora determines, “the truth is, this happens, right? We’ll leave the relationship thing out of it for now, but the crush thing, it happens, and sometimes you have to negotiate that situation. However, there’s also the big ‘hearts and minds’ narrative, like *To Sir, With Love*. There’s the idea out there that students achieve in your class because they love you, but this is just the smearing of the idea of love, it’s assuming that love can’t exist without sexual tension. I think what students actually feel in a supportive classroom environment might be some kind of mixture or respect, admiration, adulation, a whole host of emotions that are easy to conflate into ‘love.’”

“That makes sense,” Katherine nods.

“So maybe the correct response to the suggestion that this is a classroom management tool is just to reframe it in those words,” I conclude.

“Well, and maybe add that my years of training and experience help me manage my classroom as well,” says Nora. “But I think usually it’s not about crushes, but that students feel able to better love themselves if you can see possibilities for them.”

“Right,” says Katherine, “it’s giving them a source of self-confidence.”

“Also when I was writing those letters, I had one student who contacted me after she had graduated, she looked me up on Facebook,” Nora admits.

“Oh, I love it when they look you up on Facebook!” I cheer.
“Well, anyways, she said, that she still had all my letters, and that I was her best friend in high school. Which was weird, because I always had a very clear line about not being friends with my students. Just because, you know, you are so wary to go too far, but we would even talk about it in class, that because I also evaluated them, we were not friends. Then later, I was so glad that our letter exchange had meant something to her, because it meant something to me too.”

“Friendship with students is another aspect of this definitely,” I say. “I was always worried about where that line was as well. With some teachers it was just so clear that the friendship aspect of their relationship with their students was overtaking the teaching part.”

“Well and that’s what people often assume you’re doing when you are friends with your students, they don’t assume the whole package,” says Nora.

“The whole package is holistic education,” Katherine offers, “you can’t get a student through school while ignoring 70% of their personhood.”

* * *

March

Maggie is sitting in her car in the parking lot of the strip mall down the street from her school. She looks at the clock: 20 minutes until the final bell rings. She hopes that Gwen is doing okay with her afternoon class. She feels very bad for leaving them with her for the whole period but she is not sure how she would react if she had to talk to her students right now.

She goes over the events of the last two weeks. First, she had visited a walk-in clinic to get yet another round of antibiotics for an ear infection. So far that year she had had two throat infections and one ear infection. Which really wasn’t surprising given her insomnia and stress.
levels. The doctor at the walk-in clinic had noticed that her thyroid gland was swollen and had sent her for a biopsy.

One week ago. She booked an afternoon off to go for the biopsy. She tried not to be concerned. She had been seeing a psychologist and an acupuncturist to manage her stress levels, and the acupuncturist had reminded her that the thyroid gland is very susceptible to stress. It was probably just some fluid.

Today, she had gone for the results of her biopsy. Because she took an afternoon off the week before, she didn’t want to call another substitute. She was worried about how it might look to administration if she was away again, just as she had refused to see the psychologist the school board provided for teachers because they were only available during school hours. Maggie felt that if people knew she was seeing a psychologist, they would think she was unable to cope with the demands of teaching.

Instead of calling a sub she had asked Gwen to get her class started for her. She thought she could make it back for the last half of the period. Of course, she had not considered how she would feel if the biopsy revealed something serious.

Now, Maggie is sitting in her car thinking how ridiculous it is to get a cancer diagnosis and be worried about missing an afternoon of work. She waits until she knows the buses have left with the students before returning to the school.

* * *

April

It is 5:30 a.m. and Maggie is sitting with her family in the waiting room of the hospital. This is where what is about to happen really sinks in. Up until yesterday, she had been busy arranging a substitute and trying to figure out how to obtain a sick leave. Between the paperwork
and worrying about what would happen to her students in her absence, she had not thought a lot about her surgery.

“Maggie Ellis,” a nurse calls. She hugs her family and heads for the operating room.
“It was the constant illness that eventually made me think, ‘I have to get out,’” Katherine remembers. “But really, it started so long before then. I don’t know if I got out soon enough, let me put it that way.” We all ponder this last comment thoughtfully for a moment before Katherine continues her story. “The first thing that happened was that I fainted at the school. I may have some troubles remembering the timeline for all of this, I think I’ve intentionally forgotten some of the details, but I think that was February of my second year. I passed out, after just feeling really low-energy. Then, I went to the doctor who just said, ‘you’re not taking proper care of yourself,’ and asked if I had been sick lately. Of course, I had been, so that was that, weakness after illness and not properly recovering. But then, it happened again the following school year in December. That time I pushed the diagnosis a bit further and learned that it was pernicious anemia.”

“Ah, sudden and dramatic dips in your hemoglobin,” Nora defines.

“You got it!” says Katherine.

“I have thalassemia,” Nora continues, “which is a misfunction in terms of the actual production of hemoglobin, so I produce half the hemoglobin a regular human body should. Which led to similar problems for me. During my first leave from teaching I was passing out all over the place!”

“And was your pernicious anemia actually caused by not taking care of yourself, as the Doctor suggested?” I ask.

“Well, the stupid thing is supposedly I’ve had this my whole life,” says Katherine.

“Same with thalessimia,” says Nora, “but they told me that it is set off by – “
“– stress!” we all say in chorus.

“Yes, stress-triggered,” Nora adds, “you know, teaching triggered. Both of these conditions are triggered by stress.”

“So that December,” says Katherine, “I finally felt justified in taking some time off, because you know, this was something more than just random fainting. I remember that I ran out of sick days, and I was trying to figure out how to take a leave. The problem was that I so worried about the stigma around sick leave or stress leave, that I didn’t really know who to ask, or there was nobody I felt comfortable asking. So, I ended up continuing to call in sick day-by-day, which also meant I had to continue to do the planning.”

“Which isn’t a true break,” Nora comments.

“No, it was stressful, and I felt so guilty for not being there. Then finally, I did find somebody who agreed to stay until the winter break, which was a couple weeks away. She was an ESL teacher, so that was good, and she said she okay with the drama students. A few days later though, she changed her mind. She said that my position had too heavy a workload for her to take on even short term.”

“What was too heavy about it? Did she say?” I ask.

“Well, yes. It was partly the way the ESL classes were structured, with so many different language levels in each class. Then of course the drama component and all that entailed in terms of extracurricular. Which, we had some events planned already, so she would have no choice but to supervise them.”

“So, your substitute wouldn’t agree to do your job for two weeks?” Nora says with disbelief.
“Yes, which was in some ways good because it was the first time I had someone objectively say to me, ‘this is too much,’” Katherine explains. “Which empowered me to ask for some concessions when I returned to the classroom, things which, initially, my principal agreed to, but most of them never materialized.”


“Well, okay, I told her I couldn’t teach drama the following year, and she said ‘okay,’ but then later she came to me and explained that she needed me to teach drama because if she had to fill that spot, she would also need to let another teacher go.”

“Oh no! How could you say no to that?” Nora asks.

“You couldn’t,” I say. “I think it was unfair of your principal to place somebody else’s job on your shoulders.”

“Well, maybe,” Katherine says, “but I really liked my principal. I always felt she had the students’ best interests at heart.

“In this case though,” I point out, “she had a bottom line that did not allow for your well-being.”

“But by that time I was feeling good again, so I thought it would be okay,” says Katherine. “It wasn’t long though before I fainted again, and after pushing even a bit harder with my doctor I was diagnosed with another issue. Also stress-triggered – cyclothemia, which is a type of bipolar thing. So that’s when I started seeing a psychologist and began talking about getting out. Though I still couldn’t figure out how to get a leave!”

“It’s a wretched process,” Nora commiserates. “But this is interesting because I’ve recently been given a similar diagnosis. All of which gave me pause to really think about my five years of teaching. I realize now that I pushed so long and so hard, with that high-depression-
high-depression, I should have left years before I did. But again, going back to the Orchid and Dandelion idea, this thing is on chromosome 22, it already exists. It’s triggered by a stressful environment, but once it’s triggered you can’t put it back in the box.”

“That’s where I keep getting stuck,” says Katherine, “if these things preexist, should I have seen it coming? I feel like people are going to say ‘what were you thinking going into teaching?’ But at the same time, I just feel so strongly, and I wish I could explain, ‘I am a teacher, trust me, I really am a teacher.’ This is why I’m really loving this Orchid theory, because it gives me a different way to look at this narrative – these are strengths that became weaknesses.”

“That’s something I often find difficult to explain to people too,” I reply, “that I am a teacher, I don’t work as a teacher, but I am a teacher, a teacher who is unable to teach.”

“Well, and this is where the divorce analogy might be helpful,” says Nora thoughtfully. “Leaving teaching is devastating – it’s devastating financially; it’s devastating in terms of your identity; it’s devastating in terms of how you imagine your future, how you see yourself and how you know who you are; in every way, it impacts you life. The worst part is, it seems like, from where you do your practicum to your first position and the characteristics of that school, it’s all a fluke, how it all comes out in the wash.”

***

May

Maggie is pulling into the school parking lot for the first time since going out on leave two weeks earlier. She has timed her visit for her spare period, she is not ready to see the students but she does want to talk to her replacement and find out how everything is going. Though her surgery had been uncomplicated and successful, she realizes that the two-week
timeline they gave her for recovery will not be enough. She is hoping that Jim, the teacher who is substituting for her, will stay for a little longer.

Jim is a retired teacher who worked for many years in the English department at William Aitken. Maggie does not know him well but she thought, given his knowledge of the school, that he would be a good fit. She has not received any updates from him but she is grateful for the space. Before taking her leave she heard stories about teachers being asked to send in lesson plans from their hospitable beds, so it was kind of Jim, and her school, to give her a true break.

Before her surgery, telling the students she was going on leave had been very difficult. Each class reacted differently. The grade 10 and 11 classes had been worried about their substitute more than anything. The grade 12 class however, likely because they knew her well, were very concerned about her. She had tried to put their minds at ease, and had not mentioned the word cancer. She was lucky that she would never have to mention it, as her surgery was considered curative.

Maggie enters her classroom and finds it empty. She surveys the desks, now in rows, and wonders how her students are handling life without the hippie circle. She scans the piles of marking on her desk. It looks like Jim is still using her lesson plans. She also finds a note that reads, ‘In art room with Aidan.’ Maggie smiles. Aidan, one of her new teacher colleagues, has been spending his spare block in the art room painting once or twice a week. Maggie senses that keeping up with this hobby has gone a long way to helping Aidan stay sane.

Maggie approaches the art room. “Hello!” Aidan and Jim shout simultaneously. Aidan gives her a hug, “Welcome back!” he says.

“Let’s not get ahead of ourselves!” Maggie jokes. Though it is good to see them both Maggie notices that she is already tired: this is the first time she has left her apartment since the
surgery. She is also aware that the piles of marking have brought up some feelings of stress, even though the marking is not hers.

“So, this is quite a group of kids you’ve got here!” Jim says. Then without much prompting from Maggie, Jim recounts some of his more colourful exchanges with her students. Though Jim is recounting these stories in a playful way, they are not what she is hoping to hear. Kyle has been expelled by Alfie. Emory has been moved into the student resource room. Travis hasn’t been to class since Jim’s first day. “I took one look at that kid, and he took one look at me, and that was all we needed to know it wasn’t going to work. I don’t take crap from kids that’s for sure.” Maggie begins to understand that Jim thinks she is worried about his feeling overwhelmed by her students, when it’s actually the other way around. All that hard work, Maggie thinks, undone in a heartbeat. Even so, the stability for the students would be better than the alternative, so Maggie asks Jim if he will stay at least one more week. “Oh no, I’m sorry but the wife and I booked a vacation,” Jim explains, “I’ll need one after this gig.”

Maggie still takes the extra week, but it is no longer restful. She has been unable to find a substitute to take the whole week, so the students have had a different teacher every day. Overcome by a sense of professional obligation, Maggie returns to work the following Monday.

* * *

“So how did your leave end up working?” Katherine asks Nora, “because I eventually just applied for an unpaid education leave, after never having figured out another option. There was one point where I had a pamphlet in my hand!” Katherine says triumphantly, “but then I realized it was the pamphlet about coming back after a sick leave, not getting one!” We all laugh for a moment, each of us remembering our own similar struggles with the system.
“I also began by seeing a counselor,” Nora begins, “and I did actually make use of the
one provided by the school board.”

“The one only open during school hours?” I say.

“Yes, so you have to book a sub and all that, but the other thing is, the Employee Health
Resource Centre is actually housed within a school.”

“Noooo!” Katherine and I both burst into laughter, “did you have to sign in?” I ask.

“Yes!” Nora shouts as she laughs as well, “you have to sign in with the school
secretaries, so it’s very awkward. Eventually, I figured out that if I parked down the street, I
could avoid that step because my car wouldn’t be in their lot.” As the laughter subsides Nora
continues, “this was not until after I returned from my education leave, maybe I should back up. I
went on a three-term leave, and agreed to return to teach three blocks of Business 11, which is a
one-term course that comes with a set of teaching modules, assignments, scoring guides,
everything, so there’s really no planning. This is what my principal and I had agreed to once my
leave was approved because with my leave application, I also handed in a paper I had written
about my experience of teacher burnout, so she was clear about what was going on.”

“That’s brave,” Katherine comments.

“Well, I thought she should know,” Nora says matter-of-factly. “It wasn’t until I met up
with a teacher friend just before the end of my leave that I found out I was timetabled to take
over an English class. So I went into the school the next day and spoke to my department head,
who confirmed what I had heard. But it kept getting worse, because I soon found out that my
department head was currently teaching the class, and she described them as the most
challenging class she had taught in her 30 years of teaching. So, very quickly it became a bigger
problem that just the additional planning and marking an English course entails. I was so angry
because she knew why I went on leave, I had been very honest with her. She knew I was suffering from the effects of burnout, and given her leadership position, I guess I expected that she would know what the research has to say about return to work plans for professionals who incur stress-related injuries.”

“Of course,” I say, “you have a reduced ability to handle stress, and that’s a long term consequence of burnout. But again, it seems like there is a bottom line that does not include teacher well-being.”

“Absolutely, and in this case,” says Nora, “the school had failed to give my department head a prep that semester, so she was desperate to lose a block. Because she was so close to retirement, and I think a little burnt-out herself, she really didn’t want to face this particularly bad class.”

“Though, as a veteran teacher, she would have had more resources than you to handle a class like that,” I comment.

“Probably, yes,” Nora agrees. “It wasn’t long before I was taking advantage of the counseling service because I was really just so worried by then. I felt that I needed some immediate survival strategies in order to make it until June. Their reaction, the counselor’s reaction, to the assessment I filled out and to our discussion was immediate, and it was, ‘you are on leave as of right now.’ They didn’t give me the option of staying until June.”

“Did they advocate for you after that?” Katherine asks.

“Well yes and no. I wanted to go back until the end of the week so I could leave things for the sub and tell the principal myself. This happened in May, and actually I just felt so bad for leaving the students in a lurch I set up the remaining online modules for the Business classes, and I also planned the next English unit, which was a novel unit.”
“That’s a lot of work!” I say.

“Well, yeah, but what kills me is what happened next. They hired a Shop teacher to finish the semester because they wanted to secure him for the following year. Then, they asked me to continue to do the marking and planning from home because they had this new teacher who was struggling. In essence, they hired somebody who couldn’t teach English, and then expected me to help him.”

“But you were out on leave!” I say indignantly.

“Yes, and that’s what I had to say in order for the requests to stop, that it would actually jeopardize my leave to do any more work from home.”

“And did that do it?” asks Katherine.

“Yes, it did,” says Nora, “but I learned later that they hired someone to come in and help the new teacher mark. Which was just – “

“So upsetting,” I offer. Nora nods reflectively for a moment before continuing.

“They had this money all along,” she says in disbelief, “and watched me go out on two leaves before making use of it? I just didn’t understand,” Nora sighs. “Of course, the other aspect of the situation was I had students emailing me like crazy, asking me when I was coming back. But then this one student in my Business 11 class, a student who kind of struggled and who I had been working really hard with, he writes me to let me know he finished all of his assignments and in his email he writes, ‘I just want you to know that you shouldn’t feel guilty for not being here, you just need to get better.’” Nora pauses as the memory threatens to overwhelm her, “it was the worst moment, and also the nicest. Because the whole process was just so insensitive and cruel.”
“I had those moments too,” Katherine says, “when I was leaving, many of the drama students just knew, they knew! They knew that I was doing things that other teachers don’t do. But really interesting were some of the comments I was getting from their parents. For example, ‘I hope you continue doing what you’re doing,’ and when I was leaving it was ‘who will be there for my son next year?’”

“Oh, the guilt!” I say.

“It’s really additional pressure,” Nora adds.

“I think I said something like, ‘I’d like that,’” Katherine reflects, “but I felt like they could see right through me. It also really didn’t help that I had no idea if they would even find another drama teacher or if their new teacher would care about drama club. I felt like I was abandoning them!”

“Really, what the parents need to be doing is advocating for your situation, not trying to push you to continue,” I comment, “but it’s this system again, I think everyone feels powerless to effect change.”

The thought of effecting change brings my thoughts back to the literature related to effective teacher induction. The highly contextualized nature of induction programs make the conditions at the school site the most consistently cited predictor of new teacher success (Borman & Dowling, 2008; Carter & Francis, 2001; Guarino, et al., 2006; Hobson, et al. 2009; Ingersoll & Kralik, 2004; Johnson & Birkeland, 2003; Wang, et al., 2008). Johnson and Birkeland found the importance of a stable, orderly, and collegial work environment, where teachers were provided with adequate resources for the task at hand, to be key to beginning teacher success regardless of whether or not beginning teachers had mentors, and regardless of other demographic variables of schools. Johnson and Birkeland also found that characteristics of
school administration played an important role in beginning teachers’ feelings of stability. This is certainly true for Nora, Katherine, and myself – the leadership at our respective schools was unresponsive to our requests for assistance and support – even though all of us were on sick leave at one point during our beginning years. It is those in leadership positions who have the ability to ensure teachers have manageable assignments and workloads (Borman & Dowling, 2008; Hobson, et al., 2009; Johnson & Birkeland, 2003). Administration may also grant beginning teachers some kind of novice status by reducing their teaching or administrative duties or by providing them with graduated expectations (Johnson & Birkeland, 2003, p. 607). The literature also points out that administrators who were seen by beginning teachers to be supportive and generous played a significant role in a beginning teacher’s decision to stay at a particular school.

Schools might also facilitate individual mentorship relationships by coordinating or offsetting the preparatory blocks of new teachers and their mentors. The former would allow for mentors and mentees to observe each other in the classroom, a strategy beginning teachers find highly valuable (Carter & Francis, 2001; Hobson, et al., 2009; Johnson & Birkeland, 2003; Wang, et al., 2008 et al.); while the latter would allow for shared planning and reflection (Wang, et al., 2008). It is also beneficial for pairs of beginning teachers to have coordinated or offset schedules in order to collaborate and support one another (Wang, et al., 2008). Schools can also support mentor development, and prevent mentors from becoming overwhelmed, by choosing mentors on a volunteer basis and by providing them with release time and opportunities for relevant training (Hobson, et al., 2009). Nora’s comment that she felt her department leader should have understood the needs of someone returning to work after experiencing burnout may
be symptomatic of mentor teachers not being provided with the knowledge and skills required to support beginning teachers effectively.

* * *

June

Maggie is truly enjoying what she now knows will be her final weeks at William Aitken. Just before returning from her leave, she received a letter of acceptance for a Master’s program and she had accepted. This fact, combined with the knowledge that she is not ready to be back at work full-time after her surgery, has empowered her to do much of her teaching from her classroom’s couch. Her students, who normally draw names for the couch as an incentive not to be late, do not begrudge her this seat. In fact, they seem relieved to have her back and she is surprised at how easily they fall into the routines that Maggie worked so hard to establish earlier in the semester. She also notices that other teachers drop into her room frequently, both to chat with her and to chat with her students. During this time Maggie creates some of her fondest memories of teaching.

She is also able to reconnect with many of her students who got lost in the shuffle of her sick leave. Though Kyle is permanently expelled from William Aitken, Travis starts attending her class again as soon as she returns. “Ms. Ellis!” Travis says, “I heard what you did for me, Mr. Taylor told me.” Maggie doesn’t say anything. She is surprised that Ryan chose to share her email with Travis despite the negative reaction of administration. “After your letter a lot of teachers started coming up to me in the hallways and saying really nice things. So thank you.” Maggie manages to get Travis caught up enough to earn a 50%.
“Now, all you have to do is pass the diploma and you will graduate,” she tells him, “and all you have to do to pass your diploma is to write an essay like you did for *Main Street Hero*, hopefully the topic will allow you to write about *Main Street Hero*, and then you’ll be set!”

Maggie will learn the following September, when she is already back at university, that all of her grade 12 students pass their English exam that year – a significant accomplishment for a group of students who each face their own challenges to learning. Maggie is so very proud of them.

Maggie applies for an education leave just before the deadline. She learns that quite a few of her colleagues are doing the same and that they have each had a meeting with the principal before getting approval. Maureen Sterling calls her down at the end of the last day of classes before exams begin.

“Hi Maggie,” Maureen says warmly, “I’m so happy to have you back. I’m so sorry I haven’t been up to see you since you returned to work, but you should know I’ve been thinking about you a lot, and I have been so thankful for your recovery.”

“Thank you,” Maggie says, “it’s been nice to be back.”

“So, I was sorry to find this leave application in my mailbox.”

“Yes, I’ve been accepted for a Master’s program,” Maggie smiles. Most of the other teachers she has told have been unequivocally happy for her. Graduate school is generally thought of as a justifiable break from the classroom.

“Well, I’m sorry to say that because of your contract status, you do not qualify for a leave.”

“Oh, I didn’t realize that. So what happens now?”
Maureen pauses for a moment and Maggie senses something is not right. Noticeably absent is the usual congratulatory remark about grad school. “You would qualify for a leave after a year of a permanent contract, which you would have next year. Many teachers choose to just take a single semester leave in order to do their coursework, and then write their thesis while teaching.”

“So, does that mean I could go in January?”

“No, you’d have to work a full year of permanent first.” Maureen pauses and Maggie doesn’t know what to say. Maggie understands that she will have to leave the school board in order to attend graduate school. She knew this was a possibility and is not really discouraged. Maureen continues, “I also did a Master’s quite early in my career, my studies were very important to me. But because I wanted to do what was best for the school I was working at, I waited until I had a permanent contract, then I did my courses in one term, and went back to the school right away.” Maureen pauses and looks directly at Maggie. Maggie feels like she is back in that long ago triad meeting of her practicum, or back in Ryan’s office just a few months prior. What is expected of her here? “Graduate schools want to attract good students, I’m sure if you call your supervisor you could get a deferral. They’ll wait for you for one year.”

“My supervisor has already told me that he won’t have room for me next year,” Maggie is so glad this is the truth, “and the project I have is very important to me, so I don’t want to miss the opportunity.”

“Well, think on it a bit, and let me know what you decide.”

Maggie leaves Maureen’s office in a state of disbelief. It would have been nice to hear that Maureen thought she was doing a good job, and therefore wanted her to stay. Maggie could have then felt proud of the job she had done. Instead, Maggie felt angry. For Maureen to imply
that she was not doing what was best for the school, when the reality was that she had put
the school so far ahead of her own needs… Maggie sighs, in that moment she wishes she never
returned from her sick leave.

It is the last day of school. The students are finished their exams and Maggie has finished
cleaning out her classroom. She remembers wanting William Aitken to be the school for her. In
fact, she still wants to feel at home here, but she doesn’t. There is nothing at William Aitken as
enticing as the chance to complete her Main Street Hero curriculum unit. After that, maybe
another school will be better. She attends the final staff meeting in order to spend the time with
her friends and colleagues, who she is going to miss immensely. Her friend Gwen is also leaving
the department to pursue grad studies, though they are headed to different cities.

“Hey you two,” Dwight Benedict says as he approaches. “I heard you’re both leaving, I
can’t believe it!” Dwight is a senior English teacher at William Aitken, and he had been a
genuine source of support for Gwen and for Maggie. They had come to appreciate his company,
and truly respect his teaching abilities.

“Sorry to say,” Gwen replies, “we’re both headed back to school.”

“Well, when I heard that, I just thought, that’s it,” Dwight says, “I mean that’s really it, if
we can’t keep folks like you around, I’m through.”

Maggie furrows her brows and looks at him questioningly, “What do you mean?”

“Well, I have been eligible for retirement for a couple of years now, and I’ve just told
Maureen I’m taking it.” Maggie and Gwen exchange a brief look of shock.

“All the best, Dwight,” Gwen says warmly, “I hope that you really enjoy it!”
Yeah, I think I will. I’m so sorry to see you both go.” Maggie does not know what to feel as Dwight sits down at another table. She has little time to reflect though as the speeches are about to begin.

“Maggie Ellis will also be leaving us this year,” her department head begins. Maggie feels some eyes turn her way; she is not sure who is hearing this for the first time. “When I started to write some things I wanted to say about Maggie, I first looked back on the things she has done during her time here. I realized that in her two years of teaching, Maggie has taught every single English course our board offers. Now you may think that that’s impossible, but Maggie managed to do this by having a few classes that had two or three different levels of students in them. Maggie also, as many of you know, worked mostly in our specialized program, so she had many colourful students who really kept her busy. She also worked hard to help us redesign a reading program and our grade 11 midterm exams. Many of you will also remember that she was one of the Student Council teachers as well. So, in short, now that we’ve burnt her out,” Alice pauses as some of the staff chuckle, “she is moving on to bigger and better things and beginning a Master’s program next year. We wish here all the best in her studies, and hope to see her again.”

* * *
Figure 9. Instead

I'm afraid to try teaching again in case I fail...

I am applying for a PhD program instead...

On the inside

Deficits in these areas are not the evil entities that current corporate-inspired political polemic would have us believe. As a number of commentators have observed, the countries of the western world would not have recovered from the devastation of World War II without them, and they continued for many years. It is high time that governments...

Financial matters, particularly budget, are on everyone's mind at the moment. The cutting of budget funds is particularly worrying in education. The result of the decision is perfectly clear: the future of indexing in the pension plan. The background problem is corruption...

The course of the next three terms is a debt of the provincial government. In 1990, the annual pension fund, was in the balance, granted the increase in costs to the lifetime pension amount, which has allowed retirees to maintain their purchasing power over time. These increases have been granted because the fund could afford them. However, continued funding is unsustainable at the current contribution levels. In real terms, look at what happens to an average pension.

The funds were $15,000. By 2004, the pension had risen to $23,440. That was almost $8,000 per year. What are the implications? They can vary, the same amount of gifts can be given with indexing, as they could in January.
“The thing about the myth of upward mobility is that if people think you’re leaving for a better thing, that means that you get congratulations instead of support,” I begin, “and there are a few acceptable outs to teaching, those that are seen as moving onwards and upwards, and they effectively silence discussions about the real reasons you’re leaving.”

“Right, and people forget that parenthood is one of the biggest acceptable outs, right?”

“Absolutely,” I agree, “every time I talk about teacher attrition I get the ‘well how many of those left to have a baby,’ and it just doesn’t work to say ‘how many of those had a baby in order to leave teaching.’ I mean, I feel like that sounds a bit jaded, but…”

“But it happens,” Katherine finishes, “absolutely.”

“But it’s the same with graduate school, it’s seen as a choice,” says Nora, “you choose to leave your career to pursue studies, rather than it being ‘I need an escape route now!’ But grad school is a logical escape route, and all three of us made that choice.”

“Now though, I am really afraid to reveal this secret because I feel guilty for not wanting to go back, or at least confused by those feelings. I mean, I still want to be a teacher, desperately, but I don’t want to go back. I also don’t want my current or future colleagues to think I’m choosing graduate studies for the wrong reasons either. Part of it is so absurd too – a PhD is easier than teaching? Seriously?”

“I know how you feel though,” Katherine laughs. “I stopped going to my psychologist once I had officially made the decision to return to grad school because I felt like she would judge me!”

“What?” I say as I join in Katherine’s laughter.

“Well, I thought she would want all my reasons for going back, and it was an exit strategy in some ways.”
“But you didn’t want to have that conversation,” I offer.

“Right,” Katherine says. “But it was interesting because other people had other reactions. One teacher seemed confused as to why I do more schooling when I was already at the top of the pay scale!”

“Oh, that’s a tough one!” Nora chuckles.

“But worse than that, were the reactions that really stripped me of my teacher identity, ‘you’re too stressed out by this job so you don’t belong,’” Katherine recalls, “or that’s how I was made to feel anyways.”

“You just want to make a list of all the ways in which you are a teacher, a great teacher, and carry it around in your wallet” I say, “because you just feel so misunderstood. Which I think is why it’s so hard for me to talk about teacher attrition without, you know, bursting into inappropriate tears. It’s the, ‘please don’t judge me, try to understand where I’m coming from’ card.”

“Definitely, and as we were saying earlier, that’s why our discussion here has been so easy, that worry just isn’t there,” says Nora. “And you know, in terms of the upward mobility myth of grad school, I think people don’t think about all that you’ve lost. You’ve lost your career, financial security, benefits, all of those things that don’t come with grad school. But most importantly, you’ve lost your vocation. It’s like, what am I supposed to do now? Go work in a bookstore? It’s very confusing, and again the myth also makes it isolating.”

* * *
Figure 10. Dreams
After two months of grad school, Maggie has only recently begun to think about teaching again. The question arises endlessly, “What do you plan to do after your Master’s, go back to teaching?” She cannot avoid it forever. The thought of going back to William Aitken fills her with anxiety, panic, and dread. This must be how people who have been attacked by sharks feel when they think about getting back into the water – terrified. Of course, this is the wrong answer, and she cannot find the right one. All she can say so far is, “I guess I’ll figure that out before the end of next year.”

Today, she feels something different about teaching. Just before waking that morning, during the time when a few final vivid images sneak into the conscious mind, Maggie dreams about teaching. In the dream, all her students from William Aitken are in a single large classroom. Naturally, the room is a chaotic cacophony of teenagers – asking questions, chatting with each other, walking around the room – Maggie loves it. She is having too much fun. They are playing a word association game, the kind of game you play on the last day of school before a holiday, and the air is filled with excitement. She is not the only teacher in the room, Gwen, Hugh, and Aidan are there too. They are all walking around trying to help the students stay focused. At one point, Maggie and Hugh make eye contact and Maggie gestures for the door. Hugh nods to her silent plea for a break. Maggie runs for the bathroom, where she releases tears of sadness because it is the last week of school, and she is leaving the classroom. In the dream, there are only a few more days for her to spend with her students. In the dream, this thought brings a great heave of sorrow.

It is this heave that wakes her. She wakes, full of sadness that she will soon be leaving her students. The next moment, she realizes she has already left them. She wakes and feels her
heart break yet again. This is the beginning of a long journey towards an understanding of why she had to go, and where she will go from here.

Two more months pass and it is now winter break. Maggie is curled up on the couch reading *Cat’s Eye* for the third time in her life. She doesn’t really remember the second time she read it. She remembers being in her early twenties, she remembers sightseeing her way through the book, much as you would sightsee through the neighbourhood where you grew up: There’s the playground, there’s my old house.

Maggie is not sightseeing this time. She is hunting. Somewhere within these pages are the answers to who she has been. Why has she never learned to navigate the world of girls and their hidden, ever-changing set of rules? Why did Maggie take on expectations that anybody could see were so unreasonable? Why did she fail?

Maggie is finding that her memories of the book, though they are distinct images in her mind, are actually collages. They are pasted together from events in random sequence, events not only from the book but also from her own life. She can see some of the ways in which the book has shaped her, and the ways in which her life has shaped her memory of the book.

Maggie now feels more of a kinship to the older Elaine, the one revisiting. She enjoys her curmudgeonly ways, her persistence in resisting categorization. Yet there is also something even more familiar about the teenage Elaine. Maggie cringes as Elaine comes home from school and peels the skin from the soles of her feet, desperate for a fever high enough to keep her home for just one day. Maggie understands the sinking sensation Elaine has in the pit of her stomach. She understands too that it resides there because Elaine cannot decipher what the other girls expect from her, though they judge her constantly. Maggie knows what this is like.
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Figure 11. Generosity
“So, I guess one last question I have is, just because this process has been so positive and in some ways joyful,’ I say smiling briefly before continuing, “my question is how important is it to understand that the transition out of teaching is painful? How important is it for others to understand the devastating, lasting, personal, physical, and psychological effects of this process?”

“Oh I think it’s critical,” Nora says immediately, “It is absolutely critical.”

“I think I want people to understand how difficult it is,” Katherine says, “and that’s where it’s really hard because that narrative isn’t out there.”

“It’s the biggest secret,” Nora adds.

“Right, it’s the breaking the silence part too,” Katherine finishes. “So it has to be there, but then, to make people understand, to make people listen, it also has to be framed in the right way.”

“So it’s not whiny,” says Nora.

“Exactly, so it’s tricky, it’s a tricky story to tell. Just like stories of loss and divorce or anything like that, it would be hard to just read and understand without wanting to judge, or to dismiss it as whining.”

“Teaching is so tied up with identity,” Nora comments, “and having a shift in that identity is just like any identity shift or major paradigm shift, or any inability to achieve a certain identity. I think it’s really important to try to communicate that message. It’s an ongoing ache, combined with a sense of failure.”

“And all the blame and questions that come with that,” Katherine says.

“I think for me one of the hardest things to accept is my reduced capacity, not just for stress, but for everything it seems,” I say. “I notice that I just don’t have the extra something I
once had to give to people or to projects. Most of the time I don’t even have the ‘something,’ let alone the ‘extra.’”

“Right, it’s this strange kryptonite phenomenon,” Nora says.

“What’s worse, is that I know that the people around me don’t understand that this is unusual for me,” I finish.

“For me, on top of feeling like a shell of myself there’s the wonder, I wonder if I’ll ever be able to get back what I’ve lost,” Nora explains. “For example, when I look back on the letter writing I kept up with the students, I just, I don’t know if I could do that now.”

“Right,” I agree, “do I have the ‘uumph’ to do it all again? Could I go back and be the teacher I was?”

“Well and that question is key,” Nora replies, “because if the answer is ‘no’ then going back is just going to be painful.”

“I feel like I still have some of that in me,” Katherine reflects, “but I’m just so weak. When I went to see the drama kids last time, I was just so emotional. Then I heard that one of them might be in trouble and it really overwhelmed me. I remember you asking me on the plane, ‘are you okay?’ and I realized that I was just sort of staring out the window, but man, I used to handle situations like that all the time. Now just a few minutes of stress is too much.”

“Well, as you say,” Nora comforts, “you’re in this place of weakness, or brokenness.”

“But today,” I say optimistically, “hopefully we’ve begun or moved along a process of identity reclamation, and of leaving some things behind.”

“Reclaiming, absolutely,” Katherine agrees.
“Well, and how nice to do this as a community and with food!” Nora says warmly, “I feel like this has just been such a gentle process, I feel like the gentleness of this process kind of parallels the horror of what got us here.”

* * *

Running into her Faculty Coordinator, Larry Evans, on campus is unexpected. Maggie heard rumours that he retired, but there he is, walking down the hallway of the Education building. Maggie almost lets the moment pass, unless she says something he won’t see her. Letting the moment pass is in fact her first instinct, but she finds herself calling out.

“Well hello!” Larry greets her warmly. She is wearing a backpack overflowing with books and snacks and pens and he is carrying his satchel in one hand and a coat in the other. Maggie extends her hand to avoid an awkward attempt at hugging. “That’s not enough after so long, give me a hug!” Maggie smiles. She is happy to be remembered fondly. He asks her if she has a minute to catch up.

He starts with the basics, “Are you doing some coursework?” He imagines Maggie is still teaching and taking an evening course at the same time.

“I’m doing an MA, full-time.”

“Wonderful, good for you! Now let me think, you…”

“Moved home, taught full-time for two years, and now I’m back here, doing an MA in theatre education actually.”

“Theatre now? Did you do theatre before – ah yes, I remember – Main Street Hero.”

“I came back to work on a Main Street Hero project actually,” Maggie leaves out the fact that she has since switched her topic to study teacher attrition, she is not ready to admit that yet.
“Oh right, that was so excellent, you did such an excellent job on your practicum, and you had such a difficult time. If I remember correctly, you got an award out of it right?”

“Yes, I did, that was nice.” Maggie remembers her practicum award and how sceptical she was of receiving it. At the time she had wondered if she really deserved it or if it had been an apology for her difficult situation with Gillian.

“Yes, you know it’s so hard to be so undermined on your practicum. I mean, you’re going to make mistakes, but to also be dealing with being undercut in so many different ways. I mean, she never really let go. It’s good that I was able to figure out what was going on there.”

“Yes.” Maggie can’t believe that Larry remembers these details. If only he had made these realizations in time, “I’ve actually applied to be an F.C. this year.”

“Well, you have two years experience. We’ve had F.C.s who have never been in a classroom. And interestingly, for me, it’s the most challenging job yet. It’s so hard, you know sometimes you’ve got to pull the plug on a student and that’s difficult. There are lots of people who go through university, then into education and by the time they hit their practicum they’ve never even had a job, no life experience! Last year…”

Maggie listens to the stream of chatter that Larry is so adept at. She is faced, yet again, with the question: am I ‘in’ or ‘out’ about teacher attrition. Maggie would like to talk to him about her research, but that would mean admitting her own defeat. She feels like nobody would study teacher attrition unless it happened to them.

Also, she isn’t ready to admit the end of her Main Street Hero project either. For the first year of her studies, Maggie had begun to film a documentary about the play. She had met with many of the actors and directors of the play, both past and present, and had spoken to many of
the live audiences attending current performances of the play. She hoped to get back to it, but for now, the hours of footage just sit on a shelf.

Maggie decides she will not tell Larry today, maybe next time. Right now, Maggie doesn’t think she can bear to alter his perception of her, she doesn’t want him to think that Gillian and Devon had been right.

* * *

“Oh, speaking of myths, I have another suggestion for a name for our new teacher archetype!” I say excitedly, breaking the serious mood in the room.

“This sounds good,” Katherine laughs, “let’s hear it!”

“Actually my sister’s DVD collection reminded me about a thought I had while watching the *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* television series.”

“Oh, I’d love it if our new name had something to do with superheroes,” says Nora.

“According to the legend of the Vampire Slayer, in every generation a Slayer is born. But actually, that’s not quite true. A Slayer is chosen, but may die at any moment, because, you know, it’s a stressful job with a high turnover rate. So in actual fact, many in each generation are born with the potential to become Slayers, and when one dies another is chosen.”

“And is that random?” Katherine asks.

“Yes, it’s random, nobody knows who the next Slayer will be,” I answer.

“Perfect!” says Katherine, “continue.”

“At some point, Buffy gathers all these girls, whom she is now calling ‘Potentials’ together and they discover that they all have a lot of common attributes. They can all fight, they’re all quite strong – they just don’t have that little extra something, the Slayer superpower.”

“But Buffy has it,” Nora clarifies.
“Right,” I say, “she gets premonitions, and she heals fast, this kind of thing. Anyways, sometimes when I think about my career, I think that I had the ‘potential’ to become a master teacher, but was never fully imbued with the power.”

“Perfect!” says Nora, “Potentials.”

“It fits,” Katherine says, “especially the randomness of it all.”

“Right, you might make it, you might die quickly,” I say as we all laugh.

“Anything could happen,” Nora smiles.

“But,” I say seriously, “how much better would the world be if all Potentials were allowed to achieve their full power?”

“Yes, how much more beautiful if, instead of being ‘weeded out,’ every Orchid was given greenhouse care,” Nora finishes. We all smile warmly once more as we make preparations to officially close our two-day summit.
Chapter 5 – Openings

Though I would like to offer some concluding thoughts to this work, I have chosen to title this final chapter ‘Openings’ because my goal is not to conclude but “to open up conversations” (Irwin & Springgay, 2008, p. xxx) about the way we induct (or fail to induct) beginning teachers into their chosen profession.

Throughout the preceding chapters, I have outlined suggestions for effective teacher induction found in recent research. These suggestions have so far been focused on suggestions for mentors within the school setting. However, as Maggie’s story and the dialogue of the research summit reveal, teachers are constantly working with school districts and systems. When induction policies are considered at the system level everything becomes more complex. Systems are under constant pressure from a variety of education stakeholders: from the governments that fund them, and from the general public. The literature related to effective teacher induction indicates that the motivations of districts for initiating or continuing a teacher induction program, and the public perception of the value of teacher induction, can influence induction policy and decrease or increase available funding (Carter & Francis, 2001; Flynn & Nolan, 2008; Glassford & Salinitri, 2007; Yusko & Feiman-Nemser, 2008).

Districts may be tempted to increase teacher salary as a way to attract and retain teachers and research indicates that increasing salary has a positive correlation with teacher retention (Borman & Dowling, 2008; Guarino, et al., 2006; Johnson & Birkeland, 2003). However, Johnson and Birkeland found that teachers who were settled in a positive school environment had less concerns about their salary (p. 603). This is consistent with Guarino, et al.’s finding that teachers felt less satisfied with their salary when the other perceived benefits of teaching were not present (p. 190).
A final induction strategy systems might employ is the creation of career ladders in the teaching profession (Hobson, et al., 2009; Johnson & Birkeland, 2003). This would begin by granting new teachers novice status, and also by creating further opportunities for teacher advancement. Some research has shown that the lack of opportunities for advancement is a source of dissatisfaction for beginning teachers who are struggling (Borman & Dowling, 2008; Guarino, et al., 2006). Interestingly, researchers also propose that granting mentors formal status, release time, and increased pay would also create another step in the career ladder, providing teachers with meaningful opportunities for professional growth (Hobson, et al., 2009).

One of the programs reviewed by Glassford and Salinitri (2007) was the Santa Cruz New Teacher Project (SCNTP), which is a university-based program. This program was also reviewed in the literature by Ingersoll and Kralik (2004) and Yusko and Feiman-Nemser (2008) as an example of a successful induction program initiated at the system level. The SCNTP centralizes the tasks of selecting, training, and providing mentors with ongoing supports. Mentors are teachers with at least seven years of experience who must go through a rigorous screening and interview process before being selected for the program. These teachers are then released from their regular teaching duties for a period of two to three years. They receive training in effective mentoring and then are given a number of beginning teachers to support. The mentors themselves meet regularly to reflect on their own practice at a centralized location, but provide mentoring to beginning teachers in their individual school contexts. Often, the years teachers spend as mentors are a precursor to administrative positions in the schools or at the district level.

The SCNTP’s strategy for meeting the needs of its beginning teachers answers several of the concerns raised throughout this thesis. First, the act of providing beginning teachers with a dedicated mentor is a recognition of their novice status. This immediately changes the
expectation that a beginning teacher should be able to rise to the same expectations of their veteran colleagues. Second, providing mentors effective training increases the likelihood that these mentors will be able to differentiate for the needs of their mentees. The presence of a single mentor would also help to reduce the hidden expectations of the job. Instead of navigating the system by intuition, beginning teachers would have an ally who could answer their many questions. Finally, providing veteran teachers with mentorship training before placing them in leadership or administrative roles increases the likelihood that they include the well-being of their staff in their bottom lines. The SCNTP is also a good example of how a centralized policy can still be responsive to the needs of beginning teachers within their local contexts.

Reports from the SCNTP indicate that districts who have implemented this program are enjoying several benefits of effective teacher induction. They notice an immediate and drastic decrease in teacher attrition (Strong, 2005), a monetary savings to teachers, schools, and districts (Strong & Villar, 2007), and student achievement is positively affected (Johnson, 2009). Beginning teachers in this system are provided the opportunity to reach their personal and pedagogical potentials, a goal which moves beyond mere retention to teacher actualization.

Though the SCNTP is a university-based program, it is still an ambitious project, one that requires support from a multitude of education stakeholders. Future research might focus on what smaller interventions would be effective in the absence of this support. For example, could a small intervention targeting the establishment and effective communication of school expectations alleviate some of the more serious confrontations beginning teachers face? Could identifying the learning needs of beginning teachers help mentors to respond to these needs more effectively? What are effective ways for helping a beginning teacher recover from a damaging experience – whether they remain in the profession or choose to leave it? For those who choose
to stay, how do these early experiences influence their teaching practice and the perception they have of themselves as teachers?

Though it is my hope to engage with some of these questions in future research, my motivation for this work has not been to provide a comprehensive solution. Rather I sought to dispel misconceptions and reveal the complex and difficult process that teacher attrition is. I also sought to give a voice to the passionate, dedicated, and skilled educators we have lost along the way. It is my hope that I was able to reveal, in all its complexities, the story that lies beyond the boundaries of the checkbox. At the very least, my goal has been to reveal the many places where a small change might have a positive effect on a teacher’s professional well-being. Each positive interaction, each offer of support for a beginning teacher, makes a difference. It is my hope that the stories of beginning teachers might inspire individual educators on “an ongoing quest for something better” (Barone, 2002, p. 259).
Epilogue

Today was the second day of our summit and the feeling was definitely different from yesterday. We went a little deeper, talked about things that were a bit harder. Though we didn’t talk for as long we were ready to delve into some of the more intimate details of our stories. By far the best part of today was our closing.

During our discussions, we occasionally stopped to write down something worth letting go of – thoughts we realized were not serving us. For our closing, we grabbed these ‘burnables’ and headed outside. There was of course quite a bit of snow on the ground. We walked out to the alley, which is on the border of a large High School field. We thought about heading into the field but it is entirely fenced, and we would have had to walk a while to get in. This was unappealing especially given Nora’s baby bump. So, we dug a hole in the snow at the base of the cement wall of the fence and lit some kindling. We had not planned the details of this closing ceremony in advance, so there was much back and forth about the best way to go about things – this resulted in much giggling. We decided to say a few words. Katherine and Nora said a thank you to me for doing the research, for bringing us together. I said a thank you for the nomination, for the opportunity to be their voice. We realized we had not yet found a name for ourselves, that we had circled around ‘Orchids’ and ‘Potentials,’ which everyone still liked immensely, myself included. Then we began to burn! We found the most satisfying thing to do was to hold each burnable in the flames and actually watch the words being consumed. Katherine had the presence of mind to take a few pictures. Then we each lit an incense stick, using the smoke to cleanse ourselves while giggling profusely. The fact that it was so fun felt so freeing. We began laughing outright when we realized that the car going by us was from the school parking lot – a teacher leaving for the day. We then realized where we were: up against the cement base of a schoolyard
fence, on the outside, on the margins, lighting a fire in protest, lighting a fire in the hopes of freeing ourselves. We laughed at the fact that the passing car would see three women standing in front of a small fire waving incense around. We laughed at what the driver might understand if he knew we were teachers. Eventually, we put our still burning incense in the ashes, letting them cleanse the remaining flames. We decided not to bury what we had done in the snow; it was about letting go, not covering up.

I feel like I now have a perspective to work from. I feel like only positive things will now come out of my analysis and my future writing of the narrative; up until now the writing has been so hard. Also there is so much in my eight hours of data on which to base future research. I feel like we have started to truly speak out, and that we might be heard.
Letting go…

Of the idea that my teaching career began and ended with the public school system,

Of the desperation to go back,

Of the need to prove something,

Of the worry that my sponsor teacher was right about me,

Of the thought that I could have done something differently,

Of any notion that it was my fault.

Figure 12. Letting Go
References


[http://www.ccfi.educ.ubc.ca/publication/insights/v13n04/articles/nassef/index.html]


assistance and assessment in new teacher induction. Teachers College Record, 110(5), 923-953.
## CERTIFICATE OF APPROVAL - MINIMAL RISK

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**INSTITUTION(S) WHERE RESEARCH WILL BE CARRIED OUT:**

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Other locations where the research will be conducted: This research will be conducted in private spaces rented for the purposes of conducting the research and in locations convenient to the participants. This research may also be conducted via email or telephone if the participants desire to communicate in these ways.

**CO-INVESTIGATOR(S):**

Jaime Beck

**SPONSORING AGENCIES:**

UBC Faculty of Education

**PROJECT TITLE:**

Breaking the Silence: Beginning teachers share pathways out of the profession

**CERTIFICATE EXPIRY DATE:** December 18, 2010

**DATE APPROVED:**

December 18, 2009

**DOCUMENTS INCLUDED IN THIS APPROVAL:**

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The application for ethical review and the document(s) listed above have been reviewed and the procedures were found to be acceptable on ethical grounds for research involving human subjects.

*Approval is issued on behalf of the Behavioural Research Ethics Board and signed electronically by one of the following:*

- Dr. M. Judith Lynam, Chair
- Dr. Ken Craig, Chair
- Dr. Jim Rupert, Associate Chair
- Dr. Laurie Ford, Associate Chair
- Dr. Anita Ho, Associate Chair